

FINAL DRAFT

**Village Institutions and Leadership in Myanmar:
A View from Below**

**A report for UNDP by MDR and Susanne Kempel
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Acronyms:

EFG	Externally-facilitated Group
GAD	General Administration Department
HDI	Human Development Initiative
HRBA	Human Rights Based Approach
MRCS	Myanmar Red Cross Society
MDR	Myanmar Development Research
MWAF	Myanmar Women Affairs Federation
MWCA	Myanmar Women and Child Association
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SRG	Self-reliance Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USDP	Union Development and Solidarity Party
VA	Village Administrator
VERP	Village Elder and Respected Person
VPDC	Village Peace and Development Council
VTA	Village Tract Administrator
VTPC	Village-Tract People's Council

Executive Summary

This study is one of the first to explore the nature of village level governance in Myanmar. It aims to map and analyse structures and dynamics at the nexus between traditional, state and externally facilitated institutions that influence and govern village communities. The study provides a foundation for discussion about engagement with village level institutions and leaders for development and local governance purposes. It forms part of a series of studies and assessments commissioned by UNDP Myanmar to inform the development of the next phase of its HDI programme. However, the findings are of relevance to most agencies engaging with village level development and governance in Myanmar.

It considers the following research questions:

1. What are the structures and relationships of local institutions and leadership in the selected villages?
2. How do local institutions and UNDP-facilitated groups relate to village leadership structures?
3. To what extent do formal village administrations represent the interests of the township, households, institutions and others?
4. What are the possible implications and recommendations for UNDP?

It aims to further assess the relevance of the findings with reference to the report 'What Lies Beneath: An Operational Analysis on Leadership and Institutions at the Local Level in Myanmar' (WLB).

The study is based on qualitative field research in 16 villages in Rakhine, Chin, Shan and Mon states. In 10 of these villages UNDP implements the HDI programme. Local researchers stayed 3-4 days in each village location and carried out a total of 239 focus-group discussions, key informant interviews and informal interviews with 697 respondents (58% men / 42% women). The ethnicity of the respondents was a mix of Bamar, Shan, Danu, Chin and Khami.

Summary of key findings for research question: 1. What are the structures and relationships of local institutions and leadership in the selected villages?

Village institutions in the four selected areas of Myanmar have the following types of institution: formal administrative (government), traditional socio-religious, state-sponsored, UNDP-facilitated (only in the ten villages where UNDP implements its programmes) and others. The 16 villages studied each have seven to 20 local institutions. The highest number of institutions was recorded in Mon and Rakhine states and the lowest in Chin and Shan states. The most common village institutions are village tract and village administration, socio-religious youth group and pagoda or church trustees, which exist in almost all villages. The second most common are Village Elders and Respected Persons (VERPs) commonly referred to as *ya mi ya pha* in Myanmar i.e. the elders' council. Other common village institutions are school committees, self-reliance/revolving fund groups, village militias and/or fire brigades.

Male respondents are generally members of more institutions than female respondents. The most common membership is in traditional socio-religious institutions and in UNDP-facilitated institutions where they exist. Female respondents are poorly represented in village tract and village administrations and in VERP institutions, which are dominated almost exclusively by men. The leaders of the village tract and village administration have a significantly higher membership of institutions than other respondent segments.

Each village has a Village Administrator (VA) (some larger villages have several VAs, which are also called 100 household leaders), who reports to the Village Tract Administrator (VTA). The VTA/VA is responsible for government administration and keeping peace and order but also plays a key role in dispute resolution, socio-religious affairs and small-scale village development. Although the VTA/VA holds an officially sanctioned position and exercises authority over village households and institutions, he does not do so in isolation. He cooperates with the VERPs, whom

sometimes act in a senior advisory role and at other times form the main body of authority in the village with the VA playing a more nominal role. The VERPs are the most influential traditional socio-religious institution in the majority of villages, which often also takes up a (mainly informal) governance function. The traditional socio-religious institutions play an important role in religious and social events. The extent to which these institutions are formalised varies significantly; some have open-ended structures and informal roles and other have assigned areas of responsibility. Few of them have formal mechanisms for leadership transfer. No traditional village institution with broad participation from the community takes a leading role in overall village decision-making and development affairs although traditional socio-religious youth institutions conduct some development-related activities and mobilise broad participation from a wide segment of the village population (aged 15-45 years). State-sponsored interest groups exist in most villages. With the exception of the fire brigade and village militias, they are largely inactive at the village level and have nominal membership. State-sponsored interest groups have minimal influence over decision-making at the village level.

In comparison to traditional institutions, UNDP-facilitated institutions – such as women’s Self-Reliance Groups (SRGs) and livelihood/village development committees – are more structured and have defined criteria for membership based on wealth-ranking. While SRGs are very segmented comprised exclusively of poorer women, the UNDP-facilitated livelihoods development committees tend to be broad-based with participation from large segments of the village population. Some of them have become key institutions in their villages, initiating and supporting a wide range of activities while others focus mainly on coordinating UNDP-related activities and providing loans from revolving funds.

Core leaders play a central role in key village decision-making and other aspects of village life. They are very influential and provide explicit or tacit sanction for most decisions related to village-wide affairs and also resolve disputes. They usually hold officially or traditionally recognised leadership posts such as VTA/VA or that of VERP. Secondary leaders can mobilise villagers and are often leaders of institutions outside of those led by the VTA/VA and VERPs. They are consulted in key village decision-making but are not positioned to make decisions without core leader support. Core and secondary leaders are usually men with a medium or high socio-economic background. Core leaders are expected to exempt poorer segments of the village population from informal taxes such as contributions to local fundraising or ‘donation requests’ from township authorities, where often the cost of this is borne directly by the core leader. Tertiary leaders lead institutions that are less central to key village institutions such as the UNDP-initiated SRGs and socio-religious women’s groups but they do not hold influence over village-level decision-making. In comparison to the core and secondary leaders, tertiary leaders come from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Notably, leaders in this group may also be women. Normative perceptions and other barriers constrain them from taking up secondary or core leadership positions.

The normative expectations and qualities that make an effective, influential and well-liked leader relate mainly to personality and ability although socio-economic standing and benevolence are also considered important. Respondents with a low socio-economic background placed particular emphasis on leaders being fair, unbiased and willing to charge the poor less or nothing at all for village fundraising. Of particular importance is the capacity of core leaders to implement directives from township or military authorities in a manner that does not negatively impact households. Strong social pressures exist for leaders to conform to these norms to some extent. Those who do not are disliked and those who mismanage village funds risk being replaced.

An important finding of the study is that about half the VAs are reluctant leaders. They openly expressed a preference for not holding the position or a desire to resign. The disincentives for them to take up leadership roles or continue in them centre on demands on their time and for financial contributions. Moreover, they have to deal with matters and demands from township authorities particularly that may cause conflict in the community or people to dislike them.

The financial and time demands of the VA position combined with low education and cultural gender stereotypes act as barriers to leadership for women and the poorer segments of village society. For example, women are seen to be weak in enforcing orders and thus not ‘fit to lead’.

Women are generally accepted as leaders of groups that have women membership only. There are few instances of people challenging these beliefs.

Summary of key findings for research question: 2. How do local institutions and UNDP-facilitated groups relate to village leadership structures?

Most villages demonstrate supportive or non-conflictive relations between core leaders and other village institutions. Only two out of 16 villages experienced open conflict. The dynamic relationship between VTAs/VAs and VERPs is the most important for decision-making at the village level. One or both of these institutions tend to form the main governance body and centre of power in the village and they wield significant influence over other institutions. Traditionally, it is the role of the VTA/VA to govern and the role of the VERPs to lead village social and religious affairs. However, the roles carried out by these two institutions depend on the perceived status of the VTA/VA vis-à-vis the VERPs. In villages where the VTA/VA is regarded as inexperienced, corrupt or lacking interest in his position, the VERPs often take up a more prominent role; assuming the decision-making lead, managing village development initiatives and coordinating village institutions. Overall, in many but not all villages the VERPs act as a check and balance on the power and performance of the VTA/VA, representing the strongest form of social accountability existing between village institutions. Core leaders tend to adopt a closed decision-making style through which agreements reached in private are announced to the community, often with their nominal approval sought only and with few objections encountered.

Core leaders are generally leaders or patrons of several other village institutions, particularly traditional socio-religious ones while their family members often take up institutional leadership positions too. Traditional institutions usually follow the instructions of core leaders and inform or seek permission from them before carrying out activities. The relations of core leaders with UNDP-facilitated institutions focus on providing advice, serving as patrons or being called upon to enforce loan agreements, which makes use of their authoritative power. Overall, this relationship (between core leaders and UNDP-facilitated institutions) is more balanced and affirmative than with traditional institutions where relations between core leaders and institutions are more hierarchical. Generally, UNDP-facilitated institutions experience a supportive relationship with village leadership structures. Core leaders tend to be more closely involved in (UNDP-facilitated) village and livelihoods development committees, where they may hold an executive position, than in SRGs where they have a more marginal role. UNDP-facilitated interventions stimulate the capacity of secondary leaders (who often head the village and livelihoods development committees). However, the field data is not sufficient to form a conclusion as to whether these secondary leaders later take up core leader positions – and as such if UNDP-facilitated interventions result in an expanded pool of future core leaders or not.

While UNDP-facilitated SRGs (generally formed women from poorer households) has a function in generating income for the members and empowering women capacity and leadership within the SRGs, it is evident that SRGs in their current form neither contribute to producing core leaders nor significantly enhance the role of women in decision-making at the village level. They are in themselves not sufficient to overcome barriers to participation of women in public decision-making.

Summary of key findings for research question: 3. To what extent do formal village administrations represent the interests of the township, households, institutions and others?

Competition for leadership positions of village institutions is generally low. Few positions offer sufficient incentives relative to disincentives. In part owing to these reasons, the pool of potential leaders for key positions is limited.

There is no standardised manner by which VTAs and particularly VAs are selected or general procedures for their dismissal or resignation. VERPs play a central role in such processes. While township authorities officially appoint VTAs, which in turn appoint VAs, in many cases this is simply a bureaucratic procedure that formalises a selection that has already taken place at the village tract and village level respectively. In the majority of villages the VA is selected by the VERPs in a closed decision-making process in which the VERPs consult among each other and with other core or secondary leaders. They seek confirmation for their preferred choice in a village mass

meeting attended by heads of households, which are ordinarily men. In three of the 16 villages studied the VTA/VA was appointed by ballot vote. In another three villages the township authorities directly selected the VTA/VA.

No correlation was found between the VTA/VA selection method and the level of authority or popularity of the VTA/VA. Likewise, there was no uniform preference for how respondents preferred the VTA/VA to be selected if they could decide. However, no respondent expressed a preference for the township authorities to make the selection. Several VTAs/VAs have been dismissed due to corruption involving the misuse of village funds collected from households or donated for village development purposes. In such cases the VERPs and other villagers were often instrumental in complaining directly to the township authorities, which would then investigate and almost always dismiss the VTA/VA. Although there is some acceptance that the VTA/VA position is unsalaried and so a need exists to collect funds from households, the opposition to extensive misuse of funds is strong.

Women, youth and the poor are largely excluded from the VTA/VA selection process. This is because they are not represented in the VERP institution and have low representation at village mass meetings. However, the marginalisation of certain groups from village decision-making does not mean that core leaders completely ignore their interests. Based on interviews, the research team estimates that core leaders in 12 out of the 16 villages respond to a limited extent to the interests of women specifically with similar figures for poor and youth.

The relationship between township authorities, village tract and village administrations is generally characterised by a top down command and communication structure. The interaction between the state as represented by township authorities is weak and an effective mechanism does not exist for village households to provide feedback to township authorities or for township authorities to genuinely consult households. Moreover, accountability of duty-bearers at the township-level towards rights-holders on public service budgeting for example is almost non-existent.

Limited resources pass from the state to villages so VTAs/VAs play a limited role in the allocation of resources. Instead engagements between the township and the village centre on the directives issued from the township through the VTAs to the VAs. These often relate to forced cropping of various so-called policy crops. VTAs/VAs are also directed to raise funds from households on behalf of the township authorities. Respondents reported abusive and intrusive interventions such as forced labour and confiscation of land for the expansion of military compounds by the military and township authorities. This was more prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s than in the 2000s and a halt to some forced cropping directives was observed by respondents in 2010.

In the majority of villages, VTAs/VAs are not proactive in seeking to improve access to basic services or assistance for village development with higher authorities but they often play an important reactive role in mediating between the demands of the state and household interests. This can also be described as a local form of social protection where VTAs/VAs act as a 'buffer' between the state and the needs of particularly poorer households. No major difference was found in this respect between UNDP and non-UNDP villages. VTAs/VAs react in a variety of ways to directives instructed by township or military authorities. These include: 1) implement the directive as instructed and without objection: In about one third of villages VTAs/VAs implement government directives as instructed and do not commonly intervene on behalf of villagers; 2) make exemptions for the poor: VTAs/VAs generally try to lessen the negative impact of government directives and requests for financial contributions on poorer households. As such they can act as a buffer between the state and poorer households; 3) bargain for partial implementation: Most VTAs and VAs seek ways to avoid implementing directives fully if they are unable or if they are deemed to cause undue hardship to villagers (and thus also likely to make the VTA/VA unpopular). They may appeal directly to township authorities for lenience, bargain for a compromise or try to partly fulfil the directives or ignore them altogether, often with the tacit acceptance of the township authorities; 4) intervene on behalf of individuals in criminal cases: If they involve someone from the village, the VTAs/VAs sometimes seek to help by requesting the authorities to not take action; 5) confrontation: In severe cases where the military have ordered villagers to act as porters, provide labour or material supplies, some VTAs/VAs have objected and directly refused to obey. This has

entailed considerable risk and the outcome of these engagements has been mixed with some having lost their positions.

In terms of proactive engagement, local administrative leaders occasionally approach township authorities to improve access to basic services but this occurs infrequently and is unsystematic. There is no significant difference between UNDP and non-UNDP villages in this respect although a few UNDP villages have stronger contacts with specific township departments following introductions by UNDP staff. VERPs and other village institutions have less engagement than VTAs/VAs with township authorities when it comes to intervening on behalf of villagers when government directives are issued. However, they have more contact when engaging proactively by initiating requests for improved basic services.

In Rakhine and Shan states, some institutional leaders have contact with political parties but party activities are not yet a major factor affecting village leadership and organisation. Nearby villages engage with each other at social functions or religious events. Some UNDP-facilitated groups meet regularly in cluster groups with villages in the same tract and exchange experiences.

In conclusion, the interests represented by VTAs/VAs are mixed. Their allegiance is first and foremost to the village community and their household interests. If they do not conform to normative leadership expectations to some extent and place their own household interests above those of the community (such as in the case of extensive misuse of village funds), they do not enjoy support and rarely continue in their position for long. VTAs/VAs make regular exemptions for poorer households when requesting financial contributions from households but do not include poorer households, women and youth directly in decision-making at the village level. VTAs/VAs and other institutional leaders engage only in limited ways with township authorities to proactively obtain access to services and entitlements. Few resources are allocated by township authorities to villages for basic services and so the VTAs/VAs function does not centre on allocation and administration of state resources. Finally, engagement by village households, institutions and leaders with other external entities, including membership of external horizontal or vertical networks, is limited.

Possible implications and recommendations for UNDP (research question 4) are outlined in sections 7 and 8.

1. Introduction

Most development agencies in Myanmar implement programmes at the village level but analysis and documentation of village governance i.e. local institutions, local leadership structures and relationships between these entities and outside stakeholders have been limited. Promoting democratic governance is a key UNDP priority at the global level but the democratic local governance aspect of UNDP's work in Myanmar has been constrained by the socio-political context and restrictions on the agency's mandate. Despite these constraints, UNDP Myanmar has focused its capacity development efforts on empowerment, inclusion, representation and accountability through its Human Development Initiative (HDI) grassroots work with communities, an approach that is linked to reducing poverty and promoting democratic governance. New arenas for engagement and a widening space for democratisation and public accountability are opening up in the country at the national, regional and local levels.

The Myanmar government has begun to promote good governance and many development agencies are assessing how they can foster sustainable and democratic development in the country. In this context, a solid frame of reference for our work at the local level is needed. This study is one of the first to map some of the institutional structures and dynamics that dominate village level governance in Myanmar. It provides a solid starting point for discussions on how to engage with traditional institutions and their leaders and forms part of a series of studies and assessments commissioned by UNDP Myanmar to inform the development of its HDI programme.

1.2. Report Overview

Following the introduction and sections on scope and methodology, the report is divided into four parts:

Section 2: *Institutions* provides an overview of the institutions that exist at the village level in the areas where research was conducted. This covers their 'purpose, function and activities', 'structures and membership' and 'incentives and fundraising'. (See research question 1)

Section 3: *Leadership* provides an analysis of different types of leaders, normative perceptions of leadership and the exclusion of women, the poor and youth from leadership positions. (See research question 1)

Section 4: *Relations between institutions and core leaders* describes the relations between core leaders and different types of institutions, particularly traditional and UNDP-facilitated institutions. (See research question 2)

Section 5: *Representation and relations with external actors* considers the extent to which formal leadership, particularly that of village tract and village administrators, represents the interests of households, township authorities and others. It includes an analysis of the ways in which different groups are excluded from decision-making as well as an in-depth consideration of the ways in which formal leaders manage relations with outside stakeholders, notably the township authorities. (See research question 3)

Section 6: *Conclusions* provides an overview of the key findings and concluding remarks. (See research question 4)

Section 7: *Resource material: Perspectives and relevance* includes a review of relevant material on village institutions, leadership and UNDP programming in Myanmar. (See research question 4.)

Section 8: *Recommendations* provides a list of key recommendations for UNDP and development agencies working with grassroots development, local institutions and local governance in Myanmar. (See research question 4)

1.3. Scope

The research refers to the Terms of Reference included in annex A and focus on the following questions:

1. What are the structures and relationships of local institutions and leadership in the selected villages?
2. How do local institutions and UNDP-facilitated groups relate to village leadership structures?
3. To what extent do formal village administrations represent the interests of the township, households, institutions and others?
4. What are the possible implications and recommendations for UNDP?

The research questions are analysed based on field research findings and relevant resources, specifically the report 'What Lies Beneath: An Operational Analysis on Leadership and Institutions at the Local Level in Myanmar' (WLB).¹ The field research that WLB was based on was conducted in 2011 in 20 villages in the Ayeyarwady Delta and the Dry-Zone and was the first overview of leadership and institutions at the local level in Myanmar. The present report goes further than WLB by examining village institution and leadership issues in other parts of Myanmar such as the ethnic states – and in greater detail than has been done before. It also includes perspectives that are particularly relevant for UNDP such as gender, inclusion/exclusion of poorer segments of the population in leadership positions as well as the relationship between village leaders, households and township authorities. Finally, it assesses the relevance of the overall findings to development agencies, specifically UNDP.

The findings of this report are based on field visits to 16 villages in Mon, Shan, Chin and Rakhine states. Where possible, the analysis will differentiate between structures and relations that differ geographically but the report's main focus is on generic overview based on findings that are similar across villages. Although the villages are not representative of all villages in these states or of villages across Myanmar (due to the relative small sample and the great ethnic, cultural and geographical variances within states), the study does provide a foundation for understanding key structures and relationships relating to village institutions and leadership that are likely to be found elsewhere in the country. For this reason, the findings provide useful information for anyone interested in or implementing village-level and/or local governance-related programmes in Myanmar.

This report is a qualitative analysis of the research questions and not an evaluation or assessment of the effectiveness of UNDP programs or a political analysis of local governance in Myanmar. Furthermore, it is not a comparative analysis of institutions and leadership between villages where UNDP implements programs and villages where it does not. The field research does include both types of villages and differences have been highlighted where relevant.

The findings are based primarily on interviews and discussions with respondents in the 16 villages, supplemented by discussions with key UNDP programme, policy and field staff. While local researchers were invited to contribute their thoughts and preliminary analysis, a transparent separation was made between the perceptions of respondents and those of researchers and the report author.

¹ 'What Lies Beneath: An Operational Analysis on Leadership and Institutions at the Local Level in Myanmar', See also *Section 7: Resource material: perspectives and relevance* for an overview of the findings of this study.

1.4 Methodology

The field-based part of study was undertaken by Myanmar Development Research (MDR) under the Myanmar Egress Capacity Building Centre, in close cooperation with the international consultant. MDR carried out similar research for the WLB report. The field research team consisted of four supervisors/team leaders and 12 associate researchers (reduced to nine associate researchers for the second phase). The majority of team members were of Buddhist-Bamar ethnicity. Others have a Chin, Shan or Indian-Muslim background. Members were 75% female and 25% male. Researchers were divided into four sub-teams. The MDR research manager directed the team with cooperation and supervision provided by the international consultant. During the first data collection phase two sub-teams visited Mon State and another two sub-teams Shan State. The sub-teams visited Chin State and Rakhine State during the second phase. The use of two sub-teams in each state was aimed to reduce research bias insofar that findings were not simply based on the findings of a single sub-team but could be cross-checked and compared between sub-teams in the same geographic area. Each field data collection phase lasted about 14 days (including transport to field sites) and was followed by 10 days of debriefing and writing of field reports in Yangon. The latter ensured that the team had adequate time to record and categorise the field data. It allowed for the consultant to quality check the initial data and provide support to the field teams to further improve research techniques. It also provided an opportunity for field teams to share among each other best practice and useful approaches from the first phase, which eased data collection during the second phase.

Table 1: Research team composition

International Consultant	1 person
MDR research manager	1 person
Team supervisors	4 persons
Associate researchers	12/9 persons
Translators	2 persons
* Translators were only used in Rakhine and Chin states. In Chin State, two associate researchers doubled as translators while the team added two external translators in Rakhine State.	

The research, including preparation, pilot and preliminary data analysis, was conducted over a ten-week period between January and April 2012. The report was drafted and finalised in April and May 2012. The field research took place in 16 villages in Kyaiktio Township in Mon State; Naung Cho Township in Shan State; Falam Township in Chin State and in Mrauk Oo Township, Rakhine State.

Table 2: Sub-team per location

Data collection phase	Area	Sub-team*
1: 31 Jan. - 12 Feb.	Mon State	A + B
1: 31 Jan. - 12 Feb.	Shan State	C + D
2: 27 Feb. - 11 March	Rakhine State	B + C
2: 27 Feb. - 11 March	Chin State	A + D
* Each sub-team (A, B, C, D) was comprised by three or four associate researchers and one research supervisor/team leader.		

Purposive sampling methods were used to select villages that were:

- Representative of those in the area as regards size, ethnicity and socio-economic status;
- In some proximity to each other (i.e. 2 village tracts in each state and two villages within each village tract);
- Representative in terms of project progress (i.e. both villages where project implementation has progressed easily and those where progress has been more difficult);
- Accessible for researchers;
- Approachable i.e. where respondents have time and willingness to meet with the researchers.

UNDP township staff undertook the final village selection based on these criteria and decided that half of the villages should be non-UNDP project villages. The latter criterion was difficult to meet in

some areas so the final selection included 10 UNDP project villages and six non-UNDP project villages.

The four sub-teams stayed three to four nights in each village and each visited two villages per phase. They also conducted interviews with UNDP township level staff before and after village visits. Upon completion of each field phase, the teams returned to Yangon to write detailed village reports. After the field research was completed, the researchers participated in overall data analysis discussions to identify key findings and recommendations. In Chin State, two team members provided translation in each of the villages visited whereas in Rakhine State two external translators (recruited by MDR) provided translation. Chin villages posed the greatest challenge in terms of overcoming language and cultural barriers.

Overview of research methods

The research methods were predominantly qualitative but some quantitative data were collected from respondents such as institutional membership, age, gender and socio-economic background of his/her household. The village-level research methods included the following:

1. *Interviews with UNDP township level staff:* Introductory focus group discussions prior to local village deployment.
2. *Village-based field research:* A sample of draft interview questions, matrix of local level institutions and key leadership characteristics. These are included in annex B.

Key components of the village-based research included:

- a) A series of focus group interviews with members and non-members of local institutions;
- b) Key informant interviews with institutional leaders and non-leaders;
- c) A matrix of existing local institutions and groups;
- d) Identification and reputational sampling of key institutional leaders and mapping of their relationships with other institutions;
- e) Case studies based on detailed interviews;
- f) Participant observation and casual conversation in informal settings.

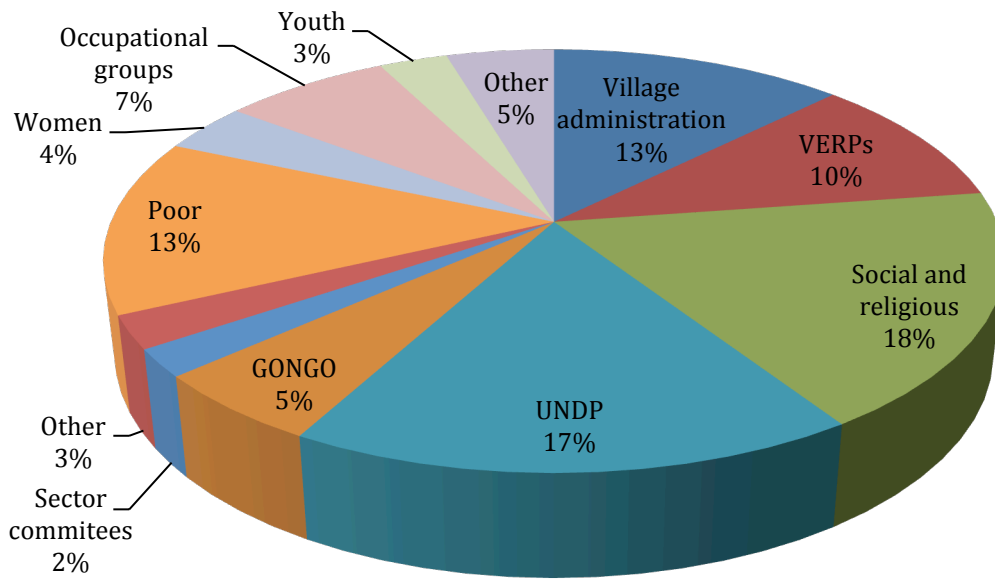
Overview of interview categories

The sampling of respondents at the village level took place based on a set framework to ensure the inclusion of leaders or members of administrative, traditional, state-sponsored² and UNDP-facilitated institutions, in addition to respondents that were not necessarily members of institutions but represented a segment of the village population defined by age, gender and economic status with particular attention to inclusion of youth, women and poor respondents.

The research team carried out a total of 239 interviews: 18% with members of traditional socio-religious institutions, 17% with members of UNDP-facilitated institutions, 13% with village/village tract administrations, 13% with respondents identified as poor and 10% with VERPs (village elders and respected persons). Poor people were also part of interviews based on institutional membership. The remaining interviews were with other groups and institutions as outlined below in Chart 1.

² These 'Report Of The Independent Assessment are also known as government organised non-government organisations or GONGOs.

Chart 1: Interviews by Institutions and Other Criteria

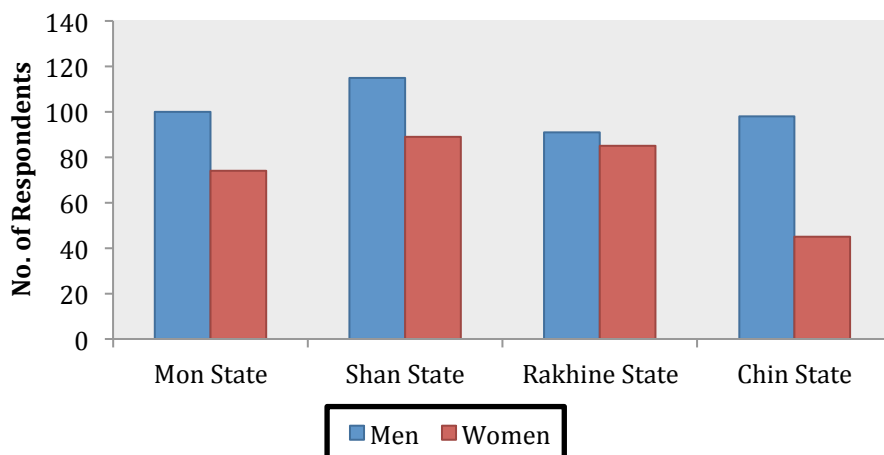


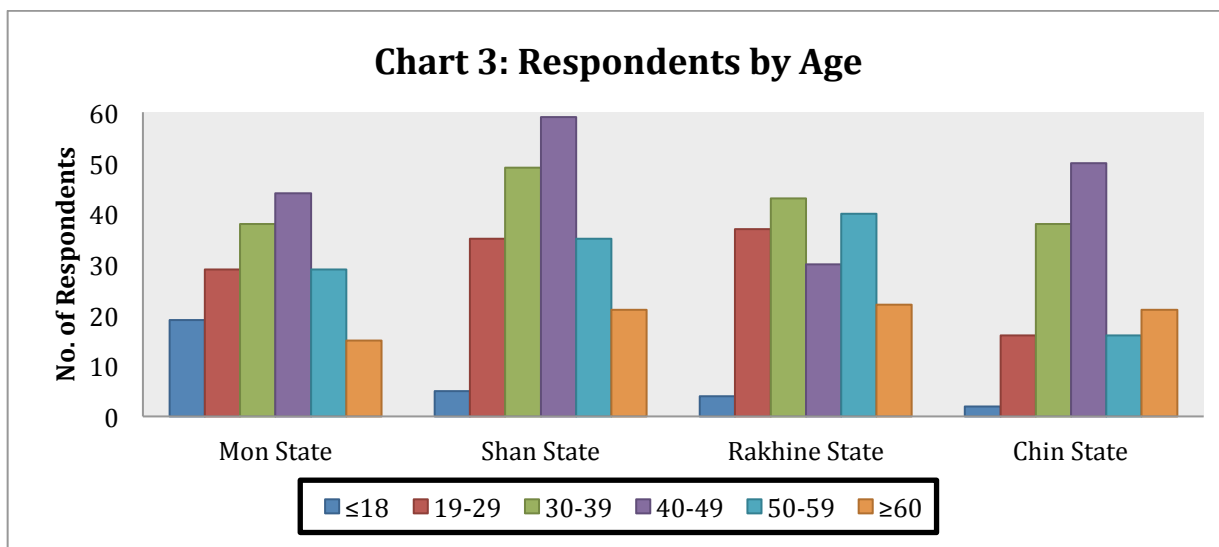
Overview of respondents

The research team interviewed a total of 697 respondents of which 58% were men and 42% were women. The ethnicity of the respondents was a mix of Barmar, Shan, Danu, Chin and Khami. The majority of respondents were Buddhist with the exception of respondents in Chin State, whom were largely Christian.

The graphs below show the spread of respondents across gender and age. Variances reflect what respondents were available for interviews during the field visits:

Chart 2: Respondents by Gender





2. Village-level Institutions

This section overviews key village institutions found in 16 villages in Mon, Shan, Rakhine and Chin states. The institutions were grouped into four main categories: formal government and village administration, traditional socio-religious, state-sponsored and UNDP-facilitated.

While the analysis identifies key institutions that are typical for villages in each geographic area, they should not be considered representative of all villages in the selected states. Significant variations exist between villages unrelated and unrelated to their geographical location.

The following points are included for institutions within the four categories: a) purpose, function and activity, b) structure and members, and c) incentives and funding.

2.1. Most common village institutions

7-20 local institutions exist in the 16 villages with some regional differences. The highest number of institutions were recorded in Mon and Rakhine States with an average of 15.5 and 14 per village and the lowest in Chin and Shan states with an average of 8.5 and 10 per village.

	Total per village	Average per village
Mon State	14-17	15.5
Shan State	7-13	10
Rakhine State	10-20	14
Chin State	7-10 (12)*	8.5 (10)*

* Several Chin villages have three different church denominations with individual churches. If these are counted as three different entities rather than one, then the number of institutions is higher as indicated in brackets above.

The most common institutions found in the 16 villages are: a) Village tract and village administration (16), b) monastery/church (16), c) socio-religious youth group (16), d) pagoda or church trustees (14), self reliance/revolving fund groups (12 UNDP and self-initiated), group of Village Elders and Respected Persons i.e. the elders' council (subsequently referred to as VERPs)³ (11), school committees (11), village militias and/or fire brigades (10). Some other state-sponsored groups exist in 9-12 out of 16 villages but are largely inactive (such as Myanmar

³ In Myanmar language they are commonly referred to as *ya mi ya pha* ('father and mother') or sometimes *na ya ka*. However, *na ya ka* generally means 'patron' and can also be used for persons appointed as patrons to other institutions.

Women and Child Association (MWCA), the Myanmar Women Affairs Federation (MWAF), the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS)).

Institution	Count
Village tract/village administration	16
Socio-religious youth group (associated with monastery/church)	16
Pagoda/church board of trustees	14
Self-reliance/revolving fund groups	12
School committees	11
Village Elders and Respected Persons (VERP)	11
Village militias and/or fire brigades	10

2.2. Individual membership of institutions

What follows is an overview of the individual institutional membership of all respondents (but not of the overall village population). Respondents can be members of more than one institution so the total percentage exceeds 100%.

Women: Female respondents are generally members of one institution per person, with a maximum of three institutions for any female respondent. The most common membership is in traditional socio-religious institutions (34%) and in UNDP-facilitated institutions (43%). Other institutions have less than 11% membership of women per institution. Female respondents are poorly represented in village tract and village administrations (1%) and in VERP institutions (0%). However, they are more than twice as likely as men to be members of UNDP-facilitated institutions.

	Women	Men
Mon State	1	2
Shan State	0.9	0.9
Rakhine State	1	1.7
Chin State	1.5	1.9

Men: Male respondents are generally members of one to two institutions per person and participate in a maximum of five institutions. The most common membership is traditional socio-religious institutions (48%), followed by UNDP-facilitated institutions (24%), Village Tract Administration/ Village Administration (21%) and VERPs (20%). Village Tract and Village Administration and VERPs are dominated exclusively by men with the exception of one lower-ranking (10 household) female leader.

*Socio-economic status*⁴: In Mon and Chin states, richer members of the village participate in more institutions than those with a medium or poor income level. The poor are significantly underrepresented in Village Tract Administrator (VTA), Village Administrator (VA) and VERP institutions with 2% and 5% respectively in comparison with 20% and 23% among the richest. Respondents are evenly represented among traditional socio-religious institutions (excluding VERPs) and UNDP-facilitated institutions. However, issues concerning selection bias and imprecise definitions of socio-economic status mean that definitive conclusions based on the latter data cannot be made. It should not be assumed though that UNDP-facilitated groups are exclusively for the poor as outlined in section 2.14.⁵ The qualitative data based on in-depth discussion showed that medium and richer income groups play an important role in livelihood and village development institutions facilitated by UNDP whereas Self-reliance Groups (SRGs) are

⁴ To define socio-economic status, respondents were asked to rank their household status as poor, medium or rich compared with other households in the village. In villages where UNDP had already defined households into categories from A through D, category A was re-classified as 'rich', categories B-C as 'medium' and D-E as 'poor' for the purpose of this research. Thus economic status is self-defined, not based on external, objective, precise criteria. As UNDP generally targets villages with high levels of poverty overall (i.e. among all households), those respondents classified as 'medium' for example are likely to be poorer than those ranked as 'medium' in areas with lower levels of poverty in other parts of the country or the specific state.

⁵ At a conceptual level UNDP targets mainly the poor as per its programme design. However, the socio-economic status of the members of the UNDP-facilitated groups may also fluctuate over time (as some may improve their socio-economic status).

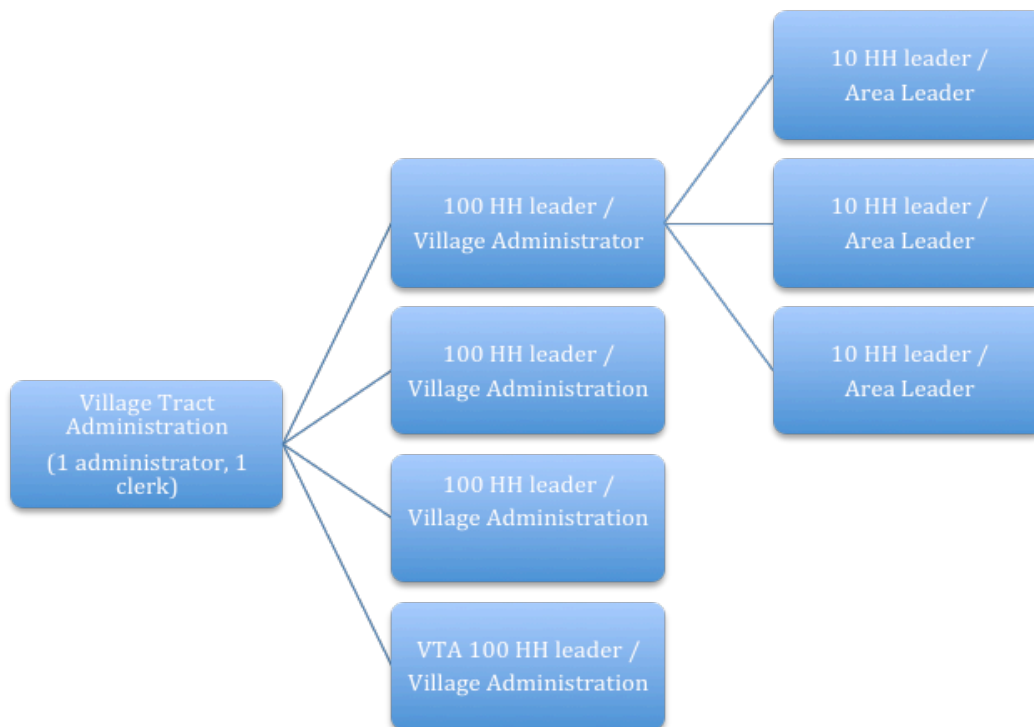
dominated by the medium and poorer income groups. However, participation in SRGs is a challenge for segments of the poorest of the poor.

Village tract administrators/village administrators: The leaders of the village tract and village administration have a significantly higher membership of institutions than other respondent segments – on average 2-4 institutions except in Shan State. They have a particularly high membership of socio-religious institutions.

2.3. Village tract and village administration

The structure: The lowest tier of the official government administrative structure in Myanmar is the Village Tract Administration in rural areas and the Ward Administration in urban areas. A village tract is an administrative unit formed usually of 4-6 villages located in close proximity. The village tract administration reports directly to the township-level administration and in most areas is administered by a Village Tract Administrator, a clerk or secretary and a number of 100 household leaders, which are often referred to as Village Administrators.⁶ The VAs and 100 household leaders are responsible mostly for one village while some villages, often larger ones, might have two or three 100 household leaders responsible for less or more than 100 households. They all report directly to the VTA who is of higher authority. The VAs and 100 household leaders are assisted in administrative tasks by 10 household leaders, which are sometimes called area leaders. The roles and responsibilities of the VAs and 100 household leaders are similar; they share equal authority and their titles may be used interchangeably. VAs and 100 household leaders will be referred to as VAs only within this report, unless where relevant to distinguish explicitly between the two.

Chart 4: Village Tract and Village Administration Structure



⁶ The VTA is known formally in Myanmar as *Oak Su Oak Chote Yayemhu* and the VA as *Kaye Ywar Oak Chote Yayemhu*. Prior to 2010 the titles were *Oak Su Oakkatha* and *Kaye Ywar Oakkatha* respectively.

There are differences in the role and influence of Village Tract Administrators compared with Village Administrators in different areas and with regard to their relations with township authorities (see section 5). In addition, all VTAs function as VAs in their resident villages. Respondents in villages where the VA is also the VTA do not differentiate between these different functions so it is not always possible to distinguish the separate roles. This has been done where possible.

The three main differences between the roles of VTA and VA are a) the VTA has overall responsibility for the village tract while the VA is only responsible for his own village (or in instances where there are multiple 100 household leaders, parts of his own village); b) the VA reports to the VTA who holds a position of higher authority than the VA; c) the VTA refers directly to the township authorities, which pass directives and disseminate information through him.

Historical changes to the structure and functions of the village tract and village administration

Prior to British colonial rule, the village headman was the leading authority at the village level in Myanmar. This traditional (often hereditary) position was one of relative autonomy of the state (or the king). His job was to represent and defend the village against the intrusion of the government, which according to a traditional Burmese proverb is one of the traditional five evils along with fire, flood, thieves and enemies. Village headmen along with elders also played a strong role as traditional 'judges' solving local disputes and in upholding social harmony and peace. The British retained the headman system but transformed the village headman position into the lowest representative of the Crown, reporting upwards through the bureaucracy and in charge of enforcing government regulations. (Thawnhmung 2004: 52, Khin Zaw Win 2006: 74, Steinberg 2001: 39) This was set out in the 1886 Village Act, which also emphasized the village headman's duties as collector of revenue (taxes) while ignoring his role in the social system of the village, (Tun Myint 2006: 15-16). Thus village leaders were turned (at least partially) into agents of the state. (Adas referred to in Thawnghmung 2004: 32) "This change was continued after independence allowing for greater state control of rural areas." (Steinberg 2010: 30-31),

During the rule of Burma Socialist Political Party (BSPP) (1962-1988), where the BSPP was the sole authorized political party in the country, the Village-Tract People's Council (VTPC) was the lowest level of bureaucracy (along with the executive branch of Village-tract Judges' Committee) which required members and chairmen to be party members of the BSPP. Under this highly centralized system, the VTPC reported to the Township People's Council who again reported to higher levels of the administration. According to the 1974 Constitution people's representatives should be "elected directly by secret ballot by citizens having the right to vote in the area concerned". Very little documentation exists to assess the extent to which this was widely practiced at the village tract level, how the VTPCs functioned and were perceived by the rural population. It is however clear that the BSPP was highly unpopular as expressed during the widespread public uprising in 1988. During the rule the military State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which took over power from 1988 and its successor the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the village tract administration existed in a constitutional vacuum along with other government institutions. Overall, the SLORC and SPDC retained the general administrative structure (based on village tracts, township, district, states and divisions) with some modifications while reinforcing the strong rule of the army (which dominated the BSPP) and replacing many of the members of the various councils with SLORC and SPDC approved persons. It is unclear (and largely undocumented) to what extent this led to a complete change of village heads (i.e. VTPC chairmen) across the country during this time.

Generally, respondents who took part in this study referred to only smaller changes to the village administrative system during BSPP and SLORC/SPDC rule. The SLORC/SPDC renamed the village tract administrative body Village Tract State Law and Order Restoration Council (and subsequently Village Tract Peace and Development Council). This body generally included a chairman, a clerk two executive members (EC member 1 and EC member 2, who were often VAs). However, as this study documents variances exist as to the how uniform the village tract and village administrations are, the position they occupy in local society, how the members/leaders are selected and the level of influence they have. Recent changes occurred in early 2011 when the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) handed power to the new government. This resulted in a title change from Village Tract Peace and Development Councils to Village Tract Administrations, and the chairmen renamed as Village Tract Administrator (VTA) mirroring similar changes at the township, district and state/regional levels. In some areas the method of selection or election of VTAs has also changed (see section 5.3).

Over time, changes to the system have not been implemented uniformly. For example, official regulations issued in 1996 stipulated age and education prerequisites for VTAs but these were only partially

implemented in the villages researched during this study. Before the parliamentary elections in 2010, VTAs and VAs in some areas were required to be members of the military-backed Union Development and Solidarity Party (USDP). Former EC members still carry out their earlier role in a few areas despite the fact their position no longer exists. Although the VTA and VA structure was found to be broadly the same in research areas, some Shan villages differed by for example including a clerk and two members the village administration. The perceived levels of power and authority held by particular VTAs and VAs vary greatly from village to village and are covered in detail in section 5.

The 2008 Myanmar Constitution does not include any provisions as to how the ward and village tracts shall be administered including how the ward and village tract administrator should be selected beyond executive article 289 (chapter 5), which stipulates “Administration of ward or village-tract shall be assigned in accord with the law to a person whose integrity is respected by the community.” (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008): 124.) In early 2012, a new Ward and Village Administration Law was approved by the Myanmar parliament and the president following debate over the most appropriate selection system of VTAs. The parliament rejected the president’s proposal that VTAs should be selected through a (not further defined) “negotiated selection system” rather than through a secret ballot. The new law generally maintains the existing administrative structure but allows for direct elections of VTAs by 10 household leaders (Myanmar Times 2012.) Secret ballot retained in ward, village admin bill, Soe Than Lynn, Volume 31, No. 617, 5 – 11 March 2012, <http://www.mmmtimes.com/2012/news/617/news61721.html>. The law also allocates a fixed salary for VTAs, which is a position that was not officially salaried. However, bylaws, rules and regulations for the new law have not yet been announced and come into effect.⁷

Purpose, function and activities: The VTA is responsible for government-related administrative and security matters within the village tract. He generally meets with township authorities under the General Administration Department (GAD) on a monthly basis to receive government directives and report. The management and execution of most tasks is delegated to VAs with the exception of the tract village i.e. the village where the village tract administration is located, which in most cases is the village where the VTA is resident and where he executes affairs directly. The VTA is also responsible for overseeing affairs concerning several villages such as inter-tract road maintenance or resolving disputes that cannot be handled by VAs.

The VA is directly responsible for administrative and security matters in his village and receives instructions from the VTA and in some cases higher authorities (see sections 5.6-5.8). In some areas the VTA meets monthly with the VA whereas in others *ad hoc* meetings are held when the VTA deems it necessary. However, the importance of the VTA/VA exceeds the functions outlined by the state due to expectations placed on him by fellow villagers that he also acts as a social leader in the village tract/village (see section 5 for further). Thus the role the VTA/VA performs includes a mix between administrative and security matters related to the state and other matters as outlined below:

- Keep and submit updated household and visitor lists;
- Manage the maintenance and repair of village roads, bridges and ponds;
- Oversee fire prevention through the village fire brigade;
- Resolve disputes among villagers and with other villages, and take action in the case of theft, violence, social/drunken misbehaviour or when a villager fails to comply with rules and regulations;
- Maintain security through the village militia or by alerting the police or other authorities in serious cases;
- Implement government directives related to the cultivation of specific crops;
- Collect funds for township authorities and village-related development and administrative affairs;
- Host visiting higher authorities and other influential guests;
- Act as chairman of or advisor to traditional socio-religious institutions and externally facilitated groups such as those supported by UNDP;
- Obtain agricultural loans on behalf of farmers from the government bank;
- Interact with aid and development providers such as UNDP;

⁷ An English translation of the law has not yet been made available.

- Assist in obtaining government registration or financial support for a new school, well, road etc.;
- Act as referee and witness to loan contracts for villagers seeking financial assistance from externally-facilitated groups (EFGs).

For a more detailed analysis of the relations between VTAs/VAs and external actors, particularly township authorities, implementation of government directives and their role in assisting household access to basic services, see sections 5.7-5.14.

The 10 household leaders do not hold much responsibility; they assist the VA in carrying out the above activities and often taking a more practical role. Sometimes the VA will consult them to determine how best to implement various tasks.

Structure and members: In comparison with most other local institutions the structure of the village tract and village administrative system is quite formalised with mandated roles and responsibilities. However, the means and extent to which these are carried out vary and is influenced heavily by the individual leader and the power relationship between core leaders at the village-level, see section 4. Despite the formalised nature of the VTA and VA positions, there is no transparent system of keeping and sharing meeting minutes. Respondents had a uniform and clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of VTAs/VAs but they did not refer to any written constitution or regulations although such have been issued by the government. Some VTAs/VAs in parts of Myanmar are in possession of a booklet outlining their roles and responsibilities.

VTAs/VAs are always men and have a medium or rich socio-economic background. VTAs usually have a higher educational and socio-economic background than VAs. There is no evidence of generational family control of VTA/VA positions except in Chin State where some of the VTA/VAs belong to families that have traditionally held village leader positions. However, VTAs/VAs tend to have more family members in other leadership positions, such as in the traditional socio-religious and other institutions including UNDP EFGs, than other households. The election/selection methods of VTAs/VAs vary and are detailed in section 5.3.

Rich	6
Medium	8
Poor	2
TOTAL	16*

*No VTAs are categorised as poor.

High school or higher education	3
Middle school	4
Primary	8
Monastic	1
TOTAL	16*

*All but 1 out of the 6 VTAs has a middle school or higher education.

Incentives and funding: About half of the VTAs/VAs are 'reluctant leaders', particularly VAs. Often they do not want the position but feel obliged to play this role for various reasons. This indicates that disincentives often outweigh potential incentives to take up such positions in the areas where research was undertaken. See section 3.6 for further details. No funding is allocated by township authorities for VTAs/VAs in the form of a salary or in-kind contribution for their work. Indeed, VTAs/VAs are often themselves responsible for covering costs associated with their position. They may be able to recoup these costs through fund raising from villagers in more or less transparent ways. In Shan State, costs were recouped in several villages by the levy of a 10% charge on the value of land sales. A few VTAs/VAs have participated in very limited training (a few days) in relation to their position, which was conducted by the township-level General Administration Department. However, this was not carried out systematically (in most areas not at all) and hardly any information is available about the content of this training. Finally because the state provides very few resources to the villages, the VTAs/VAs do not play a key role in resource allocation. This may change in the future if planned economic and decentralization reforms move ahead.

⁸ See footnote four for classification of economic background.

2.4. Traditional socio-religious institutions

Purpose, function and activity: All villages have several socio-religious institutions that play important and often interlinked roles in relation to religious and social fairs and events such as pagoda festivals, Christian holidays, weddings and funerals. Three types of socio-religious institutions exist in about 75% of the villages (VERPs, pagoda/church trustees, and groups of unmarried youth) while other institutions are area or village specific. Overall, about 13 different socio-religious groups were recorded with each village having an average of 4-5 socio-religious institutions. The exception was Chin State, which has only 2-3 socio-religious institutions per village. Chin State villages, which are Christian, also showed a distinctly different set of institutions than in other areas that are majority Buddhist. In these Christian villages the village institutions tend to be based in umbrella groups associated with the different church denominations, which then have several sub-groups such as youth groups, women's groups etc. (but all under one umbrella).

Most institutions mobilise members to carry out activities for specific events. However, some such as the VERPs, pagoda/church trustee groups and a few of the youth groups also meet on a regular basis. The VERPs are highly influential in village decision-making and local development affairs while other socio-religious institutions only conduct activities or make decisions on issues outside of their core institutional purpose infrequently.

Surprisingly, almost religious leaders such as monks and priests/pastors have a lead role in village affairs aside from their religious duties (out of the 16 villages, only two monks took an interest in village development). Instead, traditional socio-religious groups are concerned with organising socio-religious events while village development generally falls under the responsibility of VTA/VAs, VERPs and externally facilitated groups.

Structure and members: Participation in some of these institutions covers the majority of people in a certain age group and with a certain social position (married/unmarried). For example, it is generally compulsory for all unmarried youth to participate in village youth groups where these exist. This is not enforced by official rules but is expected by individuals in this age group and social category and as such is not questioned. Other groups, particularly those concerned with religious affairs are based specifically on interest and have smaller memberships. Almost all groups are gender separated with specific female/male sub-groups or memberships of one gender only. Formalisation of group structures varies greatly from those with open-ended structures and informal roles to those with assigned areas of responsibilities such as president, treasurer etc.

Incentives and funding: All socio-religious groups raise funds from their members and the wider village community. This is achieved by a regular membership fee or more commonly by voluntary donations during social events or when needed for larger projects such as for example monastery repair.

2.5. Village Elders and Respected Persons (VERPs)

Purpose, function and activity: VERPs are generally advisors to the current VTA/VA and other villagers. They oversee social, religious and funeral affairs in the village. They guide and support the VTA/VA and act as a check and balance on his power. They also play a key role in the selection and dismissal of VTAs/VAs. Sometimes they take up a strong governing role, particularly if the VTA/VA is perceived as inexperienced, weak or untrustworthy. In parts of Shan State that have had corrupt VAs, the position of VERP has been elevated and the title changed to the more formal *Na Ya Ka* with a very explicit mandate to monitor the VA. In some situations the VERPs settle disputes or are called in as grantees. They often participate in meetings associated with village development affairs and direct traditional institutions for socio-religious events. They are respected for their experience rather than their formal authority.

“VERPs are elders so they are knowledgeable. They know what has happened and what will happen so it is good for us to work with them. Besides, they do really good work for the village during their tenure.”

Structure and members: VERPs are sometimes officially recognised by township authorities. There is no division of responsibilities between members but one will often assume the role of chairman. They meet in an informal manner and on an occasional basis. The selection process for VERPs is not clear. Typically, they are chosen by the Village Tract Administrator with advice from other elders in the village or are self-appointed. Most of them are former VTAs/VAs who automatically assume a VERP position upon leaving their post. In some villages the VERPs occupy a more permanent position than the VTA/VA and so outlast several VTAs/VAs. However, in a few villages the VERPs are rotated whenever a new VTA/VA is elected. Members are generally older men of a medium to higher socio-economic background. In one village three older women were also members, which villagers attributed to the investment made by UNDP in capacity building. No other such cases were found. The number of members ranges from 4-9 persons.

Incentives and funding: VERPs rarely have group funds but sometimes make private financial contributions to village activities. Incentives for membership are influence and a sense of responsibility to the village.

2.6. Monastery and church trustee committees

The monastery trustee committee is the leading religious institution supporting monastic and religious affairs at the village level in the Buddhist majority villages.⁹ All 12 Buddhist villages have a monastery trustee committee whereas two of the four Christian Chin villages have a church committee with somewhat similar functions.

Purpose, function and activity: The key purpose and function of monastery trustee committees are to manage religious affairs and ceremonies. This includes monastery building and maintenance, providing assistance to monks such as collecting funds for basic necessities and medical costs, and calling monks to deliver sermons at ceremonies. The committee has an organising role in mobilising villages and particularly village youth groups to carry out practical work associated village ceremonies and festivals.

Structure and members: Monastery trustee committees generally date back to the establishment of the village monasteries. Some were later recognised more formally by the national (state) religious department. A few villages that do not have their own monastery are associated with monasteries in villages nearby and represented at these by monastery trustee members. The committees have 5-14 members, all male, aged between 40-60 years with varied socio-economic backgrounds. Some of the committees have a clear leader appointed by the village monk but others do not. Decisions are usually reached by member agreement. Monastery trustee committees do not hold regular meetings, instead gathering when the need arises, most often in preparation for village ceremonies.

Incentives and funding: The incentive for committee participation is generally out of interest and a sense of obligation to contribute to religious affairs. Those that are requested directly by the monk feel that they cannot refuse. Most monastery trustees collect funds on a regular basis from villagers for monastery maintenance and to support the monks. Some respondents reported that richer households are expected to pay more than households with a medium income while the poor can contribute as they wish.

2.7. Socio-religious youth groups

Village youth groups separated into male and female sub-groups play a key practical role in the organisation of social and religious events. The groups have different names that can be translated as 'group of unmarried persons', 'the celibate group', 'women's and men's group', and 'group of joy and sorrow' (*tha ye ya ye* in Shan State or *ka la thar* in Mon State). They exist in all 16 villages and

⁹ Commonly called *gaw pa ka* in Myanmar and *kyang da gar* in Rakhine State.

in some areas such as Chin State they have an expanded role that may include village development. This is less evident for youth groups in Buddhist villages. Many youth groups include or are closely associated with so-called cooking groups, which are responsible for preparing meals for villagers and guests during festivals and ceremonies.

Purpose, function and activity: The youth groups are customary groups formed to assist in religious and social events such as weddings and funerals. In Mon State, the villages have separate funeral groups to provide support for poor households in the event of a death. The assistance provided by youth groups is of a practical nature but in some cases includes female prayer groups that meet regularly under the guidance of the monk and also help to clean the monastery. Youth sometimes form separate groups to undertake social and entertainment activities such as local music bands or organising fun fairs.

Youth groups in most villages play a limited role in village development. They sometimes work on small-scale infrastructure projects under the leadership of the VTA/VA and/or the VERPs. Occasionally they mobilise financial or other help for members of their group or collect donations for things such as monastery maintenance.

In two Chin villages, the youth groups, which were formed as an institution with members from the various church denominations have a stronger role in village development. This is most often a response to the lack of other groups or individuals taking up this role such as the VA, VERPs, Church etc. These two youth groups are traditionally responsible for funeral services but are increasingly active in small-scale infrastructure development such as construction of village paths or cleaning of ponds; social affairs such as helping elders in the community who are unable to maintain their farms, and in one village, investigating theft and policing unruly behaviour.

Structure and members: Youth groups typically encompass all villagers between 15-45 years old although in some villages each household with an unmarried youth is only expected to contribute one member. In some villages only unmarried youth participate while in others married persons participate also. In Chin State, which has higher levels of migration than the other areas, the absence of many youth has been a challenge in some villages. Membership of groups varies from 15-50 with mixed socio-economic backgrounds that include the poor. About half of the groups have a steering committee with 5-7 members in formalised positions. All groups have a recognised leader – almost always male – although women lead women sub-groups. The Chin groups have a more formalised structure than the other groups. Leadership is often handed over by the out-going leader or to the eldest member(s) if supported by members or appointed under advice from VERPs. In the case of the Chin youth groups, leadership is selected by a ballot voting system with a fixed term of 2-3 years. There is not much competition among members for this post. The majority of members are men, particularly in the Mon *ka la thar* groups but most youth groups also have a women's sub-committee. Decisions are usually taken collectively and advice is sought from older leaders from other institutions such as the VA/VTA, VERPs and the pagoda or church trustees. Meetings are held on an *ad hoc* basis and are organised around particular events with the exception of a few villages that hold annual meetings (see below).

Incentives and funding: Youth participate because of cultural expectations and out of interest. There is usually no financial gain in being a member although financial support in the event of emergencies is provided in some cases. Most youth groups generate funds by collecting membership fees (generally around 2000 kyat per year), renting out kitchen utensils for larger events to households hosting weddings and funerals and by mobilising funds from the community when necessary. One youth group in Rakhine State established a revolving paddy bank that generates funds by renting paddy to its members with interest. In one case, exceptions to paying fees were granted to students in higher education. In Mon State, the youth groups demonstrate transparent financial accounting and provide annual financial statements at yearly meetings, which usually take part after water festival in April. VTAs/VAs/VERPs and monastery trustees also take part. Likewise, in Mon State and in some villages in Shan State, funds are raised when a woman marries a man from another village. In this case, the man is obliged to pay a sum of money as a kind of dowry to the youth group in the woman's village. This practice is also widespread in other Bamar-Buddhist parts of Myanmar such as the Dry-Zone.

Given that youth groups is one of the few institutions with both male and female membership, with members from all socio-economic strata and with some experience for organisation joint activities, they could be considered as a potential local institution which external agencies can work support for village development work – if the focus is on supporting existing structures and institutions rather than set up new or parallel structures.

2.8. Other traditional groups

Cultural groups: Two Rakhine villages recently formed smaller cultural groups to preserve traditional cultural traditions such as ethnic Khami dances and styles of dress.

Music bands: A few villages have formed traditional music bands that perform at festivals and weddings in the community and sometimes in neighbouring villages.

Women’s groups: In addition to the young women’s sub-committee formed as part of the youth groups, six villages have specific women’s groups undertaking different roles and with different names (*witika* in one Mon village, female rice collection groups in one Shan village and one Rakhine village, and women’s religious groups in two Chin villages). These groups are commonly small and conduct few activities, mainly supporting religious activities. They are loosely structured and participation is based on interest. The rice collection groups collect a small amount of uncooked rice from each household in the village (a fist full per meal or as much as the household can afford every two weeks) and donate this for monastery purposes (for example to buy silverware, maintain religious buildings or to provide for the basic needs of monks). One of the groups also lends paddy to its members with interest.

2.9. State-sponsored interest groups

During the time of the SLORC and SPDC governments (1988-2010) most of the villages established state-sponsored interest groups following instruction by township authorities. Villages in Mon and Shan states generally have 3-4 of these institutions while Rakhine State and particularly Chin State have a lower number. These institutions include the Myanmar Women and Child Association, the Myanmar Women Affairs Federation, the Myanmar Red Cross Society, the fire brigade and local village militias. With the exception of the fire brigade and the village militias, they are largely inactive with only nominal membership. None of the institutions receive financial support from the state and they rely on volunteers and small contributions from the village community. Occasionally, training takes place at the township level. At the national level these organisation are recognised entities within the state.

The institutions have a fairly uniform structure across villages and generally come under the responsibility of the VTAs/VAs who have a mobilising role – more so in the case of the fire brigade and the village militias, whereas the MWCA, MWAFF and MRCS often refer directly to the township-level of the respective associations. A few additional state-sponsored institutions exist in about a third of the villages and these are related mainly to education or local infrastructure. None of these institutions play a leading role in overall village development or in socio-religious affairs.¹⁰

	MWAF	MWCA	MRCS	Fire brigade	Village militia	Average no of institutions per village
Mon State #/4 villages	4	4	1	4	4	4
Shan State #/4 villages	2	3	1	3	4	3
Rakhine State #/4 villages	2	4	0	3	0	2

¹⁰ Apart from the limited role some village militias play in preserving order and security during pagoda festivals.

Chin State #/4 villages	1	1	0	0 (2)*	2(4)*	1
TOTAL #/16 villages	9	12	2	10	10	
* The village militia also carries out the functions of the fire brigade as per recent instructions by township authorities.						

2.10. Village militias

Purpose, function and activity: Village militias exist in all villages except Rakhine State. They were established by township or military battalions and remain connected to them. However, their purpose and level of activity varies across areas. Their main responsibility is village security, which includes protection against armed ethnic insurgents (mainly in Mon State until the mid-2000s); preventing theft within the village and by thieves from outside the village; fining or arresting individuals and transferring them to the police in the case of violent, drunken or other misbehaviour; monitoring and reporting non-resident visitors (in cooperation with the VTA/VA) to township authorities or military; and providing security at pagoda festivals and serving as night watchmen to patrol the village.

Village militias regularly serve as night watchmen and report on non-resident visitors but are only occasionally called upon to act in their other capacities. Respondents mentioned only a few incidences in recent years where the village militias were mobilised to intervene in cases of armed insurgency while organised robbery is not common. As such, they are mainly on standby for such events. This is particularly the case with regard to insurgency, which has decreased markedly since the 1990s. At that time, Mon village militias were mobilised to take part in military operations outside of their villages. It is unknown why village militias do not exist in Rakhine State villages. Shan and Chin village militias are not particularly active. In Chin State, the two village militias were transformed into fire brigades around 2009 and serve a double role. The greater mobilisation and militarised nature of the village militias in Mon State (some of which have arms although they have not been used for many years) is due to the close proximity to conflict-affected Karen State. While Mon State village militias are connected and report to military battalions stationed nearby, this is not the case in other areas. In a few villages, respondents suggested that village watchmen existed prior to the SLORC/SPDC period but were transformed into village militias by the SLORC/SPDC governments. Some members of village militias have undertaken a few days of security training at the township level.

Structure and members: The village militias are formally organised with set members and areas of responsibility. In most instances they have a recognised leader who divides set responsibilities among the members, for example who will patrol where and when. In other instances they have a fairly flat structure under the direction of the VTA/VA. In some areas they are organised at the village level but more commonly they are organised at the village tract level with a few representatives from each village. In Mon State, the village militias have 10-15 regular members and 10-20 reserve members while the numbers are lower in Shan and Chin states, where the range is from 5-7 members. They are generally able-bodied men between the ages of 25-55 years. Socio-economic status is mixed with a preponderance of working poor. Members are mainly selected by VTAs/VAs and VERPs without consultation or means of objection. In one village, rotational selection is used while in another qualified men are entered into a lottery system. Once selected, membership is compulsory.

Incentives and funding: There are few if any incentives to becoming a member of a village militia and there is no competition for such posts. In two villages, participation was in part hereditary with most of the members having fathers and forefathers who were former members. A few others viewed their work as a duty to serve and protect the village.

Village militias do not receive financial support from the township authorities or military such as food rations. Instead they raise local contributions by various means with the assistance of the VTAs/VAs in addition to providing their own funding for items such as uniforms. Local fundraising varies from collecting a monthly payment from lottery sellers who sell tickets for the illegal three

digit lottery, collecting an annual license fee of 50,000 kyats from fisherman granted access to a local fishing ground, and fixed contributions of 200 kyats per household per month.

2.11. Fire brigades

Purpose, function and activity: The purpose of the village fire brigade is to prevent and extinguish village fires. The fire brigade is affiliated with the township fire brigade from which it receives training and occasional instruction. About half of the village fire brigades conduct activities such as routine reminders for villagers of fire hazards and checks that tools to extinguish fires are in place. In Chin State, the village militia and the fire brigade were combined into one institution following instruction from the township authorities. The fire brigade plays no role in village development

Structure and members: Village fire brigades have between 2-10 members and are generally selected by the VTA/VA or nominated through a lottery system. They are loosely structured; some have a nominal leader but others do not.

Incentives and funding: Fire brigades have no funding and there are no incentives for members to participate. Activities are infrequent and do not require local contributions so there is little opposition among members to be part of the institution.

2.12. Maternal and Child Welfare Association, Myanmar Women Affairs Federation and Myanmar Red Cross Society

Purpose, function and activity: These institutions are the least active among the state-sponsored institutions. The MRCS was mentioned by respondents in only two villages and the only reference made was responsibility for first aid. The few respondents who knew about the MCWA and MWAFF reported that the former is responsible for reducing the mortality rate of children under five years old and for maternal care. The latter is responsible for promoting the role of women, protecting and furthering women's rights and protecting women from domestic violence and human trafficking. MWCA and MWAFF seem only to be active at the township level and occasionally visit villages to conduct child immunizations on an *ad hoc* or yearly basis. Registered members at the village level are expected to welcome and assist them in carrying out such activities. Only one village reported that a member had undertaken training at the township level on childcare but no follow-up activities took place in the village. Another village reported that members took part occasionally in nutritional seminars at the township level.

Structure and members: Members are often unaware of their membership and so other villagers do not know who is registered as a member of the MCWA and MWAFF either. A few respondents said that as a general rule the wife of the VTA/VA is president of these institutions. The number of members ranges from 3-15 and they are generally selected by the VTA/VA. Overall, respondents explained the structures of the MCWA and MWAFF as top-down by the respondents. No meetings or activities seemed to take place at the village level except per instruction and upon visit by township-level MCWA and MWAFF.

Incentives and funding: No incentives or funding exist with the possible exception of attending training at the township level.

2.13. Other groups

Political parties: Respondents in six of the 16 villages made reference to membership of political parties, predominantly the government-backed USDP (five villages), the National Unity Party, which is linked with the former Socialist government (one village) and political parties based on ethnicity (three villages) in Rakhine State, namely the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party and Khami National Development Party. The USDP was formed as a political party in 2010 to contest the November 2010 parliamentary elections. Previously, it was a state-sponsored mass organisation called the Union Solidarity and Development Association. This research found that

political parties do not play a significant role in village affairs and rarely carry out activities at this level. Respondents are members as individuals and participate occasionally in party meetings at the township level. In two villages, the main reference to political parties was in connection to raising external funds for a school building and emergency supplies following floods. Leaders in one village submitted complaints about land confiscated by the government/army to a local member of parliament.

Economic-activity groups: Village economies in the 16 villages are based predominantly on paddy or upland farming for subsistence and sale, although villages in Mon State have an additional focus on rubber plantations. Despite the large proportion of landless farm labour, few self-initiated economic activity groups exist. None of those found (four with an additional few in Mon State) were linked to any wider networks. They tend to be loosely structured labour groups for planting and harvesting paddy or nursing rubber plants. Some farmer and/or livestock groups (3) were formed to obtain loans from the government. The research yielded limited information on these groups suggesting that they do not play a dominant role in household and village economy affairs. The labour groups tend to be for poor day labourers or rubber plant nursery workers while farmers and livestock producers have a medium to rich economic background. There is no evidence that these groups are increasing in number or scale or that they are seeking to confederate. Farmers in many villages often group together to submit loan applications to the state bank. This is not institutionalisation or joint-lending but an example of a leading farmer, VERP or VTA/VA submitting loan papers on behalf of individual farmers.

Sector-specific groups: Sector-specific groups are established upon request from township authorities or by village leaders (VTA/VAs) or groups of villagers. A few have been established by UNDP and are outlined in section 2.17. The majority of the sector-specific committees are school committees (in 11 villages at least, with an additional two initiated by UNDP) parent teacher associations (five villages) and a few electricity or road committees (four villages). Generally, school committees were set up by villagers at the time of the establishment of the village school. The purpose of school committees is to promote the education of children, undertake and mobilise funding for the establishment or renovation of school buildings and school furniture and to coordinate between teachers and parents. The committees organise annual award ceremonies for the best performing students, mobilise labour from village households and collect funding from villagers and from external sources such as education departments and UNDP. Membership is often limited to 5-6 members and includes schoolteachers, VERPs and other core leaders. In some villages, school committees focus on establishing and maintaining school buildings while parent teacher associations undertake the other tasks while in others the school committee does both.

Permanent electricity or bridge committees exist in four villages, which were formed to maintain electrical equipment, collect monthly electricity bills and maintain inter-village bridges. VTAs/VAs and VERPs play a leading role in these by mobilising villagers. Elsewhere such activities, which may include road repairs are conducted in response to need, as part of the responsibility of core leaders and not dealt with by separate committees.

2.14. UNDP-facilitated groups

The following section includes a description of UNDP's HDI approach and UNDP-facilitated institutions by UNDP (see box). In keeping with the rest of the analysis, the subsequent description of local UNDP-initiated institutions (sections 2.15 -2.17) is based predominantly on the views of respondents from the villages where research was undertaken.

Community driven development under the Human Development Initiative (HDI) approach

By UNDP

UNDP under its overall HDI initiative supports community based development at the grassroots level through two specific projects: the Integrated Community Development Project (ICDP) and the Community Development for Remote Township project (CDRT).

Jointly the projects have a wide geographical coverage and have extended the UNDP presence and support to more than 50 TSPs in some of the most remote and poorest areas of rural Myanmar. ICDP support focuses on 23 townships in the Delta, Dry zone and Shan areas. CDRT operates in 26 townships in Northern and Eastern Rakhine, Northern and Southern Chin, Kachin and Mon and Kayin states. While some significant differences exist between the CDRT and ICDP projects with regards to geographical focus and operational modalities, both projects follow an integrated, long-term and demand-driven approach to strengthen the capacity of poor communities to address their basic development needs.

Village priorities based on initial participatory appraisal and revisited on an annual basis form the roadmap for interventions at the village level in the areas of health, education, water and sanitation, social infrastructure, disaster preparedness and environmental practices. At the household level UNDPs livelihood support is aiming at tangible benefits for the poorest and most vulnerable households through a range of interventions targeting increased income and food production. UNDP connects its livelihood support with a strong focus on multiyear social capital formation and such an approach has strengthened community driven development in the project areas and contributed to building up successful models of community governance.

Emphasis is being given to strengthen the capacities of various project-supported groups at sub-village and village level enabling access to finance and to technical assistance for their members. Simultaneously, group capacities are being built in a sustainable way for taking over gradually community governance functions on joint planning and implementation of village development priorities.

Empowerment through Self Reliance Groups

SRGs form the cornerstone of UNDPs social capital approach and are supported within both ICDP and CDRT. SRGs are formed with members who share common socio-economic backgrounds and livelihood constraints. They also share common interest in furthering their capacity to access improved means of livelihoods. The SRG is thus a vehicle for introducing democratic process and a means for promoting economic initiatives mainly through establishment of a savings and credit fund from which members can borrow. SRGs are small groups with membership ranging from 15 to 20 people. Members have access to loans from a revolving common fund that is composed of savings and interest (as under CDRT), or in addition (as applied under the ICDP approach) receives project inputs. Under the ICDP, SRGs are the main vehicle for delivery of project funds to the communities.

Loans are taken for consumption as well as for livelihood purpose based on rules and procedures agreed by all members. The small size of the groups allows members to form greater cohesion and trust amongst themselves as well as support a repayment culture based on peer pressure logic. The SRG members are mostly women. The microfinance linkages of SRGs through wholesale loan lending are for the moment only being applied within the context of ICDP, mainly based on geographical criteria.

SRG formation has been effective in bringing together the poor and very poor in the communities to give them access to funding and technical support, as well as to reflect jointly on their livelihood situation and the opportunities they may develop through their own efforts to tackle poverty and vulnerability and to improve their socio-economic well being.

Studies of SRGs have shown that SRG members apart from increased economic wellbeing, social security and social development at household level are benefitting from enhanced cooperation, mutual help and building of confidence among the poor. The organisational arrangements allow the poor to reflect on their abilities, develop their livelihood earning capacity, mobilise resources through community effort, and reinforce the strength of their traditional cultural capital. Based on own interest and savings, mature SRGs are also able to contribute to collective works and community social welfare with cash and labour. At the end of 2011 there were 5542 SRGs in ICDP and CDRT, out of which 98% are women only.

Community based organisation in support of wider economic and social resilience

Apart from also working with SRGs, CBOs are a key and distinct feature of the HDI CDRT project. Community based organisations (CBOs) are formed either as *ad hoc*, temporary entities

to address a specific task (e.g. related to social infrastructure), or as a group that is supported to have a more lasting presence. Based on needs and interest there can be a variety of groups within a village; ranging from CBOs related to livelihood or asset maintenance, to community managed food banks, including SRGs (savings based) as well.

Under the CDRT approach, the Livelihood CBO is the main vehicle for micro-project development and fund delivery to the communities and households. Livelihood groups under CDRT are recipients of project grants from which they set up group managed revolving funds for local projects. Group membership varies, but normally encompasses about 70-80% of the poor and poorer households in a village. Supported by the project with technical guidance and capacity development these CBOs identify and agree on small projects and beneficiaries. In contrast to the SRGs that are widely created to mobilise women-based organisations, membership in these CBOs is based on household. Following traditional patterns, household representation is often, but not exclusively exercised by men. In these CBOs, community driven development is promoted in large part through mobilising community organisations to assess and prioritise local needs and then to implement and follow-up on these. Project funding can be allocated to the public (community) or the private (household) side, as impoverished communities characteristically lack both, the social and productive infrastructure and services needed to support villagers in their pursuit of sustainable livelihoods at the household level.

In addition and with a view to overall strengthening of village governance and the coordination of existing groups, CDRT has encouraged the forming of Village Development Committees (VDCs) which function as apex bodies and provide a forum for all groups to discuss and agree on village development priorities, as well as to respond to a wider range of community interests. VDCs are a mechanism to discuss overall performance and resources of groups, as well as to agree to engage in joint initiatives of wider village significance (e.g. support to the poorest of the poor, households, renovation of village infrastructure, transparency and communication). In conjunction with the other existing groups, they contribute to social and economic resilience of the UNDP partner communities.

Presently under the HDI there are about 2896 CBOs operating under the CDRT project, totalling an estimated 310,000 members. There are in addition 1295 food banks supporting more than 286,000 members, as well as and roughly 600 functioning VDCs.

Sustainability and strengthening of community governance

To monitor their development towards self-reliance, the maturity and overall performance of SRGs and CBOs are assessed on a quarterly basis against multiple organisational, financial and accountability related criteria. All groups are also being audited on an annual basis through a participatory format by project staff and trained members of the communities.

Results show that out of the 5,500 SRGs more than 86% are functioning at a mature and sustainable level. These mature groups not only continue functioning effectively in the villages but subsequently become viable partners for microfinance linkages or other village development activities. A growing number of SRGs are no longer receiving additional financial inputs but are now interacting actively with the commercial market. Similarly, out of 2,896 CBOs, 67% are able to sustainably manage their own affairs.

Drawing from 2011 monitoring data, more than 3,000 SRGs and other livelihoods related CBOs took initiative – without project support – to draw funds from their savings and interest to engage in development activities within their villages e.g. construction or preservation of small infrastructure, financing village based education and schooling, or supporting the poorest/destitute households through cash or contributions. Food banks, supporting their members during food insecure periods, represent another well-received resilience mechanism.

In addition, local governance functions taken over by the groups have been supported through the formation of SRG or CBO cluster leading groups for peer support; as well as by creating and sustaining village development committees. VDCs are created to bring together the leaders from all groups/CBOs in the village, as well as regularly include the informal and administrative leadership. VDCs also function as the focal point for linking up with external stakeholders (e.g.

township authorities, technical departments) in support of village development activities. They provide a basic model for village based community planning and offer a mechanism for communities to drive community development and to take on local governance functions.

UNDP is planning under its new country program to foster its community driven approach, including through extending efforts beyond the village level towards inclusive community mobilisation at the village tract level, as well as through establishing effective linkages to the emerging local governance system at the township and state level.

2.15. Self-reliance Groups (SRGs)

Self-reliance groups for women are established in all 10 villages where UNDP is present. They are the most common form of UNDP-facilitated institution found. In Shan State, SRGs are the only institution established by UNDP whereas villages in Rakhine, Mon and Chin states have additional UNDP-facilitated groups.

Purpose, function and activity: Respondents provided a range of answers as to the purpose of SRGs. These focused on a) being able to save money, increase income and improve livelihoods of households, b) contribute to village development and social affairs, c) help each other, and d) improve the role of women.

The main function of SRGs is to provide members with loans at an interest rate of around 3% for individual households, which compares to 10-20% from private money lenders. However, most SRGs also contribute to social and village development affairs. Examples include making financial contributions from the common fund, which is accrued from loan interest, to the poorest households in the village or to monks and the monastery (for pilgrimage, health costs or renovation of buildings). Other activities include contributions to village pond renovation/construction or the purchase of a village telephone. This participation does not extend to involvement in village-level decision-making over development affairs and mainly takes the form of donations. Some SRGs also conduct functions commonly pursued by traditional socio-religious women's groups (as part of the village youth groups – see section 2.15). These may include providing refreshments and other support during village ceremonies.

Respondents reported that they have participated in training in book keeping and accounting, audit trainings and SRG cluster groups meetings, which take place with other SRG groups from nearby villages and are organised by UNDP. The SRGs also participate in monthly meetings organised by livelihood or village development groups in villages where these take place.

Structure and members: Villages tend to have several SRGs (two to five groups) per village with 11-20 members per group. The SRGs are exclusively for women with members from all age groups. Members are selected following wealth ranking carried out by UNDP, which divides households into five tiers with five being the poorest. According to respondents, members are generally women from poor households that are ranked three and four. A few villages specifically include those ranked five while others exclude them. In one village, UNDP made an exception and included those ranked one because even those considered richer were still poor relative to other villages. In three out of the ten UNDP-supported villages where several women were excluded from the SRGs because they did not meet membership criteria or lacked interest or ability to regularly save funds, these women expressed disappointment at not being part of the female SRG community and involved in their broader activities, particularly those previously carried out by the traditional women's group, which has members from all wealth brackets.

The SRGs are organised formally, have clear memberships, hold weekly meetings and keep meeting and financial records. Decision-making is generally collective. On issues where consensus cannot be reached, further discussion may take place at weekly livelihoods development meetings or in consultation with the VA for example. Leadership revolves annually or every 3-6 months but in one village other members than the two accepted leaders were reluctant to take up positions of authority because they did not feel qualified.

Incentives and funding: The main incentive for members to participate in SRGs is access to low interest loans with a view to making small investments in livelihood-related activities or covering education or health expenses. Other incentives are a sense of community among the women, ability to contribute to village affairs and the potential to develop skills through UNDP trainings. Members pay back loans through small regular (weekly) payments. Respondents indicated that some SRG groups collapsed because of insufficient commitment by members, high migration or theft of the common fund.

2.16. Livelihood and village development committees

In all four areas except Shan State respondents reported that UNDP facilitated the establishment of livelihood or village development committees.¹¹ However, a uniform description is not possible because these have different functions and memberships in different areas despite sometimes being referred to under the same name.

Purpose, function and activity: Villages in Mon State have broader village development committees tasked with guiding overall village development, particularly in relation to UNDP village institutions, and separate, smaller livelihood committees that focus on helping the poor establish small-scale agriculture and livestock businesses by providing low-interest loans. A few members have been trained in and provide agriculture and livestock extension services upon request from villagers. Villages in Rakhine State have just one type of committee, which is referred to as the livelihoods development committee. This coordinates village development affairs – mainly those related to UNDP – and also livelihoods support through a revolving fund with a high proportion of villagers participating. The livelihoods development committees in Chin State do not seem to coordinate village development affairs such as small infrastructure developments but only UNDP-related institutions. However, they do provide livelihoods support, particularly in the form of access to a large revolving fund with extensive membership. Taken together, the village and livelihoods development committees are heavily focused on making available low interest loans.

Structure and members: Most village and livelihoods development committees have a core group or executive committee of about 7-9 members with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. While women are members of these executive committees, leadership positions are generally occupied by men, often by those with a higher socio-economic status. Within this group decision-making is generally collective with an emphasis on consensus. In Rakhine and Chin states membership of the groups seemed open to anyone with an interest and many have a large membership, such as one in a Chin State village that has 52 members. The village and livelihoods development committees hold monthly meetings with broad participation of members from UNDP-facilitated groups, the VTA or VA, VERPs and sometimes members of traditional socio-religious institutions. These meetings provide a regular opportunity for the different groups to report on progress, coordinate plans, resolve outstanding issues and initiate new ideas. Loans to individual members are also approved in these meetings, which seem to be the only forum at the village level where development-related affairs are jointly discussed apart from occasional VTA/VA or VERP-dominated mass meetings. So although the UNDP-facilitated village and livelihood groups are male dominated, they do provide a greater opportunity for participation by the poor and women in the monthly meetings (where SRG and other groups are also represented) than is the case in villages where such monthly meetings are not held or fully dominated by the VTAs/VAs and/or VERPs. Some of the livelihoods development committees have become key institutions in their villages, initiating and supporting a wide range of activities while providing funding (from the common fund and UNDP) for small-scale infrastructure projects such as road repairs and pond clearance, while also providing regular access to small scale loans for members. In one exceptional village in Chin State, members attributed lower youth migration rates, higher living standards and income opportunities to the work of the livelihoods committee.

¹¹ In Shan State the ICDP focuses on SRG groups while the HDI programme, which is implemented in the three other states, includes wider village development activities and the establishment of other groups in addition to the SRGs.

Respondents often traced livelihoods development committees to the earlier establishment of UNDP-facilitated Village Technological Capacity Development Committees, which were more narrowly focused on agriculture and livestock activities.

Incentives and funding: Several of the livelihoods and development committees have the equivalent of several thousand US dollars at their disposal following an initial investment by UNDP and several years of lending and saving. Many have revolving paddy banks to increase access to lending and funding for either small groups of poor people, or for all villagers. The incentives for households and individuals to participate in the schemes are to improve individual household incomes and to support village development and livelihoods improvement.

2.17. Other UNDP-facilitated groups

A further 10 sector-focused UNDP committees were also found throughout the 16 villages. These include education committees in villages that did not have traditional school committees; and health, water maintenance, disaster reduction or environmental protection committees. These have limited memberships and functions and are concerned with maintaining school buildings and ensuring water pipes to wells donated by UNDP are still functioning for example. Some of them are no longer active. In a few villages, paddy banks separate from the livelihoods development committees were also set up.

3. Institutional leaders

This section provides an overview of institutional leaders at the village level and perceptions of good leadership. It introduces the notion of ‘reluctant leaders’ and outlines barriers to access for leadership positions that effect segments of the village population such as women and the poor.

This forms the basis for section 4, which analyses the relational aspect of leadership and village institutions.

3.1. Core, secondary and other institutional leaders

The field research looked into a number of issues related to leadership. Respondents were asked to define and provide explanations as to whom they regard as the most influential leaders in their village. This information was qualified through identification and examples of leaders that are key to solving conflicts, take the lead in village development, oversee socio-religious affairs and have a level of authority over several institutions. This information was triangulated among different respondent groups and vent diagrams were used to provide a visual representation of the perceived influence of different institutions and their leaders as well as the relations between them. Respondents provided several case stories to illustrate their perceptions.

The definitions of leaders used in this analysis are analytical (rather than emic) categories based on those used in the ‘What Lies Beneath’ study to allow for a level of analytical coherence between the two studies.

Leadership categories and definitions:

- Core leaders: These leaders play a central role in key village decision-making and a range of other aspects of village life. They are very influential and their authority is respected by the vast majority of villagers. As such, they sanction almost all decisions related to village-wide affairs – either explicitly or tacitly. Core leaders are regularly involved in several village institutions as leaders or advisors.
- Secondary leaders: Involved in key village decision-making together with village core leaders. They are often leaders of traditional socio-religious or other institutions than the VTA/VA and VERPs. They are not positioned to make decisions without core leaders but are able to mobilise villagers and implement decisions and initiatives that have core leader support;
- Other leaders: They can lead their own institutions or groups but lack influence over village-level decision-making and with core leaders, who may not consult them.

VERPs	6 villages
VERPs and VTAs/VAs	5 villages
VTA/VA	2 villages
Other	3 villages

3.2. Core leaders

In the majority of villages, core leaders hold an officially recognised post such as VTA/VA or VERP. They govern the village, take the lead in village level decision making, oversee the implementation of village development initiatives, play a defining role as patrons or leaders of socio-religious and state-sponsored institutions, act in an advisory capacity (often in the case of SRGs) or leadership role for UNDP-facilitated groups and sometimes for village and livelihood development groups also. They also play a central role in dispute resolution, interaction with township and other authorities, leading and/or sanctioning community development initiatives including fundraising etc. It is not unusual that they their family members occupy other institutional leadership positions. Generally core leaders are respected and viewed as capable by respondents.

In six out of 16 villages, core leaders are VERPs with the VTAs/VAs playing a marginal role. This is often the case in villages where the VTA/VA is new, does not take much interest in his role, is disliked and lacks ability or leadership skills, or in villages where previous VAs have been dismissed due to corruption. This was the case in two Shan State villages and one in Mon State where the VA position is now rotated every three months. In two villages the VTAs/VAs were the only core leaders, in part explained because the VERP institution does not exist in these villages. In five villages, the core leaders are the VTAs/VAs and the VERPs. This is frequent in villages where the VTA/VA and the VERPs are both well-respected, engaged in village affairs and regularly consult with each other. In three villages, there were either no core leaders or one of the leaders from an institution other than the VTA/VA and VERP, such as the livelihood development committee, was the core leader.

Core leaders are always men with a medium to high socio-economic background. Whether the VTA/VA is core leader or not, he takes formal responsibility for issues related directly to the state. However, authority over other issues rests with core leaders regardless of their formal authority.

3.3. Secondary leaders

Secondary leaders are often leaders of village institutions other than the VERPs and VTA/VA. They are all men with a medium or high socio-economic background. They are most commonly involved in UNDP-facilitated livelihood development committees and the more important traditional socio-religious institutions such as the school committee or socio-religious youth group. The secondary leaders tend to be leading members of several institutions or were formerly influential core leaders, particularly former VTAs/VAs. They participate in most village meetings and engage with core leaders from whom they seek advice and tacit permission. Many secondary leaders have close family ties with core leaders. They take initiative in village social affairs but only to a limited extent in development issues outside of their institution's domain. An exception to this is livelihoods development committee leaders who are more active in this field. While the secondary leaders have some influence and can mobilise group members, they have limited formal authoritative power in the sense that they cannot necessarily order fellow villagers to follow their instructions nor do leaders of other institutions seek their permission or formal accept. The secondary leaders may have some linkages with external actors outside of the village but these are generally not extensive or close. They play no role in mediating between the state and villagers and although they might support a particular candidate for a VTA/VA position, they are not instrumental in this respect. This is also the case with regard to dismissal of VTAs/VAs. However, they do mediate in disputes between villagers before issues are passed to core leaders if not resolved. They seem under less pressure to financially support fellow villagers in need.

3.4. Tertiary leaders

Tertiary leaders do not have an influential role in overall village affairs. While some of them may make occasional suggestions to core leaders they are not involved in village-level decision-making among core leaders. Nevertheless, they can effectively organise and lead their own institutions and have members that respect them. They are often leaders of smaller institutions that are less central to key institutions in the village, for example the UNDP-initiated SRGs, the cooking or women's sub-groups of the traditional socio-religious youth groups or the state-sponsored interest groups. These groups tend to be more focused on activities that are related to their group members only, such as SRGs, or on social affairs. Tertiary leaders are sometimes former core leaders who are no longer active in village affairs but are still respected and consulted due to their former position and experience. In comparison to the core and secondary leaders, tertiary leaders come from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds including rich, medium and poor. Notably, leaders in this group may also be women.

Case study: A Shan village and its different leaders

This case study provides an insight into different core, secondary and other leaders in one village and offers reasons why they have attained their status and positions. It is based on interviews with a range of respondents with different socio-economic backgrounds and is fairly typical of other villages.

Core leader: U Hla Myint, man, farmer with moderate income, 58 years old

VERP member, leader of the religious group (that recites the Buddha's teachings), secretary of the traditional socio-religious group, secretary of the village tract's monks affairs association, former staff of the cooperative enterprise shop and former secretary of the VTA. U Hla Myint can prepare financial statements and is trusted by villagers and leaders. He was asked to take the statistician's role for the process of renovating and constructing bridges, the village road and other social activities. The different village leaders consult with him before making major decisions. He also arranges for villagers to watch entertainment videos at his home at no charge, helping him to build a close relationship with the villagers. Some consult him with regard to social problems. He and U Mya Thaug solved a conflict with villagers from Saya Aye Kone village concerning water management from the stream, which flows through both villages. U Hla Myint takes responsibility for village affairs and is focused on the benefits to villagers rather than to himself or his business.

Core leader: U Mya Thaug, man, rich farmer, 57 years old

VERP member, former village administrator (1996-2000), former secretary of the village tract (2000-2004), former volunteer member of the village's cooperative enterprise shop (1978-1979), former officer of the village's cooperative enterprise's shop (1979-1983). When U Mya Thaug worked at the cooperative enterprise, he raised the issue of misuse of funds by the staff. Together with U Hla Myint he solved the water conflict with Saya Aye Kone village, which was an issue that had gone unresolved throughout the tenure of the four previous leaders. U Mya Thaug has some legal knowledge and can advise villagers when needed.

Secondary leader: U Tin Aung, man, rich farmer, 56 years old

Former village administrator (2008-2011) and the traditional socio-religious group's leader (1993-2007). Under his administration he never misused authority and treated the villagers as if they were his own family members. When the government asked for money from the village to raise funds, U Tin Aung always paid himself or would sometimes borrow from the broker before asking villagers for contributions. He would then collect money from the villagers at harvest time once they had earned their income. He did this because he was afraid of the authorities but also wanted to protect the villagers from action taken by the authorities if they didn't pay. He encouraged villagers to plant more sugarcane because of high demand for this crop, helping farmers to earn more income. Although U Tin Aung was favoured by villagers because of his sacrifices and contributions, he could not lead in decision-making processes as well as U Hla Myint and U Mya Thaug. He rarely made decisions alone and preferred to discuss ideas with U Hla Myint and U Ba Swe. It was rare for him to make mistakes during the period of his administration.

Secondary leader: U Ba Swe, man, rich farmer, 63 years old

VERP member and former village representative for the agriculture bank. U Ba Swe was the first person to nominate the new village administrator during the selection process. He was not the most influential person among the VERPs but was accustomed to providing feedback quickly. Although villagers didn't like his quick style of decision-making, he was appointed as a VERP member because he was knowledgeable in administrative matters despite never having had a role in the village administration. The villagers never object to what the VERPs say. U Ba Swe worked with U Hla Myaing and U Tin Aung as a VERP. The villagers trust him due to his role as a village representative at the bank where he helped them to borrow money for crops.

Secondary leader: U Win Kyaw, man, moderate socio-economic income, farmer, 33 years old

U Win Kyaw is the incumbent VA. He is willing to carry out village development and being a young leader, he wants to develop his plans quickly regardless of whether they are possible or not. For this reason he is sometimes weak at consulting with the VERPs and so is not well liked by them. He does not have strong organisation, mobilisation or leadership skills as he has never participated in other groups before. In this regard, he does not know how to unite the villagers and sometimes seems as if he is governing the village on authority alone. The villagers do not always agree with him. For example, at the beginning of his administration he issued some rules to be followed by the villagers concerning village development. These rules were not considered useful. For example, they stipulate that villagers should not make any noise at night, leave home at 7 am to farm, and take care not to spill water on the village road from their irrigation. U Win Kyaw never took action against transgressions because he didn't want to be disliked.

Secondary leader: U Kyaw Htay, man, poor farmer, 41 years old

U Kyaw Htay took the role of 10 household leader at the time of the former village administration and then resigned from the current village leader's administration. He resigned because he felt the new VA was weak in law enforcement and does not take action against those who break the rules. However, he

actively participates in village development affairs and went with the VA to the UNDP office to learn about the methods of grouping SRGs. He got involved in encouraging villagers to join the SRGs although he is not a member. He will join the group when it is structurally formed as now he is not pleased with the current status of the SRG as he feels it is not structured enough.

Tertiary leader: Ma Aye Mai, woman, moderate socio-economic background, farmer, 40 years old
She is the leader of the traditional socio-religious group, SRG and a member of the MCWA. She has led the young women in the village since 2011 and actively participates in village affairs. She initiated the formation of the female SRG and inspired members to join. She is trying to make the group more structured by learning approaches and methods from other groups in the village.

Tertiary leader: Ma Moe War, medium socio-economic background, farmer, 33 years old
She became the first member of the female SRG and is an active member. She leads the decision-making process within the group and consults other groups for advice.

3.5. Leadership: Expectations and qualities of leaders

The expectations and qualities that make an effective, influential and well-liked leader in village institutions are outlined in this section. The ability to meet expectations and fulfil certain qualities is key to becoming and staying a leader. They also act as barriers to segments of the village population such as the poor who are not seen to demonstrate such qualities. While having influential family relations plays some role in determining who are seen as good leaders (and are selected or emerge in the first place), qualities related to personality and ability are more prominent. Someone in a leadership position with influence over decision-making at the village level should also be in position to devote time and funds for village affairs, which limits the pool of potential leaders. Respondents expressed a fairly uniform view of what makes a good or bad leader with no significant variance across geographical areas, gender or socio-economic background. Normative statements expressed by respondents and detailed descriptions of leaders seen to possess or lack varied leadership skills correspond closely.

Respondents referred to a good leader as someone who is:

- Educated, experienced and has a secure livelihood;
- Well-organised, pro-active and has an interest in village development affairs;
- Hard-working, dedicated, honest, fair, patient, friendly and responsible. This includes not appearing drunk (which respondents emphasized repeatedly);
- Able and willing to sacrifice his or her own interests in favour of those of the village. and willing to contribute private funds and provide credit, particularly to the poor;
- Respected, decisive and authoritative;
- Has good communication and problem-solving skills.

Respondents with a low socio-economic background placed emphasis on leaders being fair, unbiased and willing to listen to and help fellow villagers in need. They indicated that leaders should not just provide credit but should also charge the poor less or nothing at all for village fundraising. Core leaders that influence decision-making not just within their own institutions but at the village level are respected if they have a good relationship with other village institutions and are viewed as non-corrupt and able to deal with and mobilise resources from outside actors such as township authorities, the military or donors. Of particular importance is the capacity to implement directives from township or military authorities in a manner that does not negatively impact households.

Respondents indicated that bad leaders are biased, unreliable, irresponsible, corrupt, alcoholic, care only about their own interests, are uninterested in village affairs and have little authority to enforce decisions. As outlined further in section 5.10, a VTA/VA able to mitigate the demands of township and military authorities is preferred. A leader, particularly a VTA/VA who mismanages village funds rarely stays in the position for a prolonged period. Moreover, in villages where the VERPs play a dominant role, it is important that the VTA/VA has good or at least non-conflictual relations with them.

Respondents did not differentiate between the preferred qualities of leaders from different institutions with the exception of highlighting qualities that are particularly important for VTAs/VAs. Expectations of leaders in SRG groups focus more on good management, accounting and teamwork skills rather than authority and relations with other institutions and outside actors.

“A bad leader is someone who says ‘Do what I say’ but is secretive, who does not stand for the followers, and is not enthusiastic.”

Traditional socio-religious group, Rakhine State

“A bad leader is someone who is drunk, uneducated and who does not care about others.”

VERPs, Rakhine State

“A good leader is someone who is able to lead and give direction for followers to be united, and is keen at problem solving.”

Traditional socio-religious youth group, Rakhine State

“A good leader is someone who is willing to promote the welfare of others, is dedicated, and passionate.”
[They and others referred to a traditional Myanmar proverb.]

Group of women, Mon State

“The person in the administrative role needs a high education level and a wealthy background to advise effectively on the development of the village.”

VERP, Mon State

“A good leader should be fair, have sympathy and be willing to help fellow villagers. He should have a brotherly attitude to all villagers, care for others and serve as a mentor for the villagers.”

Woman, poor, Mon State

3.6. Reluctant Leaders

About half of VAs are reluctant leaders whom openly expressed a preference for not holding the position or a desire to resign. Some have already tried to do so but were ordered or requested to stay on by township authorities or by villagers. In some cases a suitable successor could not be found. The disincentives for them to take up a leadership role or continue in one centre around demands on time and financial cost. Leaders must devote time and funds to village matters at the expense of their own livelihoods. Moreover, they have to deal with matters that may cause conflict in the community or people to dislike them. They must also enforce orders from township authorities that are a burden to themselves and fellow villagers.

Incentives to hold positions relate mainly to an interest in village affairs, a desire for influence and power, prestige and religious merit. In some cases a leadership position allows for profit from funds allocated by villagers or contributions assigned to the village. However, in many villages the disincentives outweigh the potential incentives and few VTAs/VAs in the 16 villages seemed to profit financially from their position. Relative to the VA position, the VTA position provides more incentives, has more influence, prestige and allows for closer relationships with external actors. This provides an opportunity to at least cover expenses associated with the position and perhaps profit.

Other institutions had fewer reluctant leaders because the disincentives to holding such positions tend to be lower and leaders have usually chosen to become leaders out of interest, volunteer spirit or because fellow villagers hold them in high regard. Several respondents indicated that they continued in their positions because of difficulty finding a suitable replacement or because members had encouraged them to continue. See section 5.3 for further information on leadership selection.

“No one wanted to be the leader because they could not give the time and were afraid of having to contribute their own money so it came to me to be the leader. I’m also interested in village affairs.”

VA, farmer, 49 years old, Rakhine State

“Even after I got married, I didn’t leave the leader position of the unmarried group [traditional socio-religious group] since they kept supporting me and there was no one to hand over to.”

Man, farmer, 37 years old, Rakhine State

“We are taking these positions as per the request of the VERP, the village administration and the villagers. By devoting ourselves to social affairs we cannot focus on our own livelihoods. We feel that we are getting poorer because we don’t have much time to make money.”

Traditional socio-religious youth group, men, poor farmers, 30, 33, 39 years old, Shan State

“If villagers like a leader, he or she can be the leader for his or her entire life.”

Traditional group leader, man, 63 years old, Mon State

3.7. Barriers to leadership: marginalisation of women and the poor

A strong preference for male leaders with a good socio-economic background prevailed in all 16 villages. This was particularly the case for core leadership positions such as administrative leaders (VTAs/VAs), VERPs and the traditional socio-religious youth groups. Women and men with a poorer socio-economic background can be leaders of other village institutions. Youth under 30 years rarely take up VTA/VA or VERP positions. Respondents did not explain why this is the case other than to cite lack of experience and influence.

3.8. Gender preferences and preconceptions

Women are generally accepted as leaders of groups that have women membership such as in the UNDP SRG groups and the women sub-groups of traditional socio-religious youth groups. Women have limited influence over VTA/VA selection because they are not VERP members who dominate the selection process. In traditional village mass meetings where core and other leaders present their decisions concerning village affairs (including VTA/VA) selection or allow for limited discussion thereof, usually only the head of the household attends and in the majority of cases this is a man. If women do attend, they tend to keep a low-profile. No regional differences were observed as to perceptions of women in leadership roles.

In the villages where monthly livelihoods and village development committee meetings (initiated by UNDP) take place, leaders of women’s groups seem to have a higher participation as they are specifically invited to report on their group activities. Women tend to take up stronger leadership positions in UNDP than non-UNDP villages but this is largely confined to the groups with high female membership and does not extend to overall decision-making in village affairs. While women are members of the executive committees of UNDP-facilitated livelihood and village development groups, men overwhelmingly dominate the top leadership positions in these groups. The bias against female leadership in overall decision-making and in groups where men participate is rooted in strong social and cultural beliefs, which are enforced by men and women, the latter often excluding themselves from even considering such roles. The beliefs and perceptions acting as a barrier to female leadership in village decision-making and groups with male participation – as expressed by respondents - are categorised below:

Capabilities and vulnerabilities: Women are often perceived as less knowledgeable than men in administrative affairs outside of the household. They are seen as weaker than men and unable to enforce decisions and orders, which is an important function of the VTA/VA role. Women are generally expected not to travel by themselves outside of the village if it requires an overnight stay. This limits their perceived ability to engage with township authorities and resolve matters that require overnight travel. Some respondents suggested that women are more prone to emotional outbursts, which limits their ability to perform a leadership role. The perceived low level of education among women is an additional barrier.

Practicalities and responsibilities: Many respondents referred to women as being responsible for household affairs and childcare. Women are expected to support their husbands by taking care of such affairs. Household responsibilities mean that women cannot devote time to leadership positions, particularly that of VTA/VA. There is a strong concern that household responsibilities would be neglected if women devoted time to leadership positions, which is related to gender stereotypes.

“As we are always spending time on household affairs and childcare, we cannot be involved much in village affairs and leading as well. And we don’t have much knowledge and authority.”

Youth group members, women, Shan State

“For a man, he has his wife who will support him if he becomes the leader. His wife will do everything concerning the household affairs. If a woman was in this position, who would keep the household and take care of the children?”

Traditional socio-religious group, Shan State

“It’s impossible for women to become leaders because we are responsible for our household affairs.”

Leader of socio-religious group, woman, 30 years, Rakhine State

“Women can’t become the leader because they have daily activities in the home, lack interpersonal skills, are fragile and need to make sacrifices. Due to our physical nature we cannot get the respect from villagers that a man can get (i.e. control the men when they get drunk at festivals)”

SRG group members, women, Mon State

“Men work for the community, women for the home only.”

Members of drinking water committee, men, Chin State

Ethnic, religious and other perceptions: Many respondents indicated that women are not fit for leadership positions, particularly that of VTA/VA. Some based their arguments on traditional, ethno-cultural and religious grounds while others simply accepted stated that this is simply the way it is without providing further explanation. Many women did not express an interest in changing the status quo.

“There is no way for the men to be managed by the women.”

Socio-religious group members, Shan State

“The women should not become the village leaders. It is not their position, but they may be needed to take part in cooking and serving the invitees at the social events.”

Socio-religious group members, farmers, poor farmers, 30, 33, 39 years old, Shan State

“Most of the men went to the village administration selection meeting while the women were home. They believed it was enough that the household leaders [their husbands] attended the meeting. [...] I never thought about what kind of capacity would be needed for a woman to become the leader.”

Woman, poor, 23 years, Rakhine State

“I have no idea [whether women should be leaders]. I don’t want to be a leader. I don’t want to deal with the complicated issues.”

Woman, poor, 50 years, Rakhine State

“In Chin culture, we do not consider women in the administration.”

VA, man, Chin State

“The Holy Bible states that there are no women over men. Therefore, it is impossible for women to be leaders.”

Members of religious group, Chin State

There are few instances of people challenging these beliefs with a view to enabling women to assume leadership roles in overall village affairs, such as the position of VTA/VA, VERP or village/livelihoods development committee leader. However, a range of respondents expressed a belief that women can be leaders, at least in general terms. A high level of education was often stated as essential for women to attain leadership positions. Local and national role models serve as evidence and inspiration that women can be leaders. If not now, then in the future.

"I know the Burmese proverb that only a rooster – not a hen – can bring the dawn. But I think women can also become leaders."

VERP, man, 63 years, Mon State

"Women can be leaders in village groups like the SRG, but not the village administration."

VERP member, Shan State

"Women can also become leaders because we know well about preparing financial statements. As women do not get drunk, there is less chance of mistakes."

SRG members, women, Shan State

"A woman can be the leader because now we have Ma Oo Khin Nyunt, the female leader of the unmarried people's group."

Woman, poor, 32 years, Rakhine State

"We didn't have the practice of selecting women as group leaders before the SRG came. When the SRG started organising, the capacity of women for public speaking increased to some extent. We expect to have female leaders in the other village groups as well later."

VA, man, rich farmer, 62 years, Rakhine State

"If Daw Aung San Su Kyi will lead our country, I will lead my village."

Women, member of religious group, Chin State

"If women are nearly as good as Aung San Suu Kyi, yes, they can become leaders."

VERP members, men, Rakhine State

"We think that women are able to lead as they are more educated nowadays."

VA, Man, Chin State

"Women can become village leaders. Women are now more educated because their families send them to college."

VA, man, Rakhine State

"For a woman to be a leader, she needs to be educated."

Woman, casual worker, 25 years old, Rakhine State

Case Study: Not governed by a woman

The following case study is exceptional because it is one of only two examples of a woman taking up a formal position in the village tract/village administration in the 16 villages researched (the other worked as a clerk in the village tract administration). This woman emphasised that she only carries out her role as a so-called area leader (this term is only used in Shan villages and largely corresponds to a 10 household leader position but includes more households) with reference to the authority of the VA. She does not believe that a woman can become a VA.

Daw Khin became the area leader in April 2011, assuming her husband's role after he passed away. Her husband, U Maung Ko held the area leader position for 14 years. While he was in that position, Daw Khin assisted him in carrying out the village administrator's instructions since U Maung Ko was busy with his own business. Daw Khin attended the village meetings called by the administrator on behalf of her husband. In the case of money collection and organising the people from their area to actively participate in social events, Daw Khin led on behalf of her husband. The village community and administration appreciated her efforts and respected her as an area leader even though her husband held the position officially. When her husband died and the time came to select another area leader, the VA nominated her for the new area leader position and the VERP members and the villagers from her area agreed. She deals with the villagers in a soft manner when she needs something from them such as labour or money. She never asks them by force. She follows direction from the VA.

"If I ask the villagers to do something, I always say, 'It isn't my instruction but the administrator's order. If you were punished by the administrator for not following the order, I can do nothing for you. Actually, I also don't want to see you being punished. Don't be silly! Just do it.' I deal with my villagers like that. So they never stray from the instruction. [...] I haven't done anything regarding village development yet because I need to focus on my livelihood and I am bored with collecting villager contributions. I also haven't joined the SRG because I am occupied with managing our farms. [...] As I'm getting older, I want to retire from the area leader position and just go to the monastery to meditate. [...] I don't think a woman can be the village administrator because of deeply rooted traditional perceptions and stereotypes. For my current position, there is no problem since the villagers don't see they are being managed or governed by a woman; they know that I am just doing what the VA says."

4. Relationships between institutions and core leadership

This section provides an analysis of the relational power dynamics and engagements between institutions and core leaders, particularly VTAs/VAs and VERPs.

Overlap in membership and leadership of village institutions is common and many institution members engage with each other in informal ways, often as individuals rather than members. However, it is the relationship between leaders from different institutions and the perceived authority of individual leaders that defines the engagement between institutions, including the influence that leaders exercise over institutions that do not fall under their direct authority. These relations are dynamic and differ from village to village but some patterns are evident, which are mapped out below. Overall, core leaders (usually VTAs/VAs and VERPs) are closely involved in most village institutions. While they are more influential in traditional institutions over which they may have direct authority, their relations with UNDP-facilitated institutions focus more on providing advice or being called upon to enforce loan agreements. Both traditional and UNDP-facilitated institutions are not in a position to function as a check and balance on VTAs/VAs and VERPs although a level of social accountability is provided by the VERPs over the VTAs/VAs.

Institutions also engage with each other irrespective of the involvement of core leaders. This takes place particularly in relation to village-wide social and development activities such as festivals, weddings and funerals, repairing the monastery or roads. A few institutions occasionally assist the poor in villages or households that have suffered an emergency or need money for medical expenses.

4.1. Conflict and cooperation

An analysis based on situational ranking of relations between core leaders, their institutions and other village institutions revealed that two out of 16 villages experienced open conflict between institutions while seven out of 16 had good and supportive relations. In another seven villages relations were less cooperative with institutions tending to work separately from each other. There was no apparent difference between UNDP and non-UNDP villages while relations were better in the four Rakhine villages and worst in the four Shan villages, which also experienced problems with corruption. Overall good relations exist between most core leaders and UNDP-facilitated institutions in the sense that there is no open conflict and core leaders are cooperative with the institutions. In one of the two villages that experienced conflict, institutions are grouped around two different leaders with a newly appointed VA in a mediating position. In the other village with conflict, a newly-established village youth institution with a large membership and a popular leader has emerged as influential in social and development affairs at the village level. At the same time the local VA is seen as incapable and disinterested in such affairs and openly admits to feeling threatened by the youth organisation, which is closely associated with UNDP-facilitated groups. The youth institution has initiated activities that it believes are the responsibility of the VA to originate. The institution has repeatedly tried to have the VA dismissed through appeals to the township authorities but without success. While this particular institution is an example of emerging younger leadership, it does not reflect a broader trend observed in the other villages. Nevertheless, it suggests that some youth institutions have the potential to take up a stronger role in village development affairs under the right circumstances.

4.2. Relations between VTAs/VAs and VERPs

The relationship between VTAs/VAs and VERPs is the most important for decision-making at the village level. As outlined previously, one or both of these institutions tend to form the main governance body in the village and they wield significant influence over other institutions. Traditionally, it is the role of the VTA/VA to govern and the role of the VERPs to lead village social and religious affairs. However, the relationship between and roles carried out by these two institutions are defined by the perceived status of the VTA/VA vis-à-vis the VERPs. In general the VERPs function as advisors to the VTA/VA based on their experience and respect for them. A VTA/VA would rarely make an individual decision on village affairs or settle disputes without

consulting the VERPs and gaining their support. As such, the VERPs act as a resource that the VTA/VA can rely on for advice, experience and to enforce compliance with his decisions vis-à-vis villagers.

In villages where the current VTA/VA is seen as inexperienced, corrupt or lacking interest in his position, the VERPs often take up a more prominent role, assuming the decision-making lead, managing village development initiatives and coordinating village institutions. VTAs/VAs considered weak will often freely delegate authority over village affairs to the VERPs to avoid potential conflicts. The VTA/VA is then reduced to a marginal role but remains the key official link between the township and village administration.

The VTA/VA also retains more formal authority than the VERPs and can use this to enforce specific decisions in relation to the villagers but VERPs generally hold higher normative authority /influence. VERPs are instrumental in selecting and forcing the dismissal of village leaders who they feel misuse village funds (see section 4.2 for further). While some VERPs are formally selected by the incoming VTA/VA, this is generally not the case. In villages in Shan State where former VAs were dismissed due to mismanagement, the VERPs' formal role increased and they were given a specific role to oversee the VA in cooperation with township authorities. The traditional name used for VERPs in Myanmar is *ya mi ya pha*. This has been changed to *na ya ka* meaning chairperson, which is associated with more formal authority. In many cases the VERPs act as a check and balance on the power and performance of the VTA/VA, representing the strongest form of social accountability existing between village institutions. No other institution is in a position to do this. However, given that VERPs influence the selection of the VTA/VA in the first place, there is a concern that they will not select somebody who can act independently of them. Few open conflicts exist between VERPs and VTAs/VAs in the villages suggesting that the weaker party would rather withdraw from the centre of decision-making than openly challenge it. Some villages in Chin and Rakhine states do not have VERPs and no other distinct body can hold the VTAs/VAs to account. Instead other institutional leaders act as core leaders. Examples include leaders of traditional socio-religious youth groups or in some cases the leaders of UNDP-facilitated village and livelihoods development groups.

Decision making: Core leaders tend to adopt a closed decision making style where they informally consult each other, reach agreements in private and announce decisions to the community, often with their nominal approval sought only and with few objections encountered. Prior to decision-making, they may listen to the views of leaders from other institutions as well as other segments of the local community. This happens in relation to development and UNDP-related issues discussed during monthly mass meetings in the villages that hold them. However, decisions are based on perceived authority and the participation or direct influence of others beyond the core is rarely invited, except sometimes for secondary leaders. Core leaders have less direct involvement in decisions related to the more narrow interests of a particular institution, particularly in SRGs.

“When the VA discusses and makes decisions with the VERPs, most of the decisions are accepted by everybody. If there is a mistake, it is not only his fault.”

Member of VA, Mon State

“When we planned to construct a new road in the village, the VERP members gave us suggestions and even made the decision about how it should be.”

VA, man, farmer, 33 years old, Shan State

“Though the VERPs are not officially included in the village administration, they always take a management role. When the former administrator came to retire, they nominated another person for that position.”

Pagoda trustee, man, 54 years old, Shan State

4.3. Relations between core leaders and other traditional socio-religious institutions

Core leaders are generally leaders or patrons of several other village institutions particularly traditional socio-religious institutions or have influence over them. Respondents referred to the VTAVA or the VERP as either working together with other institutions in village affairs or managing other institutions. Traditional institutions usually follow the instructions of core leaders because they are in a position of formal authority or have influence over institutions, which may inform or seek permission from core leaders before carrying out activities. While the VTAVA has clear authoritative power (*anna*) delegated by the township authorities, his use of power is accepted by members of other institutions. In contrast, VERPs must rely on their power of influence (*awza*). Well-liked VTAs/VAs also make use of influence, which can extend over many institutions while other leaders generally have to rely on their power of persuasion and roles within their own group.

Family members of core leaders are often leaders of other institutions, which further links the traditional institutions with the VERPs and the VTAs/VAs. Core leaders can mobilise traditional institutions to carry out village social or development activities, which the core and sometimes secondary leaders prioritise – with more or less participation by other institutions in the decision-making process. These activities may include improving roads, organising pagoda festivals etc. While core leaders make the decisions it's the institutions that do the work. In some cases, discord exists between core leaders and traditional institutions but it is rare that members of traditional institutions complain about the level of influence of core leaders. If an institution or individual does not value the opinion of the VTAVA or VERP, rather than confront them, they tend to consult with them less over time or remain quiet.

VTAs/VAs have the power to fine villagers for transgressions such as drunken misbehaviour, domestic abuse, chicken theft and fighting. This can take the form of a penalty paid in cash or as labour for public works. However, this is done on an individual basis and is not used in relation to institutions. Traditional institutions sometimes rely on or appeal to core leaders when they need to link with external actors to access resources or gain formal permission for activities such as school renovation. As such, core leaders can act as a resource for institutions.

“The VERPs engage with the youth group and board of trustees for social occasions and religious affairs. These groups have to inform the VERPs about what they plan to do. Sometimes they have to take suggestions from the VERPs.”

VERPs, Mon State

“The members of the socio-religious group, the village administration and the board of trustees work together for the village’s social affairs.”

Member of socio-religious group, man, farmer, 33 years, Shan State

“The socio-religious group is managed by the administration. We are following the instructions of the administrator and the suggestions of the VERP members.”

Members of socio-religious group, Shan State

4.4. Relations between core leaders and UNDP-facilitated institutions

The relationship between core leaders and UNDP-facilitated institutions is generally supportive. While core leaders are more directly influential over traditional institutions and often command authority over them, they play a somewhat different role in UNDP-facilitated institutions. In these institutions they generally provide advice and are consulted but have less exclusive decision-making power. The below table provides an overview of core leader participation in the 10 UNDP-facilitated institutions in the 10 villages where UNDP implements programmes. A core leader can participate in more than one way.

Core leaders tend to be invited as patrons or participate in annual ceremonies held by UNDP-facilitated institutions. This allows them a role of limited influence but ensures that they feel involved and respected, and can be mobilised if the institution needs their advice or assistance.

This also reduces the risk of core leaders being obstructive to the institutions and is in line with cultural values that place emphasis on respecting older and experienced persons. Core leaders are called upon to act as key advisors in cases where the leaders of UNDP-facilitated institutions are younger and less experienced. This also occurs when core leaders are close relatives of institution leaders. Complaints of elite capture of institutions by core leaders from respondents are infrequent. This may be for cultural reasons as core leaders are expected to take a lead role in village institutions. There is no evidence of core leaders co-opting UNDP institutions for personal financial or state interests. To the contrary, their participation is often seen as a resource provided members maintain influence over decision-making and implementation, and as long as core leaders are not seen to misuse funds (as in the case with fundraising non-related to UNDP-facilitated committees and donations from outside stakeholders).

Patron	5
Provide occasional advice	7
Participate in key decision-making	6
Implementation	4
Other	1
No role	2

Core leaders tend to be more closely involved in village and livelihoods development committees that are involved in activities that affect a greater part of the village than in SRGs, which mainly focus on their members. In the village and livelihoods development committees they are sometimes executive members and jointly lead monthly meetings where most institutions – particularly those set up by UNDP – participate, report and coordinate. SRGs generally run their activities without direct involvement from core leaders. However, SRGs and development committees routinely make use of the authoritative and persuasive power of core leaders, particularly the VTAs/VAs, when it comes to calling meetings and in the allocation and repayment of loans. Many UNDP-facilitated institutions use VTAs/VAs as references or witnesses for loan agreements and almost all make use of them to reinforce repayment of loans, particularly if payment is late. Respondents explained that VTAs/VAs can negotiate repayment terms or demand that a loan be paid on time. Given their influence, and sometimes in the case of fines or other repercussions, the repayment is much higher if VTAs/VAs are involved. Respondents also referred to cooperation with core leaders in the allocation of funds for village activities (for example a donation to the monastery by the SRG or a decision to prioritise pond renovation by the development committee) and that core leaders can be helpful in preparing audits, financial statements and in organising logistical matters. Core leaders general appreciation towards the institutions is due to the perception that the institutions contribute to overall village development because they can provide funds for particular social or development activities and improve the livelihoods of their members.

"We invite the VA to our annual meeting to give the opening speech and they have the patron role in the paddy and money borrowing process of the livelihoods committee. He has to sign on the borrowing contract as a referee. [...] By giving the VA the patron role, if the borrowers don't pay back the loan he can assist the group in asking those borrowers to give the loan back [...] By allowing the VA to be involved in the village development activities our activities have become more transparent. [...] It is good that the administrator has become involved in the village development groups because we feel that could make our group more powerful."

Leader of livelihood development committee, man, farmer, 51 years, Rakhine State

"Although the VERPs and VTAs do not engage with the SRGs directly, some of them are leaders of the village development committee (VDC). The current VTA is the chairman and the previous two VTAs were president and secretary of the VDC respectively. They monitor the group's monthly report and decide how much from the group funds will be used for village development affairs."

VERP members, Mon State

"We can get suggestions for our group's development from the VA or the livelihood committee members by engaging with them informally."

SRG assistant leader, woman, farmer, 50 years, Rakhine State

"Although VERPs and the VA are not members of the livelihoods committee, they are invited to the group meetings. In this regard, the committee uses the power of village leadership in collecting repayments. If a committee member fails to pay off the loan on time, the village administrator and VERPs intervene and make a compromise between the member and the committee. For instance, the village administrator and VERPs intervened with a member and compromised on a time by which they could repay. But the leaders told them that they would be put into second priority when second loans are issued."

Secretary of livelihood committee, man, rich, 45 years, Rakhine State

"In our SRG, the members of the VERP and the VA don't get involved except the daughters of some members. We decide ourselves within the group. Our SRG holds a group meeting every week. Borrowing or settling of loans is done at the group meeting. If someone raises an issue at the group meeting, the leader asks the member how they will decide on it. The members put forward their suggestions and then negotiate with each other. After that, they make a group decision."

SRG members. Women, Shan State

"One speech by the village administrator is equivalent to ten speeches by the committee! It is more convenient to collect repayments by inviting the village administrator to the group meeting because government authority is given special attention. This is why the committee wants him to be a member. Also most leaders in UNDP-supported institutions are young so it is better if we have VERPs in the group's leadership positions."

Livelihood committee accountant, man, medium socio-economic background, 33 years, Rakhine State

5. VTA/VA: Representation of township, households' and own interests.

This section provides an analysis of the extent to which VTAs/VAs represent the interests of the township authorities, the interests of households or other interests. It does so by exploring a) the involvement of the township, local institutions and households in the selection of VTAs/VAs; b) the extent to which the interests of households, particularly the poor, women and youth are part of VTA/VA decision-making; and c) the ways in which the VTA/VA engages with external stakeholders, particularly township authorities. The analysis also provides insight into the roles that other leaders and institutions play in engaging with external stakeholders, particularly the state.

5.1. Change of leaders

Competition for leadership positions of village institutions is generally low. Few positions offer enough incentives in terms of influence, prestige, religious merit or money vis-à-vis potential disincentives such as time, money, criticism and pressure exerted by other leaders, or more frequently township authorities in the case of VTAs/VAs. Moreover, the pool of potential leaders for key positions is limited for cultural, educational and social reasons.

5.2. Change of leaders: traditional and UNDP-facilitated institutions

Institutional leaders are most often selected informally and based on nominal consensus. Once a leadership candidate has come or been put forward, often by the former leader or core leaders, few people suggest other candidates or voice objections. In comparison, UNDP-facilitated institutions have more clearly defined leadership selection criteria, which include fixed terms and greater involvement by group members in the selection process. Leadership selection in traditional socio-religious groups is fairly informal with core leaders playing an advisory role with respect to who would make a good leader. VERPs are generally self-appointed, informally chosen by villagers or in some cases selected by the VTA. Given that many have backgrounds as former VTAs/VAs and socio-religious leaders, they tend to be better educated and with a medium to high socio-economic background. Almost all of them have a position of influence already. Leaders of state-sponsored groups are selected by the respective VTA/VA.

Leaders of traditional socio-religious groups usually resign when leaders feel the role occupies too much of their time and impacts on their household income. In the case of traditional youth groups, leaders also resign when they get married, or reach a certain age. Respondents did not refer to cases of socio-religious leaders or leaders of UNDP-facilitated groups being dismissed due to mismanagement or competition for positions.

5.3. VTA/VA selection

The processes of selection, dismissal or resignation of VTAs/VAs have not been documented in detail by prior studies. These processes provide further insights into the dynamics of power and relations between formal leaders, village institutions and village households, including issues such as the exclusion of women, poor and youth from village level decision-making.

There is no standardised manner by which VTAs and particularly VAs are selected or procedures for their dismissal or resignation.¹² While township authorities officially appoint VTAs, which in turn appoint VAs, in many cases this is simply a bureaucratic procedure that formalises a selection that has already taken place at the village tract and village level respectively. In the case of VTAs, the main tract village commonly has a monopoly on this position and there is little open consultation with other villages on the selection. There are exceptions to this where the VERPs in the tract

¹² The recently approved Village Tract and Ward Administration Law (2012) has made the selection system for this administrative level clearer as no law previously set this out. While the new law defines a selection process for VTAs and 10 household leaders (whom are selected by household heads by secret ballot after which the 10 household leaders select the VTA) it does not stipulate the selection of VAs. The extent to which the new law will be implemented is unknown.

village consult core leaders in other villages. Sometimes core leaders from other villages can nominate candidates from their own village, generally from among VAs.

In the majority of villages the VA is selected by the VERPs in a closed decision-making process in which the VERPs consult among each other and with other core leaders. They seek approval for their preferred choice in a public village mass meeting where the heads of households i.e. mainly men participate. During the meeting the VERPs announce their preferred choice and ask for approval, which is usually shouted. Those who do not agree stay quiet. It is rare that objections are voiced publicly as a strong emphasis is placed on consensus.

“We don’t know whether it is our culture or not since the villagers don’t have any habit of objecting to what the VERPs say.”

VERP member, man, reflecting on VA selection, Shan State

“They feel uncomfortable pointing out who is not good. That’s why they stay quiet even if they don’t like [the person selected].”

VERP member, man, farmer, Shan State

Out of 16 villages, nine made use of this selection method. In three other villages the VTA/VA was appointed by vote in a mass meeting participated in by household heads. Voting processes took the form of participants standing up when a candidate’s name was announced, a secret ballot or a ballot where the voter would place his ballot paper in a box in front of the preferred candidate. Electing VTAs/VAs by vote was more common in Chin State than elsewhere. Voting seems to have been a more common form of VTA/VA selection during the Socialist period (1962-1988) but in most places respondents said the process had changed after 1988 when the SLORC/SPDC military government took power. In three out of 16 villages, the township authorities directly select the VTA/VA. This usually happens when a close relationship with a particular VTA/VA candidate exists or where they dismiss a leader because of mismanagement or corruption.

Table 11: Selection of VTAs/VAs in 16 villages	
VERPs’ selection	9
Election (vote)	3
Township selection	3
Other	1
TOTAL	16

Preferred selection process: No correlation was found between the VTA/VA selection method and the level of authority or popularity of the VTA/VA. This rests on other factors such as performance, leadership style and personal qualities (see section 3.5. for further). Likewise there was no uniform preference for how respondents preferred the VTA/VA to be selected, if they could decide. Many respondents preferred the VERPs to be responsible for the selection as they trust their judgement in such matters and feel that it is not their business to decide. In some cases they were worried that an electoral win would cause conflict and that only a candidate with strong financial backing and support from many relatives would be successful. Others preferred election by vote because this would ensure the person with majority support would win and that people would be able to exercise their right of expression. Nobody expressed a preference for the township authorities to make the selection.

To Vote or Not to Vote: Respondent reflections on selection of VTAs/VAs

"We'd like to vote for the one we like."

VERP members, Shan State

"Freedom of expression is the best way; it should be applied in the village's leader selection process."

VERP member, man, farmer, 58 years, Shan State

"The village administrator position should be selected by vote because we will get the one who is preferred by most of the people."

Leader of LDC, man, 51 years, rich, farmer, Chin State

"The voting system is good. We don't like to change [administrative leaders] by the order of the township authorities. We would like to select by ourselves without having any order from the township administration. We would like to serve one or two years for the village. More than three years is not good. I submitted the resignation letter to the township authority three times already but I did not receive any response."

Current VA, man, Chin State

"Village tract administrators are appointed by the township authorities with a varying degree of consultation with the villagers. Take me as an example; I was appointed directly by the township administration without any consultation with the village. In the future, I would rather let the villagers select the formal leaders."

VTA, Rakhine State

"We want selection of the members of the administrative group to be based on the common consensus of the villagers not just by the elderly people [VERPs] but a voting system will require many relatives and financial force."

Chief cook of the socio-religious cooking group, man, Mon State

"I believe the VERP's decision might be right. I like their selection and want this system to be adopted in the future."

SRG leader, woman, farmer, 41 years, Shan State

"We don't like the voting system because we're afraid the person we dislike will become the leader. We don't want to see our preferred candidate get few votes."

Self-initiated SRG leader, man, Shan State

"We don't like the election process by voting because then only the rich and influential people can win. We prefer to select the leader based on the suggestions and desires of the monk, VERPs and the religious group's leaders."

Socio-religious group, Shan State

"Although we like the current selection process, we also want the villagers to be asked about their preference three times at the mass meeting i.e. being asked "Do you agree or not."

Socio-religious youth group, Shan State

"It is not our business [how the VA is selected]. It is the VERPs."

Youth group leaders, men, Mon State

"It does not matter how the leaders of the administration are selected. We thank them for their dedication."

USDP member, man, 45 years, Mon State

5.4. VTA/VA resignation and dismissal

VTAs/VAs resign for reasons that include age; the time demands associated with the work that could otherwise be spent on their own business; the financial costs associated with the position such as travel, hosting officials, providing funds to township authorities; or because they feel too much pressure from township or the military to implement certain directives (see section 3.6). VAs/VTAs are often changed when a new government takes power or when new regulations are

introduced, although the implementation of government directives varies greatly across areas. Former VTAs/VAs referred commonly to the time and financial burden of the positions and its impact on their income as the key reason for resigning. In many cases they continue longer than they prefer due to a sense of community obligation, social pressure from core leaders or because there are no other suitable candidates.

Several VTAs/VAs have been dismissed due to corruption. Cases involve the misuse of village funds collected from households or donated for village development purposes. Such misuse was prevalent in four villages in Shan State. Of the current VTAs/VAs 2 were deemed very corrupt by respondents. In cases where VTAs/VAs were dismissed following misuse of funds, the VERPs and other villagers were often instrumental in complaining directly to the township authorities, which would then investigate and would almost always dismiss the VTA/VA. Villagers have been quite successful in bringing such cases to the authorities. Although there is some acceptance that the VTA/VA position is unsalaried and so a need exists to collect funds from households, the opposition to obvious misuse of funds is strong. The material did not provide examples of VTAs being involved in the dismissal of VAs unless corruption or misuse of funds was reported by the VERPs and other households. Likewise no cases were reported in which villagers other than the core and secondary leaders instigated a dismissal. Finally, there was no pattern of corrupt VTAs/VAs being able to continue in their position over many years.

Dismissal of a corrupt VTA in Mon State

The last village tract administrator was a former administrative clerk at the township level. He had played a leading role in village affairs before he became village tract administrator. He sent a written request for an affiliated middle school, a school library and a primary school to the township authorities. During his tenure, he had links with donors in the township and raised funds for renovating the affiliated middle school and constructing the village clinic, the primary school and the library. Currently he is trying to link with Kyaw Thu's Funeral Help Association through the Kyaikhto Funeral Association.

According to the old head of the village militia and a former member of the military, the last village tract administrator was dismissed from office for several reasons. One reason was that he relied on the township police instead of the village militia for village security purposes, which led to some confusion over who should be paid for carrying out security. Another reason was that the former village tract administrator went to Kyaikhto to mobilise contributions from private donors. He received 100 pieces of tin plate for the roof of the village affiliated middle school but only 70 tin plates were on record. The villagers received news about this from the schoolteacher. In mediating local disputes, he told the villagers to buy materials (tin roof, concrete, and chairs) as a penalty – but the villagers did not know where and how these materials were used. For these reasons, 11 villagers, including the person who later replaced him as village tract administrator, this person's cousin, two VERPs, one member of the village militia, and VERPs from other villages in the village tract, wrote an official complaint to the township authorities. Afterwards, the township authorities came to the monastery with a dismissal letter for the village tract administrator and selected a new one.

5.5. VTAs/VAs and inclusion of women, youth and the poor in village decision-making

Women, youth and the poor are largely excluded from the VTA/VA selection process because they are not represented in the VERP institution and have low representation at village mass meetings. The exception is UNDP-facilitated monthly mass meetings where more women attend, particularly from SRGs.

The head of the household normally attends mass meetings and this is usually the husband. If women do participate they tend to stay quiet and leave others to make decisions because of a sense of inadequacy, a lack of confidence or disinterest. As many poorer households are occupied with income generation, they often stay away from such meetings. Likewise, youth are not expected to play a leading role in such decision-making for reasons similar to those expressed by respondents in section 3.7 that relate to women and the poor taking up leadership positions.

Many respondents expressed a sense of distance from village decision-making processes. A few mentioned that core leaders would decide regardless of what they said. However, this does not

mean that core leaders completely ignore the interests of such groups. Based on interviews, the research team estimates that core leaders in 12 out of the 16 villages responded to some extent to the interests of women specifically while the corresponding numbers are similar for the poor and youth. This takes different forms. For example, it is common that VTAs/VAs exempt or reduce the village contributions for poorer households. Respondents referred to cases where benevolent core leaders assigned village land to landless poor households or assisted them with support for income generation at their own expense. In the case of youth and women, many core leaders extend their support for them to carry out activities as part of local institutions – traditional or typically SRGs. Local perceptions concerning the benevolence of core leaders are closely linked to the extent to which they manage to fulfil the expected qualities of a good leader as outlined in section 3.5. Thus, many marginalised groups do not expect core leaders to assist them specifically but to act in a fair manner, be active in village affairs and to not burden them with requests for contributions. Core leaders are not always viewed as benevolent. Core leaders who do not live up to expectations are unpopular, also among the marginalised sections of the community.

5.6. Formal channels of communication between the township and villages

The relationship between township authorities, village tract and village administrations is generally characterised by a top down command and communication structure. Directives are passed down from the township to the village tract administration, which informs the respective 100 household leaders/VAs at the village level. The VAs communicate instructions to villagers at mass meetings. Sometimes they confer with the VERPs or request 10 household leaders to assist with carrying the directives out. Instructions by township authorities take both written and verbal forms and are generally conveyed at the monthly meetings conducted by the township General Administration Department with the village tract administration. The VTAs generally use the same formal channels to submit information requested by the township authorities. Township authorities rarely engage directly with VAs with the exception of inspections of certain infrastructure projects or cases where they are investigating fraud or complaints submitted by VAs or groups of households directly to the township. In villages in Chin State that are close to the township town or where the village tract administrators have a diminished role, VAs often bypass the village tract administration and deal directly with the township authorities. Most communication between villages and the township authorities originates at the township level. In the regular formal meetings held once or twice a month between the village tract and the township, the VTA reports on on-going implementation of government directives. In a few cases this also serves as an opportunity for the VTA to report on particular needs of villages within his tract, often with a preference for the village in which he resides.

5.7. Role of the village tract and village administration in mediating between the state and the village

In the majority of villages, VTAs/VAs are not proactive in seeking to improve access to basic services or assistance for village development with higher authorities based on their own initiative or upon request from local institutions or households. However, VTAs/VAs in about half of the villages researched play an important reactive role in mediating between the demands of the state and household interests.

No major difference was found between UNDP and non-UNDP villages with respect to the nature of engagement with authorities. Some UNDP villages may have closer contacts to the veterinary department or the local bank for example, which have been facilitated by UNDP, but these contacts are limited to technical issues and there is no indication of systematic and broader channels of communication between the village and township authorities on village development issues.

5.8. Directives by state authorities

Most respondents referred to township authorities and their directives when asked to describe village engagement with external stakeholders. Few referred to services provided by the township authorities with the exception of farmers that obtained limited credit at the state-owned agriculture bank and the state-sponsored schools.

The directives issued from the township to the VAs through the village tract administration often relate to forced cropping of summer paddy and jathropa (physic nut). Other crops include peanuts, sunflower, castor oil, tea, hill paddy, coffee and black pepper. Respondents reported these as being almost always unproductive, not suited to the particular locality or only produced at a loss by the villagers. Other directives include local tree planting, prevention against fire hazards, wood collection and providing labour for government projects such as road construction and even a golf course. VTAs/VAs are also directed to fundraise on behalf of the township authorities and occasionally the military. For example, VTAs/VAs must purchase a certain number of annual calendars from respective township departments, which they then sell on to villagers or cover the purchase themselves. This is a means for local township departments to raise funds but there is no indication of transparency towards the local communities in terms of how these funds are used. In addition, many VAs collect money from villagers to cover expenses for occasional visits from township officers to the village, travel costs for official meetings and socio-religious affairs.

Although the research did not focus on this aspect, in Rakhine and Chin states respondents reported more abusive and intrusive interventions by the military and township authorities, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, than in Mon and Shan states. These included forced portering by the army, forced labour for military battalions and confiscation of land for expansion of military compounds. A compulsory provision of a quota of the paddy harvest to the government was implemented countrywide but officially abolished in 2002. Several respondents in these areas mentioned that such practices decreased or stopped during the late 2000s and some from 2010 (forced cropping particularly – except summer paddy) when the new government took over.

5.9. Directives by non-state actors

Armed non-state actors such as ethnic opposition groups have little control over the localities researched. As such, the patterns of mixed administration that exist in areas of the country such as conflict-affected Karen State where directives are issued from multiple and competing authorities are not common. Generally, in mixed administration areas of armed or recent armed conflict in Myanmar, the pressures on formal village leaders are high since they have to mediate between competing demands and violent abuses. This was much less evident in the areas researched. In Chin State respondents mentioned a few examples from the recent past of attempts by the Chin National Front to extract funds from villagers on a regular basis. The Myanmar military sought to extract information about the whereabouts of Chin National Front members from village leaders also. Likewise, in Mon State, the village militia groups were more active and referred to the threat of armed opposition groups and fighting that had taken place in the 1990s. They still maintain vigilance.

5.10. Responses to township and military directives by VTAs/VAs

Respondents expressed a uniform and very strong preference for VTAs/VAs that are able to intervene on their behalf in relations with township authorities. The extent to which respondents approve of their current leader is closely linked to their view of his ability and willingness to intervene or bargain on behalf of the village with external authorities.

The various responses by VTAs/VAs to directives instructed by township or military authorities are categorised below:

Response 1: Implement directive as instructed.

Response 2: Make exemptions for the poor.

Response 3: Bargain for partial implementation.

Response 4: Intervene on behalf of individuals – criminal cases.

Response 5: Confrontation.

Response 1: Implement directive as instructed: Leaders who implement government directives without questioning them or trying to intervene on behalf of villagers were often described as weak and were generally disliked by fellow villagers. In some cases respondents differentiated between administrative leaders whose intentions were viewed as generally good but who were powerless in the face of government directives and those that were viewed as not prioritising the interests of villagers when they failed to intervene. VTAs/VAs who do not intervene justified this with the claim that they do not have the power or it is not their responsibility. In about one third of the researched villages, the administrative leaders did not commonly intervene on behalf of villagers. This was more pronounced in Shan and Chin villages than in Mon and Rakhine ones.

"I do not dare to refuse these instructions; I have to do them because the whole region has to [...] I am also one of the villagers so I can understand the villagers feelings but I was ordered by the township administration which is why I have to use my authority and order the villagers"

VA, male, 42 years old, Chin State

"There's no change even if we discuss with the authorities about how their instructions are not possible to develop. They don't accept our words."

VA member, man, 44 years, Shan State

"We just do what we are asked to do. We don't want to go back to the authorities since we know there's nothing to be changed."

Farmer, woman, poor, 33 years, Shan State

"In January 2012, the farmers were fined by the township agricultural department because they hadn't paid the interest of their loan before the deadline. However, the deadline officially announced by the village administration was not the same as that announced by the township. That's why the farmers missed the deadline and were fined. When the farmers tried to raise this issue with the township agricultural department through the village administrator, he didn't accept their idea and persuaded them not to do it. He told the farmers that everything was already finished; to let it be."

VA member, Farmer, man, 44 years old, Shan State

"By order, the village leader asked the villagers to pay a contribution towards summer paddy cultivation, to plant kyet su (Jatropha) trees and to contribute their labour as well in the road construction. He followed the government's instruction. For the summer paddy cost, the villagers needed to pay the village tract leader. The township administrator assigned each village tract to cultivate summer paddy of 5-10 acres so the village administrator assigned each village administrator to take responsibility for two or three acres per village. So each village needed to contribute to the planting cost to the village tract administrator to develop the project. But it was not successful."

Summary of findings by local researcher based on interviews in one village, Shan State

"If we are asked to contribute towards village development affairs, we have to pay whether we have the money or not."

Group of poor women, 23-32 years, Rakhine State

"We are not able to intervene in government projects like the cost of cultivating summer paddy, providing the paddy quota or [acting as] porters because they are instructed by order."

Leader of unmarried persons group, farmer, male, 37 years, Rakhine State

Response 2: Make exemptions for the poor: There is no distinct pattern of leaders intervening more frequently when the interests of richer households are threatened than when poorer households are. However, in general many tried to lessen the negative impact on the poor. In the case of 'fundraising' by the VTAs/VAs for township authorities or to cover costs associated with hosting officials and travel to meetings etc., it is a common practice to charge the poor and elderly less than other villagers, to let them pay back later without interest or to exempt them from payments altogether. In many cases, administrative leaders cover funding gaps between what they are expected to submit to the township authorities and what they are able to collect from the village households if they are not able to collect the full amount. This is a heavy burden on VAs/VTAs and one of the reasons why often they do not want to continue in their position. The costs associated with being a VA/VTA also contribute to excluding poor people from taking up administrative posts.

"If it is a small amount (like 2000 or 3000 kyats) the (100 household leader) pays out of his own pocket; if it is large amount of money and he cannot afford to pay by himself he collects it from the village. However, he does not collect from the poor."

FGD, Mon State

"The former village administrator used to pay from his own money on behalf of the whole village for the contribution asked for by the government. The current leader does not and forces the villagers to pay."

Reflection by researcher, Shan State

"We consulted with our members (of the village tract administration) about the paddy quota which was first allocated by the village tract administrator. After consultation, I decided the amount of quota depending on the socio-economic status of the villagers. The village administration then called a village meeting and let the villagers know about the instruction and their quota as determined by me."

VA, 40 years old, Shan State

"We could not force the villagers when we asked for their labour contribution for the village affairs. I asked them whether they could do it or not, and who would take what responsibility. Even if they didn't come, I never took action against them because I understand that they are not free and how much they struggle to survive."

VA, farmer, man, 48 years, Rakhine State

"He is afraid of approaching the authorities. However, he contributed his own money without asking the villagers for some of the government collections, except the summer paddy cultivation cost and the fees which they had to pay for not contributing a labour force for military purposes. He doesn't want to pass on the burden to the poor for the contribution to the government. He is not assumed to be able to disobey the government's order."

Reflection by researcher on a VTA in Rakhine State

"I could not force the villagers into a big contribution for the township administration because they could not afford to pay. That's why I had to pay their contribution on behalf of the whole village."

VA, rich farmer, man, 62 years old, Rakhine State

"The biggest challenge from the government is the instruction to collect money from the villagers. The village tract administrator knows the 100 household leader's village situation very well so he assigns him only the [financial] amount possible. That is why the 100 household leader can not collect from the poor, only charging the medium and high income people. For example when he has to sell the calendar from the township, he requests only the leaders from the institutions in the village to buy it and other people who have a good business."

Information from interview with VA, man, Mon State

Response 3: Bargain for partial implementation: Many VTAs, and particularly VAs, seek ways to avoid fully implementing directives if they are deemed to cause undue hardship to villagers. They may appeal directly to township authorities for lenience in such cases or bargain for a compromise. Unlike most other matters, VAs often bypass the village tract administration and directly approach the township authorities in these cases as the VTAs are not seen to hold much power in this respect. In a few exceptional cases in Rakhine State, VTAs/VAs appealed to ministers or a member of parliament to have their cases heard. In most cases the VAs try to only partly fulfil the directives or simply report bad results of for example forced cropping during one year and ignore to implement it the following year. In the majority of such cases, leaders were partially successful in implementing the following strategies with outcomes including the negotiation of a smaller area of summer paddy or the tacit abolishment of the directive to grow certain crops. In about half of the researched villages, respondents could provide examples of formal leaders that had responded strongly and intervened on their behalf. This role is almost exclusively taken up by the VTAs/VAs and not by the VERPs. While the formal administrative leaders often consult with the VERPs to gain their support, it is the administrative leaders who intervene and deal directly with the township authorities in these matters. VERPs play a stronger and more direct role in initiating requests for better access to basic services from the state than in mitigating township directives (see 5.13).

The following case studies compiled by the research team are based on interviews with villagers from the same village in Rakhine State. This village has been particularly strong in responding to directives from the township authorities and has educated and confident administrative leaders with exceptional links to township authorities and parliamentarians from the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party.

“At times, the government instructions are not feasible in real village circumstances. For instance, the villagers were told to plant castor oil plants. The villagers knew the soil and weather conditions were not appropriate for castor oil plants. Additionally, they were busy with their survival. The tract administrator used an order to get the villagers to follow the government instructions. Coincidentally, no single castor oil plant survived. After this castor oil project, the village tract administrator never told the villagers to follow government demands by force.”

“After 1988, the township administrator arranged to move a Muslim village near to Tha Yet Oak village. The village needed to give their land for those people’s living – for the place to construct the mosque and the cemetery. So U Maung Thein Kyaw (VTA) requested the township administrator to move the Muslim village to another area since they could not provide sufficient water for the new Muslim village from a small village pond and also they could not provide farming land since the village owned so little of it. The township administrator agreed to his request and arranged to move the Muslim village to Budawtaung Township instead.”

“In 2011, the central government took 10 acres of farming land occupied by villagers in order to construct the railway and the railway station. The farm owners were not provided with any compensation. The VTA raised the issue with the Lower House Representative from this area. When the representative asked them to attach strong evidence and the real facts and figures, the VTA collected the evidence and the figures together with the local State House Representative. Then they submitted the report to the parliament. There hasn’t been a response in this case yet.”

“When villagers faced a similar issue where their farming land was taken by the military to expand their compound, the VTA advised them to raise the issue with the ILO. That case is still under investigation.”

“U Bo Ni is retired from military service and his native town is in the dry zone. He had to retire due to an injury sustained in the Kyaukphyu battle and settled in this village where his wife is from. He was directly appointed as Village Tract Administrator and Village Administrator by the township administrator as he had served in the military and had had some management training as well. During his administration, he tried to negotiate with the township administrators in the case of summer paddy cultivation. The authorities forced them to cultivate 20 acres of summer paddy for the village tract. He discussed with the authorities whether it was possible to cultivate only five acres. Because of water scarcity there was no irrigation for the field during summer and the villages were very poor and afraid to lose money. Finally, the township administrator agreed to his point and allowed them to cultivate only five acres.”

Examples from other villages

“Four years ago the township administrative authorities asked the farmers to grow both monsoon paddy and summer paddy. The township administrative authorities also told the farmers they would be arrested if they failed to follow the direction. However, the farmers couldn’t follow the instruction because there was heavy rainfall. When the township administrator asked the village administrator whether the farmers followed his instruction he protected the farmers and said yes. The township land registration staff also knew the situation. But he reported to the authorities that the farmers had followed the township instruction. It was because the farmers bribed him.”

Group member of the ‘Vegetables and oilseed growers group’, farmer, man, 46 years old, Mon State

“In 2009, a petty businessman from this village wanted to buy a natural pond which is situated close to a hill where he has some land. He had links with the township ministry of fisheries and planned to raise fish for commercial purposes. However, the villagers were not happy with his plan because he might have placed wire around the pond to prevent visits from domestic cattle or he might have asked for compensation when the cattle used the pond. Typically, the cattle from the village and nearby villages relied on this pond for their drinking water. In regard to this, the villagers told the village leaders to handle the situation. A former VA led the activity and went to the township authorities to file the villagers’ concerns. As a result, the village won out over the petty businessman. The village leaders also warned him that if he ever tried to harm the village again, he would be expelled from the village. However, the petty businessman was not pleased with the result and made a second mistake. He threw stones at the audience during the annual elder appreciation ceremony. The villagers found out that it was him. Finally, the villagers told him to leave the village. The village also made the pond common property. A few weeks ago, two villagers from another village came and asked the current village administrator to show them the hill, which is still owned by that petty businessman – and the natural pond. They told the VA that they came to buy the hill and the pond as those things were owned by the petty businessman who had moved out of the village. The buyers later found out the real situation and canceled their plan. The petty businessman filed a complaint at the township police station claiming the VA intruded on his business affairs. But the police didn’t take any action because the VA showed them the letter that the pond is owned by the village. The petty businessman was not pleased with the police’s lack of action, hence, he forwarded the case to the vice township administrator who is his cousin. But the vice township administrator transferred the case to the VTA because the village VERPs and administrator explained the situation to him. The case is not over yet.”

Case study as told by various respondents, Rakhine State

“All administrators have to follow instructions from the authorities but they can bargain on behalf of villagers. The township administrator instructed the village to cultivate tea plants on three acres, which would be a burden to the village. Then, the VA complained and requested that the quota be reduced to half an acre. He forcefully ordered the villagers to do many things as instructed by the authorities. If he couldn’t do like that, the authorities would blame him. The VERP can’t negotiate between them.”

Various respondents, Chin State

“The village administrator implements the government directives but makes some adjustments. He gave the example of summer paddy: he first lets the village tract administrator know how he will implement [the plan]. He then assigns one or two farmers who can access the water source to grow the village quota and he collects money from other villagers from the village and gives it to the assigned farmers. He said he had to wait for some for the villagers to give money or labour contributions.”

Interview with VA, Shan State

“This village has been displaced because the old village was including in the Tanaw dam project. When they had to move from the old village, the Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) leader could not go against the government project, which is why the whole village shifted to its current location in 2005. At the old village, the villagers owned around 5-10 acres of land per household and also had an income from mango trees and other orchards of around 500,000 to 1,000,000 kyat per year. However, the government gave just 40 ft. x 60 ft. of land per household and 80,000 to 800,000 kyat of compensation based on the condition of their house. In this case, the VPDC leader could not complain to the government. On the other hand, he was successful in recommending the place where the new village was constructed. The VPDC leader requested the government to cancel the first place where they were supposed to move as it was not suitable. He also requested some land for plantation and to get access to water because the new village does not have easy water access.”

Case story as explained by respondents in Mon State

“The village tract administrator reduced the three acre quota for cultivation of summer paddy. After I complained he reduced it to 100,000 kyats instead of three acres. This was a successful achievement.”

VA, Shan State 7

Response 4: Intervene on behalf of individuals – criminal cases: In criminal cases that involve someone from the village, the police or a township department, the VTAs/VAs sometimes seek to help the person in trouble or their family by requesting the authorities, usually the police, not to take action or by placing a financial or verbal guarantee on their behalf.

“In this village, people use firewood for cooking and heating. Each household has to pay 1000 kyats per year for household wood usage. A year ago, a villager collected a pile of wood to build a house. An officer from the forest department was there and he inspected this matter. He tried to take action but the village administrator and other members requested him not to and guaranteed that it would not happen again.”

Various respondents, Chin State

“A fire in the village set fire to some farms. The township authorities investigated the case. The village administrator was arrested and ordered to apologise to the relevant township persons to avoid punishment from the township court. The village administrator requested the township not to punish the culprit and the township accepted this. After that, he asked the villagers to help in cultivating the lost farms that had been on fire.”

Various respondents, Chin State

“Villagers from a nearby village raised the issue with the township’s forestry department that villagers from this village cut wood illegally to make charcoal and construct houses. The township authority tried to take action against the offenders. Those who used illegal wood for construction would be fined 10,000 kyat and those who made charcoal would be sent to jail. In this case, the VA tried to intervene and negotiate with the officers. Finally, the officers agreed to be paid only 3500 kyat (1500 kyat for construction of houses and 2000 kyat for making charcoal). The VA paid the fines on behalf of the offenders.”

Case study, Shan State

“In February 2012, U Kyaw Bu stole the cookers of Maung Sein Kyaw from a nearby village. When Maung Sein Kyaw found out, he had U Kyaw Bu arrested and sent to the police station. The cookers cost about 3000-5000 kyat but Maung Sein Kyaw asked for 100,000 kyat in order to withdraw the case. But U Kyaw Bu was very poor and could not afford to pay so Maung Sein Kyaw gave money to the policemen and let U Kyaw Bu be tortured. Being tortured, U Kyaw Bu broke out of the prison and ran away. Then Maung Sein Kyaw and the policemen went to U Kyaw Bu’s home. When they didn’t find him, Maung Sein Kyaw threatened his family members and said they would capture his father on behalf of U Kyaw Bu if his family members failed to send him back to the police station. At this point, the village administrator requested the policemen and Maung Sein Kyaw not to do this and not to increase their punishment for U Kyaw Bu. He also guaranteed that U Kyaw Bu’s family would pay the required money. So, the policemen and Maung Sein Kyaw were pleased with that and went back. Finally, U Kyaw Bu’s family borrowed 100,000 kyat from a brother in Kachin State and gave it to Maung Sein Kyaw “

Case story, Rakhine State

Response 5: Confrontation: In severe cases in Chin and Rakhine states where the military have ordered villagers to act as porters, provide labour or material supplies, some village administrators have sometimes objected and directly refused to obey. This has entailed considerable risk and the outcome of these engagements has been mixed with some having lost their positions.

“I was a former village administrator from 1993 to 2002. During my tenure, there were frequent occasions when the military came to collect porters from the village. We were asked to provide nine or 10 villagers every day to farm and construct shelters for them. Even female members of households had to go when their husbands or brothers were busy with the family livelihoods. One soldier threatened to shoot the villagers if they refused to be porters. I told the soldier to shoot me instead if he would then allow the whole village to be free from providing labour by force. Similarly, one village administrator from a nearby village was threatened with being shot and had a gun pointed at his head when he did not meet the quota for porters. Additionally, he was asked to visit nearby villages with a signboard hanging on his neck saying, “Do what I say (...provide military with the porter quota...) and not what I did.”

Member of VERP, 60 years old, Rakhine State

“When the township administrator instructed us to collect wood for the military, the village administrator refused. This is why the villagers were relieved from collecting firewood for the military.”

Women’s religious group, Chin State

"When I was village administrator the second time (1999 – 2001), I had a conflict with the military authorities. At that time, three military brigades agreed to ask villagers for labour in their respective area – as Mrauk U was divided into three parts. Our village was responsible for only one brigade. However, the village was also asked by another brigade to provide free labour. I refused to follow that order. That's why I was arrested and beaten by the other brigade. Then, the former village administrator raised this issue with the brigade the village was assigned to and asked them to negotiate with the other brigade. I was then released. After that incident, I voluntarily quit from my position and after that there was no one who wanted to become the new village administrator."

Former VA, Rakhine State

"Twenty years ago during a village festival, a soldier from a local regiment fired a gun shot while drunk. We took it as an offense towards the village. The next day, the village president and VERPs filed a written complaint to the township authorities together with that soldier's enrollment number. He was punished and transferred to another area. Since then the soldiers dare not misbehave. Among the area police, the village is known as 'book-village'. Because the village is well governed with rules and regulations."

Shan State livelihoods committee, Rakhine State

"The VERPs and the village administrator have tried to reclaim farmland confiscated by the government (redistributed to former armed ethnic opposition groups in exchange for peace and arms). In this attempt the VERPs acquired help from the township USDP leaders. They submitted a reclamation letter to the land registration department and the township administration department six months ago. But there has been no result so far."

Various respondents, Shan State

"I reported twice to the township education department about the teacher's absence from the village school but they have not taken any strong action. This makes me feel disappointed. But I will try again this year."

Leader of social group, rich farmer, man, 37 years, Rakhine State

"As UNDP facilitated us to engage with the agriculture bank to keep our savings, our communication with the bank staff has improved. We didn't have any experience before in engaging with external institutions."

SRG leader, woman, 43 years, Rakhine State

"The SRG leader engaged with the agriculture bank, facilitated by UNDP, to keep their savings. She also had to submit a monthly report to UNDP and then they also participated in the SRG cluster meeting attended by three UNDP project villages every three months. The livelihood committee leader coordinates with the other village groups for the village development and other social or religious affairs. The livelihoods committee leader led the annual meeting to declare their financial statement, to analyse their project implementations and to share experiences and lessons learnt as well. At that meeting, the committee members invited two representatives from each of the 10 UNDP project villages in the area and UNDP staff as well. The livelihoods committee leader participated in the problem-solving process for the other livelihoods groups from other villages and then advised them as well. For example, after their livelihoods committee collapsed following theft, the livelihoods committee's leaders from other villages encouraged them to reorganise the group and it was re-established in 2011."

Case study, Rakhine State

"On a regular basis, the secretary of the livelihoods committee and the president of the vegetables and oilseed growers group contribute to village development activities by supporting the farmers to access loans for their winter crops from the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank. He also has links with the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party."

Various respondents, Rakhine State

5.11. VTAs/ VAs proactively engaging with authorities

Local administrative leaders occasionally approach the township authorities to improve access to basic services. However, it is fairly infrequent, unsystematic and limited to a few areas such as obtaining government loans for farmers, land registration, establishing or improving educational, electrical or assistance in the case of an emergency (for example flooding). Only six out of the 16 researched villages could provide examples of VTAs/VAs engaging with authorities in this manner. Likewise, it was infrequent that township authorities initiated engagement with villages in this respect other than routine vaccinations for children or notification of deadlines for obtaining or repaying government loans to farmers. There was no significant difference between UNDP and

non-UNDP villages although a few UNDP villages had stronger contacts with specific township departments following introduction by UNDP staff. This seemed to be limited and focused on specific issues such as animal vaccinations rather than broad or systematic engagement to access services or entitlements.

VTAs/VAs received mixed responses when seeking to improve basic services through contact with township departments. Nobody indicated negative repercussions from engaging with authorities in this manner. At worst, requests were ignored and at best, some were highly successful. In a few exceptional cases, local administrative leaders approached government ministers or travelled to the capital to engage directly with ministries, which resulted in positive outcomes.

Below are some examples of proactive engagements by local administrative leaders with authorities to access better basic services.

“The primary school in the village was a bamboo building with thatched roofing. After reporting the school situation to the township authorities through the tract administrator, the village received a donation of 200,000 kyats from township education authorities.”

VERP, Shan State

“To improve electricity, the village administration communicates through the Township Poverty Reduction Committee to the Union Minister of Forestry as he is the chairman of the National Poverty Reduction Committee. The Union Minister funded 3,000,000 kyats for the local electricity project and the opening ceremony will be on 27 March this year. During his visit, the village administration intends to present their case for upgrading the village school.”

Various respondents, Chin State

“The village tract administrator attends bi-monthly township meetings. At the meetings, he reports his village’s needs and wants to the township administrative leaders. For instance, Kawt Bein village received in-kind assistance from the township in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Moreover, in recent flooding of paddy fields where salt merchants had blocked the embankment, the township authorities granted 1.5 million kyats to the village for reconstructing of the embankment. As this amount was not enough to build the embankment, which will cost 6 million kyats, the village tract administrator asked advice from VERPs on how much more is needed and how much each farmer should contribute per month.”

FGD and key informant interview, Mon State

“The current administrator managed to get a school teacher from the township education department and engaged with the information department of the township in the construction of a village library. In addition, he engages with the health department for vaccinations of children under 5 years.”

Various respondents, Chin State

“I went and met the Minister of Industry (1) U Aung Thaug and the Minister of Transportation U Thein Swe while they visited Mrauk U because the two ministers used to be seniors when I served in the military. I asked them to provide a village pond for the village. The two ministers donated a (private) contribution for constructing the village pond.”

Former VA, retired from the army, Rakhine State

“Once in every six years the VA leader goes to the Land Registration Department to apply for permission for shifting cultivation. When he goes to this office he doesn’t need to give any money. This office issues the permission letters at once.”

Various respondents, Chin State

“A representative from the national parliament told us that we could receive agricultural loans from the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank for our winter crops if we submitted a collective application. Taking this suggestion into consideration, the village called a meeting with the village administrator, VERPs and the farmers. We then established a group called the ‘Vegetables and Oil Seed Growers Group’ and chose the group leaders. Afterwards, the group leaders collected a list of farmers who were interested in obtaining loans. The village administrator did not know how to write a loan application to the government authority so the village administrative clerk was asked to help. In November 2011, the group sent the application to the township with consent and a signature from the tract administrator. But we were later informed that our application would be considered for next year as this year’s winter season was over. Currently, there are 23 farmers in the group and each farmer was asked to pay 3000 kyats for membership.”

A livelihood committee secretary, Farmer, Male, 45 years old, Rakhine State

“The village school was established by contributions from the villagers in 1985. It was later recognised by the government in 1987. In 1998, the government provided 400,000 kyats to the village for school renovation but it was not enough to cover it. However, since the village was poor and could not contribute the required amount (50,000 kyats), the school was not renovated. The school gradually became more damaged. Then one of the VERPs requested UNDP in 2008, 2009 and 2010 to provide the required financial assistance for the school reconstruction. In 2011 he requested again. The UNDP staff member promised that if he had a chance, he would raise their needs to his friends who were interested in making a personal donation. In June 2011, the VERP realised that the township education department had provided a school in a village nearby. He asked for the school application process and consulted with the headmistress to request the fund provision from the township education department. He went twice to the township education department along with the headmistress and a few other VERPs and leaders of local institutions. According to the instruction of that department, they submitted a draft drawing and the estimated cost (10.8 million kyat) as calculated by an engineer. The paddy bank committee members gave 50 paddy baskets from the paddy bank for the consultant fee of the engineer. In early 2012, the Union Solidarity and Development Party informed them that they would provide 13 million kyat for the new school construction. The construction process began in April 2012.”

Case study, Rakhine State

“One of the VERPs represented the farmers when they needed to take out a loan from the township’s agricultural bank. He went to the town and took out money on behalf of the farmers. This is why the villagers need to rely on him in some cases as most of them don’t dare to engage with the government’s department.”

Various respondents, Shan State

5.12. VTAs/VAs engaging with other stakeholders

Respondents referred to few instances of VTAs/VAs engaging with external stakeholders other than township authorities apart from UNDP in the villages where UNDP is active. One noticeable exception included a VA who successfully obtained funds from the Japanese Embassy to construct a school and irrigation scheme. In Rakhine and Shan states a few local administrative and other institutional leaders had contact with political parties, which enabled them to forward cases to parliament and access assistance for school buildings and during emergencies such as flooding.

5.13. Engagement with external stakeholders by other leaders and institutions

VERPs and other village institutions have less engagement than VTAs/VAs with township authorities when it comes to intervening on behalf of villagers when directives are implemented. However, they have more contacts with agriculture and livestock departments and VERPs occasionally initiate requests for improved basic services, particularly in relation to education. Local institutions, especially those facilitated by UNDP, have broader contacts with other stakeholders than township authorities such as predominantly UNDP and UNDP-facilitated cluster groups. Traditional religious institutions have some limited coordination with township-based religious organisations. In Rakhine and Shan states, some institutional leaders have contact with the local ethnic parties and the government-supported Union Solidarity and Development Party. In Rakhine State, leaders of local institutions reported more engagements with external stakeholders than elsewhere.

“The livelihoods committee dealt with the township agriculture and livestock department for technical assistance. When their plants were infected, they informed the township agriculture services. Then the technical persons instructed them which pesticides should be used.”

Livelihoods committee members, Rakhine State

“The accountant of the livelihoods committee was previously selected as an agricultural extension worker (AEW) and has attended UNDP-supported agricultural capacity development trainings. As an AEW, he has contributed to the knowledge of farmers and the application of improved farm practices. Additionally, he has links with township agricultural dealers to provide the farmers with fertilizer, pesticides, and vegetable seeds.”

Key informant interview with livelihoods committee member, 33 years, Rakhine State

“UNDP facilitated groups and their leaders engage with the leaders from both UNDP and non-UNDP villages. For instance, the UNDP-facilitated group leaders from Min Pya, Kyauk Taw, and Pa Le Wa came and observed the institutions in our village. Other leaders engaged with township land registration in asking permission for school and religious buildings.”

Various respondents, Rakhine State

“The education committee has been organising an annual scholastic awards ceremony since 2003. The committee invites the members of education committees from other UNDP project villages, teachers and the township education administrator to the ceremony. The township education administrator attends almost every ceremony. The committee once reported the situation of students in the village to the township education administrator. The students walk two miles everyday to attend middle school at Mrauk Oo. It is difficult for them to do this in monsoon season. Therefore, a post-primary school is needed in the village. The township education administrator responded that we could receive permission sooner or later. At present, the mission of the education committee is to send all children to primary school in 2013.”

Education committee member, Rakhine State

“The villagers were afraid of external actors, especially those ‘who wear trousers’ because they were asked to work as porters by the military for many years. After UNDP started its project in 2003, the villagers became less afraid and actively participated in sharing their livelihood situations and discussing village affairs. They also became members in UNDP facilitated groups. In 2010, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) organised villagers to support the party. As RNDP won in the 2010 election, the villagers are now more engaged with the party. The bottom line is that the villagers are now eager to engage more with outside stakeholders with the help from RNDP.”

Researcher reflection, Rakhine State

“Last July, eight houses were destroyed by the flood from Lay Myo river due to unusually heavy rain. The president of the vegetables and oilseed growers group and the secretary of the livelihoods committee collected and reported a list of families that were flooded to the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party. The party provided 60kg of rice to those families. Family members from rank three and four received one kilogram of rice per person and two for those from rank five.”

Livelihood committee accountant, man, 33 years, Rakhine State

5.14. Engagement with nearby villages

All villages cooperated with nearby villages in occasional socio-religious affairs such as pagoda festivals, sports and school award-giving ceremonies. The traditional socio-religious groups take the lead in this and are sometimes assisted by local administrative leaders and VERPs. They also cooperate on inter-village road projects and dispute resolution with the VTA/VA taking the lead. Some UNDP facilitated groups meet regularly in cluster groups with villages in the same tract and exchange experiences. Inter-village relations are not determined only by administrative state boundaries such as the village tract, which is generally accepted by respondents as the administrative unit they belong to, but by other factors. These include proximity, such as belonging to the same monastic order or area (especially Shan villages); accessibility, particularly for those villages along the main inter-village or township road; and business relations. For example, rubber workers in Mon State have relations with people engaged in similar work in villages outside of the single village tract. The village tract administration and village administrators under the same tract cooperate in fulfilling duties and responsibilities directed by the state, an example being policy crops. Some villages under the same or different village tracts also have inter-village road and

bridge renovation schemes. For road projects, villagers referred to contributing their labour but the research did not investigate whether this was voluntary or forced. With regard to dispute resolution, if VAs or VERPs cannot solve problems involving parties from different villages then matters are referred to the VTAs. Issues include access to water sources, land disputes or personal disputes between families or individuals.

“Two villagers from the village attended a UNDP workshop where two representatives selected from each UNDP project village were invited. During the meeting, the representatives from the villages discussed their village situations and exchanged lessons learned. All SRGs in the village are members of the SRG leading group and two selected representatives from each SRG attend monthly SRG leading group workshop.”

Explanation by SRGs, Mon State

“After the rainy season, our village repaired the road link with a nearby village. We took responsibility for repair of the damaged part of our village while the nearby village did for their part. Before repairing, the leaders from the two villages discussed when the work should be started. So, both the group’s members and non members were involved in the road repairing process.”

Leader of youth group, man, farmer, 37 years old, Rakhine State

“Six years ago in constructing an inter-village bridge, not only the villagers from nearby villages but also those from other villages under the same tract participated in a collective manner, helping in constructing the inter-village road.”

VERP, man, 60 years old, Mon State

In summary, although the majority of households do not participate in the selection of local administrative leaders and segments of the village population are excluded from village-level decision-making, normative expectations require that VTAs/VAs intervene with authorities on behalf of households to the extent possible. Few VTAs/VAs express an allegiance to township authorities but if they do not seek to mitigate the impact of state directives, particularly on poorer households, they are seen by villagers as representing state interests. VTAs/VAs who take little interest in village affairs, development and supporting the poor, preferring instead to devote time to personal income generating activities, are viewed as representing their own interests at the expense of village households. The majority of VTAs/VAs are not viewed as exploitative but supportive of the village communities. However, the extent of their perceived benevolence varies greatly. Unpopular VTAs/VAs rarely continue in their position for long as other core leaders, particularly the VERPs, hold significant influence over their selection and dismissal. The capacity of administrative local leaders to engage effectively with external stakeholders, particularly township authorities, depends on their existing network outside the village, educational and family background, interest in village development and related affairs, financial situation and willingness to prioritise village interests over their own. They are stronger in mitigating negative impacts than systematically and proactively accessing services on behalf of villages. While other institutions also play a role in engaging outside stakeholders, the potential for expanding this aspect of institutional engagement is yet to be developed.

6. Conclusion

This section outlines the key findings of this study that are of relevance to development agencies, particularly UNDP, and others engaged in village development and local governance in Myanmar. It refers to selected resource material where relevant and provides an overview of the implications and recommendations for programming.

This section is ordered in line with the research questions:

1. What are the structures and relationships of local institutions and leadership in the selected villages?
2. How do local institutions and UNDP-facilitated groups relate to village leadership structures?
3. To what extent do formal village administrations represent the interests of the township, households, institutions and others?
4. What are the possible implications and recommendations for UNDP?

6.1. Key findings: Structures and relationships of local institutions and leadership

6.1.1. Local institutions

Village institutions in the four selected areas of Myanmar have the following types of institution: formal administrative, traditional socio-religious, state-sponsored (largely inactive), UNDP-facilitated (only in the ten villages where UNDP implements its programmes) and others. The 16 villages studied each have seven to 20 local institutions. The highest number of institutions was recorded in Mon and Rakhine states and the lowest in Chin and Shan states.

The most common institutions are formal administrative ones such as the Village Tract Administration and Village Administration, which form the lowest level of the state bureaucracy. Traditional socio-religious institutions are also common, of which four types exist in the majority of villages: Village Elders and Respected Persons, pagoda/church board of trustees, school committees and socio-religious youth institutions. State-sponsored institutions include the local village militia and the fire brigade but also the Maternal and Child Welfare Association and Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation although these are largely inactive at the village level. Among UNDP-facilitated groups the Self-reliance Groups and village and livelihoods development committees are the most common.

Since pre-colonial times, the village headman has been a key centre of power and authority at the village level. During colonial rule headmen were transformed into representatives of the state responsible for implementing government regulations, collecting taxes and maintaining order. This role was largely continued during socialist and military rule till today although the formal title of the position has changed. Currently, each Village Tract Administration governs about 4-6 villages within the tract and refers directly to the township authority. The village tract administration is most commonly comprised of a Village Tract Administrator and a clerk or secretary. Each village has a Village Administrator (some larger villages have several VAs, which are also called 100 household leaders), who reports to the VTA. Although the VTA/VA holds an officially sanctioned position and exercises authority over village households and institutions, he (it is rarely a woman) does not do so in isolation. Apart from being assisted by 10 household leaders, he cooperates with the VERPs, whom sometimes act in a senior advisory role and at other times form the main body of authority in the village, with the VA playing a more nominal role. The VERPs are the most influential traditional socio-religious institution in the majority of villages and are formed by a group of 5-8 older men with a medium to high socio-economic background. Often, they are former VTAs/VAs who continue to exercise influence over village affairs, organise and advise village institutions and sometimes intervene if a VTA/VA is perceived as incompetent or corrupt. VERPs do not hold a position of state-sanctioned power generally but are respected by community members and the VTA/VA who will often consult with them due to their age, experience and status.

The traditional socio-religious institutions play an important role in religious and social events such as pagoda festivals, religious ceremonies, weddings and funerals. The extent to which these

institutions are formalised varies significantly; some have open-ended structures and informal roles and other have assigned areas of responsibility. Few of them have formal mechanisms for leadership transfer. No traditional village institution with broad participation from the community takes a leading role in overall village decision-making and development affairs although traditional socio-religious youth institutions conduct some development-related activities in addition to social affairs, which constitute their key activities. In exceptional cases, they have emerged as the most influential village institutions. Generally, they mobilise broad participation from a wide segment of the village population (aged 15-45 years, including women and those with a poor social background) for common village affairs such as small-scale infrastructure projects. This experience of mobilisation combined with their established fund raising mechanisms mean that youth institutions have greater potential than most traditional institutions – which either have narrow membership or are strictly focused on religious affairs – to play a stronger role in engaging village communities for local development initiatives. They offer a potential entry point for external development agencies that want to work with and strengthen existing traditional village institutions for grassroots development rather than establish new or parallel structures. However, leadership positions in youth institutions are male-dominated and leaders cannot act independently of core village leaders, who generally hold officially sanctioned or traditional positions of authority (see section 3). Barriers to women's participation in decision-making need addressing, as does a means of ensuring the support and involvement of core leaders.

State-sponsored interest groups exist in most villages and were established during the period of military government from 1988-2011, with a few such as the village militias dating further back. With the exception of the fire brigade and village militias, state-sponsored interest groups are largely inactive at the village level and have nominal membership. State-sponsored interest groups have minimal influence over decision-making at the village level outside of their specific domain and their involvement in improving the lives of women and children for example is limited at present. The potential for grassroots village development initiatives to take root if implemented through state-sponsored interest groups is low in their current form.

In comparison to traditional institutions, UNDP-facilitated institutions are more structured, have defined criteria for membership based on wealth-ranking and are more focused on improving the livelihoods of members, particularly through revolving funds. While the SRGs, which are comprised of women, provide financial assistance to their members and occasionally larger contributions for small-scale village infrastructure improvements, those surveyed do not play a leading role in village decision-making or in initiating localised village-wide development initiatives. There is a risk (observed in three out of 10 villages¹³) that SRGs take over some of the functions of traditional women's sub-committees that exist within the socio-religious youth institutions while excluding some of the women who participate in them because they do not meet SRG membership criteria based on wealth-ranking. Overall, membership of SRGs can improve income levels and empower women within their households, as indicated by other studies¹⁴, but this study did not find any evidence that SRGs enable women to take leading positions in other village institutions or in public decision-making beyond the realm of their own institution. Perhaps this is not problematic if the intention of supporting SRGs is solely to improve access to credit for poor women and their status within households. However, if it is to also empower women to take up or have influence over core village leadership positions then further measures are needed to address barriers to participation.

The UNDP-facilitated livelihoods development committees tend to be broad-based with participation from large segments of the village population. Some of them have become key institutions in their villages, initiating and supporting a wide range of activities while providing funding (from the common fund and UNDP) for small-scale infrastructure projects such as road repairs and pond clearance, and also regular access to small scale loans for members. Others focus mainly on coordinating UNDP-related activities at their monthly meetings and so fall short of playing a lead or coordinating role in development affairs on behalf of the whole village. Overall, the establishment of broad-based UNDP-facilitated livelihoods development committees has shown some potential for playing a coordinating function between village institutions, providing a

¹³ 'Gender Based Constraints in Rural Areas and Women's Empowerment in HDI', The Gender and Development Initiative, UNDP Myanmar, 2011

¹⁴ Ibid.; 'A Hen is Crowing: A Gender Impact Study of Two UNDP Myanmar Community Development Programs (2006)

forum for inclusive public discussion of local development activities and priorities and for promoting more open decision-making processes in comparison to the closed manner in which VTAs/VAs and VERPs operate. The high level of involvement of both official and informal institutional leaders such as VTAs/VAs and VERPs in the livelihoods development groups potentially strengthens their long-term sustainability. However, livelihoods development committees currently revolve mainly around UNDP-facilitated activities and UNDP-initiated resource mobilisation so their sustainability as independent, long-term grassroots development institutions is untested.

6.1.2. Institutional leaders

This study includes an overview of village leaders based on the analytical categories used in the 'What Lies Beneath' study, which categorises village leaders into core, secondary and others. It documents normative local perceptions of good leadership and documents the existence of 'reluctant leaders'. Finally, it outlines barriers to access for leadership positions that effect segments of the village population such as women and the poor.

Core leaders play a central role in key village decision-making and other aspects of village life. They are very influential and provide explicit or tacit sanction for most decisions related to village-wide affairs and also resolve disputes. Core leaders are usually involved in several village institutions as leaders or advisors. In the majority of villages (13 out of 16), core leaders hold officially or traditionally recognised leadership posts such as VTA/VA or that of VERP. While secondary leaders are consulted in key village decision-making they are not positioned to make decisions without core leader support. They can mobilise villagers and are often leaders of institutions outside of those led by the VTA/VA and VERPs such as the UNDP-facilitated livelihood development committees and the more important traditional socio-religious institutions such as the school committee or socio-religious youth group. Secondary leaders tend to be leading members of several institutions, have family relations with core leaders or were formerly influential core leaders, particularly former VTAs/VAs. Core and secondary leaders are usually men with a medium or high socio-economic background.¹⁵ More than secondary and other leaders, core leaders are expected to exempt poorer segments of the village population from informal taxes such as contributions to local fundraising or 'donation requests' from township authorities, where often the cost of this is borne directly by the core leader. Other leaders lead institutions that are less central to key village institutions such as the UNDP-initiated SRGs and the cooking or women's sub-groups of the traditional socio-religious youth groups, but they do not hold influence over village-level decision-making. In comparison to the core and secondary leaders, other leaders come from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds including rich, medium and poor. Notably, leaders in this group may also be women.

Given the influential and sometimes benevolent role of core leaders it is important that external development agencies do not ignore them as is sometimes the case when targeting focuses exclusively on empowering marginalised and poor segments of a village population. Developing effective ways of engaging directly with and strengthening the capacities of core leaders and other potential leaders in a manner that promotes inclusive, responsive and effective leadership has potential benefits for a wide-range of village institutions, marginalised segments of the population and the wider village population. Secondary leaders hold much influence over their own institutions and could emerge as core leaders in the future so improving their leadership skills could enhance the pool of effective leaders in the long-term. Finally, while other leaders show great strength in effectively managing the institutions they lead, a number of normative perceptions and other barriers constrain them from taking up secondary or core leadership positions, which are outlined below. Some of these barriers could be addressed through a programmatic approach that focuses on empowerment, leadership training and the nurture of leaders of planned multi-tier institutions with a view to linking village institutions both vertically and horizontally. Collective action by marginalised groups on issues that benefit the wider community could also be included. In this way leaders would have an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to manage broader village issues, which could improve perceptions of them and make secondary or core leadership positions possible.

¹⁵ For more information about how socio-economic status was defined, see footnote 4.

The normative expectations and qualities that make an effective, influential and well-liked leader relate mainly to personality and ability although socio-economic standing and benevolence are also considered important. Respondents referred to a good leader as someone who is educated, experienced and well-organised, with an ability to command respect and enforce decisions. A good leader is interested in village affairs and makes impartial decisions. He or she must be non-corrupt, able and willing to sacrifice his or her own interests in favour of those of the village and to contribute private funds and credit, particularly to the poor. Respondents with a low socio-economic background placed particular emphasis on leaders being fair, unbiased and willing to listen to and help fellow villagers in need. They indicated that core leaders should not just provide credit but should also charge the poor less or nothing at all for village fundraising. Of particular importance is the capacity of core leaders to implement directives from township or military authorities in a manner that does not negatively impact households. Strong social pressures exist for leaders to conform to these norms to some extent. Those who do not are disliked and those who mismanage village funds risk being replaced. The perceptions of leadership could function as locally-embedded reference points for development agencies seeking to foster improved local leadership and enhance local accountability. Building on these while introducing new ideas rather than seeking to replace them by external concepts and mechanisms is likely to be more sustainable and effective.

An important finding of the study is that about half the VAs are reluctant leaders. They openly expressed a preference for not holding the position or a desire to resign. The disincentives for them to take up leadership roles or continue in them centre around demands on their time and financial contributions that come at the expense of their livelihoods. Moreover, they have to deal with matters and demands from township authorities particularly that may cause conflict in the community or people to dislike them. The position is unsalaried although the VTA position will become salaried when the newly approved Ward and Village Tract Administration Law comes into effect. Incentives to hold VA positions relate mainly to an interest in village affairs, a desire for influence, prestige and religious merit. In some cases a leadership position allows for profit from funds allocated by villagers or contributions assigned to the village but few VAs in the areas where research was conducted seemed to profit enough financially from their position for it to be a major incentive.¹⁶ This is different from some other areas of the country that are more affluent.

The financial and time demands of the VA position combined with low education and cultural gender stereotypes act as barriers to leadership for women and the poorer segments of village society. This is particularly the case for core leadership positions such as administrative leaders (VTAs/VAs), VERPs and for the traditional socio-religious youth groups as well as (albeit to a lower extent) UNDP-facilitated livelihoods development committees. A strong preference for male leaders with a good socio-economic background is evident in all 16 villages.

Women are generally accepted as leaders of groups that have women membership only. These include UNDP SRG groups and the women sub-groups of traditional socio-religious youth groups. In traditional village mass meetings where core and secondary leaders present their decisions concerning village affairs it is customary for the head of the household to attend only. In most cases this is a man. In the villages where monthly livelihoods and village development committee meetings (initiated by UNDP) take place, leaders of women's groups seem to have a higher participation as they are specifically invited to report on their group activities. Women tend to assume stronger leadership positions in UNDP than non-UNDP villages but this is largely confined to the groups with high female membership (particularly the women-only SRGs) and does not extend to overall decision-making in village affairs. The bias against female leadership in village-level decision-making and in groups where men participate is rooted in strong social and cultural beliefs. There are few instances of people challenging these beliefs with a view to enabling women to assume leadership roles in overall village affairs but a range of respondents expressed the belief that women can be leaders, at least in general terms. A high level of education was often stated as essential for women to attain leadership positions. Local and national role models serve as evidence and inspiration that women can be leaders. These findings emphasise that measures to address livelihoods issues, incentives, leadership capacity and normative perceptions of who

¹⁶ Other reports indicate that this may be different in areas with lower levels of poverty or with higher inflows of resources (financial or in-kind) such as in the Ayeyarwady Delta area post-cyclone Nargis.

can lead must be addressed in a way that empowers and enables new leaders to emerge whilst simultaneously engaging with existing leaders that are influential in selecting and promoting leaders to new positions. In the long-term, it also underscores the importance of education for women and socio-economically disadvantaged groups and the potential influence of role models.

6.2. Key Findings: Relations between institutions and village leadership structures

The relationship between leaders from different institutions and the perceived authority of individual leaders defines the engagement between institutions. The relationship among core leaders and between core leaders and other institutions are the most significant. These relations are dynamic and differ from village to village but some patterns are evident.

Among the 16 villages, seven of them demonstrate good and supportive relations between core leaders, their institutions and other village institutions while in another seven villages relations were less cooperative with institutions tending to work separately from each other but without apparent conflicts. Only two out of 16 villages experienced open conflict between institutions. There was no apparent difference between UNDP and non-UNDP villages.

The study finds that the relationship between VTAs/VAs and VERPs is the most important for decision-making at the village level. One or both of these institutions tend to form the main governance body and centre of power in the village and they wield significant influence over other institutions. Traditionally, it is the role of the VTA/VA to govern and the role of the VERPs to lead village social and religious affairs. However, the roles carried out by these two institutions depend on the perceived status of the VTA/VA vis-à-vis the VERPs. In general the VERPs function as advisors to the VTA/VA, who rarely makes decisions without consulting them and obtaining their approval. The VTA/VA retains more formal authority (*anna*) than the VERPs but VERPs generally hold higher normative authority/influence (*awza*). In villages where the VTA/VA is seen as inexperienced, corrupt or lacking interest in his position, the VERPs often take up a more prominent role; assuming the decision-making lead, managing village development initiatives and coordinating village institutions. The VTA/VA is then reduced to a marginal role but remains the key official link between the township and village administration. VERPs are generally instrumental in selecting VTAs/VAs and forcing the dismissal of those who are seen to misuse village funds. Few open conflicts exist between VERPs and VTAs/VAs suggesting that the weaker party would rather withdraw from the centre of decision-making than openly challenge it. Overall, in many cases the VERPs act as a check and balance on the power and performance of the VTA/VA, representing the strongest form of social accountability existing between village institutions. It is also relevant to note that some villages do not have VERPs and rely on other institutional leaders to act as core leaders. In any case, no other institutions – traditional, state-sponsored or UNDP-facilitated – are in a position to hold core leaders to account. Irrespective of whether they are VTAs/VAs, VERPs or other institutional leaders, core leaders tend to adopt a closed decision-making style through which agreements reached in private are announced to the community, often seeking their nominal approval only and encountering few objections.

Development institutions seeking to strengthen accountability between local leaders and village households should incorporate elements of existing social accountability mechanisms into programming as this is likely to enhance sustainability and effectiveness. Measures to promote more open forms of decision-making should be encouraged along with systematic ways for village households – particularly those excluded from core or secondary leadership positions such as women and poorer households – to hold leaders to account. The central role of core leaders suggests that systematic training in good leadership, management, accountability and inclusive decision-making for such leaders and others with leadership potential would have a wider enabling impact on relations between leaders, members and households.

Relations between core leaders and traditional institutions: Core leaders are generally leaders or patrons of several other village institutions, particularly traditional socio-religious ones while their family members often take up institutional leadership positions too. Traditional institutions usually follow the instructions of core leaders and inform or seek permission from them before carrying out activities. While core leaders make or sanction the decisions for such work, it's the institutions that

mobilise their members and carry out the work. The use of power by VTA/VA's is accepted by members of traditional institutions because of the official authoritative power invested in them by the township authority. In contrast, VERPs rely on influence derived from their status, background and position of responsibility for socio-religious affairs. However, in practice it is not possible to discern a strict division of roles between VTAs/VAs and VERPs relative to traditional institutions as this varies depending on the relationships between core leaders in each village.

There is no evidence in the villages surveyed of core leaders co-opting UNDP institutions for personal, financial or state interests. Core leaders tend to be more closely involved in village and livelihoods development committees, where they may hold an executive position, than in SRGs where they have more marginal role but is called upon for enforcing loan agreements.

Core leaders and UNDP-facilitated institutions: Good relations exist between most core leaders and UNDP-facilitated institutions. There is no open conflict and core leaders are cooperative. While core leaders are more influential in traditional institutions over which they may have direct authority, their relations with UNDP-facilitated institutions focus more on providing advice or being called upon to enforce loan agreements making use of their authoritative and persuasive power. Core leaders tend to be invited as patrons, key advisors or to participate in annual ceremonies held by UNDP-facilitated institutions. This allows them limited influence and ensures they feel involved and respected, and can be mobilised if the institution needs their advice or assistance. This reduces the risk of core leaders being obstructive to the institutions and is in line with cultural values that emphasise respect for older and experienced persons. There is no evidence of core leaders systematically co-opting UNDP institutions for personal, financial or state interests in the villages covered by this study. Core leaders tend to be more closely involved in village and livelihoods development committees, where they may hold an executive position, than in SRGs where they have a more marginal role but are called upon to enforce loan agreements. It is not clear to what extent the role of core leaders in UNDP-facilitated institutions can be attributed to a systematic and strategic approach by UNDP. Rather, it may also be attributed to local communities which have found that marginalisation of core leaders from village institutions is not productive. In any case, while the relationship between core leaders and UNDP-facilitated institutions is generally balanced and supportive, UNDP programmes do not specifically target core leaders or institutional leaders of traditional institutions for leadership or management training (unlike leaders of UNDP-facilitated livelihood development institutions whom receive some training). Many respondents referred to this as a potentially valuable intervention when asked how leadership could be improved at the village level.

Finally, the field data is not sufficient to form a conclusion on whether secondary leaders within UNDP-facilitated livelihood development committees move on or not to become core leaders or VTAs/VAs. One of the challenges to research is that these specific institutions are fairly recently established and that possible emergence of new core leaders out of livelihood development committees over time cannot yet be measured. More research is needed to assess whether UNDP interventions stimulate an expanded pool of future core leaders and VTAs/VAs, or not.

6.3. Key findings: To what extent do village tract and village administrations represent the interests of the township, households, institutions or others?

This section presents key findings concerning the degree to which VTAs/VAs are seen to represent the various interests of township authorities, households, village institutions and others. It also considers the involvement of townships, local institutions and households in the selection and resignation of VTAs/VAs; the extent to which the interests of households – particularly those of poor people, women and youth – influence VTA/VA decision-making; and finally, the ways in which VTAs/VAs and other leaders engage with external stakeholders, especially township authorities.

6.3.1. Leadership changes

Competition for leadership positions of village institutions is generally low. Few positions offer sufficient incentives in terms of influence, prestige, religious merit or financial profit relative to disincentives such as time, financial cost, public criticism and, in the case of VTAs/VAs, exposure to pressure from township authorities. In part owing to these reasons, the pool of potential leaders for key positions is limited.

Leaders of traditional institutions are most often selected informally and decisions are based on nominal consensus. Once a leadership candidate has come forward or is nominated – often by the former leader or core leaders – few people suggest other candidates or voice objections. In comparison, UNDP-facilitated institutions have more clearly defined leadership selection criteria, which include fixed terms and greater involvement by group members in the selection process. Leadership selection in traditional socio-religious groups is informal with core leaders advising on who would make a good leader. VERPs are generally self-appointed, informally chosen by villagers or in some cases selected by the VTA. Sometimes they are officially recognised by township authorities. Leaders of traditional socio-religious groups usually resign when they feel the role occupies too much of their time, impacts on their household income or when they no longer fulfil the leadership criteria (i.e. upon reaching a certain age or getting married in the case of traditional socio-religious youth groups). Respondents did not refer to cases of socio-religious leaders or leaders of UNDP-facilitated groups being dismissed due to mismanagement or competition for positions.

There is no standardised manner by which VTAs and particularly VAs are selected or general procedures for their dismissal or resignation.¹⁷ VERPs play a central role in such processes. While township authorities officially appoint VTAs, which in turn appoint VAs, in many cases this is simply a bureaucratic procedure that formalises a selection that has already taken place at the village tract and village level respectively. In the case of VTAs, the main tract village commonly has a monopoly on this position and there is little open consultation with other villages on the selection. Exceptions to this do exist in which the VERPs in the tract village consult core leaders in other villages. Sometimes core leaders from other villages nominate candidates from their own village, usually incumbent VAs. In the majority of villages the VA is selected by the VERPs in a closed decision-making process in which the VERPs consult among each other and with other core or secondary leaders. They seek approval for their preferred choice in a village mass meeting attended by heads of households, which are ordinarily men. In three of the 16 villages studied the VTA/VA was appointed by vote in a mass meeting attended by household heads. In another three villages the township authorities directly selected the VTA/VA. No correlation was found between the VTA/VA selection method and the level of authority or popularity of the VTA/VA. This rests on other factors such as performance, leadership style and personal qualities. Likewise, there was no uniform preference for how respondents preferred the VTA/VA to be selected (direct vote or selection by VERPs) if they could decide. No respondent expressed a preference for the township authorities to make the selection.

VTAs/VAs resign for reasons including age, insufficient time, the financial cost associated with the position or as a result of pressure from township or the military to implement certain directives. VAs/VTAs are often changed when a new government takes power or when new regulations are introduced. Several VTAs/VAs have been dismissed due to corruption involving the misuse of village funds collected from households or donated for village development purposes. In such cases the VERPs and other villagers were often instrumental in complaining directly to the township authorities, which would then investigate and almost always dismiss the VTA/VA. Although there is some acceptance that the VTA/VA position is unsalaried and so a need exists to collect funds from households, the opposition to extensive misuse of funds is strong. This is reflected in the fact that VTAs/VAs perceived by respondents to be corrupt were unable to continue in their positions over many years. Many respondents suggested that formal leadership could be more effective and inclusive if positions were salaried and more management and leadership training provided.

¹⁷ Please refer to footnote 17 for more information about the new Village Tract and Ward Administration Law, which defines selection processes for VTAs and 10 household leaders but not VAs.

6.3.2. Representation of marginalised groups in VTA/VA decision-making

Women, youth and the poor are largely excluded from the VTA/VA selection process. This is because they are not represented in the VERP institution and have low representation at village mass meetings. Many such respondents expressed a strong sense of distance from village decision-making processes. The exception is UNDP-facilitated monthly mass meetings where more women attend, particularly from SRGs. However, the marginalisation of certain groups from village decision-making does not mean that core leaders completely ignore their interests. Based on interviews, the research team estimates that core leaders in 12 out of the 16 villages respond to some extent to the interests of women specifically with similar figures for poor and youth. This typically takes the form of VTAs/VAs exempting or reducing financial contributions for poorer households or, less frequently, supporting them in-kind or financially. In the case of youth and women, many core leaders extend their support to carry out activities through either traditional local institutions or SRGs. Many marginalised groups do not expect core leaders to assist them specifically but to act in a fair manner, be active in village affairs and to not burden them with requests for contributions in line with the normative expectations of good leadership. Core leaders who do not live up to expectations are unpopular, including within marginalised sections of the community.

6.3.3. Relations between village leaders, township authorities and other stakeholders

The relationship between township authorities, village tract and village administrations is generally characterised by a top down command and communication structure. Little direct interaction takes place between households, village institutions and the state represented by the township authorities. Township authorities pass on directives through the VTA to the VAs which then communicate them to village populations. Information is passed upwards through the VA and then the VTA upon request from township authorities. The interaction between the state as represented by township authorities is weak and an effective mechanism does not exist for village households to provide feedback to township authorities or for township authorities to genuinely consult households on priorities such as poverty reduction for example. Moreover, accountability of duty-bearers at the township-level towards rights-holders on public service budgeting for example is almost non-existent.

Limited resources pass from the state to villages so VTAs/VAs play a limited role in the allocation of resources. Few respondents referred to services provided by the township authorities when asked to describe the main forms of engagement between villages and external stakeholders. Instead such engagements centre on the directives issued from the township through the VTAs to the VAs. These often relate to forced cropping of various so-called policy crops, which all failed to produce a surplus in the villages studied, and other directives such as local tree planting, fire prevention, wood collection and the provision of labour for government projects. VTAs/VAs are also directed to raise funds on behalf of the township authorities and occasionally the military. VTAs/VAs may request money from villagers to cover expenses associated with their position. Although the research did not focus on this aspect, respondents reported abusive and intrusive interventions such as forced labour and confiscation of land for the expansion of military compounds by the military and township authorities. This was more prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s than in the 2000s and a halt to some forced cropping directives was observed by respondents in 2010.

In the majority of villages, VTAs/VAs are not *proactive* in seeking to improve access to basic services or assistance for village development with higher authorities but they often play an important *reactive* role in mediating between the demands of the state and household interests. No major difference was found in this respect between UNDP and non-UNDP villages. VTAs/VAs react in a variety of ways to directives instructed by township or military authorities:

Response 1: Implement directive as instructed: In about one third of villages VTAs/VAs implement government directives as instructed and do not commonly intervene on behalf of villagers. VTAs/VAs justify their action with the claim that they are unable to act otherwise or it is not their responsibility to intervene. They are viewed by respondents as either powerless in the face of government orders or as giving little priority to the interests of villagers.

Response 2: Make exemptions for the poor: VTAs/VAs generally try to lessen the negative impact of government directives and requests for financial contributions on poorer households. In the case of 'fundraising' on behalf of township authorities, it is a common practice for VTAs/VAs to charge the poor and elderly less than other villagers, extend an informal loan without interest or to exempt them from payments altogether. In many cases, administrative leaders cover funding gaps between what they are expected to submit to the township authorities and what they are able to collect from the village households if they are not able to collect the full amount. As such they can act as a buffer between the state and poorer households.

Response 3: Bargain for partial implementation: Most VTAs and VAs seek ways to avoid fully implementing directives if they are deemed to cause undue hardship to villagers (and thus also likely to make the VTA/VA unpopular – or simply unable to implement the directives). They may appeal directly to township authorities for lenience or bargain for a compromise. In exceptional cases, they may appeal to local MPs or ministers. Often the VAs try to partly fulfil the directives or ignore them altogether with the tacit acceptance of the township authorities. In the majority of cases VTAs/VAs (VERPs play a limited role in this respect) use these strategies with some success and can negotiate a more lenient implementation of directives with township authorities in areas such as forced cropping for example.

Response 4: Intervene on behalf of individuals – criminal cases: In criminal cases that involve someone from the village, the police or a township department, the VTAs/VAs sometimes seek to help the person in trouble or their family by requesting the authorities – usually the police – to not take action or by placing a financial or verbal guarantee on behalf of the accused.

Response 5: Confrontation: In severe cases in Chin and Rakhine states where the military have ordered villagers to act as porters, provide labour or material supplies, some VTAs/VAs have objected and directly refused to obey. This has entailed considerable risk and the outcome of these engagements has been mixed with some having lost their positions.

In terms of proactive engagement, local administrative leaders occasionally approach township authorities to improve access to basic services but this occurs infrequently and is unsystematic. Only six out of the 16 villages researched could provide examples of VTAs/VAs engaging proactively with authorities. Likewise, it is rare for township authorities to initiate engagement with villages, provide services (beyond teachers for the village school, occasional visits by a health worker and the like) or consult on needs and priorities. There is no significant difference between UNDP and non-UNDP villages in this respect although a few UNDP villages have stronger contacts with specific township departments following introductions by UNDP staff. This seems limited and focused on technical issues rather than broad or systematic engagement to access services or entitlements. VTAs/VAs have received mixed responses when seeking to improve basic services through contact with township departments. Nobody indicated negative repercussions from engaging with authorities in this manner. At worst, requests were ignored and at best, some were successful. Respondents referred to few instances of VTAs/VAs engaging with external stakeholders other than township authorities and UNDP in the villages where UNDP is active. VERPs and other village institutions have less engagement than VTAs/VAs with township authorities when it comes to intervening on behalf of villagers when government directives are issued. However, they have more contact when engaging proactively by initiating requests for improved basic services for example, particularly in the area of education. Local institutions, especially those facilitated by UNDP, have slightly broader contacts with stakeholders than other township authorities such as the UNDP and UNDP-facilitated cluster groups. In Rakhine and Shan states, some institutional leaders have contact with political parties but party activities take place predominantly at the township level and are not yet a major factor affecting village leadership and organisation.

Traditional religious institutions have limited coordination with township-based religious organisations while other traditional institutions rarely engage directly with external stakeholders with the exception of nearby villages. Cooperation between villages on socio-religious events and inter-village road or bridge projects is common. Some UNDP-facilitated groups meet regularly in cluster groups with villages in the same tract and exchange experiences. Inter-village relations are

not determined only by administrative state boundaries such as the village tract, which is generally accepted by respondents as the administrative unit they belong to, but by other factors such as proximity, accessibility, markets and labour relations between villages.

In conclusion, the interests represented by VTAs/VAs are mixed. Their allegiance is first and foremost to the village community and their household interests. If they do not conform to normative leadership expectations to some extent and place their own household interests above those of the community (such as in the case of extensive misuse of village funds), they do not enjoy support and rarely continue in their position for long. VERPs play a key role in the selection and dismissal of VTAs/VAs but these procedures are unclear and unsystematic. As formal representatives of the state, VTAs/VAs generally seek to implement directives issued by township authorities in ways that mitigate some of the negative impacts on the village community while they are also careful that this does not bring them into conflict with township authorities. VTAs/VAs make regular exemptions for poorer households when requesting financial contributions from households but do not include poorer households, women and youth directly in decision-making at the village level. VTAs/VAs and other institutional leaders engage only in limited ways with township authorities to proactively obtain access to services and entitlements. Few resources are allocated by township authorities to villages for basic services and so the VTA/VA function does not centre on allocation and administration of state resources. Finally, engagement by village households, institutions and leaders with other external entities, including membership of external horizontal or vertical networks, is limited.

These findings suggest scope for improving representation of marginalised groups such as women, youth and poorer households in key decision-making bodies and processes. They also indicate that community mobilisation in which marginalised groups organise, make use of collective bargaining to access services, claim entitlements and exert influence, is limited at present and needs strengthening. The findings recognise that leaders are held to a level of social accountability that should not be ignored by external development agencies and that VTAs/VAs can play an important role in mediating between the often-divergent interests of households and the state, particularly for the poor. This aspect of the role of VTAs/VAs should be viewed as a resource that could be utilised when implementing pro-poor village development projects. Proactive and systematic engagement between households, village leaders and township authorities to improve access to services and entitlements is an area that has received limited attention to date by UNDP and many development agencies in Myanmar. Horizontal and vertical linkages need to be strengthened and approaches to empower communities to claim such rights should be prioritised.

7. Resource material: perspectives and relevance

Limited resource materials exist that refer to village-level governance in Myanmar. This study was designed specifically to deepen knowledge of on this issue and provide input into the project formulation for the next phase of the UNDP HDI programme. It was also designed to validate the issues raised in the 'What Lies Beneath' study conducted in 2011 in Ayeyarwady Region and the Dry-zone of Myanmar whilst exploring these issues further.

7.1. What Lies Beneath: Comparisons, contradictions and confirmation of key findings

This study confirms and contradicts a number of the findings of the WLB report while going into more detail and drawing on a wider selection of respondents, particularly marginalised segments of village communities such as women, poorer households and youth etc. It also covers issues such as leadership selection processes, linkages to township authorities and the role of women in greater depth, issues which received limited or no coverage in the WLB report. For these reasons a direct comparison between the two studies is difficult.

This study confirms the key findings of WLB with a few notable exceptions. As described in WLB, the Village Tract or Village Administration (formerly called the Peace and Development Council) is the main unit of government administration at the tract and village levels. This study shares the finding in WLB that village institutions have similar types and functions. It confirms the notion that the formal village tract or village administration shares a close relationship with the VERPs and that an influential core group of leaders exists with largely the same synergistic roles outlined in WLB, specifically that "The interplay between these two sets of leaders is the most important feature of village institutions and reveals a blending of official and social accountability".¹⁸ However, this study also finds that significant variety exists in the nature of power relations between core leaders – most frequently but not exclusively made up by VTAs/VAs and VERPs – between villages and in different geographical areas. It cannot be taken for granted for example that VERPs are generally "removed from village affairs" as was concluded in WLB.¹⁹ This study finds that in the majority of villages the VERPs occupy the main governing roles in the absence of effective VTAs/VAs or govern jointly with VTAs/VAs. In a few villages the VERP institution does not exist at all. The notion of strong family control of VTA/VA positions, which was noted in the areas covered by WLB, was not supported by the findings of this study although both studies highlight a preference for financially wealthy, educated male leaders.

This study does not agree with the findings of WLB in regards to the participation of VTAs/VAs in externally-facilitated sector or project committees. Where WLB found such committees to be unsustainable and compromised by a lack of involvement from formal leaders, this study finds a high level of participation by VTAs/VAs and VERPs in both sector and village livelihoods development institutions, albeit less so in SRGs. Given that sustainability of institutions is, among other issues, linked to participation of existing leaders, this is an important finding with relevance to the long-term sustainability of UNDP-facilitated institutions. The contrasting levels of participation documented by the two studies may be explained in part by the different development context; where villages in the Ayeyarwady Delta experienced a large influx of multiple (and sometimes competing) externally-facilitated aid committees following Cyclone Nargis, this was not the case in villages researched for this study. As such, core leaders have fewer demands on their time and reasons to not engage actively in sector or project committees with a more narrow focus. WLB concluded that externally-supported community-based organisations have little effect on expanding the pool of core leaders. This study does not find any conclusive evidence to support or dismiss this claim in the case of UNDP-facilitated village and livelihoods development committees. However, it is evident that SRGs in their current form neither contribute to producing core leaders nor significantly enhance the role of women in decision-making at the village level. Barriers to participation of women in public decision-making and other gender specific aspects are missing in WLB but have been outlined in this study. Finally, while this study validates the WLB finding that core leaders often take a role reminiscent of the 'benevolent land owner', this should not be over

¹⁸ Op. Cit. 'What Lies Beneath', p.iv

¹⁹ Ibid. p.iii

emphasised because behaviour is not uniform and reports neglect or abuse of power and funds are not infrequent. If more financial resources are to be channelled through the VTA/VA system for poverty alleviation in the future, then without measures and support to improve management, accountability and leadership, abuses of power are likely to increase.

In terms of implications for development programs, WLB emphasises that a) external agencies need to understand and engage with existing local institutions and leaderships to be effective particularly core leaders; b) analysis of basic institutional structures is needed in different localities/regions to inform development interventions and institution-building; c) existing forms of informal accountability merit strengthening; d) opportunities to foster cohesion and strengthen relationships between elites and non-elites as well as alliances between villages should be explored, and e) innovative approaches to strengthen the voices of the poor are needed. These implications are in-line with most of the recommendations put forth in section 8. The recommendations of this study also emphasise leadership and management training; adoption of a stronger rights-based approach; improvements to the role of women in village decision-making; possible support to traditional institutions in addition to the VERP and VTA/VA institutions; empowerment of households and institutions to engage more actively and systematically with township authorities; and more effective contributions to overall local governance in Myanmar.

7.2. Relevance of other resource materials on local institutions and UNDP's HDI programme in Myanmar.

The types and functions of village level institutions and formal leadership outlined in this study display similar characteristics to those mapped in the report: 'If Given the Chance: Women's Participation in Public Life in Myanmar', which also makes reference to village level governance in the country.²⁰ The main functions of office holders in Village Peace and Development Councils, referred to as VTAs/VAs in this study, are management and administration, implementing directives and taking part in community and social affairs. The most commonly mentioned 'desired characteristics/criteria' for VPDC members referenced in the report are ability to devote time to community affairs (65.2%), being educated (47.8%) and being authoritative (47.8%). Having good interpersonal skills, honesty, money, the community's trust and a good ability to reason are considered important.²¹ These findings mirror those outlined in this study. The 'If Given a Chance' report also states that in 13 out of 23 cases surveyed, selection for VPDC positions was by open or secret ballot, in eight cases appointment by the government, in six cases 'nomination' (unclear by whom) and in five cases 'linked to official position'. It provides no further details in this respect. The reliance on ballot voting is not supported by the findings of this study and may owe to the common occurrence of core leaders seeking nominal approval at village mass meetings for the person they have pre-selected. An important finding of 'If Given a Chance', which is of relevance to this study and future programming, is that 56% of the local institutions surveyed, of which almost half were village development committees, livelihood support committees and health committees, were initiated by village elders and 38% by village heads. Outside agencies initiated 47% and 18% were initiated by community members.²² The finding that elders and village heads play a proportionally higher role than community members in initiating local institutions, many of which have community development and social welfare functions, underlines the importance of such leaders and the need for external agencies to engage with them for poverty reduction in ways that promote effective, inclusive, participatory and sustainable leadership.

The yearly independent assessment missions, the impact studies of the UNDP HDI and other reports prepared for UNDP to inform programme development include findings that are relevant to and inform the recommendations of this study. While few of them include detail on traditional village institutions and leadership, a number of commonalities are evident:

²⁰ 'If Given the Chance: Women's Participation in Public Life in Myanmar', Oxfam, Action Aid and Care, 2011

²¹ *Ibid.*, p42

²² The total is more than 100% because multiple entities may initiate an institution or CBO, which is the term used in 'If Given a Chance'.

1. Interaction with village leadership: Some UNDP-initiated groups, particularly SRGs, have limited interaction with village leadership and have not empowered institutional leaders to take up village leadership roles outside of their own institutions²³ Poor households and members of women's groups in particular continue to have a limited voice in regard to broader village affairs, despite the existing approach of the programme.²⁴ However, the recent establishment of village development committees has succeeded in increasing the interaction between different institutions and village leadership.²⁵

2. Wealth-ranking and inclusion of richer households: Several reports question the way that the UNDP's wealth-ranking system has been used (i.e. by prioritising interventions targeting the poorest) as an effective approach to enhancing social capital and improving livelihoods. While homogeneity (as in SRGs) may enhance solidarity and trust in local institutions, which is necessary for the success of revolving fund schemes for example, it may also be detrimental to the formation of social capital because it segments the population and has failed to result in improvements to the position of marginalised groups in the community.^{26,27} The inclusion of wealthier households in externally-facilitated institutions may allow poorer ones to link more closely with them and benefit from their better access to market opportunities and technologies, willingness to adopt innovations and access to state institutions and market actors.²⁸

3. Women and leadership: Several studies highlight that UNDP interventions such as SRGs empower women to take up leadership roles within institutions, improve their status within the household and immediate environment, and encourage greater confidence and self-esteem. However, such interventions have failed to improve their presence at the village leadership level or within wider community development.^{29,30,31} This may be due to that the SRGs have focused on economic empowerment rather than empowerment to lead village-wide development affairs. The UNDP Gender Assessment Report does not report increased participation of women in village and village tract level meetings that are dominated by men traditionally. If the definition of empowerment is accepted as "capacity to influence decision making and to control resources" then these findings question the extent to which UNDP interventions are successful.³² It suggests that other barriers to women leaderships must also be addressed (such as for example stereotypes limiting what roles women are seen as capable of)

4. Limited engagement with township authorities: The cautious interpretation of UNDP's restricted mandate has resulted in limited engagement with township departments and authorities. This undermines a more lasting impact of interventions.^{33,34} Several studies have recommended that UNDP engage more actively with local government authorities both directly and through the establishment of multi-tier institutions at the village and village tract levels that can undertake advocacy activities on behalf of members and interact with the government, market and civil society. This would result in economic and social capital benefits such as increased resources, better linkages, improved capacity for planning, visibility and enhanced support for the poorest. Multi-tier institutions also provide access to higher-level leadership positions for community members.³⁵ The new and broadened mandate of UNDP allows plenty of scope for such interventions.

²³ 'Strategy for Community Processes of Social Capital Building For the New Programme Formulation', Shoaib Sultan, Khan Khaleel, Ahmed Tetlay, Yangon, Myanmar, 2011.

See also 'Study of Social Capital Formation In the HDI Programme', Jens Sjørnslev, 2012 (forthcoming)

²⁴ Op. Cit., 'Strategy for Community Processes' 2011, p8

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. p10-11

²⁷ Op. Cit., 'Study of Social Capital Formation In the HDI Programme', 2012

²⁸ Op. Cit., 'Formulation of a Strategic Framework for the Livelihoods Component of the UNDP Programme' 2011

²⁹ Op. Cit., 'Strategy for Community Processes' 2011

³⁰ A hen is crowing: A Gender Impact Study of Two UNDP Myanmar Community Development Programs (2006) and UNDP Gender Assessment Report, GDI (2011).

³¹ Op. Cit., 'Formulation of a Strategic Framework for the Livelihoods Component of the UNDP Programme' 2011

³² Ibid.

³³ 'Report Of The Independent Assessment Mission 2010 on the Human Development Initiative', Lars Birgegaard, Glen Swanson, Dulan De Silva, 2010

³⁴ Op. Cit., 'Formulation of a Strategic Framework for the Livelihoods Component of the UNDP Programme' 2011

³⁵ Op. Cit., 'Strategy for Community Processes' 2011

5. Rights-based approach and empowerment: The HDI programme uses a needs-based rather than a rights-based approach to community development. As outlined in the report 'The Consultant mission for programme formulation – HRBA',³⁶ UNDP-HDI does not assess the capacity of rights-holders to claim their rights and of duty-bearers to fulfil their obligations, and it does not develop strategies to develop these. Nonetheless, it does apply other elements of good programming practices that are considered essential to a human rights based approach (HRBA). This report and several others recommend that UNDP review how aspects of HRBA could be adopted, particularly now that political reforms in the country have provided a space to develop new approaches.^{37,38} HRBA is relevant to the empowerment of individuals and their engagement with existing power structures. Strengthening the capacity of rights-holders to claim rights, services and entitlements enables them to engage more effectively with duty-bearers and to improve their livelihoods through increased service provision and collective bargaining power. Rights-based approaches aimed at empowering rights-holders (such as poor households or women) to engage with duty-bearers (such as male village leaders or township authorities) are relevant to the findings of this study insofar as a mainly needs-based focus is unlikely to impact effectively on the power structures that dominate relationships between individuals and institutions at this level of Myanmar society. Furthermore, building the capacities of duty-bearers, particularly core village leaders such as VTAs/VAs and township authorities, is required if they are to meet their obligations such as delivering services, upholding the basic rights of citizens; as well as promoting more responsive, accountable, and inclusive decision making, etc. This would affect how local institutions relate to village leadership and how village leadership and village institutions engage with township authorities.

6. Local governance: The 2008 Myanmar constitution is the basis for a more decentralised governance structure and the reform process launched by the new government in 2011 recognises good governance, poverty alleviation, anti-corruption, economic development, reconciliation with ethnic groups and greater engagement with the international community as priority issues. A new law governing ward and village tract administration has also been approved. As such UNDP and other development agencies have a unique opportunity to contribute to systematic and strategic improvements to local governance at all levels.

³⁶ Consultant Mission for Programme Formulation – HRBA, David Karlsson, 2011

³⁷ Op. Cit., 'Report Of The Independent Assessment Mission 2010 on the Human Development Initiative', 2010

³⁸ 'The Independent Assessment Mission Of The Human Development Initiative Myanmar Covering The Period June 2010 To May 2011', Glen Swanson, Liz Kiff, Abhijit Bhattacharjee, 2011

8. Recommendations

Detailed consideration of local governance is new territory for many development agencies working in Myanmar where interventions have been village-based and focused on improving health, education and livelihoods. Good governance is only now moving towards the forefront of the development agenda for many agencies in the country. At the same time many are still cautious of promoting an overtly human rights-based approach (HRBA) due to concern that this could be perceived as too confrontational to the government and ultimately detrimental to the operational space. Interest is growing but few agencies are working directly with local authorities to strengthen capacity and bring about a shift towards a more people-centred perspective. While there is growing interest in empowering communities to claim access to services, entitlements and rights (i.e. adapting and mainstreaming the principles of HRBA into the local context) a comprehensive programme for capacity-building of village, village tract and township administrative leaders is yet to be initiated. Furthermore, most programme interventions at the village-level focus on establishing new institutions rather than supporting and strengthening existing traditional institutions. Barriers to participation in public life for women and the poor are yet to be broken down. However, many organisations are already working closely with local institutions and leaders to improve livelihoods in communities. Such efforts are the foundation for exploring new entry points to local governance work. A changing governance context and an expanded mandate for the UNDP call for steps to adapt existing programmes to match new realities.

Based on the findings of this study and the opportunities that are present, this study recommends the following to development agencies in general and to UNDP in particular:

1. **Analyse the dynamics and capacities of existing village institutions and leaders before implementing village development activities.** Explore how existing local institutions in specific localities could best be supported for sustainable pro-poor development. Identify capacities of existing and potential leaders including how these can be utilized for the benefit of poor and marginalised household - and adapted into programme design and interventions.
2. **Promote models for village development planning, which go beyond segmented initiatives** (confined to a small segment of the village population) and/or links sub-groups to broad-based village-wide participation. These should focus on inclusion, promoting linkages between groups, expanding the existing traditional means of 'social protection' and utilize the different resources held by households for common interests and the benefit of the poor. While village development committees have demonstrated a role in providing linkages between institutions, they should be assisted in working towards village development generally, ensuring that they are not limited to coordinating agency/UNDP-facilitated activities only.
3. **Continue to implement plans for multi-tier institutions that bring village institutions from several villages together and consider expanding these to the township level.** The clusters should be formed largely at the village tract level but be flexible enough to allow for instances where villages have closer relationships with neighbouring or other villages that are not part of the village tract. Consider how these institutions can relate effectively to government administrative leaders/institutions, create communication channels between communities and authorities in relation to development priorities - and be a mechanism for participatory development planning and/or budgeting between communities and local authorities.
4. **Adopt a programme model that mainstreams rights-based approaches relevant to the local context** in ways that empower households, village institutions and their leaders to engage directly and systematically with duty-bearers at the village, village tract and township levels with a view to accessing services and claiming rights and entitlements. This could be achieved in a non-confrontational way to improve livelihoods through the mobilisation of resources from external stakeholders. It could also further develop relationships between village institutions and township authorities. Such an approach

should have a strong empowerment component and be based on collective community mobilisation. This would require a flexible, responsive and empowering institutional attitude within UNDP and other development agencies and a focus on impact rather than activities.

5. **Develop and expand leadership and management training and support for existing leaders of village institutions, particularly VTAs/VAs. Support the emergence of new leaders, particularly women, poor and youth** through a focused and targeted approach that builds their capacities and acceptance within the community for their leadership ability. The aim of both interventions is to improve participatory and inclusive leadership with a view to strengthening the potential for local institutions to work effectively and sustainably to improve livelihoods and access to basic services, rights and entitlements.
6. **Consider developing a capacity-building programme for local administrative leaders across the country in cooperation with the government.** This should be obligatory for all newly-appointed local administrators and would include modules on management, leadership, participation, inclusion, and representation. This could also provide an important entry point into the promotion of more democratic and inclusive decision-making processes. In addition, VTA and VA positions should be salaried by the government to allow for genuine participation of qualified, poorer candidates in such positions.
7. **Continue to explore means of empowering women generally, and SRG groups specifically, to take greater part in village level decision-making and initiate village development activities together with other segments of the community in ways that benefit the wider community** (and thereby demonstrate the competencies of SRG members to leaders and other households). Combine this with sensitisation to gender stereotypes. This would demonstrate to the members and institutions the role that women and the poor can play in improving their own livelihoods and contributing to overall village development.
8. **Develop performance indicators for the existing monitoring and evaluation framework that specifically monitor participation, mobilisation, leadership, empowerment and access to services and measure improvements in these areas.** Ensure that lessons learned are captured to inform future programming.
9. **Undertake studies on the barriers that constrain township service authorities and service providers to engage meaningfully with communities.** Develop and implement pilot interventions to address the issues identified.

Annex A: Terms of Reference



UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME TERMS OF REFERENCE

I. Position Information

Assignment: **Consultancy on analysis of village institutions for project formulation of community level components**

Sector of assignment: Community Development

Location (city): Yangon, Myanmar

Period of assignment: To start end October 2011.

Type of contract: IC contract

Supervision: The consultant will be working under the overall guidance of the UNDP Deputy Resident Representative and in close collaboration with the UNDP Programme Strategy and Design Unit, and UNDP HDI projects on community development

II. Background/ context

UNDP HDI

Since 1994, UNDP has been working in Myanmar under a special Executive Board mandate that requires UNDP assistance to have grassroots level impact. UNDP has implemented three phases of the Human Development Initiative (HDI) programme, with its currently fourth phase, foreseen to be ending in December 2012. The HDI-IV comprises two integrated community development projects working country wide in 50 Townships, a microfinance project and an HIV/AIDS project. A fifth project, the Integrated Household Living Conditions Assessment, focuses on nationwide poverty data collection and is the only non-community based project. The overall 2011 budget of the HDI initiative is roughly 30 million USD.

The pattern and duration of HDI (ICDP/CDRT/MF) support have made the HDI programme a significant development intermediary in the HDI villages. The programme currently covers nine out of 14 states and regions. This entails coverage of over 60 townships (or 18 % of all Myanmar townships) and 8,755 villages (or 14% of all Myanmar villages). In a township the programme on average covers 75 % of all villages.

Despite covering various agro-ecological zones, ethnicities and cultures, interventions and activities have been roughly the same across various regions. The programme has employed a combination of interventions for productive asset creation, including provision of direct inputs, training and technologies dissemination. The modality to deliver support has been to provide small capital grants to community groups (SRGs and CBOs), who together with member savings and other funds mobilized by the groups operate a revolving fund mechanism benefiting the group members. A wealth ranking methodology has helped the HDI projects to identify the

h.s. Ruler
7 Oct 2011

households falling within the categories of “poor”, “very poor” and “poorest” to target for their livelihoods improvement.

New programme

Assessments, including the 2010 Independent Assessment Mission, have addressed concerns over the effectiveness of the current strategic framework for the grassroots interventions. Therefore at the Board meeting in September 2010, the Executive Board recommended “that UNDP initiate, as soon as possible, within the full potential of the existing mandate, the design of programming activities from 2012 onwards”, taking into account the recommendations of the independent assessment mission”.

Accordingly, UNDP Myanmar has initiated the process of formulating a new, post-2012 programme. Pursuant to this, the Country Office is seeking expert advice in regard to best practices, strategies and options for interventions. The overall structure of the new programme will be designed by a UNDP Headquarter formulation mission in November.

The Nargis Tripartite Core Group Social Impacts Monitoring studies and a recent study (What Lies Beneath: An operational Analysis on Leadership and Institutions at the Local Level in Myanmar, June 2011) has a number of findings with implications for project formulation that is to follow the overall programme formulation. Structures and relationships related to local formal and informal leadership, local institutions and their engagement with households will clearly impact any intervention/ activity at the village level. More specifically the finding that externally supported community based organizations have had little effect on expanding the pool of effective leadership has implications for the HDI. Another finding is that such externally facilitated groups have a small chance of long-term sustainability, unless engaging with the core village leadership (both formal and informal). This study however only examines leadership and village institutions in the Ayeyarwady and the Dry zone and other areas may portray different dynamics.

This consultancy is one of those to be fielded by the country office **to inform detailed project formulation of the programme components relating to community level work.**

1. A study of village level institutions and leadership should be conducted in 4 townships (Falam in Chin, Naung Cho in Shan, Kyaikhto in Mon state and Mrauk Oo in Rakhine) for a total of 16 villages, whereof 12 HDI villages. The non-HDI villages should preferably have presence of other development actors. This would help validate the relevance of the What Lies Beneath Study also for other regions and local conditions, as well as explore further some of the issues raised.

III. Scope of work and Deliverables

Scope of work

The consultancy firm will have the following duties and responsibilities in close cooperation and with concurrence from the Policy, Strategy and Design unit (PSDP), Programme and Projects:

Village level institutions and leadership study

1. Review various reference material, including
 - Findings and methodology of the What Lies Beneath Study
 - Findings of other relevant studies in Myanmar and South East Asia on externally facilitated groups, village level institutions and leadership.
 - Strategic framework for the new programme/ draft programme document

2. Propose a methodology and conceptual framework for the study. The methodology

should help answer the following research questions;

-Do the findings from the relevant reference materials with regards to externally facilitated groups hold also for villages in other regions, and for HDI villages? In what formal and informal ways do externally facilitated groups relate to the leadership structures?

-Assess the relevance of the reference materials on externally facilitated groups for the different HDI groups (CBOs, SRGs in ICDP, SRGs in CDRT).

- Do villages in other regions display additional/ different structures and relationships for Leadership and local institutions? If so, what are those and possible implications for the new programme?

-To what extent do the formal village administration see themselves as representatives of the township authorities and/or to what extent as representative of households' interests? How do they manage their (dual?) role?

-In what ways, and to what extent, do households see (a) the formal village leadership and (b) the informal leadership as representatives of the township authorities and/or to what extent as representative of households' interests?

3. Undertake field research. Train, instruct and supervise those undertaking field research. If necessary, undertake field visits to ensure quality of research.
4. Follow up with UNDP field staff to verify and expand on information provided from the research.
5. Analyze data collected and write up of report on village institutions and leadership. Make clear the methodology used for possible replication. The report should provide a conceptual framework and put forward relevant potential models on how the new programme and new projects should relate to traditional formal and informal power structures within the full potential of the mandate. The report should also give recommendations on how UNDP can withdraw from structures that offer less impact.

Timing and duration

The study is planned to be undertaken starting end October 2011 in Myanmar. Proposal for duration of the assignment should be part of the proposed methodology by the consultant.

Outputs and deliverables

- A. Proposal of an assessment methodology for village institutions and leadership study for presentation and feed-back from UNDP staff. The methodology should allow for comparison with What Lies Beneath study and ensure research questions are answered.
- B. Report on village institutions and leadership, including recommendations in terms of project formulation in terms of working with village institutions and leadership

V. Terms of payment

UNDP will only contract the consultant and will not make any contractual arrangements with a field research team.

- 1st payment:** 30% upon completion of output A.
2nd payment: 70 % upon completion of output B.

VII. Recruitment Qualifications

Education:	Advanced university degree in economics, social sciences, development studies or related field.
Experience:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At least 7-10 years of international working experience within the area of rural poverty alleviation and /or local governance,• Previous experience in conceptualizing and undertaking local level mapping and local level governance analysis.• Previous working experience and track record of applied gender analysis is an advantage.• Previous working experience in Myanmar is an advantage• Strong writing and analytical skills• Proven ability to work and function in complex and sensitive development environments
Language Requirements:	Fluency in English language, knowledge of Burmese desirable.

Annex B: Overview Matrix of Detailed Research Questions

Research question as per ToR	Modified research questions for methodology	Detailed research question
<p>- Do the findings with regards to externally facilitated groups hold also for villages in other regions, and for HDI villages? In what formal and informal ways do externally facilitated groups relate to leadership structures</p> <p>- Assess the relevance of the reference materials on externally facilitated groups for the different HDI groups (CBOs, SRGs in ICDP, SRGs in CDRT)</p> <p>- Do villages in other regions display additional/different structures and relationships for leadership and local institutions? If so, what are those and possible implications for the new programme</p>	<p>1. What are the structures and relationships of local institutions (LIs) and leadership in the villages in the selected area?</p> <p>1.2. How are these different/similar to the findings in reference material?</p>	<p><u>A. Local level institutions:</u></p> <p>a.1. What types of local institutions exist?</p> <p>a.2. What are their purpose and activities?</p> <p>a.3. How have they been established (externally-facilitated or not, by whom?)</p> <p>a.4. How are they organized/managed/structured (formal/informal)?</p> <p>a.5. Who are their members?</p> <p>a.6. What are the incentives of members to participate?</p> <p>a.7. How do they relate to non-members?</p> <p>a.8. How do the local institutions engage with each other?</p> <p>a.9. How has the above changed over time?</p> <p><u>B. Leaders:</u></p> <p>b.1. What types of leaders exist (formal/informal)?</p> <p>b.2. What are the different role/functions of the leaders?</p> <p>b.3. Who are the most important (core, secondary, tertiary) leaders?</p> <p>b.4. What are seen as the qualities of a 'good'/'bad' leader?</p> <p>b.5. How do leaders manage their leadership role i.e. what style of leadership/management do they display?</p> <p>b.6. What different forms of power/authority do they hold?</p> <p>b.7. Who is their constituency and what is their source of power/authority?</p> <p>b.8. How are the leaders selected/changed?</p> <p>b.9. What are their reasons (incentives) to become/stay/stop being leaders?</p> <p>b.10. How has (all of the above) changed over time?</p> <p>b.11. In what ways can accountable, participatory and inclusive leadership and village administration be improved?</p> <p><u>C. Analyse the above findings in comparison with the findings of WLB and other reference material.</u></p>
	<p>2. In what formal and informal ways do a) local institutions and b) specifically externally facilitated groups (EFGs) relate to village leadership structures?</p> <p>2.2. How are these different/similar to the</p>	<p><u>D: Relations between local level institutions (specifically EFGs) and formal/informal village leadership³⁹:</u></p> <p>d.1. Why and on what issues do a) local institutions; and b) specifically EFGs engage with other formal informal and leaders?</p> <p>d.2. In what ways to they relate to/engage with different leaders?</p> <p>d.3. What is the outcome of these</p>

³⁹ Formal village leadership is defined as the official government-appointed leadership. Informal village leadership is defined as other leaders as viewed by the village community i.e. leaders of local institutions/groups.

	<p>findings in reference material?</p>	<p>engagements/relations? d.3. What strategies/areas are particularly successful and which are not? d.4. What is the influence/participation of local level institutions and EFGs in/on formal and informal leadership structures? d.5. What is the influence/participation of formal and informal leadership structures in/on local level institutions and EFGs? d.6. What (if any) are the main differences between how externally facilitated groups vs. other local institutions relate to formal and informal village leadership structures? d.7. How has (all of) the above changed over time? d.8. How can the influence/participation of local level institutions and EFGs in/on formal and informal leadership structures be strengthened including how can leadership be more representative of under-represented groups? <u>E: Analyse the above findings in comparison with the findings of WLB and other reference material.</u></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To what extent do the formal village administration see themselves as representatives of the township authorities and/or to what extent as representative of households' interests? How do they manage their (dual?) role? - In what ways and to what extent do households see as a) the formal village leaderships, and b) the informal as representatives of the township authorities and/or to what extent as representative of households' interests? 	<p>3. To what extent and in what ways do formal village administration function as representatives of the township authorities and/or as representative of households' interests?</p> <p>3.1. How do formal village administrators view this?</p> <p>3.2. How do informal leaders view this?</p> <p>3.2. How do households view this?</p>	<p><u>F: Representation and engagements with outside stakeholders, particularly government authorities: (See also B for representation/participation)</u> f.1. In what ways, with what entities and in relation to what issues do the formal village administrators engage with external actors including government authorities? f.2. In what ways, with what entities and in relation to what issues do local institutions and informal leaders engage with external actors including government authorities? f.3. In what ways do the formal village administrators implement government directives/instructions at the village level? f.4. In what ways do they mediate between the demands of the state and the interests/needs of particularly poorer households? f.5. To what extent do village administrators play a role in accessing rights/ entitlements/basic services for different types of households? f.6. To what extent do village administrators, informal leaders and households view village administrators as representatives of the interests of a) government, b) wider village community, c) themselves/own family, d) specific sections of the village community/households others, e) others. f.7. How has (all of) the above changed over time? f.8. In what ways can the capacity of village institutions including (formal and informal) leaders be strengthened (empowered) to engage effectively with external stakeholders on behalf of/in the interest of/with households to improve livelihoods and increase access to services/entitlement/rights? <u>G: Analyse the above findings in comparison with the findings of WLB and other reference material.</u></p>

<p>-Analysis to also include:</p> <p>Conceptual framework and relevant potential models on how should the new programme and new projects should relate to traditional formal and informal power structures? Recommendations on how UNDP can withdraw from structures that offer less impact.</p>	<p>4. What are the possible implications of the above findings for the new programme/projects?</p> <p>4.1. How should the new programme/projects relate to traditional formal and informal power structures?</p> <p>4.2. Recommendations on how UNDP can transition from/adapt structures that offer less impact.</p>	<p>H: What are the overall implications for new programme/project design and implementation?</p> <p>I: What are the detailed implications for new programme/project design and implementation?</p> <p>J: Describe analytical framework and models for how programme/projects can better relate to power structures (including decision making, participation, responsiveness, accountability, transparency, mobilization, organization, accessing services)?</p> <p>K: Recommendations on which and how UNDP can transition from/adapt structures that offer less impact.</p>
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