The Role of Power Dynamics for Community Engagement

A Case Study in Myanmar

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Abstract
The participation of grassroots communities became a *must* of development projects. International organizations advocate for the inclusion of community members to ensure projects' success and sustainability. However, community engagement is often undermined by existing power dynamics between implementing agencies and communities. Power imbalances result from the lack of interdependency between actors and are manifested with the employment of institutional norms and assumptions. Through a case study in Myanmar, this research explores the influence of power dynamics on community engagement in development projects. It does so by illustrating the consequences that implementing agencies' assumptions about participation have on community engagement practices. Semi-structured qualitative interviews investigated how staff and volunteers perceive the notion of participation and whether their perceptions influence their behaviour. Results indicate that assumptions about the inherent positive value of participation simplify staff and volunteers' understanding of this concept, its challenges as well as its enablers. Moreover, findings show that implementing agencies are constrained by projects' structures and lack institutional incentives to question their understanding and current practice of community engagement. This, in turn, leads to three hindering community engagement practices: limited consultation, careless provision of (dis)incentives, and inadequate feedback mechanisms. The research concludes that the exercise of power negatively influences community engagement practices in development projects in Myanmar. For the achievement of meaningful community engagement, the notion of participation should be freed from assumptions. Thereby, the research recommends lengthening projects' timeframes and rebalancing power dynamics between implementing agencies and community members in development projects by increasing interdependency between the actors.

Acknowledgements

Summary

International development organizations increasingly advocate for the inclusion of grassroots communities in aid projects. Community members should be involved from the inception to the evaluation phase to ensure projects' relevance, ownership, and sustainability. However, community engagement is often undermined by existing power structures between communities and implementing agencies, as well as within communities themselves. While current research extensively shows the limitations of community members' participation in development projects, further studies are needed to dig deeper into the causes behind community engagement challenges. By building on the example of Myanmar, the present research aimed at exploring the influence that power dynamics between communities and implementing agencies have on community engagement in development projects.

One of the practical manifestations of the exercise of power is the making of assumptions that will influence the design and implementation of projects. The latter implies making implicit cognitive judgments or normative claims based on common beliefs and intuitions without questioning the true value of those cognitions. The concept of community engagement itself is built on assumptions. This study focused on the implementing agencies' assumption about the exclusive positive value of community members' participation in development projects. Therefore, the research attempted to show the role of power for community engagement by exploring the influence that implementing agencies' normative understanding of participation has on community engagement practices of development projects in Myanmar.

Myanmar was selected as a case study for its distinctive story and characteristics. After decades of military dictatorship, the country is undergoing a process of liberalization which has been key in populating it with several international projects. Burmese society was for many years under the strict control and oppression of the Government, limiting the population freedom of expression. Community engagement thus represents a challenging element in the realization of these projects.

Semi-structured interviews with staff and volunteers operating in Myanmar investigated their understanding of the concept of participation and whether their perceptions influenced their behaviour. Results indicate that implementing agencies share a simplified positive framing of community engagement. The normative understanding of participation is reflected in what

interviewees identified to be its challenges and enablers. Both challenges and enablers are limited to technical aspects or institutional arrangements, leaving no room for the discussion of the exercise of power. Notwithstanding the predominance of a positive view of participation, interviews revealed that staff and volunteers are aware of the contextual reality and the influence of power but lack the institutional motivation to question current practice. Implementing agencies face a dilemma between ensuring meaningful community engagement and adhering to projects' incentives, funding, and reporting cycles set by donors. Findings illustrated that the normative understanding of participation together with implementing agencies' dilemma result in potentially harmful community engagement practices, i.e. limited consultation, the careless provision of (dis)incentives, and inadequate feedback mechanisms.

The research explored the causes behind implementing agencies' assumption about participation and identified projects' narrow timeframes as well as the lack of interdependency between community members and implementing agencies to be decisive elements. Yet, it shows that both factors are in turn products of power imbalances between the actors involved. Therefore, assumptions are manifests of power, raised by the lack of time and interdependency. In addition, the present research argued that both the exercise of power and assumptions are mutually reinforcing. Implementing agencies' simplified understanding of community engagement and consequent community engagement practices are a way of exerting control over communities. Assumptions are at the same time the product as well as the medium to the exercise of power.

In conclusion, the research illustrated that the exercise of power negatively influences community engagement in development projects in Myanmar. To achieve meaningful community engagement, the research recommended lengthening projects' timeframes and increasing interdependency between implementing agencies and community members. Further studies are encouraged to explore how projects' structures can be modified to increase the interdependence between those actors.

List of Abbreviations

ARB Project	Building Accountable Red Cross Branches through Community Engagement
CEA	Community Engagement and Accountability
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
MRCS	Myanmar Red Cross Society
RCRC	Red Cross Red Crescent
SRC	Swedish Red Cross
VDC	Village Development Committee

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Table of Figures

1. Introduction

The present research explores the influence of power on community engagement in development projects through a case study in Myanmar. This chapter introduces the research by discussing its background and motivation (section 1.1). It then zooms into the study purpose (section 1.2) and the research question (section 1.3). Finally, it illustrates the conceptual framework (section 1.4) and the way the research is structured (section 1.5). Facilitating the readers' understanding of the research problem and scope, this introduction is key to fully appreciate the study results and consequent discussion.

1.1 Research Problem

International development organizations[1] have given increasing importance to the participation of grassroots communities in aid projects (Anderson et al., 2012; Cechvala, 2019; Dara, 2009). They succeeded in prioritizing this concept by employing it as a '*must*' of their projects, advocating for the inclusion of local perspectives to ensure relevance, ownership, and sustainability (Cechvala, 2019; Dara, 2009). However, community engagement[2] is often undermined by existing power structures between communities and implementing agencies, as well as within communities themselves (Konyndyk & Worden, 2019; Swithern, 2019). Being an abstract concept yet having extremely real consequences, the exercise of power is the invisible determinant of a project's success or failure. Unbalanced power structures can result in long-held institutional norms and assumptions[3] which silence marginalized groups and hinder the implementation of bottom-up initiatives (Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, 2019). Therefore, assumptions are one of the practical manifestations of power in development projects and represent the lens through which this research investigates its aim.

The notion of participation has been the object of several assumptions from implementing agencies. The unproblematic positive framing of participation hides the complexity of the phenomenon which is reduced to a linear process. In practice, it might be difficult to

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[1] Innumerable actors and layers contribute to the realization of development projects. The present study considers international organizations to be the intermediaries between donors and aid recipients. In other words, they are responsible to use donors' funding for the realization of projects targeting, in this case, community members. For the sake of simplicity, they can be here referred to as 'implementing agencies'.

[2] For the sake of simplicity, the present research employs the terms 'participation' and 'community engagement' interchangeably.

[3] Assumptions are defined as those propositions accepted as true without question or proof (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). The author is aware that assumptions about community engagement are not only from institutions but also from community representatives. While recognizing that both types of assumptions are equally important, the scope of the present research focuses on the former.

acknowledge the complexities of participation, which are commonly intangible, hidden, and silent (Woroniecki et al., 2019). Hence, academic research covers a crucial role in investigating beyond the surface of this concept, exploring what it truly entails, what it is implicitly communicated, or what its unintended outcomes are[4]. Current research extensively shows the limitations and challenges of community engagement in development projects. However, further research is needed to dig deeper into the causes behind community engagement challenges. It urges the need to explore established relations of power and approaches in development projects[5] and the consequences of uneven power dynamics on community engagement (Davey et al., 2013).

1.2 Aim and Scope

The research aim is to explore the influence of power on community engagement through a case study in Myanmar. To do so, the research explores the effects of implementing agencies' assumptions on community engagement practices. Specifically, the research investigates the widely shared assumption which gives participation an exclusively positive connotation. The objective of this study is not to discourage participatory approaches, but rather to complexify implementing agencies' current understanding of participation (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). The questioning of this concept intends to shed light on the conditions which should be provided for participation to be truly empowering. Narrowing the research focus towards one of the practical manifestations of power, i.e. assumptions, in the specific context of Myanmar, enables the influence of power on community engagement practices to be ever more visible.

Myanmar was selected as a case study for its distinctive story and characteristics. The country presents a challenging legacy left by the former military dictatorship and decades of "*brutal repression of dissent and public debate*" (World Bank, 2019, p. 2). After many years of military oppression and censorship, Burmese society, economy, and culture are gradually changing (BBC, 2018; Forsyth, 2018). Its recent liberalization attracted several international organizations that are now implementing diverse projects throughout the country. Community engagement thus constitutes a crucial and challenging element for the success of these projects

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[4] Facing significant limitations, complexities might be blind to the researcher as well. The author is aware of the challenges she faces due to her background, unconscious biases, and position of power. Self-reflexivity is thus central to the present research and is discussed in section 3.3.

[5] 'Development projects' here refers to projects which are not related to a specific emergency and which go beyond addressing basic needs. Their lifespan is usually longer and yearly based. The ARB project described in section 4.2 is an example of these longer-term commitments by international organizations.

and the overall resilience of the country. It is thus a good time to capture possible learnings and possibly adjust institutional approaches and practices along the way.

The work has been mainly based on a project implemented by the Swedish Red Cross (SRC) and Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS): Building Accountable Red Cross Branches through Community Engagement (ARB project). The wealth of experience originated from the ARB project application represents a crucial possibility for learning and exploring enablers and constraints of implementing agencies' current practices. In addition, supplementary insights were gathered from other INGOs active in Myanmar. The research truly benefited by the comparison of two distinct approaches and perspectives on community engagement, i.e. the Red Cross Red Crescent and other INGOs approaches.

1.3 Research Question

By observing the relationship between international organizations and community members through a case study in Myanmar, the researcher intends to shed light on the influence of the exercise of power on communities' participation in development projects. In order to address the research aim and see how community engagement practices are influenced by implementing agencies' assumptions, the study explores the institutional understanding of the concept of participation, its challenges as well as its enablers. It, therefore, attempts to answer the following research question:

"How does the normative understanding of participation

influence community engagement practices

in Myanmar?"

1.4 Conceptual Framework

There are several key concepts that need to be described in relation to the research, such as community, participation, community engagement, power, and assumptions.

A 'community' can be location, identity, or organization-based and is characterized by a complex web of interconnected components, such as religion and culture. Communities are dynamic entities constantly undergoing a process of transformation and self-identification. Interconnections among their components are thus transactional, negotiable, and time-dependent (Etzioni, 1996). The concept of community is a simplification of the reality as each member is complex and different (Pelling, 2007; Walter, 2004). Section 2.2.2 further

problematizes the concept of 'community' by discussing the superficial and instrumental way institutions often employ it. However, human communities present common conditions affecting participants' identity and position, i.e. beliefs, preferences, resources, risks, and needs. Community engagement refers to the process of involving the community in organizations' projects and work. Community engagement can take many forms in the different stages of the process. Overall in this research, it is conceived as those practices through which international organizations hold themselves accountable to the population they work with, ensuring their active inclusion in the project from the inception to the evaluation phases. Ideally, the two parties co-own the project and mutual learning is provided to improve the response as it goes along. The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement defines community engagement as: "*the processes used by Movement components to engage and communicate with vulnerable and affected people in order to better understand their diverse capacities and vulnerabilities, gather their perspectives on their needs, priorities and preferences around how assistance is designed and delivered, and ensure they have safe and equitable access and opportunities to provide input and feedback on the quality and effectiveness of assistance and to participate actively in decisions that affect them*" (Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, 2019).

Community engagement or participation is often undermined by existing power dynamics between communities and aid-providers as well as within communities themselves (Konyndyk & Worden, 2019). Despite the present research aim to explore the tangible consequences of power dynamics on community engagement rather than analysing the concept per se, power is here defined as the control of one actor over another actor's fate (Fiske, 1993).

Finally, the present research refers to assumptions as those unstated propositions accepted as true without question or proof (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020; Mejía D., 2009).

As figure 1 shows, these concepts are here interlinked in a cyclical way. The exercise of power leads to the making of assumptions which, in turn, influence community engagement practices. At the same time, community engagement practices can lead to the making of assumptions which, in turn, can reinforce the exercise of power. The concepts of power, assumption, and the way they are interlinked are more extensively discussed in Chapter 2.
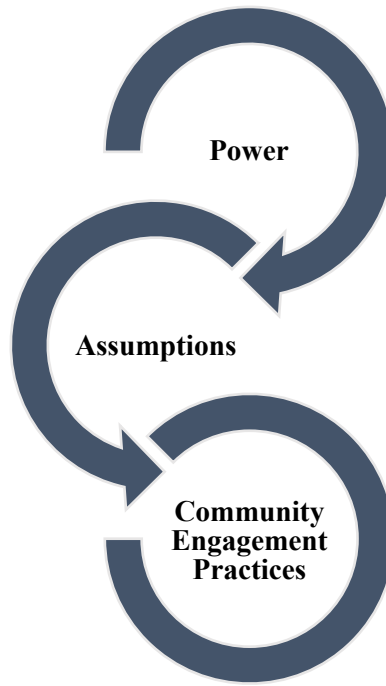
Figure 1. The relationship between power, assumptions, and community engagement practices

Illustration by the author

1.5 Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 introduced and set the boundaries of the research by presenting the subject area, the research objectives as well as the research question. The conceptual framework is here defined, indicating to the reader the study's path and direction. A literature review of the main themes is presented in Chapter 2, showing to the readers the interconnections among the principal elements constituting the research, i.e. power, assumptions, and community engagement. Chapter 3 comprises the selected study methodology, presenting selected data collection and analysis methods, as well as the research assumptions, challenges, and limitations. The context of the research is portrayed in Chapter 4 through a non-exhaustive introduction to the case study in Myanmar and the ARB project. While Chapter 5 presents the results from the data analysis, Chapter 6 discusses their implications for the research question, objective, and problem. Chapter 7 concludes the study and suggests further areas of inquiry.

2. Literature Review

The present chapter positions the research in comparison with previous studies. Relevant literature is presented to describe as well as show the interconnectedness among the concepts of power (section 2.1), assumptions (section 2.2) and community engagement (section 2.3).

2.1 Power

A theoretical analysis of the notion of power is beyond the scope of the present research. Rather, the focus here is on the tangible consequences of power on community engagement. Nevertheless, the concept is first introduced through a theoretical lens (section 2.1.1) and then explored in its empirical expressions (section 2.1.2).

2.1.1 A Theoretical Framing of Power

Schaerer et al. define power as: "*individuals' asymmetric control over valuable resources*" (2018, p. 73). Similarly, Fiske's definition of power describes it as the: "*asymmetrical control over another person's outcome*" (1993, p. 623). The definition here adopted differs from the aforementioned ones as power is not necessarily described as 'asymmetric'. Already in 1962, Emerson suggested the possibility of a '*balanced power relation*' which is here acknowledged. Therefore, the present research defines power as the control of one actor, i.e. a person or a group, over another actor's fate (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993; Schaerer et al., 2018). The power relation is still dynamic, and its power balance can shift over time. Each actor is thus to a degree dependent on the other for the accomplishment of a determined outcome. Power and dependency are closely interlinked, with less dependent actors being more powerful, and vice versa (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993). Dependency is in itself determined by two variables, as it is directly proportional to the level of interest in the specific outcome to be accomplished while being inversely proportional to the availability of alternatives in the way the outcome can be accomplished (Emerson, 1962).

As Figure 2 shows, power is both dynamic and systemic. It is a dynamic concept which generally determines change, while also being continually shaped by change (Brown & Donini, 2014; Woroniecki et al., 2019). Manifested power dynamics result from past events and ideologies (Atallah, 2016; Christie, 2015; Matin et al., 2018). The present study adopts the categorization of power dynamics presented by Woroniecki et al. (2019), which is based on a literature review of 143 papers on the framing of power in climate change adaptation research.

The authors distinguish between expressions and dynamics of power. Power can be expressed as an enabling function, i.e. *power to,* or as a constraining function imposed by one actor on another, i.e. *power over*. These expressions of power can thus result in different dynamics, i.e. *empowerment, disempowerment, resistance, and participation* (Woroniecki et al., 2019). Expressions and dynamics of power are neither fixed nor explicit throughout the project length. What is portrayed as the *power to* can in reality be or suddenly change in *power over*, depending on the specific actors and project's phase.
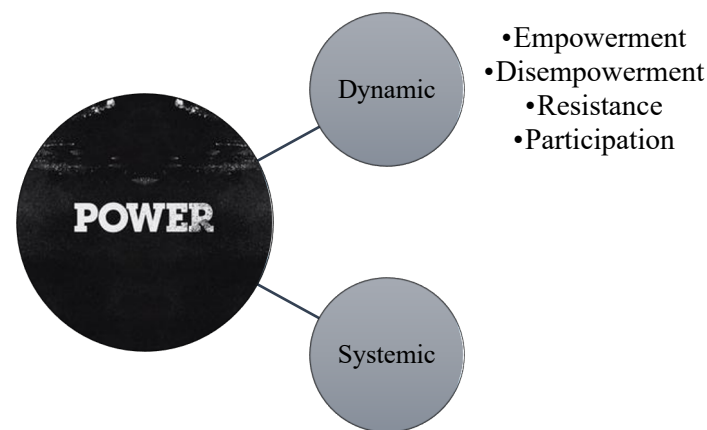
Figure 2. The Features of Power

Illustration by the author

While being exercised by the actors holding it, power is a property of the system and it is not related to the specific features of the actors involved (Emerson, 1962). By changing the structure of the system, power dynamics can, therefore, be shifted and balance ambitioned. Matin et al. (2018) eloquently elaborated on the aforementioned concept: "*if the problem is systematic, then solutions lie [...] in approaches that build towards systemic transformation*" (p. 202). For example, in development projects, community members are less powerful than implementing agencies because of the overall development system structure, rather than because of the innate characteristics of the actors (Dara, 2009).

The concepts of dependency and power will be empirically described in the following section (2.1.2) through an analysis of the relationship between implementing agencies and participants in international development projects.

2.1.2 The Power Relationship between Implementing Agencies and Community Members

Power is an abstract concept with significant and real consequences (Swithern, 2019; Woroniecki et al., 2019). In development projects, such as the one here explored, power can be 'observed' at two distinct levels: between implementing agencies and local communities, as well as within communities themselves (Brown & Donini, 2014). The power relationship between implementing agencies and participants is not balanced (Anderson et al., 2012; Steets et al., 2016). Section 2.3 illustrates how agencies retain most of the decision-making power, leaving limited and pre-determined space for participants' active contribution to projects' design (ALNAP, 2015; Cechvala, 2019; Clarke, 2017). Moreover, implementing agencies often fail to conduct proper context analysis[6] and assume to understand power dynamics in the contexts they fund (Brown & Donini, 2014; Steets et al., 2016; Woroniecki et al., 2019). Subsequently, they benefit some and marginalize others in what the researcher Devin G. Atallah (2016, p. 92) defines as: "*daily slow-onset socio-political disasters*", inflating pre-existing imbalances within communities themselves (Anderson et al., 2012; Cechvala, 2019; IFRC, 2016).

Human relationships are fundamentally shaped by power, and the relationship between community members and international development organizations is no exception (Walter, 2004). Applying the definitions of power and dependency described in section 2.1.1, one might argue that in development projects while community members' fate is dependent on implementing agencies who retain decision-making power, the same does not hold the other way around (Dara, 2009). Implementing agencies are not formally required to be accountable to community members, whose perspectives are not necessary elements of projects' indicators, evaluations, and staff incentives (Jean, 2017).

2.2 Assumptions

The present section discusses the notion of assumptions. Section 2.2.1 theoretically introduces the concept, while section 2.2.2 presents two implementing agencies' assumptions that have the potential to highly influence community engagement in development projects.

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[6] IFRC (2019b) describes context analysis as: "*the knowledge of power structures, community dynamics, conflict connectors and dividers, etc. that make up the context in which an agency is operating*" (p.3)

2.2.1 A Theoretical Framing of Assumptions

This study aims to explore the relationship between power and assumptions, and their influence on community engagement. Assumptions imply making implicit cognitive judgments or normative claims based on common beliefs and intuitions without questioning the true value of those cognitions (Mejía D., 2009). A common example of assumptions is stereotypes. Stereotypes entail describing a person based only on one of his/her distinctive features, e.g. culture, gender, age, etc. (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). Specifically, descriptive stereotypes claim to depict people's behaviours, preferences, and competences limiting interactions' potential (Fiske, 1993). Assumptions have a cognitive function as they reduce complexity in judgement and decision-making, yet they can lead to severe and systematic errors when a value is attached or interaction limited (Johnson & Levin, 2009; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). In 1993, Fiske argued that the powerful are more prone to stereotyping because they do not need to pay attention to those dependent on them. Fiske's argument seems reasonable as one can expect powerful actors to pay less *attention* to others, while dependent actors are supposedly more attentive to the ones their destiny depends upon. Moreover, apart from being less dependent, powerful actors are often busier and thus less likely to have time to give detailed consideration to others (Fiske, 1993; Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). Consequently, the present study argues that assumptions can be formulated as a function of interdependency and time. They are inversely proportional to both the level of interdependency and the amount of time: as interdependency between actors and the amount of time increase, assumptions decrease.

Seeing that stereotypes are a form of assumptions, one might argue that the powerful are more prone to making assumptions as their fate is less dependent on others, and they do not have the time or motivation to question cognitions. However, Fiske's argument goes beyond this rather intuitive correlation where power leads to stereotyping and presents the '*theory of the mutually reinforcing interaction between power and stereotyping*', hereafter referred to as 'the mutually reinforcing theory'. She argues that stereotypes, in turn, reinforce power by restricting the stereotyped freedom: "*power is control, and stereotypes are one way to exert control*" (Fiske, 1993). Therefore, as stereotypes are a type of assumption, the present research argues for the validity of the mutually reinforcing theory also for assumptions in general, beyond stereotypes. Consequently, in development projects, not only does power affect assumptions, but also making assumptions is a way of retaining power. Figure 3 represents the relationship between power and assumptions according to the mutually reinforcing theory.
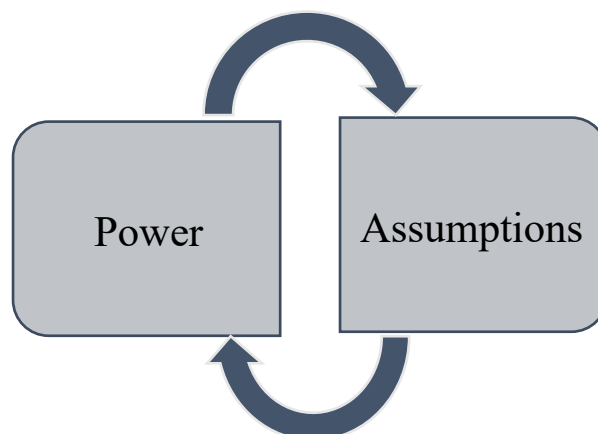
Figure 3. The relationship between power and assumptions

Illustration by the author

Both human and institutional features, such as the lack of interdependency and time, inhibit our cognitive capacities and lead to the making of assumptions. The good news is that assumptions are systematic, and it is possible to act on their causes to hinder their production. They can be considered structural properties of the system which are not contingent to specific individuals in positions of power. Fiske's theory on stereotypes confirms the systemic basis of assumptions by stating that: "*any group in the kind of social structure described here would be likely to stereotype other people*" (Fiske, 1993). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that in a system where dependency is unbalanced and time is lacking, assumptions are likely to rise. It follows that by balancing power and thus increasing interdependence and time, assumptions will decrease.

2.2.2 Two Implementing Agencies' Assumptions: Communities as Homogeneous Entities and Participation as Empowerment

Section 2.1.2 showed the unbalanced dependency between implementing agencies and community members. Development projects are also characterized by limited timeframes, pressuring organizations to deliver in time (Anderson et al., 2012). Accordingly, if unequal power relations foster assumptions, it is reasonable to state that also in development projects the less dependent actor, i.e. implementing agencies, is prone to making assumptions. Indeed, the so-called '*pre-packaged assistance*', comprising pre-planning and pre-identification of

beneficiaries, is not uncommon in the development arena (Anderson et al., 2012; Swithern, 2019). Particularly, two assumptions might highly influence community engagement in development projects: (a) addressing the community as a homogeneous entity; (b) defining participation as empowerment.

Implementing agencies often portray communities as homogeneous entities, by describing them as either victims or agents of change (IFRC, 2016; Steets et al., 2016; Walter, 2004). In the first case, the relationship between implementing agencies and community members is too often referred to, and assumed to be, an exchange between the powerful and the powerless, fundamentally disempowering the latter (Anderson et al., 2012; Brown & Donini, 2014; Clarke, 2017). Community members are stereotyped as victims whose resilience or knowledge should be enhanced, failing to acknowledge their existing capacities (Christie, 2015; Dara, 2009; Swithern, 2019). In contrast, communities are also increasingly portrayed as agents of change, while their resilience is romanticized (Etzioni, 1996; Pelling, 2007; Walter, 2004). The World Disasters Report on community resilience explains: "*meanwhile, just as dangerous as ignoring coping and adaptive capacities completely is the danger that outsiders, impressed by the mere fact of survival romanticize community resilience*" (Walter, 2004, p. 17). The researchers Lama et al. (2017) comment on the above dichotomy by claiming that: *"such either/or fallacy fails to capture the wide spectrum of outcomes that could be possible"* (p. 199).

Concerning the second assumption, without a common and shared definition, the concept of participation covers multiple and contrasting forms of engagement, while sometimes being considered as an "add-on" (Brown & Donini, 2014; Cechvala, 2019). The Red Cross Red Crescent report '*All the Evidence We Need*" (2019) states: "*it takes creativity to capture and communicate what effective participation actually looks like*" (p. 8), while at the same time claiming that "*participation is part of everything that everyone in the Movement does every day, a way of working that reflects values and mission*" (p. 12). The report employs the term as a buzz word encompassing a wide spectrum of activities that serve multiple interests, making the reader questioning the true value of the term (Arnstein, 1969; White, 1996). What is usually referred to as 'participation' can instead be consultation or information sharing (Arnstein, 1969). Furthermore, the prime focus has been mainly on the mechanisms of participation, instead of its content (White, 1996).

Although participation represents one of the four power dynamics proposed by Woroniecki et al. (2019), it is often a priori associated with the concept of empowerment. Therefore,

participation has been mainly embraced in a normative rather than practical way, implying a positive connotation to it, whilst its 'inherent advantages' have never been truly questioned by international organizations (Anderson et al., 2012; Jean, 2017). Adopting the words of Woroniecki et al. (2019): "*the frames analysis highlights a research blind spot if participation is linked to effectiveness in a straightforward manner, through unproblematic framings of power to or empowerment*" (p. 11). This assumption implies linearity between the amount of participation and the degree of empowerment, considering *more participation* as the desired goal in all projects, favouring quantity over quality (Brown & Donini, 2014).

The present study considers the assumption about participation to have the potential to be decisive for the outcome of community engagement practices. Hence, this assumption was selected to be the focus of the subsequent interviews' results and discussion.

2.3 The Empirical Expressions of Power and Assumptions in Development Projects

This research focuses on the influence of power and assumptions on community engagement. It follows a presentation of current evidence on the consequences of unbalanced power relations and assumptions in development projects[7].

Unequal power relations can be revealed by observing the diverse stages of a project, i.e. initial assessment, planning, implementation and monitoring, and evaluation (Cechvala, 2019; Swithern, 2019). An insufficient level of consultation with community members might lead to the proliferation of assumptions on the latter's identities and preferences. The community is then depicted as a homogeneous entity desiring to participate in institutions' projects. Figure 4 shows the degree to which communities are consulted in the different phases of a project cycle. The maximum level of consultation occurs in the initial assessment, whereas planning and evaluation experience the lowest ones (Brown & Donini, 2014).

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[7] The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) defines projects as: "sets of coordinated activities implemented to meet specific objectives within defined time, cost and performance parameters" (2010, p.13).
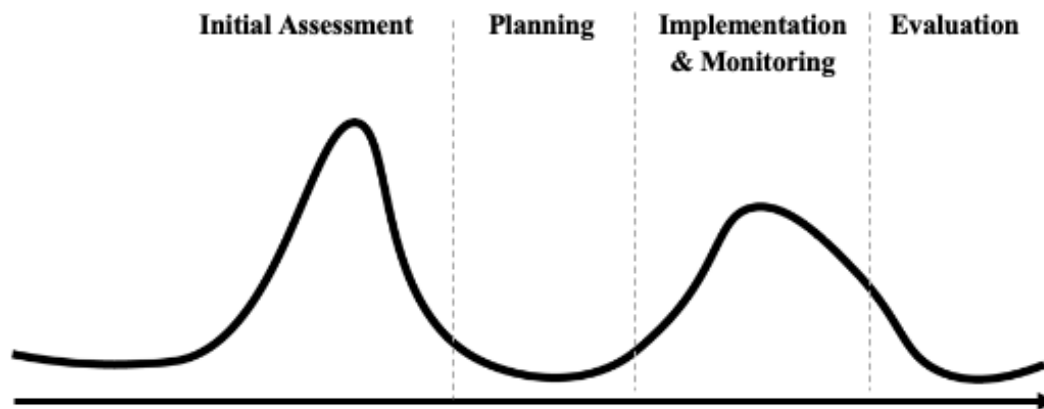
Figure 4. Level of Community's Consultation in the Project Cycle

Illustration by the author

Anderson et al. (2012) in their book '*Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*', describe how initial assessments depict community members by classifying them according to only predetermined contradistinctive features, e.g. wealth, gender, age, etc. Recalling the definition of stereotypes suggested in section 2.2.1, one might argue that the modality in which initial assessments are performed, promotes the production of stereotypes of community members. Moreover, they claim that often projects participants are not allowed to give feedback outside of the standardized categories or templates seeking information on what is already being provided (Anderson et al., 2012; Swithern, 2019; van Praag, 2015). Finally, when organizations succeed in collecting meaningful feedbacks, they often lack adequate systems to include them in project planning (Cechvala, 2019; Jean, 2017). The specialist Sophia Swithern (2019) explains: "*just as they struggle to understand changing needs, humanitarians struggle to respond to what they do learn*" (p. 39). This evidences the significant extent to which project planning relies on implementing agencies' assumptions (Swithern, 2019).

In the implementation and monitoring phase, information covers a crucial role as it allows communities to effectively participate while holding organizations accountable for their projects. Nevertheless, being the project mainly informed by implementing agencies, they also retain all the knowledge related to it. Accordingly, they have the power to determine how and what to share with the communities (Anderson et al., 2012). Similarly, Anderson et al. (2012) proceed with their analysis by explaining that in the evaluation phase: "*as much is left out of such set formats as is included in them*" (p. 80). Results are often limited to what was originally planned and do not give relevance to genuine outcomes and learnings emerged in the project implementation (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Jean, 2017; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2018). As the specialist Paul Knox Clarke (2017) wonders: "*resistance to change undoubtedly exists, but do we also resist acknowledging change?*" (p. 23).

Unbalanced power dynamics and assumptions are thus a reality of development projects. Chapters 5 and 6 show the consequences that implementing agencies' assumption of participation have on community engagement practices in the context of Myanmar.

3. Research Methodology

The Research Methodology Chapter defines which data collection (section 3.1) and analysis (section 3.2) tools were employed to address the research question and inform the study aim. Ultimately, it presents the research challenges and limitations (section 3.3) as well as its ontological and epistemological assumptions (section 3.4).

3.1 Data Collection

The research adopted an instrumental case study methodology, with a specific focus on the Myanmar context (Creswell, 2013). Through selected data collection methods, i.e. semi-structured interviews and documents' analysis, the researcher sought to contrast experiences of staff and volunteers on implementing agencies' assumptions and the ways these interact in the context of community engagement in Myanmar. In doing so, it allowed the voices of interviewees to lead and direct the data analysis. Therefore, the study adopted an inductive approach and recognized the vast share of experience and knowledge retained by interviewees.

Specifically, this project consisted of two parts:

First, a desk study to review current research on power structures and implementing agencies' approaches to community engagement was carried out. In addition, grey literature, such as the ARB project evaluation and other background material on Myanmar were analysed. The author's understanding of the research problem has then been informed by informal discussions with experienced staff. The insights gained through the document analysis and practitioners' perspectives, allowed the author to draft the interview guide (see Appendix).

Second, an eighteen-days field study and data collection have been performed in Myanmar through semi-structured interviews. The author had the possibility of visiting the Red Cross Red Crescent working environments and of attending the '*Exit Strategy Workshop for Sustainability of Accountable Resilient Branches*'. Feeling the 'atmosphere' in the country as well as attending the presentations from the representatives of the townships involved in the project were decisive for a better-informed analysis of the research findings. Face to face interviews represented a valuable method for the present research as they provided the author with contextualised data and allowed a better understanding of the surrounding environment. Moreover, fieldwork contributed to the research with a glimpse into the everyday experiences of social groups which then facilitated the analysis of interviews.

3.1.1 Primary Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews allowed to explore individual experiences and perceptions of the research question in rich detail while acknowledging interviewees' expertise on the research topic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The intimacy, trust, and rapport established in face-to-face interviews allowed informants[8] to address sensitive topics, such as the power dynamics characterizing the relationship between implementing agencies and community members, as well as within the community itself. Purposeful sampling, defined as "*the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest*" (Palinkas et al., 2015), ensured that relevant stakeholders were included in the study. Therefore, the first round of inquiry for the research has been in-depth interviews to identify key informants.

To fulfil the research aim, it was extremely valuable to consider different perspectives on the research question. Hence, while the research depicts a case study of the RCRC Movement through a focus on the ARB project, it has not been limited to it. To collect diverse perspectives on the topic, the author conducted interviews with local staff members from INGOs operating in Myanmar. In addition, the research distinguished and gathered insights from two types of informants: implementing agencies' staff and volunteers. These were selected to provide a rich picture of the studied phenomenon. Volunteers cover an extremely interesting role in the present case. They are the connectors between implementing agencies and communities; community members wearing the organization hat. Being the frontline representatives of the organization, volunteers constitute a cardinal pillar for meaningful community engagement and the overall success of the project. Finally, the author considered gender balance in the interviewees' selection.

Table 1 shows the list of interviewees who have been consulted during the fieldwork. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with staff and volunteers for approximately one hour each. Nine out of ten interviewees are Burmese nationals who were born and spent most of their lives in Myanmar. Respondents' familiarity with Burmese culture and customs has then proved to be crucial to inform the research with local knowledge. Six out of ten interviews were held in English, while for the remaining four, Burmese was identified as the preferred language. In these cases, the research benefitted from the presence of a trustworthy local staff member with strong connections to both Burmese culture and RCRC environments. This person facilitated the selection and organization of the four interviews which were held in Burmese, as well as the translation from and to Burmese. The interview guide was previously shared with

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[8] Informants and interviewees are here used interchangeably and refer to those who took part in the research.

the facilitator for the preparation of the interviews and confidentiality was ensured before starting each interview. During the interviews, the facilitator role was limited to the translation between Burmese and English and it is not considered to have affected the interviews or the research outcome.

Organization	Position	Gender	No.
Swedish Red Cross (SRC)	Staff	M	
	Staff	F	2
Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS)	Volunteer	M	
	Volunteer	M	
	Volunteer	M	
	Volunteer	M	
	Staff	F	
	Staff	F	6
INGO	Staff	F	
	Staff	F	2
Total			10

Table 1. List of interviewees

3.1.2 Secondary Data Collection

Literature on power, assumptions, and community engagement practices was consulted to inform the author's understanding of the research problem. Documents varied from academic papers to implementing agencies' reports and case studies specific to the Burmese context.

The analysis started broadly with a consideration of universal and more theoretical topics such as power and assumptions. This was possible through a review of academic papers that were published in the 1990s within the realm of psychology.

The research then zoomed into community engagement practices. In this case, the author consulted implementing agencies' tools and guidelines as well as practitioners' handbooks and reports. The author ensured that information on community engagement practices was up to date by including the latest publications on the topic in the documents' list.

The final step further narrowed the analysis to the Burmese context through a revision of case studies. Grey literature covered a central role in the acquisition of practical insights on the issue and in bridging highly theoretical concepts with daily considerations on community engagement. Literature was searched by keywords in Google Scholar and LUBsearch. Selected documents were then collected and organized in the Zotero software.

3.2 Data Analysis

After seeking oral consent, interviews were recorded. Recordings were first transcribed, and the text was then analysed in accordance with the interview guide. A first analysis was performed by reading, colour coding, and writing annotations alongside the documents.

Data was then organized in the software Nvivo through descriptive codes and sub-codes which were instrumental in the identification of the seven main themes presented in Chapter 5. The latter are not only based on the interviews' transcripts but have also been informed by the document analysis conducted before the fieldwork as well as by the informal conversations and notes taken during the fieldwork.

3.3 Challenges, Limitations, and Opportunities

The author is aware of and considered several factors influencing the research. The fieldwork short timeframe[9] challenged the perception of the study population as well as the in-depth understanding of Burmese context and culture. However, the author's unfamiliarity with the local customs and norms represented both a strength and a weakness. The adoption of an outside perspective was a unique opportunity for the researcher to see what was common to others.

Data collection was limited by the author's lack of knowledge of the local language. To overcome this limitation, an interpreter facilitated the conduction of the interviews with respondents who were not confident in speaking English. However, the researcher is aware of the limitations and challenges presented by the interviews' translation (Temple & Young, 2004). The risk of failing to grasp precious insights increased in the interviews which needed to be translated from and into Burmese, where the researcher was dependent on the interpreter's understanding. Nevertheless, the interpreter's background and familiarity with INGOs work have been crucial for data collection to be conducted in a meaningful way.

Self-reflexivity, defined as the need to reflect on "*how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production*" (Sultana, 2007, p. 376) is central to the present research. The author is aware and considered throughout the process the degree to which personal biases and background, such as the critical view about unbalanced power relations in development projects, influenced the research design, data

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[9] Fieldwork was originally planned to last two months (the maximum feasible length given the Master thesis timeframe). However, bureaucratic complications halved the possible time on the field to one month. The definitive fieldwork length was of eighteen days as the researcher had to immediately leave Myanmar as a result of the unexpected COVID-19 outbreak.

collection, and analysis. Additionally, shortly before interviews were conducted, the evaluation of the ARB project was released. The latter is significantly critical about the projects' achievements and might have influenced interviewees' perceptions of the project and their answers in the interview accordingly. To overcome these limitations, the author has taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the research design and results are technically accurate, reliable, and legitimate. Moreover, data collection strived to be as transparent and inclusive as possible, seeking the informed consent of all interviewees. The author has taken appropriate measures to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees as well as to ensure their voluntary participation in the study.

Finally, the research is connected with a more extensive study developed by the Swedish Red Cross (SRC) and Lund University. The SRC facilitated the contact and building of the relationship between the researcher and the Myanmar Red Cross Society. Nevertheless, the aforementioned elements do not influence the independence and impartiality of the study. In fact, notwithstanding its connection with the SRC-Lund University broader research, they constitute two distinct pieces of work, with different research questions and data sets. While it might be beneficial to relate the findings of the two pieces of research for a deeper understanding of the study area, they can also be considered separately. In practice, independence is ensured by different timeframes and geographical focuses between the present and the broader research.

3.4 Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

The explicit statement of assumptions is essential for the meaningfulness, purposiveness as well as interpretability of the study. The present section specifies the research ontological as well as epistemological views by addressing respectively the interrogatives *what is* and *what is to know.*

Ontology entails our philosophical assumptions regarding the world. In the present research, it is assumed that reality exists independently of our possibility of directly observing it since multiple realities are socially constructed by individuals. Specifically, power structures are assumed to exist and have real consequences for Burmese community members' active inclusion in development projects.

However, there are innumerable ways of looking and interpreting the world (Crotty, 1998). In addition, the research itself, through the selection of materials and methods, co-constructs the object of study and is part of the theoretical construction process. Therefore, it is crucial to

adopt an epistemological stance to clarify the research definition of what constitutes knowledge. Here, knowledge is subjective, and meaning is socially constructed. It follows that research results and discussion are specific to Myanmar. Power dynamics and community engagement are considered to be profoundly dependent on the area where projects are developed and are often based on long-held traditions and norms.

Moreover, the same phenomenon might be conceived differently according to the subject ascribing meaning to it. It is assumed that 'participation' embeds extremely diverse meanings depending on the position that the observed/interviewed subject covers in society. As a result, the research dedicates extensive efforts in trying to transmit a diversified picture of the studied phenomenon. Notwithstanding the aforementioned subjectivity, the research strives to be as transparent and systematic as possible.

4. Context and Background

The present chapter introduces the case study in Myanmar and describes the way it can showcase the relationship between power and community engagement in development projects. The section begins with a brief overview of the country (section 4.1) and then focuses on the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement work (section 4.2).

4.1 A Window on Myanmar

It follows a non-exhaustive introduction to Burmese geography, administrative structure, history, and social environment.

Figure 5. Map of Myanmar
Source: United Nations (2012)

4.1.1 Geography and Administrative Structure

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar is located in southeast Asia and borders China, Laos, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, the Bay of Bengal, and the Andaman Sea (Nations Online Project, 2019). Myanmar was previously known as Burma (BBC, 2018). In 1989, the military authorities in Burma opted to change the country's name to Myanmar (CIA, 2020). As displayed in Figures 5 and 6, Myanmar comprises 14 states, 74 districts, and 330 townships, which, in turn, are divided into village tracts and urban wards (The Asia Foundation, 2018).
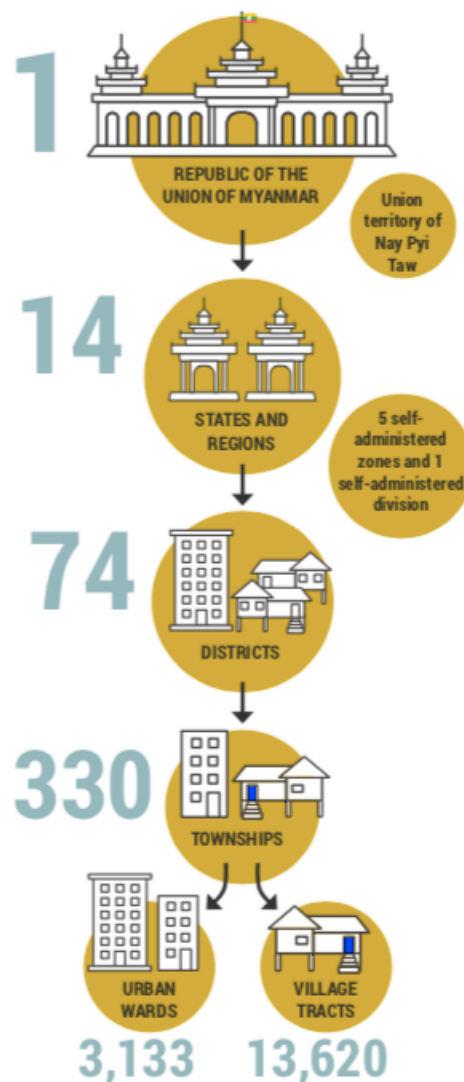
Figure 6. Myanmar's administrative structure

Source: The Asia Foundation (2018)

4.1.2 Myanmar Past and Present

Having been a British colony from 1886 to 1948 and under military rule from 1962 to 2011, Myanmar's past and present are profoundly shaped by centuries of oppression. The colonial past and the military junta have forged Myanmar political, social, and economic life, and still affects the country today (BBC, 2018; World Bank, 2019). Following the elections in 2010, the country left behind decades of isolation and started a process of liberalization which is rapidly changing the way society lives and interacts with international organizations (Forsyth, 2018).

Innumerable development projects have arisen in Myanmar to better equip the population to respond to both manmade and natural hazards. Besides protracted armed conflict and human rights violations in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan State, Myanmar registers long-term poverty as well as social and economic inequality (Forsyth, 2018; ICRC, 2020). On the other hand, natural hazards are manifested in the forms of cyclones, earthquakes, floods, droughts, landslides, and fire (CIA, 2020; Relief and Resettlment Department, 2015).

4.1.3 Burmese Society

The country is both geographically and culturally diverse, and it counts over 100 languages and dialects (Myanmar Red Cross Society, 2016b). Its religious and ethnic diversity has long been a source of tension and have resulted in the social exclusion of minority groups (BBC, 2020; World Bank, 2019). Among them, Rohingya Muslims are considered to be the most harshly discriminated group, whose citizenship is being denied (BBC, 2020). In addition, rights on paper don't always translate into reality and gender equality has hardly been achieved in Myanmar (Asian Development Bank, 2016).

4.2 The Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement

While section 4.2.1 presents the RCRC Movement work in Myanmar, section 4.2.2 shortly describes the ARB project.

4.2.1 The RCRC Movement in Myanmar

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (hereafter Movement) is a global humanitarian network of 100 million people that helps those facing disaster, conflict, and health

and social problems. It consists of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and the 192 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, 2020).

Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) with its extensive volunteer network is one of the organizations at the forefront in response and preparedness for disasters in Myanmar. The Swedish Red Cross was the first international partner to MRCS and has a long tradition of supporting community-based projects in Myanmar. At the same time, community-based activities are also at the centre of MRCS Strategy 2016 to 2020 mission: "*Develop safe and resilient communities through integrated community based initiatives, promoting humanitarian values by the network of volunteers and members*" (Myanmar Red Cross Society, 2016, p. 5).

The RCRC Movement adopted the so-called 'Community Engagement and Accountability' (CEA) approach to help put communities at the centre of its work (Myanmar Red Cross Society, 2016a). Community engagement is thus recognized as a crucial element for operations' success, and for the ultimate objective of developing resilient communities.

4.2.2 The ARB Project

'Building Accountable Red Cross Branches through Community Engagement' (ARB), developed by MRCS with the support of the Swedish Red Cross, represents an interesting example of a project with a significant CEA component in Myanmar. From 2017 to 2020, the ARB project supported the community engagement capacities of six MRCS township branches in Ayeyarwady Region and Mon State.

Branches were trained in 'Community Engagement and Accountability', thus increasing their knowledge and experience about this approach. Additionally, Village Development Committees (VDCs) were formed to implement, disseminate, and sustain engagement.

The present research is focused on, but not limited to, the experiences and insights gained from the ARB project application. MRCS and SRC staff members and volunteers who were involved in the project were consulted and their understanding and practice of community engagement explored. Interviews were conducted also with staff from other INGOs outside of the RCRC Movement.

5. Results

Results are organized in 7 categories reflecting the main themes that emerged from the interviews. Section 5.1 presents the diverse understandings of participation. Barriers and enablers that hinder or facilitate community engagement practices are explored in section 5.2. Two elements are then discussed in greater detail as deemed to be particularly decisive for community engagement, i.e. time (section 5.3) and power (section 5.4). The remaining topics which emerged from the interviews, incentives and feedback mechanisms in relation to participation, are included respectively in section 5.5 and section 5.6. Finally, section 5.7 discusses the implementation of community engagement through the ARB project, comprising what interviewees identified to be the best practices, challenges, and lessons learnt from this experience.

5.1 The Understanding of Participation

The themes around participation that emerged after the analysis of the interviews are as follows: the theoretical understanding (section 5.1.1), the practical reality (section 5.1.2), and the positive view of participation (section 5.1.3).

5.1.1 The Theoretical Framing of Participation

Ideally, staff and volunteers consider communities' participation to be an essential component for a projects' outcomes. Community members should participate from the inception to the evaluation phase for the project to be sustainable.

"From the beginning point, as soon as possible they need to participate. We have four stages: assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation in a project cycle. They need to participate in all the phases, since the assessment, otherwise the project will not be sustainable."

(Male Staff 1)

Two out of ten respondents made an exception to the widespread idea that participation should be always inclusive, having considered that challenges multiply as the number of meeting participants rise.

"For awareness sessions, what we talk about in the session and how we give the messages, it's still ok without the community participation. However, for the preparation to conduct this

training or awareness session, we need to consult with the communities, e.g. what time they are available or not. Without consultation, no one will be there."

(Male Volunteer 3)

5.1.2 The Practical Reality of Participation

When asked whether their description of participation was observed also in practice, half of the respondents explained their flawed daily experience of participation: "*Every theory has some exceptions. […] That's why in your study you need to put the limitations*" (Female Staff 4).

Many considered participation to be the community members' presence in the session and representation of a specific ethnicity, religion, gender, or village area. One interviewee expanded the concept of participation to the involvement of communities in setting the date for the meeting. Overall, there is an underlying perception that organizations hold the power to decide when to consult the community and that the transferring of knowledge is only one way. The below quote summarizes the reality of participation shared by the majority of interviewees.

"In awareness sessions, participation is when they are interested in the sessions' topics and they apply what they learn in their daily lives in the communities. It's not just listening to the speakers but also applying their [newly acquired] knowledge in their daily lives. If this is the case, then we can say: 'this is participation'; if not, we cannot say it."

(Male Volunteer 3)

Therefore, while covering a central role in the theoretical framing of participation, the majority of interviewees revealed that consultation seldomly occurs in reality: "*I have to make an assumption and I need to state where I get it from, in order to get the money*" (Female Staff 3).

Nevertheless, two respondents claimed there were no discrepancies between theoretical and practical participation.

"Participation occurs before we start the activity. For example, if we support a road, we consult with the communities and show them our resources and ask how they would support the activity."

(Male Volunteer 2).

5.1.3 Participation as Positive Empowerment

Most interviewees agreed that participation is mainly positive, and only a few explicitly acknowledged the possibility of conflict in relation to participation. Interestingly, community members were held accountable whenever participation adopted a negative connotation.

"Participation is mostly positive but sometimes we also have negative points of view because it will depend on the participants."

(Male Volunteer 1)

One respondent associated participation with empowerment, implicitly suggesting a dichotomy between powerful organizations and powerless communities who otherwise do not have a say in collective decision-making.

"They have more power if they participate. If they do not participate in the activities or projects, they will have no power but as long as they are participating, they will get a seat and they will have more power than without participating."

(Male Volunteer 1)

5.2 Challenges and Enablers of Participation

Interviewees identified several challenges and enablers (section 5.2.3) respectively limiting and promoting community engagement. Challenges can limit participation (section 5.2.2), and, in the worst case, preclude it (section 5.2.1).

"So, when you are asking what project worked well and what didn't, I would say the same project with different management styles and different modes has both success and failures. I feel the main element is the community engagement, empowerment, and ownership that we put and create."

(Female Staff 2)

5.2.1 Factors Overriding Participation

The way projects are designed and implemented sometimes does not support communities' consultation and can thus preclude participation.

"We don't have this kind of community's consultation or not enough consultation meetings. I think assumptions and reality don't meet because we didn't properly consult the communities."

(Male Staff 1)

One interviewee shared his perception that implementing agencies and communities fail to understand and trust each other*: "Sometimes when we visit the villages, [communities wonder:] are you from another planet? We are seen like that"* (Male Staff 1).

Projects' offers and community needs do not always meet. One respondent explained that by setting their own goals and objectives, projects can be driven by the organization's mission and vision and ignore community members' requirements. Another interviewee emphasized the contrast between the abstract support provided by awareness training and the hardware requests from community members. Project-driven activities can have harmful undesired consequences and lead to the so-called 'misbehaviours' from communities.

"For example, in a village, women had to go very far outside of the villages to take water. So, one project built a well in the middle of the village. The well would get destroyed every time, and finally, the organization found out the cause. At that time, women were only allowed to go out with other women when they needed to take water outside of the village. When there is a well in the middle of the village, women have no chance of social cohesion. So, they destroyed the well in order to go out of the village to get water. The point is that the development organization did not really ask what the need was, rather they defined it: "Oh, they don't have water. We will build a water source so we think they will be happy". Actually, this project was completely destroying social cohesion. […] The project never created an opportunity for the community to properly participate or engage. That was their assumption that the community needed the well. […] Again, it's a power issue; the project holds the power, and they [the organization] don't provide the community with decision-making power."

(Female Staff 2)

A final overriding element strongly emphasized by respondents is the participants' economic status: *"If we don't fulfil the basic needs, we cannot be interested in any other things"* (Female Staff 4).

5.2.2 Factors Hindering Participation

Section 5.1 showed the nuances of participation, distinguishing between attending a project and meaningfully participating in it. Interviewees suggested key elements deemed to be decisive for the outcome of participation.

The underlying cause limiting participation's potential is attributed to the confusion on implementing agencies' accountability to communities. According to the respondents, implementing agencies should not only be accountable to donors but also to the beneficiaries. However, they experienced a lack of awareness from both implementing agencies and communities' sides regarding the accountability to beneficiaries. Staff and volunteers wondered what it entails to be practically accountable to communities and how they can ensure it with current community engagement practices. On the other hand, interviewees believe community members are not aware that implementing agencies are accountable to them.

"According to the Code of Conduct, we actually have to be accountable not only to donors but also to the communities. For donors, if we are able to make clearance for the expenses, we are accountable. But what does it mean to be accountable to the communities? Accountability is we need to support what they need, and we need to listen to what they want."

(Male Staff 1)

Accountability is practically hindered by community engagement practices. Respondents were not fully satisfied with current approaches to community engagement and identified the main problem to be the application of the tools for participation, rather than the tools themselves. Specifically, they mentioned staff and volunteers' limited knowledge and inadequate application of community engagement approaches.

"The tools are perfect, but the organization cannot fully follow them yet. I think we should disseminate more the tools. […] In the tools, there are four main components, but they are following only two or three components."

(Male Staff 1)

One interviewee was deeply concerned regarding the multiple groups and opinions among community members. While recognizing their right to express different opinions, he considered the lack of consensus to be an important hindering factor for participation.

"In the first meeting, few people attend, and it is possible to listen to everyone to make decisions. The second meeting has more people and it is more difficult to get consensus. So,

the more people attend, the more it is difficult to get consensus from the community members. For the first meeting, one or two people reach the consent; for the second meeting five or six people; and then the next meetings more people are raising their concerns."

(Male Volunteer 1)

5.2.3 The Enablers of Participation

On the other side of the scale, interviewees were asked which factors should be in place for meaningful participation to occur.

"When the community comes to the workshop or meeting, we need to create meaningful participation so that they think their presence is really valuable. At least, they will do some things like raising their hands. [...] Also, the enabling environment so that they can speak openly."

(Female Staff 1)

A determinant element is the communication between implementing agencies and communities. The latter needs to have all the information about a project to be enabled to participate.

"For example, you call me to do the interview. If you say simply like this, I won't come. However, when you explain [about] your study, the steps of the research process, and how much your findings are beneficial to the community, I am very interested. That's why I came here; otherwise, I won't bother to come."

(Female Staff 4)

Meaningful participation implies that communication is a two-way process. It means that besides giving information to the communities, the latter's perspectives should be listened to and accordingly taken into account in the project design and implementation.

"The most important thing is to have an open discussion with them. For example, we are going to do first aid training for them. However, firstly to have more engagement with them, we need to openly discuss what the training is about or what the theme we want to discuss is about, and why we did this to them. Then, we can ask whether they think it is useful for them. Technically, we think it is useful for them, but what do they think about it? If they also think that this is useful and valuable for them, they will accept us. Acceptance from the community is the very first element to get community engagement. Only after they know the importance of the training, they will participate actively, and will apply it in the future."

5.3 Time and Community Engagement

Interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of time and constancy for participation. However, they point out that frequently community members lack time to properly participate in the projects. Men are considered to be busier compared to women, as the latter spend most of their time home. Therefore, they explain that gender balance is rarely accomplished in development projects.

"Many people are busy in the communities and it is a big challenge to organize. If we can organize [activities] in the communities, there are more women in the awareness sessions because the men are away from home in the daytime and they cannot come to the sessions. So, sometimes there are only women in the awareness sessions, and we cannot achieve a gender balance."

(Male Volunteer 2)

When communities do have time, they might not be willing to participate: *"Communities just want to receive the assistance, but they don't want to participate in other programs"* (Male Staff 1). The reasons why community members do not want to participate are innumerable. One interviewee underlined projects' timeframe as a hindering factor. According to his experience, implementing agencies' practice is to develop multiple projects with short timespans rather than concentrating resources into longer-term plans. Consequently, as the number of short timeframes projects increases in a determined village, the community's interest in participating in them decreases.

"We should have regular contacts with the communities. If we go out of the communities as soon as our planned activities end, we can do them [only] one time, but the next time we will have difficulties [to engage with] the communities. We need regular contact and familiarity with the communities."

(Male Volunteer 2)

5.3.1 Burmese Conception of Time

Results indicate that in Myanmar days are the unit of measure and it is extremely rare to talk about hours. One respondent highlighted the impact that the Burmese conception of time has on community engagement in development projects.

"In Myanmar we only have a daily basis, not an hourly basis, so we have to operate daily. We just say, 'by day', not 'by the hour'. Even for the volunteers [we are asked]: 'are you available for today or tomorrow?', but not from 7 pm to 9 pm, we never say like that. [...] Communities go to work in the morning and come back in the evening, but we never know at what exact time. If we could have an hourly basis, we would have more time. The more time we have, the more participation we can have in the activities."

(Male Volunteer 3)

5.4 Power and Community Engagement

Power is both an overriding and a hindering factor for participation. When asked about the relationship between power and community engagement, respondents emphasized the hindering role covered by three powerful actors: community leaders (section 5.4.1), Village Development Committees (section 5.4.2), and implementing agencies themselves (section 5.4.3).

5.4.1 Community Leaders

Working through religious leaders and village heads, power is intrinsic to development projects: *"There is a relationship between power and participation. Whenever we organize an activity with the community, we need approval from the community leaders"* (Male Volunteer 1).

Interviewees explained that working through community leaders is often the only option to access communities, at the same time it is however deeply exclusionary.

"Another factor is when communities don't get along with one particular person, let's say they don't like Mr. White. If the community activity is led by Mr. White, they will not come. We also need to know about community dynamics: who align with whom, and who dislike whom."

(Female Staff 1).

5.4.2 Village Development Committees

Section 2.2.2 explored the notion of community and concluded that the latter is a complex and heterogeneous entity composed of diverse subgroups. Respondents stressed that community

members' participation is strongly dependent on the representation of their subgroup in the Village Development Committee (VDC).

> *"Sometimes in the communities, there are two or three different groups, and their participation is very weak. Community members look at the percentage of representatives from their groups who are in the organization and the committee. They always look at it, and how they can represent them in the community in relation to the organization. They consider these kinds of points. At that time, we have less participation from the communities. […] The majority manipulates decisions in the community and the minorities dislike that. So, this is hindering participation."*

(Male Volunteer 2)

Furthermore, VDCs are not always reliable and are mainly composed of men, hence undermining women representation at the management level: *"[The fact that] no women are present in these committees, is a [further] hindering factor"* (Male Volunteer 3).

5.4.3 Implementing Agencies

One interviewee reflected on the power held by implementing agencies and connected it with the lack of time through the following quote: *"If we don't have time, power is useful"* (Male Staff 1). However, power can be counterproductive and override participation. A volunteer explained that, in his experience, the use of power to ensure participation often leads to the opposite effect.

> *"We cannot use always power because sometimes if we use power to involve the communities, they will not come, they disappear. Sometimes it's like that. We usually mobilize communities without using power and, at that time, they come to the awareness sessions. So, using power is not always good."*

(Male Volunteer 2)

5.5 What's the Matter with Incentives?

Incentives were mentioned in nearly all interviews and have resulted in a truly interesting emergent theme for the present research. Incentives have long been the focus of discussion, with interrogatives ranging from whether they are enabling or hindering factors of development projects, to how much they should amount to: *"Incentives can take any form, like providing*

travel allowances or the construction material to build the toilets in health projects" (Female Staff 2).

Respondents' views on incentives significantly differed, mirroring the wider debate on the topic. On the one hand, it is believed that community members' time spent on a project should be adequately compensated.

"Firstly, they should have two or more income channels. If not, the organizations should support for that day the allowance or daily wages. If they get this kind of support or if they have two or more income, we will get more and active participation."

(Male Volunteer 3)

However, some interviewees shared examples where incentives did not work as originally planned. Although the organization was supporting community members through the provision of incentives, participation was hardly achieved. One respondent emphasized the need to have systems in place to facilitate a successful implementation of incentives.

"We need proper systems if we give incentives, otherwise it will be misused, and people will come here because they get the money and they don't think anything."

(Female Staff 1)

On the other extreme, incentives acquire a highly negative meaning and they are deemed responsible for the failure of innumerable projects and for creating dependency. One respondent personally experienced the counterproductive effects of incentives and firmly warned against their careless employment. In the village she visited in her student trip, brand new latrines *donated* by one organization were piling up in the back of the village head's house, while the population kept going to the bushes to satisfy their needs.

"I needed to use the toilet and I asked where it was. [I remember] I have seen a new toilet. [The villager told me] it was locked because it was given by [An International Organization] and required by the Government, but it was only for the guests as they [the villagers] didn't want to use it. Their practice was to go to the bushes [instead]. […] They don't want to put the effort because they don't have the ownership, and a proper participation or engagement process to go through to understand that they need the latrine so that it would reduce the diarrhoea. So, most of the village heads have their village latrines piled up. I saw forty."

(Female Staff 2)

5.6 Feedback Mechanisms

Feedback mechanisms allow community members to voice their opinion in the implementation and evaluation stages of a project and are thus crucial to ensure accountability and have meaningful participation. Whenever communities' feedbacks are heard and acted upon, chances for implementing organizations to fulfil community members' needs increase. One respondent discussed how greater consultations suddenly reduce the distance between the two entities and allow projects to better support communities.

"In the recent flood, I went to the community to ask their needs in order to mobilize the donors who are also from the communities. So, a good example is when we can support the community's needs."

(Male Volunteer 1)

However, theory and practice have yet to formally meet. While the formal suggestion boxes at the villages are usually empty, communities informally voice their dissatisfactions to volunteers and staff. As a result, communities' dissatisfactions are in feedbacks which are not acknowledged by implementing organizations.

"The formal feedback mechanisms are not functioning. […] In parallel, there is also a working feedback mechanism, but informal. For example, in the project we have in Rakhine, the township volunteers and the staff have spent a lot of time in the communities. When they come, they hear complaints, so they spent time in the communities, and they are open to hear and to rectify complaints."

(Female Staff 3)

5.6.1 Feedback Mechanisms in the Myanmar Context

Interviewees emphasized how challenging it is to get communities' feedbacks specifically in the context of Myanmar. The population has been under control for decades and is not aware neither of their right to complain nor of implementing agencies' responsibility for the projects. One-third of the respondents attributed the cause to be in the education system which did not leave space to think freely, inhibiting population critical thinking.

"I don't know how to speak out if I feel dissatisfied or I don't feel happy. The culture and the Myanmar context very much influences the implementation of CEA. For example, in the case a project is implementing something, and you ask [the community] whether they are satisfied,

and if they have any suggestions or opinions. If you ask 10 people, you are very lucky if one answers. Sometimes, they don't know, but sometimes they feel under control became a habit."

(Female Staff 4)

Staff and volunteers' experience revealed an underlying perception in Burmese communities that projects are sorts of gifts from implementing agencies. If the project is seen as a present, community members are further reluctant to give feedback. In most parts of the world, not only in Myanmar, it is considered impolite to express a critical opinion on something that has been gifted.

"In Myanmar culture, there is a saying: 'don't check the teeth of the Buffalo that you got for free'. It means that if you are getting this kind of assistance for free, you shouldn't check it. So, [according to the community] all are doing a good job, [and say:] 'please leave it and we will take it'."

(Male Staff 1)

5.7 Best Practices, Challenges and Lessons Learnt from the ARB Project

Beyond theoretical interrogatives on the meaning of participation, its challenges, and its enablers; interviewees belonging to the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement were asked to share their experiences from the implementation of the ARB project, revealing more practical examples.

5.7.1 Best Practices

Staff and volunteers reflecting on the ARB project showed significant satisfaction with community members' participation, which led to empowerment and sustainability.

"Concerning the best practices, when we did this project and we invited the communities to participate in the activities, they got more knowledge and more power. They had the opportunity to do something and then they got to know how to continue by themselves for future activities."

(Male Volunteer 1)

When asked about the project's best practices, one respondent proudly shared two episodes he experienced in the ARB project where the organization succeeded in engaging with community members and in meeting their needs.

"All community members have to participate in simulation exercises, such as fire drills. Some people think it is not good to do these kinds of exercises, and we should not do them otherwise the fire will definitely happen in the future. So, in many communities there are these types of beliefs, even in my religion, they believe drills are not good [laugh]. In some villages, the simulation exercise was organized twice during the project period. In the first time, they just participated, and they were not very much interested in it. [...] In the second time, we got more participation, and not only participation but active participation and trust in the activity. Another best practice concerns first aid awareness sessions. Whenever we explain techniques, such as [what to do in case of] choking or broken bones, these cases are very rare. We should start with the common cases; daily cases and they are more interested in that."

(Male Volunteer 3)

5.7.2 Challenges

Interviewees emphasized the challenges posed by communities' lack of time to participate in the project's activities.

"The main challenges were two: age and time. For what concerns the former, whenever we do awareness sessions in many communities only the old and the babies are available. Actually, these awareness sessions are not targeted for them but for the middle-aged ones in the communities. Mon State, where I am from, is very close to Thailand and most middle-aged people migrate to find jobs there. Even the ones who do not go to Thailand have to work for each and every day to get an income. Actually, they do not have holidays, and if they have, they just have two days per month. Even in the holidays, they do not want to participate in any activities, they just want to rest at home. So, participation of the targeted middle-age groups is challenging."

(Male Volunteer 3)

5.7.3 Lessons Learnt

Communities' lack of time combined with the projects' short timeframe thus represented a critical factor for the development of the project. Most respondents believe that the project should have lasted longer to achieve meaningful participation: *"because of the short timeframe, finance, and logistic procedures, as soon as the community stands up and knows where to look, the project is finished"* (Female Staff 4).

Whereas most interviewees expressed a willingness to increase communities' engagement in their projects, one volunteer conveyed a contrasting opinion. According to his view, the priority should be to enhance community leaders' capacity: *"I want the committee to improve their capacities, such as through leadership training for community leaders"* (Male Volunteer 2).

6. Discussion

The discussion chapter analyses the interviews' results reported in Chapter 5 and relates them to the research question and objectives. First, it illustrates interviewees' assumption about the concept of participation, its challenges, and enablers (section 6.1). Section 6.2 reflects on the dilemma faced by implementing agencies that should be at the same time accountable to both donors and communities. The theoretical implications of the discussed findings are then explored by relating them to the literature review presented in Chapter 2 (section 6.3). Section 6.4 shows the problematic community engagement practices resulted from the assumptions about participation and implementing agencies' passivity.

6.1 Assumption about the Notion of Participation, its Challenges, and Enablers

Notwithstanding the absence of a common definition, the majority of interviewees have a clear idea of what participation is. It is mostly seen as a positive concept whose essential elements are: (a) *interest in the activity's topic*, and (b) *application of the acquired knowledge in daily lives*. This understanding of participation does not question its implicit benefits and reduces the concept to a linear phenomenon, i.e. (a) + (b). In addition, it can be argued that respondents share a perception that community members are the only ones who should learn from participation, which is thus seen as unidirectional and top-down. Interviews illustrated how community engagement is sometimes limited to the representation of a specific village area, ethnicity, or gender at the meeting while being directly associated with empowerment. For instance, among the best practices of the ARB project, one volunteer underlined the increase in the power of community members as a result of their participation in the project's activities. The majority of interviews' findings thus reflect implementing agencies' normative understanding of participation.

The positive assumption about participation influences the challenges and enablers perceived by the respondents. For example, the most cited factor hindering engagement was community members' lack of time. On the other hand, none of the respondents mentioned the increase of communities' decision-making power in development projects as an enabling factor. Literature stated the politicised nature of development projects and tools (White, 1996). Thus, assuming that participation is apolitical limits the analysis of barriers and enablers to technical aspects or institutional arrangements. As seen in the present case, it shapes the respondents' assumption that meaningful participation can be achieved through the provision of structural elements, such as time and access to the meeting, or funding. Exercise of power as a barrier or enabler does

not get a room for discussion. Only when the complexity of participation is acknowledged rather than assuming it as a positive process and relating it with positive outcomes, it is possible to consider transformational challenges and enablers for the achievement of meaningful community engagement (Konyndyk & Worden, 2019).

6.2 Implementing Agencies' Dilemma

Although interviews reflect the predominance of a positive view of participation that is in line with the institutional definition, staff and volunteers (who implement the institutional mandate) are aware of the contextual reality and the influence of power. Thus, despite being aware of what needs to be done or would be a successful approach, lack of external motivation created by institutional arrangements limit the possibility to work in ways that may be difficult but effective when it comes to community engagement. One such institutional arrangement could be the accountability towards donors and exercising adherence to their funding and reporting cycles on one hand, while not being accountable to community members fuels this dilemma (Cechvala, 2019; Jean, 2017; Swithern, 2019). Hence, implementing agencies' passivity towards community engagement challenges is explained by both projects' structures and the lack of incentives to question current practice (Emerson, 1962; Fiske, 1993; van Praag, 2015).

6.3 Factors Shaping Assumptions

The research explores the critical influence that implementing agencies' normative understanding of participation has on community engagement practices. To address the issue and ultimately complexify the notion of participation, it is necessary to dig deeper into the causes of this phenomenon by reflecting on the reasons why implementing agencies make assumptions. The literature review in Chapter 2 described assumptions as the practical manifestation of power, being originated by the lack of time and interdependency (Fiske, 1993).

In an attempt to illustrate the causes of assumptions, the present section applies the above theoretical description to the reality recounted by interviewees. The time (section 6.3.1) and interdependency (section 6.3.2) factors are first explored, followed by the analysis of the influence of power in development projects in Myanmar (section 6.3.3).

6.3.1 Narrow Timeframes

All interviews stressed the importance of time for meaningful community engagement. However, time seemed to be lacking in both communities' and projects' sides. Respondents described projects to be large in numbers and short in timeframes. The fragmented conception of time held by implementing agencies hinders projects' sustainability and stands in sharp contrast with Burmese lengthened understanding of time. Results indicate that implementing agencies' sudden departure from the community's village as soon as the project ends is detrimental for community engagement. The latter is facilitated by a strong relationship between implementing agencies and community members, which results from lasting and regular interactions (Anderson et al., 2012; Cechvala, 2019). For instance, among the best practices of the ARB project, one volunteer proudly shared the successful story of those villages which stopped being superstitious about fire drills after taking part twice in the simulation exercise.

Interviews' findings revealed that the cruciality of time has yet to be endorsed by implementing agencies, who often fail to grasp the inherent complexity. The ARB project staff argued that the modality through which context analysis are being conducted leaves no room for flexibility and reconsiderations, causing an oversimplification of the phenomenon of interest.

Respondents' experience thus confirmed the absence of time in development projects. The following section explores whether the second factor leading to assumptions, i.e. the lack of interdependency, is also a reality of development projects in Myanmar.

6.3.2 The Lack of Interdependency

Section 2.1.1 presented dependency as a function of two variables: interest in the specific outcome to be accomplished and the availability of alternatives in the way the outcome can be accomplished (Emerson, 1962). For what concerns the first variable, interviews' findings revealed that the use of incentives can create interest from community members in development projects. This holds specifically in the context of Myanmar, where projects are perceived as gifts from implementing agencies. The findings acknowledged also a lack of available alternatives for the projects' participants. While middle-aged men can decide to go to work, women, the olds and the babies are the ones who spend most of their time home and end up being the target group for projects' activities. It follows that in development projects there is no interdependency between actors, as community members are more dependent on implementing agencies, rather than the other way around.

Hence, it would seem that both the factors leading to assumptions are present in development projects in Myanmar. This evidence supports the theoretical framing of the origin of assumptions proposed by Fiske (1993). Yet, digging deeper into the phenomenon, the present research argues that narrow timeframes and the lack of interdependence are in turn products of power imbalances between implementing agencies and community members.

6.3.3 The Exercise of Power

Despite the theoretical conviction that communities should be involved in all the project's stages, from inception to evaluation; respondents confessed that implementing organizations hold the decision-making power and that communities' involvement in the design of the activities is minimal. Power imbalances are manifested in staff and volunteers' confusion regarding the notion of accountability to community members, a clear sign of the lack of interdependence between implementing agencies and communities (Konyndyk & Worden, 2019). Additional expressions of power can be observed in the role of Village Development Committees and community leaders in development projects. Community members' participation in development projects is thus dependent on implementing agencies. Therefore, applying the present research definition of power, i.e. the control of one actor over another actor's fate, one might argue that implementing agencies have the power to influence communities' fate in development projects in Myanmar.

Both the literature review and results presented assumptions as manifests of power, raised by the lack of time and interdependency. Power was theoretically framed as being a property of the system. Therefore, if the problem is systematic, the solution lies in systemic transformation (Matin et al., 2018). It follows that power dynamics can be shifted by changing the structure of the system and increasing the interdependency between the actors involved. Practically, one way of increasing interdependency is by including community members' satisfaction in the requirements for projects' evaluations as well as in staff incentives (Konyndyk & Worden, 2019). In this way, communities' power to influence implementing agencies' fate can be acknowledged. In addition, both the research findings and the literature indicate the need to increase projects timeframes to allow greater consultations and more sustainable projects (Cechvala, 2019).

Also, important to note is that having assumptions and reinforcing them is an act of power itself. Both the exercise of power and assumptions are mutually reinforcing (Fiske, 1993). In other words, assumptions and power are simultaneously the cause and the product of each other.

Implementing agencies' unproblematic framing of participation and consequent community engagement practices are a way of exerting control over communities. Therefore, the present research suggests that in the context of development projects in Myanmar, implementing agencies' assumptions are at the same time the product and the medium to the exercise of power.

6.4 Subsequent Problematic Community Engagement Practices

The unproblematised framing of participation together with the constraints posed by projects' structure result in potentially harmful practices, i.e. limited consultation (section 6.4.1), the careless provision of incentives (section 6.4.2), and inadequate feedback mechanisms (section 6.4.3), which favour the rise of further assumptions.

6.4.1 Limited Consultation

A linear understanding of participation limits the understanding of the enabling factors required for community engagement and its potential to benefit all members of the community. For instance, interviews' findings indicate that implementing organizations do not ensure sufficient consultations with projects' participants. Indeed, most interviewees felt that they fail to properly involve community members in the design stage of development projects. One respondent shared her frustration over the need to make assumptions in projects' proposals to get the funding to start the activities and interact with communities. Sometimes, community members' involvement is extended to the planning stage but only to be consulted on practical matters, such as the day and time of the meeting.

Both interviews' results and literature suggest that the absence of a two-way dialogue between communities and implementing organizations might culminate in the implementation of project-driven activities that fail to understand local constraints (Brown & Donini, 2014). For example, a volunteer mentioned a discrepancy between implementing organizations' and community members' timeframes, shown by the fact that oftentimes the target group identified by the organization cannot participate in projects because of the lack of free time (not even holidays). In worst-case scenarios, project-driven activities might cause undesired harmful consequences (Cechvala, 2019; White, 1996). A suitable example is represented by the anecdote shared by one interviewee where the construction of a well in the middle of an African village destroyed women's social cohesion. It showed how women valued social cohesion more

than easy access to water. Thus, a politicised understanding of the concept of participation may provide opportunities to identify, understand and explain conflicts and negotiation of values and interests that each participant holds, and the counter-intuitive preference manifested through the repeated destruction of the well (Eriksen et al., 2015; Nightingale, 2017).

6.4.2 Incentives or (Dis)Incentives?

The assumption characterizing participation is likely to affect also institutional approaches towards the use of incentives. There are two types of incentives that implementing agencies can provide community members with: allowances to facilitate participation in projects' sessions, such as daily wages or meals; and material incentives in projects' activities delivered through a participatory approach, such as construction materials.

Both results and literature illustrated that when participation assumes a priori a positive connotation, then implementing agencies consider *more participation* the desired goal in their projects, favouring quantity over quality (Brown & Donini, 2014). Hence, allowances as incentives are seen as enabling factors if the objective is to increase the number of community members in the projects' activities. However, section 5.1 of the findings showed the difference between attending a meeting and meaningfully participating in it. Findings indicate that allowances favour *attendance* to the meeting but do not enable *meaningful participation*, hindering community members' ownership of the projects. Therefore, if the objective of the project/programme is to ensure sustainability and meaningful participation, allowances can have counterproductive effects and become (dis)incentives.

On the other hand, the second type of incentives can play a role in projects' success and allow meaningful community engagement. Nevertheless, its employment needs to be complemented by an understanding of the concept of participation that takes into account relations of power, community members' priority needs rather than project needs, as well as by an attentive consideration for the timing of the project. Or else, it can hinder communities' ownership and meaningful engagement in the project, consequently leading to its failure (White, 1996). One notable finding in regard to this discussion is the episode of the latrines that exemplifies a mismatch between community needs and services supplied by the organization.

6.4.3 Formal and Informal Feedback Mechanisms

Finally, the direct association between participation and empowerment has significant repercussions on the feedback mechanisms employed by implementing agencies. The understanding of participation as exclusively positive convinces staff and volunteers that community engagement should be increased in every project. Feedback mechanisms are thus established to monitor whether participation is working well. However, the underestimation of community members' challenges to provide feedbacks results in the ineffectiveness of the formal feedback mechanisms set up by implementing agencies. For instance, interviewees described the non-functioning suggestion boxes in their projects. Moreover, cultural norms may also discourage direct negative feedback. Interviews revealed an underlying perception in Burmese communities that sees development projects as gifts from implementing agencies. In Myanmar, as in many other cultures, it is considered rude to critique something that was gifted. Figure 6 portrays the local saying mentioned by one respondent: *"Don't check the teeth of the Buffalo that you got for free"*. As projects do not require community members' contribution and are perceived as gifts, communities will be unlikely to constructively critique them, making their quality decline. In worst-case scenarios, communities might participate in project-driven activities which are time-consuming and do not provide any benefits. Figure 7 attempts to illustrate the concept by representing the member of the community welcoming the buffalo gifted by the implementing organization despite the fact that the buffalo has only one tooth.

Figure 7. The Burmese saying *"Don't check the teeth of the Buffalo that you got for free"* as a metaphor of development projects as gifts

Illustration by Pulz

Additionally, decades of oppressive military regime which magnified Burmese practice of acceptance while suppressing the population's capacity to question, give feedback, and undertake initiatives need to be considered when understanding participation. Therefore, it is important to account for a concept of participation that is not apolitical and considers the local context and culture. This would illuminate contextual reasons (for discouraging the use of feedback mechanisms) that may otherwise be difficult to comprehend. This was demonstrated by the research's results portraying a dichotomy between inoperative formal feedback mechanisms and functioning ones. Community members' 'informal' feedbacks are orally communicated to staff and volunteers, who fail to acknowledge them. Figure 8 illustrates this dichotomy by showing the member of the organization looking at the empty suggestion box, while behind a community member tries to voice her opinion. Implementing agencies' inability to accept informal feedbacks is the result of the constraints of projects' structures as well as the lack of incentives to challenge current practice.

Figure 8. Formal and informal feedback mechanisms

Illustration by Pulz

7. Conclusions

International development organizations intensively promote the participation of grassroots communities in their projects. However, community engagement is influenced by implementing agencies' exercise of power and assumptions about the notion of participation. This research explored the consequences that unbalanced power dynamics, manifested through long-held institutional norms and assumptions, have on community engagement in Myanmar. Specifically, it attempted to investigate the below research question:

"How does the normative understanding of participation

influence community engagement practices

in Myanmar?"

It did so by exploring how practitioners perceive the concept of participation and whether their perceptions influence their behaviour. Results indicate that implementing agencies share a positive and simplified understanding of participation, which is reflected in what interviewees identified to be its challenges and enablers. The latter, together with the institutional constraints and the lack of incentives to question current practice, adversely influence community engagement practices in Myanmar. Interviews revealed three implementing agencies' practices hindering participation in development projects: limited consultation with community members, careless provision of (dis)incentives, and employment of inadequate feedback mechanisms.

The research described assumptions as both the cause and effect of power, raised by the lack of time and interdependency between implementing organizations and communities. While being the product of power imbalances, examples show how implementing organizations can reinforce already established patterns of power through the employment of extremely resilient assumptions. This leads to the conclusion that the exercise of power by implementing agencies significantly influence community engagement in development projects in Myanmar. To reduce the hindering influence of the exercise of power on community engagement and limit the making of assumptions, the present research recommends changing development projects' structures by increasing projects' timeframes as well as the interdependency between implementing agencies and community members.

Finally, the research identifies three further areas of inquiry that could be explored in relation to the present topic. First, as this study confirms the role of power as a key factor in implementing agencies' making of assumptions, future studies should investigate how projects' structures can be modified to increase actors' interdependency and ultimately address power

imbalances. In addition, the perspectives of community members should be adequately researched alongside staff and volunteers' ones. Lastly, specifically to the context of Myanmar, further attention should be yielded at how the country's historical legacy influences community members' engagement in development projects. Future studies are encouraged to navigate deeper into community members' awareness of the relationship between Myanmar history of oppression and today's power dynamics, culture, and norms.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

- Introduction to the research and the role of the researcher, explaining that answers are subjective and how they contribute to the overall study and learning.
- Seek informed consent of the interviewee to take part to the research, emphasizing that participation is completely voluntary and that he/she can leave the interview at any time.
- Clarification of the anonymity and confidentiality of the interview.

Research Question: How does the normative understanding of participation influence community engagement practices in Myanmar?

Topic	No	Questions	To assess
Opening Remarks	1	For which institution do you work and what role do you cover?	Role
	2	Have you previously worked in the area of community engagement?	Years of working experience in the field.
	3	Could you provide me with examples of projects that have worked well and others that have not worked so well in terms of community engagement?	Recognition/awareness of institutional assumptions hindering community engagement.
Framing Participation	4	What is participation?	What he/she means by this term, i.e. representation vs. participation into decision-making, active/passive participation.
	5	What are the positive aspects about participation? Did you ever encounter any negative experience? What value did you attribute to it?	Assumptions about participation, normative interpretation of it. How deep the understanding of participation is.
	6	In other projects, it has been found that sometimes institutional expectations of community engagement did not reflect communities' response, which was instead labelled as 'misbehaviour'. *"In Bangladesh, for example, an NGO introduced a hand-tube well programme for irrigation. The pumps were located in the fields to be used for*	How narrow/wide the understanding of engagement is.

		vegetable production. The villagers, however, considered water for domestic use a higher priority. They therefore moved the pumps from the fields to their homes. Rather than recognising this as the expression of people's genuine interests, the NGO began to issue plastic pipes, which could not be re-located. Applications for the tube wells rapidly declined, and the programme was deemed a failure" (White, 1996, p. 153). Is this something you recognize? Would you consider the community's response 'misbehaviour'?	
Institutional Approaches to Participation	7	What do you feel about the existing ways of engagement?	Institutional and personal approach to participation, e.g. quantity vs quality.
	8	How would you measure/assess participation? Are there differences between yours and your organization's view? What would you do differently? If relevant, please provide practical examples.	Whether institutional indicators are more quantitative or qualitative.
	9	What is the role of volunteers?	The strength of volunteers for participation.
	10	At what stage of the intervention do normally communities come into the picture (most of the time)? Why and in what manner?	Institutional practices with regards to community engagement.
Implementation	11	Could you describe community members' participation to the meetings in township X of the ARB project?	Level of satisfaction with current practice.
	12	Which were the main challenges experienced regarding community engagement? If relevant, please share practical examples.	Major issues with approaches to participation.
	13	Which best practices/lessons learnt were identified from community engagement in the ARB project?	Institutional learnings on participation from the ARB Case Study.
	14	If given the possibility, what would you do differently regarding community's participation?	Personal learning on community engagement practices/approaches from the ARB project.

Challenges	15	What hinders participation? Why?	Challenges at different levels (strategic: communication, time, assumptions; tactical; or operational: access, funding, procedures) and underlying causes.
	16	What is the relationship between time and participation?	Recognition/awareness of the strategic role of time for participation.
	17	What is the relationship between power and participation? Do you see participation as empowerment?	Recognition/awareness of the interdependence between power and participation.
Enablers	18	Which are the conditions/elements which should be in place for meaningful participation to occur?	Assumptions about participation, e.g. structural elements -> participation seen as a linear function with inputs and outputs; transformational elements -> participation understood as a complex phenomenon.
	19	How do you secure them in your daily work? What would you do?	Priorities: emancipatory vs. exploratory participation.
Concluding Remarks	20	Why do you think institutions make assumptions when engaging communities?	See whether the importance of power is acknowledged versus practical factors, e.g. access, funding…
	21	Is there anything else you would like to share on institutional assumptions or participation?	Final thoughts on the topic.
	22	Could you suggest additional people to talk to in order to get a comprehensive picture on community engagement?	Potential additional informants.