

## **Power is key to meaningfully engage communities in development projects in Myanmar**

For the achievement of true participation, the power relationship between international organizations and community members should be balanced. International organizations should have enough time and interest to engage with communities on a real and profound level.

What are the key factors for meaningful community engagement in development projects? If you were going to invest now in meaningful community engagement, where would you put your time and energy? Many community members say that they are not satisfied with their engagement in development projects, and most aid providers confess that they are not able to properly engage with the communities they work with. We are constantly told to engage and listen and engage more. We are given the impression that these are the things we need to go after to meaningfully engage with communities in projects.

Constrained by extremely rigid funding and reporting cycles, it is very rare to go beyond these assumptions, 'truths' which we are being told; to look beyond the surface and explore the causes of these community engagement challenges. But what if we could see the causes and consequences of these assumptions? What if we could explore the experiences of staff and volunteers daily working with community engagement and have a break from these 'truths' to see what makes community engagement meaningful?

The present research did that. Interviews with staff and volunteers working in Myanmar explored their understanding of participation and whether their perceptions influence their behaviour in development projects. So, what have I learnt?

Well, the lessons are not about listening or engaging more and more. The clearest message from this research is this: power severely influences community engagement in development projects in Myanmar and leads to the creation of assumptions. I have learnt three big lessons about the consequences of assumptions on participation. The first is that the positive view of participation simplifies staff and volunteers' understanding of this concept. It turns out that community engagement is seen as a function of  $a + b$  (presence to the meeting + application of the new knowledge in daily lives). And if community engagement is understood to work as a linear function, then this framing influences also what practitioners identify to be its challenges and enablers. All interviewees first focused on practical elements such as the time or access to the meeting, leaving no room to discuss power. This leads us to the second big lesson I learnt: assumptions not only influence staff and volunteers' understanding of community engagement but also their behaviour. It turns out that focusing on these simple elements takes time and energy away from deeper elements such as power. And the third big lesson that I learnt about the reality of community engagement is that international organizations have little interest to engage with communities on a real and profound level. It turns out that staff and volunteers feel constrained by donors' funding and reporting cycles and have no time to meaningfully engage. All of this leads to three bad community engagement practices: limited consultation, the careless provision of (dis)incentives, and inadequate feedback mechanisms.