

Municipal services and Covid-19 Emergency Response - A learning journey



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Municipal services and Covid-19 emergency response - a learning journey

Summary

Dealing with a pandemic and its implications is a unique experience for all, including us in the MAGIC project. This article narrates our experience how we moved from a first response, assisting the Township Development Affairs Organisations (TDOAs) in addressing immediate needs, to identifying challenges and collecting ideas on regular tasks and responsibilities of the municipalities and how to adapt them to the Covid-19 crisis. We also studied the role of the TDAO as members of the Township emergency response committees. This information helped us to prioritize and redirect MAGIC project activities to continue supporting municipal service delivery adapted to the Covid-19 crisis.

Introduction

Municipal Accountability, Governance and Inclusive Communities (MAGIC) Project in Chin State and Tanintharyi Region is a European Union funded municipal capacity development programme implemented in five municipalities in Chin State and Tanintharyi region¹. The project just started its third year when on 11 March the COVID-19 pandemic was declared. As a first response, the MAGIC executive management committee agreed to make available 40 lakh MMK² to address some urgent needs as called for by the municipalities. This first response allowed the TDAOs to take a lead role in addressing Covid-19 emergency needs and provided the means to act quickly. Activities undertaken by the TDOAs were:

- Installation of mobile handwash basins and water tanks, mainly at markets and other busy public locations;
- Disbursing information and awareness raising materials, such as leaflets, posters and bill boards, to inform the public on the Covid-19 pandemic;
- Coordination with other departments and stakeholders: In Chin State, the TDAOs took the lead, in Tanintharyi Region, the TDAOs collaborated with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other citizens' groups and assigned specific tasks to them.

Loka Ahlinn Social Development Network (LASDN)³ project staff assisted TDOAs in buying materials for installation of the handwash basins, including pipes, disinfectants and soap, getting posters and other information material, whilst ensuring that expenditures of the first response activities were consistent with the project guidelines.

¹ The five municipalities MAGIC project is supporting are: Dawei, Myeik, Kawthaung in Tanintharyi Region and Hakha and Falam in Chin State.

² 40 lakh equals four million Myanmar Kyat, around 2500 Euro.

³ LASDN is a national NGO and MAGIC project implementing partner organisation.

MAGIC's financial support as a first response allowed for direct action and demonstrated commitment, but it immediately raised the question how we could provide support in a more systematic and sustainable way. In other words, how could TDOAs effectively fulfil their role, including engaging with the public in dealing with the crisis?

Inspired by some first Covid-19 publications⁴, we moved to phase II of the MAGIC Covid-19 emergency response and agreed that the project teams in the 5 townships would get in touch with the TDOAs to find out about four main topics. As this crisis was very uncertain and new, we wanted to facilitate a structured dialogue covering these four topics:

1. Covid-19 emergency response structures and the role of the TDOAs; what is known about coordination and collaboration at township level to address the needs emerging from the crisis;
2. Communication, in particular with the public; raising awareness and sharing of Covid-19 relevant information, using technology and translations in local languages, but also feedback loops of information from the public to the TDOAs.
3. Leading by example in enforcing and overseeing directives such as working from home, quarantine requirements, lock downs, curfews etc.
4. Reallocation of resources including collecting and managing donations in a transparent manner.

1

Covid-19 emergency response structure and the role of the TDOAs

Starting from January 2020, the Myanmar government was putting an elaborate Covid-19 emergency response structure in place, with two Union level main committees and several additional committees. The first was the **National - Level Central Committee for Prevention, Control and Treatment of Covid-19**, responsible for leading the national response efforts to control and manage the Covid-19 outbreak. This committee is led by the State Counsellor and includes union ministers from 16 ministries as well as the Social Affairs minister from the State and Region governments.

Shortly after this committee was installed, the government established the **Covid-19 Control and Emergency Response Committee**, led by one of the Vice Presidents. The main role of this committee is to ensure stability, security and law enforcement; it is bridging the civilian and military-led ministries (MoHS is not member of this committee)⁵.

Along similar lines, at State / Region level, coordination committees were formed led by the Minister of Social Affairs whilst end of March the **State /Region Covid-19 Control and emergency Response Committees** were put in place, chaired by the State / Region Chief

⁴ Blog by the Renaissance Institute: Four ways State and Region governments in Myanmar can support the response to COVID-19.

⁵ Covid Response Committees in Myanmar, Mai Hla Aye, Nay Yan Oo, Kim Jolliffe & Richard Batcheler; SAFERWORLD, The Asia Foundation, living document Version 2 (1 June 2020), page 3.

Ministers. Emergency response committees were established at Township level and (sometimes) at District level. Main responsibilities are monitoring potential Covid-19 cases, managing quarantine facilities, food distribution, organising volunteers, supporting public communication, overseeing lockdown and curfew measures and controlling border gates⁶. The Township Administrator of the General Administration Department (GAD) is the Chair with township department heads and the Executive Officer of the TDAO, Members of Parliament (MPs) and other local leaders as members. In some settings, CSOs also participate in the working committees (e.g. Falam Youth Association and Middle-age Association were invited to assist GAD, Police, Immigration, Health, and DAO in managing the town-entrance checkpoint).

How do these committees' function? How do the members take decisions, organise and divide tasks and coordinate? How is the communication up and downward with State/Region level and horizontally between the committee members and with the public? The functioning of the committees determines how people's health is safeguarded and negative social and economic impact is mitigated, two main immediate needs. Could the committees take decisions themselves? Could they independently manage emergency budgets and allocate resources? Answers to these and other questions underline the role of local governments, not only in times of crisis, and what we learn from this situation to further strengthen capacities of local governments, including delegation of responsibilities and managing resources to local levels.

We found that committee meetings are not regular. Committee membership and meeting minutes are not public, so we obtained information about the functioning of committees from members, like the DAC⁷ chair in a few cases in Tanintharyi, or from officials who know committee members. Most of the committee members are men; across the board the percentage of women in the committees is rather low and women's needs and interests are underrepresented. Interestingly, the volunteers mobilised for Covid-19 activities are mainly women and youth (see below).

To our understanding in Tanintharyi, committee decisions are communicated to the various departments and municipalities. These decisions seem to follow Union instructions. As an example, the instructions to stay inside from midnight to 4:00 AM are directed from Union level through the State and Region governments and issued locally. Same applied to managing the markets, which is a general responsibility of the municipalities. In Dawei, based on general instructions, the rules for market management were specified locally and submitted to the region for approval.

It is not clear how the collaboration with CSOs is working, e.g. the coordination at border gates in Tanintharyi to check temperature and control illegal migration. Although the Tanintharyi Government gifted 3 million MMK and personal protective equipment (PPE) to CSOs from Dawei, Myeik and Kawthaung and 1 million MMK and PPE to other Townships, no overview seems to exist of who does what, and we found no formal CSO communication mechanisms in the municipalities where the project works.

⁶ Id, page 4-5

⁷ Development Affairs Committee; (s)electd body of 7 members as part of the TDAO.

We did find that civic, private and religious organisations are active with prevention activities, and the municipal officials and CSOs are informally aware of each other's activities – the municipalities the project supports are small towns. Only in Falam, we noted a formal invitation to youth groups to meet on Covid-19 response activities, for instance for temperature checking at the town entrances. In Tanintharyi, the project supported the emergence of “Clean and Green” groups, in which the municipality and local organisations collaborate on waste management and related activities, but these structures did not serve CSO coordination for Covid-19. DAC members stay in touch with CSOs for Covid-19 response, but these are personal relations rather than institutional. One Executive Officer (EO) in Chin State suggests that CSO involvement in the response committee could be a useful way forward. In organising the volunteers for Covid-19 actions, significant involvement of youth groups and women lead CSOs has been observed. In Myeik for instance, women CSOs are actively engaged in COVID19 response.

No change in services was noted, but municipalities experience a higher workload in managing quarantine centres (Chin State), managing safety at markets, and supervising closure of non-essential shops (Tanintharyi Region). It was observed that in the quarantine centres separate arrangements for women were made, but in some places women and men must use common shower rooms. In Hakha, the municipality cooperates with the fire department to disinfect public areas, such as the markets.

In Myeik it was observed that there is more garbage, nevertheless the ward level waste management committees are left to their own devices. They claim to manage the additional waste due to the low fuel prices. Most townships have provided the protective materials to their waste collectors. It has been observed that female staff requested more materials compared to male staff. Possibly, since women have more concerns regarding safety of their children, other family members and themselves if they contract the disease.

Authorities prohibited all mass gathering and events, and safety measures have been taken to reduce transmission in markets and bus stations. Generally, every Township has focused strongly on reducing transmission risks in market places through social distancing and using face masks. As majority of vendors and market goers are women, it can be assumed that women are considered in this action. There was no information of preventive measures or awareness raising to reduce transmission risks for vulnerable groups, e.g. very poor areas of town with limited water and sanitation.

2 Communication with the public

Official information about Covid-19 measures was received from the Ministry of Health and Sports at Union level, and this has been translated into local languages, e.g. in Dawei and Hakha and Falam). While translation into local language is more essential for Chin State, Dawei community has taken this opportunity to promote its local language. The State / Region DAOs use telegrams, official letters, phone or Viber to communicate with the municipalities. It is not clear how the distribution of information to the public, including possible adaptation to local circumstances, is organised. The township committees communicate Covid-19 messages with loudspeakers in towns up to three or four times per day, and use hand held loudspeakers at the markets.

In Dawei, two municipal staff work at the municipal market to check if shopkeepers wear masks and customers respect the safety rules. People are appreciating such municipal activity, such as the distribution of masks and temperature checking at the Dawei central market.

Moreover, print media and social media are used to inform the public. MAGIC project staff discussed why DAC members are using their own Facebook accounts for communication with the public. Since then, DAC members in Falam, Myeik and Dawei started using the municipal Facebook account for COVID19 communication. Although there are educational messages for women, children, and elderly people, no specific consideration for disabled groups is observed. There is no specific communication medium for them. To continue, there is no evidence of feedback from the public in terms of questions people or businesses may have or problems they may face. We found only one example of public feedback in Kawthaung, where requests of shop keepers to wave tax payments were honoured.

3 Leading by example

Municipalities have taken precautionary measures for waste collectors everywhere, except in Dawei where garbage collection is fully outsourced, and PPE is made available for quarantine centres (Chin State) and installation of water tanks and filling water at quarantine centres (Tanintharyi Region). In line with Union level Government guidelines, in Tanintharyi Region, government offices including the municipalities have introduced alternate office days according to President's Office instruction on 50% of staff attendance, but municipal staffs attend office normally due to the number of staff and workload. Municipal office staff claims to respect social distancing and use masks and hand gel. In Dawei, pregnant staff and women who have kids are provided more days-off during the Covid-19 period. All municipalities organise online staff meetings using Viber or Skype.

4 Reallocate Resources Where Necessary

When asked about their access to the Union Emergency Fund, the municipalities responded that access is via the GAD Administrator (as Chair of the Committee) and the State/Region. Municipalities requested material needs to the MAGIC project, such as supply of PPE for at least three months (Hakha), thermometers, masks, gloves, hand speakers, hand gel, PPE, disinfectant spray machines and hypochlorite (Falam) and masks, gloves and long boots (Kawthaung). Some of these materials could still be purchased from the 40 lakh of the first response action.

We encouraged municipalities to explore proper channels through the township committees. Bottom-up communication, channels to receive feedback and other information from the public appeared to be limited. Therefore, this would be an important capacity to develop with the TDAO. Tanintharyi municipalities used their miscellaneous budget line for the Covid-19 emergency activities.

The Chin State Covid-19 Response Committee receives all donations, and municipalities distribute what they get from State level. They do not see possibilities to deal with donations in a transparent way because they are not receiving donations directly. In Tanintharyi, no cash donations are accepted. Distribution of donated goods, such as masks, hand gel, disinfectant spray for public areas, and food for quarantine centres is organised by the Ward Administrators. In Myeik, the DAC chair distributes donations, but this is likely a personal initiative. CSOs received and distributed such donations as well.

There are few, if any, municipal plans to cushion the impact of Covid-19 measures on the local economy. In Myeik, the EO is considering support during next negotiation round for contracts, such as ferry licenses. Kawthaung municipality has started tax reduction and exemption for Covid-19 affected shops, upon request of the shop keepers. In Chin State the municipalities commented that they did not receive instructions to take measures that cushion possible Covid-19 economic impact.

Main conclusions for MAGIC project towns

Covid-19 emergency structure

- Municipalities have a uniform role in the Covid-19 response. The EO is member of the Covid-19 Response Committee. Municipalities implement committee instructions and supervise compliance with Covid-19 directives for the public, markets and shops. Municipal activities run in parallel with civic response activities, with very little, if any, coordination. Municipalities have expressed equipment needs to the project, which suggest they are unable to pursue their needs through the formal -Covid-19 response committee - channels.

- On the one hand, the percentage of women members in the emergency response committees is minimal, whilst on the other hand, they play active roles in various response activities.

Communication

- Municipal communication with the public is a one-way street, and collaboration with civil society is ad hoc.
- Municipalities are not actively monitoring public or business sentiments with the emergency and the measures taken.

Leading by example

- Municipalities are taking measures in the office locations and are protecting staff from Covid-19 infection risks, with some attention to specific needs of female staff.

Reallocating resources

- The township committees do not have decision making power to handle resources; it limits the space they have to respond effectively.
- Municipalities are receiving donations from the Covid-19 response committee but have not yet received instructions on monitoring/responding to adverse impact of the crisis.
- Despite donations, Covid-19 material and equipment needs of the municipalities is not sufficiently met.

Next steps:

The information gathered has been used to adjust planned project activities towards Covid-19 pandemic, whilst keeping the MAGIC project objectives in mind.

MAGIC project objectives:

- 1. Strengthened capacities of township DAOs/DACs in planning, budgeting and revenue generation;**
- 2. Improved ability of township DAOs/DACs to deliver quality services for priority areas;**
- 3. Enhanced access to information, accountability and transparency of township DAOs/DACs towards CSOs, local businesses and urban residents;**
- 4. Increased capacity of state/region DAOs to support the functioning of township DAOs, and to share emerging knowledge of good municipal governance countrywide.**

1. DAO/DAC roles and capacities

- Assist DAOs in defining material needs and explore how they could get the support they need through government channels, i.e. the Covid-19 response committees. This can be challenging, as the committees appear to function as top-down communication channels where municipalities have not yet been able to express such needs. They manage from their own resources, as per the law, until instructions follow to do otherwise.
- Explore the suggestion of one EO to include CSOs as committee members. Learn from examples of other municipalities.

2. Quality services

TDAO/DAC COVID-19 response activities & waste management services

- Adjust the Falam waste management plan -i.e. MAGIC grant -to Covid-19 response and regulation and advise to the Falam EO to adjust the activities with key stakeholders at the start of the implementation of the plan.

Adapting social accountability process and tools (as part of service improvement plans) – some preliminary ideas:

- **Information sharing is very important but most often done in a rather fragmented way, for instance via personal Facebook pages. TDAO/DAC to better organize information via Facebook – not just using personal accounts.**
- **Explore how municipality can get feedback from the public (gender disaggregated), using Facebook or Viber polls, or through active CSOs and their online groups, or via small size town halls.**
- **Meetings of five are possible – what would be priorities? E.g. town hall meetings, women leadership.**
- **CSOs are active and may have their own Facebook or Viber groups that can be used to collect public feedback.**
- **Explore opportunities to access vulnerable groups via online.**

Need to keep expectations modest. Covid-19 is demanding a lot from people and gives much stress. Those who participated before in MAGIC may not be able to give as much time and energy now.

3. Accountability and transparency

- Assist TDAOs in organising a Facebook live Campaign - "Waste & Covid-19" - to support information and good practice sharing among municipalities, ensure that the needs of women and vulnerable groups are also included.

- Organise online sharing meetings on Covid-19 response experience among DAO/DAC across the municipalities of Tanintharyi region.

4. R/S DAO & municipal reform

- Inclusion of women and youth in any planning and decision-making process in future is critical, thus needs to be considered in the reform process as well as in any emergency response committee, for example through promoting a quota system in the long-term strategies.

Further study:

- The parallel crisis response operations of TDAO/DAC and CSOs;
- Socio-economic impact of COVID19 measures in municipalities, and related response of the municipalities;
- Upward communication channels for municipalities in crisis situations;
- Further delegation of responsibilities and resources to local levels.



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