

Service delivery and local governance in a crisis situation

An adapted approach of
VNG International in Myanmar



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Introduction

On 1st of February 2021 the military coup happened and our project activities came to a standstill; our project partner Loka Ahlinn immediately put all activities on hold, strongly rejecting this illegitimate coup. In line with the European Union and the Government of the Netherlands, we adopted the principle of non-engagement with the regime but remained committed to support the people in Myanmar and keep our governance focus. This paper captures our efforts of the past year, continuing two local governance projects and learning and developing a crisis approach. We experienced (1) the relevance of 'keeping a presence on the ground', (2) the need to allow flexibility to adapt beyond existing project frameworks (3) and the shift from partnership to localized leadership.

The coup really turned our work upside down, for the organisation and the projects. Managing such a sudden change has many challenges; drafting emergency scenario's, prioritizing staff safety and cyber security, dealing with finances in a nearly collapsing banking system and business continuation. Not knowing what would happen, end of February, we moved to a new, much smaller office that we share with a Dutch training company. The DEALS project we implement directly, the MAGIC project is implemented in partnership with LASDN. The project hierarchies started fading, whether VNG-International or LASDN staff, we connect on-line and talk about everything that needs to be talked about. Together we continuously assess the situation in the townships, in particular the dynamics within the municipalities and the Ward Administrators appointed by the SAC but also the safety and wellbeing of staff and their families and communities. We attend online meetings with the INGO-Forum and join our local governance network in webinars to exchange our experiences and research; the publications of the Center for Good Governance¹ in particular proved helpful in finding our (local governance) crisis approach.

A third project, the community development project implemented by the Department of Rural Development (DRD) stopped because the World bank withdrew. We had no choice but to close down two project locations and to send the project staff home. This was really tough. For DEALS and MAGIC all project activities were now on hold; with our donors we negotiated (partial) suspension conditions whilst figuring out about non-engagement.

In MAGIC we kept the project offices open or relocated them to safer locations. In DEALS the office was in the municipality, so the project coordinator started working from home, which she did already during the first Covid waves. Main priority was staying in contact with the staff in the project locations; the first few months we needed to come to terms with the changing situation, then we gradually started talking about what still could be done and how.

¹ Centre For Good Governance (CGG)'s series of technical notes to guide international actors through effectively supporting Myanmar communities in the volatile and challenging post-coup context in Myanmar

1 'A presence on the ground'

The adaptation was rather rigorous as we could no longer work with our main stakeholder, the municipalities. Our mandate however remains the same: we are committed to strengthening democratic local governance. But when there is no longer a democratic situation with a functioning local government, what role for VNG International is still there to play? Indeed, the coup is a real setback for the LG progress we have carefully supported over the past years. And though much is lost and the situation is still fluid, only if we manage to stay, can we assess local developments directly and consider supporting initiatives taken by the people. Besides, VNG International has experience working in conflict situations in other countries with communities and citizens taking care of their immediate needs and organizing their own services without any involvement of formal local governments. A situation that was also common in Myanmar before the reforms started in 2010.

We could keep DEALS and MAGIC projects going. Trust is the main driver of our contacts; through our trusted project staff we keep track of what is happening in their locations, the research tool we use are the Transition Diaries². The coup was not the first crisis we dealt with. In 2020 Myanmar had its first and second Covid wave, which affected the projects. The Myanmar government had put a national and subnational emergency response structure in place. We were interested to see how this structure would function at the local level as it could possibly accelerate decentralization efforts. Under guidance of our Social Accountability and Gender Experts we started research done by the project staff, working with a set of questions. In regular meetings we shared information and identified possible COVID emergency support that we could assist with. As a result of this research, we allocated grants to the municipalities to address urgent Covid related needs such as PPE and other protective equipment.

After the coup, we continued the research with adapted the questions with the main purpose to assess the changing local governance situation and to stay connected with another. The questions address the (non-) functioning of the local government and tensions in their townships, safety and wellbeing of staff and that of their communities and how these communities, including IDP's deal with immediate needs to survive and stay safe; food, livelihoods, shelter, medicines etc. Apart from that, we talk about any issue that staff want to talk about, such as providing counselling support and cyber security training. One observation clearly stands out: till date, the military regime is not able to get control over the local government structures in most of the townships. Much tension is around the Ward Administrators and the WA offices, the third tier of the LG system. The previously elected WA's are now being appointed by the SAC but not accepted by the people. The appointed WA's resign in large numbers or they are considered as informants for the junta and become targets for the people's defense forces.

² Transition Diaries paper part 1

The parallel government is establishing its own People's Administration structure involving Household Heads, community leaders and religious and traditional organisations such as funeral committees. The situation differs per township and keeps changing. The Development Affairs Committees (DACs) stopped functioning and the Development Affairs Organisations (DAOs) continue their work without any involvement of the elected members of the DACs or other citizens; it seems they have reactivated their mode of operations from before 2010.

The attacks of the military in Chin State in the past few months are upsetting and the situation in the townships in Tanintharyi Region remains tense, especially in Dawei. One of LASDN staff was detained but luckily released after 3 months, others have gone in hiding facing many difficulties, but they manage to stay in touch. And amidst these tremendously challenging circumstances, we collect information to possibly support service delivery, safeguarding civic space and restoring democratic norms.

2 Flexibility to adapt

Another priority is to allow flexibility to adapt to non-state actors and project activities beyond waste management services. The DEALS Advisory Committee emphasizes the importance of flexible programming in this volatile and fragile situation. It is a challenge to report against existing project frameworks whilst project activities have been adapted considerably. Existing administrative procedures can cause unnecessary risks for staff or delay crisis interventions, therefore we started piloting with small grants. The flexibility to adapt to the crisis situation further includes working with non-state actors, addressing immediate needs and services, and, as mentioned, safeguarding civic space.

Non-state actors

As we could no longer engage with local authorities, we shifted to non-state actors. This shift implied working with more non-formal groups of people who know and trust each other and are working in their neighborhoods and local communities, finding solutions for acute problems and immediate needs. These initiatives are led by citizens themselves, often in a response to emergency situation due to the coup or Covid, without any direct involvement of government agencies. This so-called community resilience is remarkable and as already mentioned, goes back to a situation that existed in Myanmar before 2010.

Addressing immediate needs

The situation changed, so the project activities change. First of all, finding out what can still be done takes time and effort, staff safety and security is our priority and in the end we can't do much. We continue working with some of the youth and women groups already involved in waste management before the coup, but at a much smaller scale and without the municipalities; for example, they collect and handle waste in their neighborhoods, which is no longer or irregularly collected by the Sipin.

Or, as in 2020, they address Covid emergencies, but this time without cooperation with the Sipin and under very difficult circumstances. They arrange preventive materials and organise oxygen cylinders. The health system has collapsed and medical staff joined the protest movement and provide health care under the radar whilst they risk being arrested by the junta. These informal groups reach out to vulnerable people in their communities or in IDP camps who immediately need access to shelter, medicines and food. Other community initiatives focus on educating children who can't go to school or are displaced and providing legal support to those who have been detained. Whatever activities existing or new, community groups and citizens manage, their actions are very local, small scale and often 'under the radar'; they obviously differ from the activities before the coup.

Safeguarding civic space and governance perspective

Due to the coup much of the progress made to strengthen democratic functioning in Myanmar may seem lost, however, the people we work with continue to use what they learned in the new situation. The narrative of a federal democratic system acknowledging diversity, has never been so advanced and outspoken as it is right now, especially by the parallel government (CRPH / NUG), the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO's) and the people's defense movement. We don't know what is ahead. We continue stressing the importance of democratic values and principles of good (local) governance. Online webinars and trainings to address federalism, federal democracy and decentralization are taken up by local organizations and experts and seem possible to organise. We feel an urgent need to consolidate this knowledge and the skills built over the past years. It helps to stay positive and focused on a federal and democratic way forward, especially for the youth who see their future destroyed.

As donors and international organizations don't recognize and don't engage with the military regime, their programming has now shifted to civil society organizations. We are aware that VNG-International is often directly associated with (local) governments and though it is our main stakeholder and key component in governance, it is only one part of our work. We strengthen capacities of local governments in democratic functioning and being responsible to provide services, which also means inclusion of citizens and citizen groups. People's need for services remains and needs to be addressed, also when the junta is focused on controlling people rather than providing services to them. It is important to ensure that this governance perspective remains explicit in this shift to CSO programming and that accountability principles remain relevant also in a non-democratic situation in flux. LASDN is well placed to advocate for it, whilst VNG International can provide LG expertise and share its to international experiences.

Small grants management

As mentioned, project activities have changed drastically. Project staff need to be able to quickly respond to immediate and urgent needs; we mentioned already that we worked with grants during the second Covid wave. The crisis takes us beyond the regular project cycle of annual planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring and learning. For project staff to respond quickly, they need cash and delegated responsibility to act to their and their partners best judgement.

Only they can weigh the risks and take care of their own and others safety whilst addressing urgent needs. We started piloting small grants (of 700 USD): drafted guidelines to manage them, organised training sessions with project staff and agreed on reporting afterwards. It remains a challenge, to start with, to get cash to the project staff. Expenditure of the small grants is explained afterwards and sometimes reported verbally to the project manager as written reports can be a risk for the staff. Another challenge is that the current procurement requirements remain guiding and receipts of all costs still need to be submitted. Project staff have to be present in their locations to follow up on these requirements and obviously, they only do so if they don't put themselves and others at risk. It is a major challenge as the reality of the crisis situation in the project locations doesn't match with the existing project framework and arrangements agreed before the coup; these prevent us from being able to act quickly and effectively; they take much time and slow down support.

3 Localized leadership

VNG International in Myanmar implements the local governance projects directly or in partnership with LASDN our implementing partner. The crisis has changed our working relations; one of our strengths is having a strong national team mainly from the localities where we work. Over the past 4 years we built working relations of trust and mutual respect, VNG International often initiating whilst LASDN is implementing. The crisis has changed our roles; more than ever, we rely on our staff and partner's capacities to assess their situation and respond to it; their judgements of the situation including the risks they take matter most. Our Myanmar staff and LASDN staff are in the lead; they know best, we need to listen carefully and offer the support they ask for.

If at all the crisis can bring about any positive change, it is this so-called localization: to acknowledge that the national/local leaders and experts are in the lead and guide future development programs and actions. It would change a trend of the past 10 years in which the big international stakeholders continue to dictate the development agenda, quite often driven by competition; a trend which the Myanmar national government allowed to happen not offering clear policies and guidelines for coordinated development cooperation. If at all there is an opportunity to change this pattern, it is now. It requires as much a change from the international community to step back, adopt a bottom up approach and listen more carefully as for the national / local organisations to step up and take the lead. Will it happen? It should be the main focus in CSO programming and include support for strengthening organizational and leadership capacities.

Conclusion

We were determined to keep our presence on the ground; the partial suspension of the projects allows us to do so. It has proven to be crucial for continuing our support to the people of Myanmar. To communicate and stay connected during the crisis has become an end in itself; it helps us to share everything that needs to be shared and for the local staff to feel supported. The research helps us to assess the local governance situation and anticipate possible actions. Project staff stay engaged amidst security assessments and identify possible ways forward.

Obviously, the support extends outside and beyond the existing commitments and project frameworks agreed before the coup. This is a challenge as the existing project framework remains the main reference with limited room for change. It is challenging when administrative procedures tend to take over the reality on the ground. In VNG-International, we need to assess and mitigate risks pro-actively and share them with our national staff and partner. We also need to negotiate with our donors to allow flexibility to adapt to the changing situation; to work with informal and emerging groups to address immediate and urgent needs and use small grants, which are accounted for afterwards. In the end, we aim at restoring civic space, governance and democratic norms and strengthen capacities of staff and others to resist the military regime and advocate for human rights. These are key components for further developing a crisis-approach whilst adhering to local governance and democratic principles.

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