Growing Networks?

Supporting Issue Based Networks in Myanmar

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A case study of Paung Ku and village
networks in the Ayeyawaddy Delta

Paung Ku, June 2013

1. Introduction

The emergence of new networks and their engagement with issues of local and national importance has been a major feature of the new political environment in Myanmar. For local and international development agencies interested in promoting wider participation in policy making – especially by the poor – this is an important trend.

Yet a critical question remains as to what extent, and how, this kind of grassroots network growth and advocacy engagement can be supported by external organisations. Can networks be 'grown' by external organisations? This paper looks at this question using the example of a network of village groups across three townships in the Ayeyarwady Delta region of southern Myanmar

In January 2012, these networks formulated a set of recommendations about new land laws about to be adopted in parliament. Together with over fifteen hundred farmer's signatures, the recommendations were sent to Myanmar President Thein Sein, the Speakers of Parliament (or *hluttaw*) and local members of Parliament.

The farmer's petition was an exciting moment: It represented one of the first examples of mass, grassroots to national policy engagement with Myanmar's new government. And it represented extraordinary growth: four years prior, these farmers had been working individually to rebuild after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis.

How then did these village groups grow into a network seeking to, among other things, participate in policy making at the national level? This paper traces the case of these village networks, including:

- The background to their formation
- The ways they have developed
- Why they are important in Myanmar's new political environment
- And how they were supported by external agencies

The paper is based on project records and augmented by 23 interviews conducted in February 2013 with Paung Ku staff, mentors, partners and male and female members of the delta networks.

Though issues of livelihoods, land law and political change are raised, this paper is not intended to be a comprehensive statement on these areas. Rather, the analysis is based on interpretations by network leaders and seeks to explore if and how networks engaging these issues can be supported.

Paung Ku is a Myanmar NGO, founded in 2007 by a consortium of local and international organisations as a mechanism to give small grants to local groups. It has since developed wider objectives related to civil society capacity to address and influence the major issues facing individual communities, and Myanmar as a whole. Key Paung Ku approaches include small grants and mentoring.

Loading rice in Bogale

2. Background

This section considers the background of the Delta networks: key catalysing issues including Cyclone Nargis and land and livelihoods, and the role of Paung Ku.

Cyclone Nargis

Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 was one of the worst natural disasters of recent decades, killing over 130,000 people leaving over a million homeless. The Cyclone's impact was concentrated in the flat, heavily populated Ayeyarwady river delta area with the townships of Bogale, Kyaiklat and Mawlamyainggyun among those worst affected.

The subsequent relief and rehabilitation efforts, led by local communities across the Delta area, catalysed the formation of a vast set of new community based organisations. While there had always been formal groups within delta villages, such as *thayenaye* funeral groups, parent-teacher committees and religious organisations, these were strictly limited to social and religious affairs and in most cases did not consider wider village development.

At the same time, the extent of damage and chaos following the cyclone had the effect of suspending many of the restrictive social norms and placing relations between authorities and communities in a state of flux. Within this space new norms related to freedom of association were established. And even when local authority structures had been reinstituted weeks or months after the cyclone, the new norms persisted. As one network leader said, 'We weren't allowed to form this kind of group before [the Cyclone]'.

The new relief groups also had strong platforms from which to work, stemming from access to new external resources and connections (especially with local and international NGOs) and took on roles in development decision making that had not been possible before the disaster.

In many ways, then, the Delta area experienced an 'associational revolution' in the period following Cyclone Nargis – with the formation of thousands of new village groups disrupting decades old restrictions on freedom of association.

Land Rights in the Delta

The devastating impact of Cyclone Nargis caused many acute problems for farming communities, which in turn exacerbated long-standing issues of land rights.

The Cyclone destroyed almost all paddy crops in the most affected townships, and subsequent harvests in 2009 were lower in yield as salt water flooding had heavily damaged the soil. Due to the losses associated with the cyclone, farmers felt added pressures to maximise yields in the wet and dry season – and to do this, they turned to increased use of fertiliser. And yet, while fertiliser use – and its associated costs – increased season by season, yields remained stagnant and well below pre-Nargis levels. Most of the farmers interviewed estimated that 2012 yields were only 60 per cent that of yields before the Cyclone.

In an immediate sense, these problems were linked to the cyclone. But they were also chronic in that those interviewed saw them as inextricably linked to longstanding issues of government land and agricultural policy that had stifled development and production; farmers were unable to formally own their land (with the State formally claiming

ownership of all agricultural land) and had only limited freedom in their choice of crops.

Further, due to the highly uneven nature of costs and returns in rice farming – for example, the high inputs required during planting and harvesting seasons – access to credit was essential. Farmers interviewed noted that the Myanmar Agricultural Bank gave low interest loans to farmers, but that amounts given were well below real credit needs. For example, one farmer said, 'for the wet season crop I need 100,000 kyat per acre for fertiliser, hiring of motorised ploughs and labour but I can only get 20,000 [from the government loan]'. If they required more upfront capital, farmers would need to turn to private lenders where interest rates would be up to ten times higher (up to twenty percent per month).

The combination of these acute and longstanding issues has meant that many farming families – with large accumulated debt – have been forced to sell their land. As one farmer said, 'Before the cyclone half the families [in our village] had land for paddy, now only a quarter do'.

Evolution of community groups, and Paung Ku support

Paung Ku began its Cyclone Nargis relief program in May 2008 and focussed on providing small grants for relief and rehabilitation projects defined by village groups. In all, over the 18 months following the cyclone, Paung Ku supported over 700 of these projects, each up to approximately USD 7,000, ultimately reaching hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries.

While many of the groups responding to the cyclone were only active for a short period, others became more established and implemented repeated projects within their

villages. By August 2010 (two and half years after the Cyclone), several of these community-based village groups that had been supported by Paung Ku decided to formalise into networks, which became known as 'Zonal Committees.' The Zonal Committees were the formal elected group of village group leaders, who would meet at the township level to help plan activities for the network, manage funding requests and provide additional mentoring and coaching. Four Zonal Committees were formed, in the townships of Kyaiklat, Mawlamyainggyun and southern and northern Bogale.

Paung Ku's support to groups in the Delta also evolved. The first area related to *funding*. Paung Ku had supported emergency response activities by communities, and as these activities shifted to longer-term development projects and network formation, Paung Ku supported work in these new areas, including operational funding for the networks – supporting travel costs, meeting costs, mobile phones for network leaders and hiring of external resource people.

The second area was in *training*. According to needs of different networks or groups, Paung Ku organized project cycle management, bookkeeping, leadership, gender, disaster risk reduction as well as trainings on new skills and issues identified by the networks, including organic farming and land rights.

The third area was in *facilitating linkages* with external actors. Paung Ku facilitated cross visits of network or village groups to other villages that were doing local development projects. Other connections were also facilitated with journalists, legal experts and other local and international NGOs.

Finally, Paung Ku provided *mentoring* to both network committees and village level groups. Mentoring was designed to encourage

reflection on group processes in order to make them both more inclusive and effective.

The central idea among the leaders of the new networks was that many of the local development problems they experienced in their own village were also present in other villages in their area, and the answers to those problems were often collective in nature. 'We realised that the problems weren't just in our village, other villages were struggling with the same things', said one farmer.

Cyclone Nargis Memorial Monument in Bogale

One key issue of focus was land rights and livelihoods, and this led the networks to seek to influence national policymaking. After hearing of a new land being developed in Parliament, the networks requested Paung Ku introduce them to legal resource people that could explain the legal environment and the potential impacts of the new law.

After a series of workshops, the networks decided to develop a set of recommendations and support them with a petition signed by over fifteen hundred farmers from areas covered by the networks. These were sent to President Thein Sein, Speakers of the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament and to local members of Parliament. The recommendations sought to address the issues outlined above related to agricultural

loans, land ownership, freedom of choice related to crops and fairer market practices.

3. Development of the Networks

The previous section described the background of the Delta networks, the influence of the Cyclone Nargis response and the issue of land rights, and the support role of Paung Ku. This section looks at the question of how the networks have developed since their formation in 2010.

Network leaders reported substantial change. In terms of scale, 42 village groups were involved at the time of formation in 2010; by February 2013 this had increased to 93 groups.

Along with scale, members of the network also reported changes in capacity (or *swan saung ye*), particularly related to vision and strategy. Vision and strategy was seen to have changed in two ways, which could be characterized as both *sharpening* and also *widening*.

It had *sharpened* in the sense that members of the network felt as though they have a much clearer idea of what they are collectively seeking to change. The initial formation of the network had been grounded in a desire to contribute to village development. And while there was recognition of particular development problems, there had been only a limited sense of what it meant to respond to these issues.

As the network developed, however, strategies became clearer. This is most obvious in relation to the issue of land rights. Network leaders said they had developed a clear picture of the macro level changes they are seeking – and have developed

perspectives about the new Farmland Law, its connections to the 2008 Constitution and its translation into policy at the Region level. 'We knew there was something wrong but we didn't know anything about the law before, now we can tell them what we want to change', said one network leader.

The vision has also *widened* as the network members have recognised other perspectives within communities. At their formation the networks were focussed broadly on village development, yet there was an primary emphasis on issues of land and agriculture. Over time, network members recognised that the views of women, young people and fisher folk were not being adequately represented or addressed. This led, in 2012, to the formation of women's associations, youth groups and fisheries associations within the different township networks. These new groups, along with farmer's associations, came under the structure of the four different Zonal Committees, which functioned as the networks' leadership.

Network members (and Paung Ku mentors) also said that the vision of the network has widened geographically in the sense that they are now thinking in terms of regional development issues, rather than just those encountered in their own individual villages. 'It was like they went from just thinking about the village, to thinking about this township, to thinking about the whole country', said one mentor. In short, related to vision and strategy, several network leaders said, 'our *amyin pwint de* (our perspectives opened)'.

Along with these changes, members also reported a growth in confidence. Where Delta community groups had previously been afraid to present views even at the local level, they were able to express opinions at the national level.

Practically, network leaders also said that their project implementation skills had improved in areas of planning, budgeting, bookkeeping and monitoring.

And contributing to all of these above changes was a growth in the number of external linkages that the networks had. While previously having only local level connections, the networks now have linkages to journalists, legal experts, documentary makers, farmers groups from other regions, and other international and local NGOs such as ECODEV and Oxfam. Initially, Paung Ku facilitated these connections – but as the networks have grown, they are increasingly able to independently draw upon their contacts.

These connections were all used in the land law advocacy as the network not only formed and sent the recommendations to policy makers but also sought to raise the profile of the issue through the media.

3. Networks & Accountability

These Delta networks were able to form out of a unique set of circumstances and develop their scale and capacity. This section explores the question of how the networks are important politically in Myanmar.

At a basic level, a well functioning relationship between citizens and the state requires *voice* on the behalf of citizens and a *responsiveness* or accountability on behalf of the state. To what extent, then, has this networking affected either voice or responsiveness?

Overall, from the perspective of the Delta network leaders there was a perception that networking has increased the *voice* of citizens. Yet while there are small observed changes

on the government side, significant questions remain about whether there is a real increase in *responsiveness*.

Increasing citizen voice

In terms of increasing voice, the delta networks were seen to be a platform for three different functions – facilitating communication, aggregating citizen voices and sharpening advocacy messages.

Of surprising importance was the new ability to communicate between village groups using mobile phones. Before Cyclone Nargis there had been virtually no phone use in network villages making it extremely time consuming to organise or share information between geographically separated villages. Yet by early 2013 all network leaders had mobile phones and almost all villages involved have at least one person with a phone. In this way, flow of information – and organising potential – was transformed in the post cyclone period.

The presence of the network also allowed a new aggregation of citizen voices. This was particularly apparent in the land law campaign where – aided by new flows of information – a large number of farmers (almost 1500 across three townships) were able to add their signatures to the recommendations.

The network was also better able to develop advocacy messages. In the case of the land law campaign, the network was able to access legal and policy expertise to take widespread grassroots perspectives and articulate them as concrete policy recommendations. Network leaders also said that input of legal expertise had raised their capacity to analyse the laws and therefore engage more informatively with policy makers. Using external linkages with the Yangon-based print media, meanwhile, the network was able to facilitate several Myanmar and English

language journal articles about their campaign, amplifying the message to both a wider public audience and to government.

This sharpening of citizen voices into forms that could be presented directly to policy makers was also seen to present alternative platforms for addressing conflicts that might otherwise turn violent. Myanmar has seen a number of recent clashes between police and protesters over issues of land; in nearby Maubin at the end of February 2013, for example, police response to demonstrations by farmers led to clashes in which dozens were injured and one police officer was killed.

Overall, the networks were seen to be important as a platform where citizen voice could be strengthened beyond what individual village groups could achieve – and in a way which was not possible three years ago.

Increasing government responsiveness?

The networks' role in increasing government responsiveness – the other key dimension of accountability – is less clear, especially at the national level.

At the local and township level, network leaders reported that the authorities were not necessarily more proactive in responding to community's development needs, yet there were some small changes noted in the practice of local governance.

For example, a Paung Ku mentor related a story of a village member wanting to change the name on his land title and being requested by the official to pay a bribe of 10,000 kyat. Previously, it was felt that these kinds of bribes had to be paid in order to progress the request. However, the man said that he would only pay the 10,000 kyat if he was given a formal receipt with the name of the official. The official withdrew his demand

and changed the land title name without receiving any money.

Meanwhile, a farmer's association member gave the example of local military recruiting meetings. 'Before all families in the village had to attend and the boys had to enlist,' said one farmer. 'Now most families refuse to go'. Most households in the village now refuse to attend the recruiting meetings, yet did not face any repercussions from the military or village authorities.

These examples are individual, and not directly related to the networks. But the delta networks were also seen to be important in being able to share information about changes in the behaviour and actions of local government across different areas, allowing village groups to better gauge the space they might have and how far they could push with their demands.

At the regional and national level, network leaders expressed a similar picture. There were fewer restrictions applied and there was more ability to communicate with government. For example, after the land law recommendations had been submitted, U Myat Thein, a member of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and lower house *Hluttaw* member for Bogale met with the delta networks leadership, discussed the recommendations and fed back the *Hluttaw*'s decisions – including both areas of agreement and disagreement.

However, while some new interactions with government were seen positively, such as U Myat Thein's meeting with the network, others were seen negatively. For example, many interviewees expressed anger at the comments of a Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation U Myint Hlaing at a farmers' meeting in Bathein in February 2013, where

he said that in order to pay off debts farmers should consider eating only one meal per day.

Ultimately, the network leaders suggested that there was little evidence yet of increasing national level responsiveness to citizen needs. The reform of the Farmland Law was a key example of this, with the final approved law receiving a negative reaction from the network, as well as civil society actors in other areas.

At the same time, the new Farmland Law was seen to contain some positive changes for farming families in that there is greater freedom of choice in relation to crops, formalised right to sell, pawn and buy user rights and potentially better rights of appeal against unfair land confiscation. Farmers also said that agricultural loan amounts have increased, though not enough to meet needs fully. However, formal land ownership remains with the state (as stipulated in the 2008 Constitution) and there was little progress in formalising fairer market rules (especially to do with measurement of rice). Overall, there was little change between the Farmland Law draft stage and the final Law approved by Parliament meaning that civil society advocacy efforts – including from the Delta networks – likely had only limited impact.

The example of the delta networks is important because it demonstrates new ways in which citizen voices are being sharpened and aggregated – in a manner that would not have been possible three years ago. Authorities at all levels are seen to be less likely to suppress opinion and are more open to dialogue about issues. However, while there have been some changes noted in government practice at the village and township level, there still remains little overall evidence of increasing government responsiveness to expressed community

needs. In other words, while some aspects of citizen-state interaction have changed, the extent of the impact is not yet clear.

Loading goods in Bogale

4. External Support

Network members themselves and outside observers reported that there had been substantial capacity change in the networks since their formation – related to vision, linkages, confidence and scale – and that this helped increase citizen voice.

To what extent (if at all) did the support of Paung Ku and other agencies contribute to the network's capacity development? How did network members perceive the role of Paung Ku, and its impact on the growth of the networks? And what challenges are there ahead?

Perceived Impact of External Support

Network leaders reported that Paung Ku influenced the networks in four key ways.

First, most leaders expressed that Paung Ku's facilitation of linkages was important. Cross visits and inter village meetings through 2009 and 2010 was critical to building the momentum to form the networks. And the links to media and legal expertise were seen to be crucial in the land law advocacy. The

impetus to form the networks came from the community groups, but it was felt that without this active facilitation there would not have been sufficient drive to establish and develop the networks.

Second, Paung Ku's basic operational support – subsidising travel, meeting costs and mobile phones – was seen to be critical to allowing a greater intensity of networking. The majority of network members and leaders are from villages that remain critically poor, having never recovered to pre-Nargis levels of development. 'Travel costs are a lot, it would be hard to organise things if we paid everything ourselves,' said one leader. Small scale external funding to allow more communication and interconnection was seen to be necessary.

Third, the external influence of Paung Ku and other NGOs such as Oxfam were seen to encourage the networks to be more inclusive – especially in relation to participation of women. The Zonal Committees, which lead the four different networks, have always been entirely composed of men. Yet the networks' norms were seen to be changing. 'We realised it is not good for only men to be in the committee,' said one network leader. And this has led to the formation of women's associations in the different areas, with the primary goal of supporting a greater role for women both in the networks and in local government. Paung Ku (and other NGOs) – particularly through training and mentoring – were seen to be influential in supporting this shift.

Finally, the backbone of Paung Ku's support in the Delta – small grants for local development projects – was seen to both create the auspices for initial engagement and connections between groups, as well as stimulate the wider community trust and support that the networks rely on. Network

leaders reported that without tangible development gains – through grassroots projects – it would be difficult to motivate communities to engage in discussions about other issues, including wider legal or policy change. In this way, grassroots development projects and policy advocacy were seen to be indivisible, and network leaders warned against Paung Ku shifting more clearly into a pure policy role.

Crucially, network leaders also reflected that while Paung Ku had been engaged in various ways, Paung Ku staff had not sought to control the network. Decisions to form the networks, and the issues they work on, occurred in conversation with Paung Ku. But network leaders themselves repeatedly expressed that they were firmly in the 'driver's seat' of the networks.

Overall, the ability of Paung Ku and other agencies to allow their support to evolve flexibly according to group and network needs was critical. Throughout the period of engagement Paung Ku's work stretched across a number of fields, often occurring simultaneously – from supporting relief activities, to local community development projects, to regional networking, to media activity and finally to national level policy advocacy. If confined to one sector or to one specific predetermined project plan, this kind of flexible support would not have been possible.

On-going Challenges

Development of the Delta networks and their new national level policy engagement is an example of important new trends in Myanmar's citizen-state relationship. However, despite clear growth in their capacity, significant questions remain for the Delta networks and the role of Paung Ku.

First, the social connectedness stimulated by the Nargis response was by nature dynamic and flexible. This allowed groups to work on a variety of complex issues, and explore new ways to organise themselves and engage with state authorities. As the delta networks become more institutionalised – with governing 'zonal committees' and four sub groups (women's, farmer's, fisheries and youth groups) – will it be able to maintain the dynamism that was so obvious following Nargis?

Second, increasing women's leadership within the network remains a challenge. To what extent will the new women's associations create a ladder for new women leaders, or will they be a means for the Zonal Committees to 'outsource' gender and not address key issue of inequality of power?

Third, while operational funding and support for grassroots development projects has clearly been important, how long will this level of funding need to be maintained? Will long term operational funding undermine the dynamism of interaction which has been seen in the last few years, or is it a necessary part of supporting networking in resource poor rural areas?

Overall, in order to better understand the relationship between Paung Ku (and other) external support, network capacity change and wider community change, further research is needed. In particular, further research needs to explore what changes there have been in delta villages that were not engaged with Paung Ku and the networks, yet still face similar conditions. In this way it may be possible to differentiate more clearly between wider social change in the Delta, and the particular changes in villages within the network.

5. Conclusion

New grassroots networks are an important feature of the way politics is changing in Myanmar. There have been substantial changes in scope, scale and capacity of the delta township networks since their formation in 2010. These have created a new platform for both addressing shared development needs and seeking to strengthen accountability.

The Zonal Committees' impact on policy making and regional development outcomes is still to be determined. And they will evolve over time – they may even dissolve – but, most importantly, these new relationships and ideas appear to have shifted the way that these civil society actors are operating and envisioning the changes they seek to make. These connections and new ways of thinking and organizing are not likely to disappear, and they are a strong platform for the future.

Experiences from the delta networks also indicate that external agencies may be able to support their development. Yet they also hold two key lessons for external agencies interested in supporting such growth.

First, **networking is best supported by working with the momentum of the wider social context** – in this case changes stimulated by the response to both Cyclone Nargis and land rights. Without supporting activity that aligned with – and built upon – these particular circumstances, the growth in the networks may not have been possible.

Second, **the fluid nature of grassroots networking means that standard project responses will not be appropriate.** Predetermined plans or a specific sector focus does not allow for the flexibility which is required in order to respond to the needs of networks at different stages. Where support to the Delta networks was effective it was through Paung Ku and other agencies' long term willingness to work across sectors based not on fixed plans, but on the issues that aligned with the community groups and networks changing visions.

Rather than attempting to 'grow networks,' then, this case study suggests that external organisations are best placed to identify where social shifts and movements are already occurring and engage flexibly in a way that can help to broaden vision and increase inclusivity.