Communication plays an important role in promoting good governance and public service provision. Effective communication can improve the relationship between government and the public and can strengthen the responsiveness and accountability of the government. A good flow of information will enable the public to be aware of a government’s existing and future programs, to understand their rights and obligations, to be enthusiastic about expressing their needs and views, and to know how to access services. A use of strategic communication mechanisms can promote the accountability of government bureaucrats, thus, helping with service delivery reduction and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of government programs.

On the other hand, if communication is not effectively used, governance reform is believed to have more adverse effects and challenges. It generally causes less political will (the willingness of the public to be involved in policies and government processes), resistance or opposition by different interest groups or stakeholders and hostile public opinions. Effective communication can improve public knowledge about issues. It can improve the quality of the decision-making process, thus, helping to resolve conflict, build trust and promote the accountability of government bureaucrats, thus, helping to strengthen democracy by preventing conflict between the government and civil society needs.

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Informing and Engaging the Public
Improving local governance and empowering communities in Tanintharyi Region

Context
Deconcentration in Myanmar, to the States and Regions, is an important part of the democratic transition that our country is going through. State and Region governments are seeking to develop effective government at the local level, which responds to the needs and demands of local communities. This Policy Brief should be seen in this context. It focuses on Taninthary Region and asks what reforms may be needed to ensure more responsive and effective government.

In this Policy Brief, you will read why public communication and public participation matter for Taninthary Region Government, local context of Taninthary Region in relation to access to information and participation, case studies that successfully addressed these two themes, and recommendations that provide practical solutions based on local context to address issues discussed in the workshops.

Policy Brief

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This policy brief paper is developed from the handbook “Informing and Engaging the Public – Improving local governance and empowering communities in Kayin State and Taninthary Region”.

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Editor - Kvin International (UK)
Another Development Policy Think Tank
office@anotherdevelopment.org +959 24801421
62, 5th Floor, Nyaung Tone Street, Sanchaung Township, Yangon. www.anotherdevelopment.org

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(6) Recommendations
These recommendations learn from international good practice and build on the insights and ideas of government officials and MPs, who participated in workshops. Successful implementation of some of our proposed reforms will be challenging, given resource constraints. However, there is commitment and enthusiasm within forward looking regions like Taninthary, to innovate and deliver better for their local communities.

What can be done to improve public communication in Taninthary Region

Develop a public communications strategy:
Using multiple communication channels as a means to increase public awareness including radio, print media (magazines, handbook and flyers), websites, creative performance, and SMS. This could include:
- Establishing local radio stations (such as FM radio) to transmit information in a timely manner and with overcoming language and literacy issues that arise with print media.
- Collaborating with a telecom company or other potential partner to initiate an SMS based communication system where short messages of laws, government programs, disaster warnings and other messages could be sent.
- Amending the current Taninthary government websites with more information on simplified laws and rules, a directory of officials with their contact details and availability, statistics on finances and details of the annual budget, and available services and how to use them.
- Creating a guidebook to inform the public about government’s available services, how to use them, and who to contact.
- Incorporating multiple languages relevant to local contexts in each communication channel.
- Applying tools such as community meetings, print media and radio as the most applicable to reach a dispersed rural public.
- Promoting government responsiveness and accountability:
- Promoting government’s responsiveness and accountability by allowing public feedback and complaints via communication channels.
- Using SMS to collect public opinions through surveys, to request local information, and to receive public feedback and complaints.

What can be done to improve public participation in Taninthary Region

Participatory Budget
Build on the success of recent budget participation initiatives by:
- Allowing the public to review budgets, participate in thematic areas, and coordinate with the municipality government.
- Initiating own participatory budget process in each government department by covering more specific thematic issues related to their department.
- Promoting public participation in budget process by coordinating and facilitating meetings and forums, simplifying budget information in simple formats, and capacity building for community representatives.
- Exploring the use of multiple simplified formats - posters, public displays, magazines or other creative formats - to ensure the information of Citizen Budget and other budget information reach both urban and rural audiences.

Land Issue
Capacity building of stakeholders for land registration, participatory assessment and evaluation, and public awareness-raising
- Using the Community Score Card (CSC) or community gatherings to assess and evaluate public opinions and needs on land registration and service provision.
- Creation of a center for legal advice through coordination by the land department, communities, and CSOs in terms of human and financial resources – the functions and components of the center could be based on a needs assessment of the community and might include legal advice, registration procedures, and/or information on other issues.
- Incorporating monks or religious leaders in land issues to disseminate information, to mobilise community members, and to raise public awareness.
- Establishing community-based land services agency in collaboration with the land departments to mobilize local people’s participation in addressing land registry issues.

Women’s Participation
- Using traditional tools such as multi-stakeholder (women, religious leaders, officials) meetings and dialogues on women’s participation, social dialogues, awareness-raising campaigns for women, and stakeholder commitment to support women’s rights and participation.

Investment and development projects
- Empowering community participation through community dialogues, village workshops, and training-of-trainers for community representatives to enable them to influence the decision-making in the local development projects.
- Increasing public access to information about investment and mining projects by incorporating the most suitable communication channels - including different formats of print media, social media, website, and traditional meetings and consultations - to convey understandable and simplified information. This could be done through collaboration between Union Ministry, regional government and MPs, CSOs, and private companies to obtain updated information and deliver to the public in a timely manner.

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