

What Lies Beneath:

An Operational Analysis on  
Leadership and Institutions at the  
Local Level in Myanmar

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## Glossary

EAG:	Economic Activity Group
MCC:	Maternal Child Care
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organization
PDC:	Peace and Development Council
SPDC:	State Peace and Development Council
SPIG:	Single Purpose Interest Groups
TCG:	Tripartite Core Group
USDA/P:	Union Solidarity Development Association/Party
VERP:	Village Elders and Respected Persons
VPDC:	Village Peace and Development Council
WAC:	Women's Affairs Committee
WATSAN:	Water and Sanitation Committee

## Summary

**Overview:** This analysis of village level institutions in two regions<sup>1</sup> of Myanmar is based on a sample of twenty villages. Qualitative methods were used to identify different institutions at the village level, their role and prevalence, and the interaction with local leadership, power and accountability. The study provides one of the first recent accounts of local institutions in the country, and provides insights that can: a) inform the design of community level development programs and; b) provide a basis for further analysis on institutional changes and regional variations.

**Methods:** Teams of four researchers spent between three and four days in each village. The teams used social mapping techniques to identify key socio-economic groups and carried out research using a mixed methodology mostly through focus groups and key informants interviews. The main tools used were an institutional matrix, reputational sampling of leaders, and case history analysis. One of the objectives of this project was to develop methods that were effective in the specific context. The main areas of innovation and adaptation were in the areas of clustering institutions and the creation of typologies of leaders.

**What is defined as the local space?** The Peace and Development Council (PDC) is the main unit of administration in rural Myanmar. The PDC extends down to the village tract level and consists of villagers who have been nominated or selected by the township authorities. Village tracts commonly include six to eight villages, and for most ordinary people, the village is the most important unit of social organization. This is evident in the significant differences between villages on the same tract, in terms of capacity, cohesion and institutions. Hence, the village is defined as the basic unit for analysis of the local space.

**What institutions exist in the local space?** It is common to find eight or more institutions in a village, and these fall into five main categories: a) formal village administration, b) informal leaders, c) state supported interest groups, d) development related committees, e) social and religious groups, and f) economic groups. There are close links between the formal leaders (linked to the Village Peace and Development Council, or VPDC) and the informal leaders or 'elders'. The influence of the 'elders' is widely recognized though not formally defined. In most villages a 'core group' of leaders exist, who are the most important formal or informal leaders. This core group plays an important role in resolving conflict, managing relationships with the administration, and managing community development funds.

The effectiveness of other institutions in the village is dependent on the involvement of this core group of village leaders. The core group also plays a vital role in enacting state policies, and is often required to contribute financially to the range of state supported interest groups (including fire brigade, red cross and women's development groups). Moreover, the core group plays a central role in 'activating' development committees formed by external aid providers. The wider group of elders plays an important role in social and religious affairs but is normally removed from village affairs. Livelihood groups are few, and tend to be formed by laborers and hence rarely have the active involvement of key village leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> The study draws on data collected in the Delta and the 'Dry Zone' regions of the country.

**Who are the leaders?** The main leaders in the village are invariably the 'better off' farmers and there is a strong influence of family control that can extend over generations. Formal leaders are nominated by the township authorities with varying degrees of consultation with the villages. The informal leaders act as advisers to the formal leaders and often include former members of the formal administration. 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. There is some evidence of new leaders emerging, especially in areas where non-governmental organizations are active but it is rare to find that these leaders act independently from the core village leadership.

There is a high level of expectation placed on the core leaders in the village, and this increases considerably in areas where aid providers were active (notably in the Delta Region). Several case studies showed that leaders often support the community directly through their own funds. The degree of responsibility placed on leaders is an extension of the traditional role of the "benevolent" landowner who supports a broad range of social and religious activities in the village.

**Forms of accountability:** Formal accountability systems are underpinned by strong social accountability. In some cases, local demands are successful in petitioning the township administration to remove unpopular leaders. Cases of corruption are normally dealt with internally, usually through the informal elders stepping in to put pressure on the formal leaders. Many villages have highly evolved systems of dispute resolution or methods to deal with social issues or petty crime. However, the capacity of informal systems of accountability is weakest where there are divisions or factions between core leaders. It was also found that the demands of dealing with multiple external aid providers tends to put additional pressure on accountability systems and rarely results in greater transparency.

**Regional variations:** Under the current system, there are common characteristics of village institutions largely due to the importance of the formal village administration, which is present in every village. Variations are found in the degree of 'formalization' of the system of elders, level of external (NGO) involvement, and social organization. Ethnic and religious differences were also found to be important, notably in the active development role of church based groups in Christian areas. On-going institutional changes (notably changes to the Peace and Development Council) are expected to have important implications for the patterns of leadership and institutions.

**Implications for development programs:** This preliminary analysis of local institutions provides several implications for the design and implementation of programs at the village level. These include:

- *There is a sophisticated set of institutions and active leadership at the local level that external agencies need to understand and engage with to be effective. Despite being nominated by the township authorities, the formal leadership is responsive to the community and the informal involvement of elders in village governance further supports this. The core leaders naturally tend to play a role in 'activating' any community development initiatives, and there is cause to support this engagement as part of project design.*

- *The capacity of local leadership is limited.* Village leaders play a wide range of roles, including personally supporting development initiatives. Adding new responsibilities and managing multiple aid providers can negatively impact their effectiveness.
- *Existing forms of informal accountability merit strengthening.* Accountability does exist, the most important being the checks and balance between the formal and informal village leaders.
- *There are important regional and local differences* that affect development outcomes and community capacity, and that aid providers need to be cognizant of. The findings of this analysis are not generalizable. There is a need to conduct this type of analysis of basic institutional structures in other areas of the country to inform institution-building strategies.
- *There is a need for innovative approaches to strengthen the voice of the poor.* The poor are represented by the elites in the village, but developing their collective capacity may require approaches to strengthen economic or common interest associations between villages as a means to ensure the capacity to influence local decisions benefiting the poor.

## Introduction

Local institutions are important, especially for the poor whose first and most important encounter with the state takes place at the local level. Institutions and actors at the supra-local level influence local institutions. Yet in many ways, local institutions function according to rules that cannot be understood without travelling down to the periphery and re-examining state and society from the perspective of villagers. This paper presents an account of institutions at the village level in rural Myanmar that aims to achieve two objectives. The first is to provide guidance to inform the design of local development programs in ways that are responsive to the prevailing institutions and relations that make up the local space. The second is to test a range of tools and techniques for institutional analysis.

The attention on the large-scale institutions and the important actors in the country has tended to overshadow questions about the everyday interactions with institutions at the local level experienced by ordinary citizens. This study aims to shed some light on the largely unknown field of this interface at the local level. In attempting to do so, there are at least three hypotheses that are suggested by the broader literature.

The study tests three hypothesis of the local state. The first hypothesis essentially transplants the big picture of the state into the local context and ascribes a high degree of capacity to the state in terms of influencing local relations. The second hypothesis is that the periphery of the state functions according to rules that are not dictated purely by the state, but rather by local society. The third hypothesis views the local state as an arena in which alternatives emerge that are autonomous from the state.

Little is known about the patterns of social organization that exist beyond the state, especially at the local level. Some research (Local Resource Center 2009<sup>2</sup> and Tripartite Core Group [TCG] 2010<sup>3</sup>) indicates that local elites tend to determine the effectiveness of community institutions. Hence, while there is cause to suggest that local institutions are shaped by actors and institutions that maintain some degree of autonomy of the state, this needs to be supported by an in-depth analysis of the forces that guide the decision of these actors.

The first part of the paper presents an analysis of the local space and the key institutions that are commonly found. The second part examines the local leadership and the third explores the implication of this analysis for development practitioners.

## Methodology

The approach taken aims to build a holistic understanding of local institutions and the need to evolve frameworks of analysis by identifying the underlying forces that shape the patterns of interaction within and between institutions in the local space. The approach aims to look beyond *de jure* classifications like formal and informal institutions and focuses instead on identifying the *de facto* forms that institutions take in specific contexts. It also recognizes the

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<sup>2</sup> Local Resource Center. 2009. Study Report on Committee: Effective Community-Based Responses to Cyclone Nargis. Yangon.

<sup>3</sup> Tripartite Core Group. 2010. Post-Nargis Social Impacts Assessment. Yangon.

challenges of generalizing findings through intensive local research, and instead aims to constantly test and develop assumptions.

The key starting point in this process is the definition and analysis of the local space, and the various types of institutions that are found to be common across selected localities. Given the limited degree of existing knowledge in Myanmar, the work on understanding the local space offers some new and important perspectives, which are discussed in Part 1 of this paper. Based on the analysis of the local space, the approach aims to deepen these insights through more focused analysis of leadership, and the external forces that give rise to variations between localities (Part 2).

This research was carried out between March and October 2010 in 10 villages each in the Delta and the Dry Zone. Using an institutional matrix, basic information on all formal and informal institutions at the village level was recorded; whether they were functional, when they were established and how they were constituted. Leaders were then identified based on a reputational sampling approach, to ensure that perspectives of different groups in the village were reflected before about four leaders per village were selected who were prominent and represented a diversity of leadership types. The following discussion focuses on a selection of trends that might have wider relevance, and on the identification of patterns that can help interpret local variations. It is important to stress that the analysis in this report cannot be generalized since the selected villages are not representative of the geographical areas in which research was undertaken. Rather, the purpose of this analysis is to set out these assumptions in a way that can be further tested and discussed.



## Part 1: Making Sense of the Local Space

### Overview

A wide array of institutions can be found at the village level in Myanmar. It is common to find eight or more different committees or groups in these relatively small localities. Non-governmental assistance has played a role in increasing the number of associations. However, the majority of these committees were the outcome of the reorganization of key state institutions in the early 1990s<sup>4</sup>. In this section we attempt to make sense of this array of different institutions by defining the main typologies, or institutional domains, and their relationships.

At the outset, it is important to present the basic framework around which the following discussion is structured. The first aspect of this is the definition of the 'local space', which we find to be synonymous with the widely held concept of the village. In the areas where this research was carried out, villages tended to be small, and rarely contain more than two hundred households<sup>5</sup>. In some cases a 'village' included two or more hamlets or neighborhoods, though it was generally understood that these belong to the same village. Villages are also recognized as administrative units under the local 'village tract' and we found no cases where the social and administrative identity was contested.

Within the village, there were important differences between institutions. Unsurprising, the relationship to the state was found to be one important factor that differentiates institutions. At the one extreme, the village administration was found to be the most important direct link to the state, though an array of other institutions formed under state agencies were also common. At the other extreme, social and religious organizations and other traditional institutions were found to function with minimal or no involvement of the state.

Proximity to the state was not found to be an indicator of participation or effectiveness of institutions. Instead, the 'importance' of an institution was dependent on the extent to which it was considered as being a village level institution, or included the key decision makers in the village.

Taking these two characteristics as a starting point it was found that there are three major categories of institutions in most villages: village administration, single purpose groups and traditional organizations. With each category a number of important sub-categories can be identified. The following section discusses the main types of institutions under each of these categories, which provides the basis of the framework of local institutions, which is discussed in Section 1.4.

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<sup>4</sup> Even in the Delta, where the influence of non-governmental assistance is high less than 20 percent of local committees were formed for the first time since cyclone Nargis, and over 40 percent have been formed between 1988 and 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The average population of the 10 sample villages in the Dry Zone was 505, or 114 households. Delta villages tended to be bigger, averaging 890, or 214 households.

## 1.1 Village Administration

Arguably the most important defining feature of the local governance context in Myanmar is the existence of two distinct institutions that together form the village administration. The first is the Village Peace and Development Committee (VPDC), locally known as the *Ya Ya Ka*. The second is the set of formal recognized elders in the village, locally known as the *Na Ya Ka*, which we refer to here as Village Elders and Respected Persons (VERPs). Though both of these committees are formally recognized, both locally and in the eyes of the administration, there is little in the way of formal guidelines. Hence, an attempt is made here to piece together a working definition of the structure based solely on observations from the field.

### 1.1.1 Village Peace and Development Committee

The VPDC is the only formal institution that is found in every village. As part of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) that was established in 1993, the VPDC is also the lowest tier of administration. The VPDC is responsible for a wide range of administrative activities and for implementing orders passed down from the township administration. It is clustered around the village tract. Some tracts are 'single village tracts' and some contain as many of 6 villages. This makes the task of defining the VPDC structure from the village level somewhat complex, and introduces the important distinction between 'tract' and 'non-tract' village<sup>6</sup>.

At the village level, the VPDC includes three main types of position holders, 10 household leaders, 100 household leaders and the tract level representatives, namely the president and 'member one'<sup>7</sup>. All of these VPDC members are commonly known as *Ya Ya Ka* as they are all part of the official administration. There are however important differences in status between these formal leaders. Ten household leaders are recognized but have relatively limited standing within the village, and their role is limited to participating in village meetings. The importance of the 100 household leaders varies according to their number in the village, which generally ranges from one to three, and whether the village is home to member one or the tract president. There is no official concept of the village head or leader. Usually, however, one person emerges as the *de facto* leader in the village from among the 100 household leaders in cases where the village has neither a president nor a member one.

The rules of selection of VPDC members were not clear. Officially, the township authorities nominate these positions, yet there is cause to suggest that the recommendations of non-officials from the village and tract level are taken into account (see below). There also seems to be a lack of consistency in the rules of selection. In the Dry Zone the official selection process had been changed in 2007 resulting in a complete reselection of village leaders. Under the new system, all villages nominated their proposed candidates for tract president, and the final decision was made at the tract level by the local Brigadier<sup>8</sup>. This does not seem to have been the case in the Delta. Generally, villagers were unaware of any formal 'rules', and a booklet of

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<sup>6</sup> Each tract tends to have a 'tract village' though it is not always the case that the VPDC president lives there.

<sup>7</sup> In the Dry Zone villages, it was reported that the village tract had ranked members from one to three. In the Delta only member one was recognized.

<sup>8</sup> These new procedures indicate a greater role for VERPs than previously. The research team also reports that the selection process is overseen by the military authority, Unions Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) mobilizers from the township, and the police.

guidelines for VPDC discusses only the roles of the leaders but does not specify the method of selection.

The role of the VPDC extends far beyond enacting official township orders (Box 1.1). As the formally recognized village leaders, the senior *Ya Ya Ka* support villagers in various ways: helping them resolve conflicts, mobilizing and managing funds for community development, and mediating between the village and township officials. As we see hereafter, it can be argued that the importance of the VPDC is largely a reflection of the fact that important and powerful social leaders tend to occupy these positions, and that there is a strong interface between the VPDC and embedded local relations and structures more generally.

**Box 1.1: Examples of wider roles of village formal leaders in the Delta**

In addition to acting as the link between the villagers, the township and aid providers, the formal leaders take on a wide range of additional responsibilities to support the village. When asked, village leaders cited the following as some of the examples of activities and achievements over the year:

- Resolving disputes: settling domestic and inter-household disputes, as well as negotiating between occupational groups (farmers and fishermen);
- Supporting livelihoods: supporting farmers to access loans from the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank;
- Reducing conflict between ethnic groups in the village, bringing leaders from various groups into the decision making process;
- Contributing to village development activities by mobilizing contributions from other leaders and, in one case, contributing own land for housing sites;
- Attending trainings given by NGOs, chairing various sub-committees, and supporting other groups (youth, religious, women) in social and development activities;
- Mediating in local justice: intervening to stop the arrest of, or release, farmers who have not paid their paddy quota, and helping township authorities in criminal cases; and
- Organizing community fund raising events, such as setting up a music band to raise funds for community activities.

### 1.1.2 Village Elders and Respected Persons

Another important feature of the governance structure in Myanmar is the degree of formal recognition that is given to the group of elders at the village level. In every village we found a cluster of 3 – 11 elders who were widely recognized as advisers to the VPDC. The leading elders have a similar stature to the leaders from the VPDC. It was common to find that some of the VERPs in a village were formally recognized by the local administration, thus creating a distinction within the VERPs between formal leaders (*Na Ya Ka*) and informal leaders (*Yat Mi Yat Pha*). We also found regional variations, with VERP committees formed at the tract level as well as at the village level in the Dry Zone villages. This was not the case in the Delta. As with the VPDC, the actual rules of formation and their role are far from clear. Yet, there is no reason to question the importance of the VERPs in rural Myanmar.

A group of VERPs is found in nearly every village, though there are some cases where this takes a slightly different form. One important variation in the Delta was that pastors tended to take on the role of the VERP in villages where there is a significant Christian population, which was not true of any other religious leaders. Indeed, most of the villages that did not have a VERP

committee were found to have Christian leaders who acted as an autonomous force in village affairs.

The VERP tends to act as an extension of the formal village administration and enriches the capacity of the latter. The VERP is the only institution in the village that can directly challenge the VPDC. Many of the senior VERPs were previously VPDC members, but no cases were found where someone held both posts at the same time. This underlines the fact that the VERP and the VPDC have mutually enforcing roles, which can support self-regulation as well as enhance capacity (Box 1.2). Yet, with no formal authority, the power of the VERP is ostensibly limited to adviser to the VPDC rather than an alternative. Yet, informally their influence tends to be far greater, and at time overshadows the VPDC.

**Box 1.2: How village leaders solved an aid complaint**

In the early months of 2009, an aid provider planned to construct 22 houses in a certain village. The aid provider determined the criteria for the beneficiary selection and the aid committee, led by the VPDC leader, decided on the actual selection of beneficiaries. However, most of the villagers were not content with the aid committee's decision making, contending that there were people more deserving of the aid than the beneficiaries selected by the committee. Regardless of the villagers' disagreement, the committee submitted their selected beneficiary list to the township level office of an aid provider and that office endorsed it. According to the procedure of the aid provider the preliminary list was put on a notice board for seven days so that any villager could lodge a complaint. Then, one person complained to the aid provider's head office in Yangon. As a result, the township office pressured the aid committee leader (VPDC leader) to solve the problem, and warned that failure to do so would result in all aid being stopped. At this point, the members of the village tract committee requested the village elders to review the beneficiary selection. The elders took off some beneficiaries who were related to some VPDC members and included other more deserving beneficiaries. The villagers accepted the list selected by the elders and the aid was delivered in November 2009. Since then the VPDC members who were formerly actively involved in aid affairs have withdrawn gradually.

The synergistic relationship between the VPDC and the VERP is the most important and complex aspect of village governance in Myanmar. It is nonetheless important to distinguish between formal and effective leadership. Not all VPDC or VERP members are important in village life. Many are fairly nominal and have little interest in their role. Hence, the analysis of village institutions needs to account for the interplay of leadership and institutions and the activation of key institutions by the 'core leaders'. The importance of this group of core leaders forms the basis of the second part of this paper – where the leadership stratum is investigated in more depth. It is also important to highlight the extent to which the VPDC/VERP is dominated by the economically powerful 'elites' in the village, and that at times this group can be an important means to reinforce exclusion of poorer groups in the village (Box 1.3).

**Box 1.3: Deepening dominance through local institutions**

In one village, the local elite established what they called the 'Nine Member Committee' in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis. The committee was composed of selected VERPs and VPDCs, most of whom were large farmers. The leaders had included one so-called labor leader, who was the richest non-land owner in the village, with the purpose of communicating with and controlling the laborers of the village. This man did not dare confront the nine-member committee, and instead always requested the laborers to be 'forgiving'.

In the context of worsening laborer-landowner relations, a woman emerged as the true representative of the laborers of the village. She was also a traditional women’s leader of the village and used to be involved actively in the Women Affairs Committee. Her group attended township level meetings before Nargis. After Nargis, she gained a leading role in the aid committee and villagers have been impressed by her because of her willingness to challenge the VERPs and the tract president.

## 1.2 Single Purpose Interest Groups

Research revealed a large number of ‘single purpose’ interest groups (SPIGs) that were supported by external sources and which, in contrast to the village administration, are limited to a specific set of activities. The high number of interest groups and committees at the village level in Myanmar does not so much imply a richness of institutionalized participation. Rather it is evidence of ineffective efforts to shape social organizations from two distinct sources: the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This section examines these two different aspects of institutional proliferation and their respective weakness.

### 1.2.1 State-Supported Single Purpose Interest Groups

It is not uncommon to find five separate committees in a small village (Table 1.1), which have been established by line departments, in parallel to the SPDC. There is little sign of these committees receiving any significant funding or resources from the government. Indeed, the opposite is often true, and local volunteers are required to raise funds to support activities of the institution.

**Table 1.1: State Fostered Single Purpose Organizations: Types and Frequency**

Name	Delta #/10 villages	Dry Zone #/10 villages
Parent Teacher Association	6	4
Woman’s Affairs Committee (WAC)	5	8
Maternal Child Care (MCC)	5	9
Fire Brigade	4	8
Paramilitary	4	6
Union Solidarity and Development Association/Party	5	9 <sup>1/</sup>

1/ Fieldwork in the Dry Zone was carried out after the USDP had been formally launched, which possibly explains the significant increase in prevalence compared to the Delta.

At the local level, the VPDC president is often given the responsibility of mobilizing committee members. There is an unwritten rule that the Women’s Affairs Committee and the Maternal Child Care committees are headed by the wives of the formal village leaders<sup>9</sup>. Overall, the majority of these committees (approximately 80 percent) were said to be ‘active’ in that they have members and some recognition<sup>10</sup>. This does not imply that they play a major role in village life. Most exist for the purpose of mobilizing villagers for township level functions, or recruiting and funding people to participate in training that is organized by the township authorities.

<sup>9</sup> The understanding is that the wife of the VPDC president heads the WAC, and the wife of the member one heads the MCC, where possible.

<sup>10</sup> Most of these committees were established during the time of the creation of the SPDC.

Evidence of the state permeates all spheres of administration and mobilization. The demands on local leaders to meet the resource requirement of state organizations are equally common for VPDCs as it is for the state-sponsored single purpose groups. The important question that needs to be asked therefore is why the VPDC has managed to retain its position as a socially recognized entity, whereas the formal interest groups discussed here have, at best, a marginal role in village affairs. Before doing so, we need to first consider one particularly important type of single purpose group, the Union Solidarity Development Association/Party (USDA/P).

The USDA/P deserves a special mention as a unique type of organization. The USDA was established in 1990 as a vehicle for social mobilization and transformed into the main government supported political party for the 2010 election. In both forms, the USDA/P has been operating as a state fostered organization, largely for the purpose of mobilizing support and resources for the township and higher-level units.

This research was carried out in the period that preceded the election. Though it was increasingly common to find the USDA/P represented in the village, it tended to take the form of a 'mobilizer' rather than a committee, and its scope of development related activities was limited. As such, there is little evidence that the USDA/P functions differently from other state fostered single purpose organizations. Despite efforts to project the USDA as a social organization, the local units thus have limited traction in everyday village life.

### 1.2.2 (Non-governmental) Village Development Committees

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are now common in the Delta, and parts of the Dry Zone. Relief efforts following cyclone Nargis led to a significant increase in non-governmental activity to support humanitarian relief. NGOs emphasize the mobilization of new local organizations to handle relief and rehabilitation activities. Within this broader category, the mandate of village level development committees (VDC) extends beyond a single project or sector. These VDCs were common in the Delta, where aid providers have established 'aid committees' to oversee aid coordination at the village level. These tended to include members from the VPDC and the VERPs (Box 1.4). Most VDC were promoted by a single aid provider and contributed little to interagency coordination (TCG 2010).

#### **Box 1.4: Regional Differences in Village Development Committees**

The aid committee is formed by NGOs to manage aid delivery and monitor the implementation of project activities in the village. The committee tends to consist of village formal leaders (VPDC leaders) and informal leaders, VERPs and other active persons in the village. In many villages there are more than two aid committees according to the different aid providers. Some of the aid committees are sub-divided into three or four groups according to the different functions, such as livelihood committee, water purifying committee and so on. In cases where multiple aid committees are formed in the same village, the dominant aid committee later takes the role of the village development committee.

An important difference of between village development committees in the Dry Zone and the Delta is the role of women. In the Delta, many women play a leadership role in the aid committee together with informal and formal male leaders. In the Dry Zone, women are involved in the VDC mainly due to the encouragement of the VPDC leaders and the VERPs, at the behest of aid providers. There are active women members in the aid committee. However, they are not in a leading role.

### 1.2.3 Sector Committees

Another type of single purpose group is the externally supported project or ‘sector’ committee. In the Delta, the most common of these are the water and sanitation (WATSAN) committees and to a lesser extent, savings and credit groups. Project committees for roads construction were also encountered but generally had a more limited lifespan. These project committees were found in roughly half the Delta villages two years after the cyclone.

The critical difference between the VDCs and the sector or project committees lies in the proximity to the core leadership. In general terms, the level of involvement of the formal leaders determined the importance of a committee. While core leaders were usually consulted in the selection of VDC committee heads, their involvement in the sectoral or project committees tended to be very limited. Moreover, the selection of a lesser leader as head of an externally supported committee did not elevate the status of this leader. Thus, whilst new leaders emerged to play an active role in these committees after Nargis, this did not earn them a more prominent place in village affairs. One important implication of this is that externally supported community based organizations have little effect on expanding the pool of effective leadership in rural areas. As we see below, understanding this demands further analysis of the nature of the core leadership.

## 1.3 Traditional Associations

The third main category of institutions is more difficult to define, as their distinctiveness owes less to integral characteristics than other village organizations. They are not traditional in the purest sense; they do nonetheless share a commonality in that their existence is not dependent on external support. Most of the specific institutions discussed in this section are linked to broader social or economic patterns, yet their involvement in village affairs tends to be limited. As these associations are best defined in relation to other categories, it is important to stress that the specific characteristics of these groups need to be assessed over time.

### 1.3.1 Socio-religious Groups

Socio-religious groups (SRGs) are common across Buddhist areas of Myanmar, in the form of Board of Trustees for temples. In the Delta, these committees were only recognized in 12 out of the 40 villages and very rarely played a role in village affairs. A similar pattern was found in the Dry Zone. This is not true of Christian organizations, which were found in a number of the Delta villages. In villages where there is a church it was common to find that representatives of the church were active in development affairs, functioning more like a village development organization or NGO than a social or religious group.

It is also common to find social associations in the village that are not defined by their link to a monastery or church, but which nonetheless play an important role in festival and social events. Many of the villages visited possessed traditional women’s associations, which were clearly distinct from the formal, state-supported women’s association. Youth associations were also common in the Delta though they tended to be less well recognized than the ‘men committee’ of the Dry Zone (Box 1.5).

**Box 1.5: Traditional Institutions – The Men committee**

The men committee (*Ka La Thar Ah Phwet*) is a traditional informal institution. It is primarily a social organization which is mainly involved in weddings of village girls and religious affairs. The group is usually led by a men committee leader called “Ka La Thar Khaung” who is selected by other members of the group and the VERPs only when one leader wants to quit or other members want a new leader. Most of the men committees both in the Delta and the Dry Zone organize annual meetings to review finances. Most of the men committees have financial records that are maintained by the committee leader or the treasurer. They have to purchase ceremonial materials including musical instruments with this fund. In 6 out of the 10 Dry Zone villages the current core leaders had previously led the men committee. The men committee manages religious ceremonies under the guidance of the VERPs such as pagoda festivals, donation ceremonies, novitiate ceremony, prayer chanting ceremony and so on. The committee is involved in detailed planning of ceremonies as well as in the role of entertainment depending on the capacity and skills of the committee leaders and members. Sometimes they also have to organize a play on the night of, or after, a ceremony. The main source of funds for the men committee comes from village weddings. The village has a traditional rule whereby the bridegroom has to pay a compensation fee if he is not a native of the bride’s village. The compensation fee is determined by the men committee, primarily by the committee leader. The fund is to be used mainly for collecting ceremonial materials. Then the committee loans wedding materials with specific fees to every wedding organized in the village. This is the main income of the men committee. The committee is proud of the ceremonial materials they have purchased since they are able to manage ceremonies without hiring materials from other villages and are even able to hire out materials to other villages when they need them on special occasions.

The role of these institutions in village affairs is limited. What is important however is the fact that the SRGs are the formative organized basis for the VERPs that enables some of them, as individuals, to participate as members of the core village leadership. This point will be explored in greater detail in the following section. The importance of leadership in stimulating collective action takes on additional significance when we consider the relatively undeveloped economic activity groups.

### 1.3.2 Economic Activity Groups

The Delta economy is largely composed of small-scale agriculture and fishing, with a large proportion of landless, all of whom are dependent on access to markets. And yet, only very limited signs of vibrant economic activity groups (EAGs) at the village level were encountered. The few cases that were found tended to be labor groups. This does not discount the importance of economic networks at the higher level, like rice traders associations and fishing cooperatives. It does however reveal the limited extent to which these have become integrated in the village. It is also important to distinguish between EAGs and NGO supported livelihoods groups that have promoted associations based around common interest or group management. Few farmers groups formed under externally assisted projects had developed any sustainability or dynamism. Presently there is little evidence of the latter groups showing signs of becoming self-sustaining entities. At the same time, the few important examples of ‘indigenous’ EAGs are useful to highlight the challenges, as well as the need, for these groups.

Based on the limited number of cases encountered, it is suggested that the EAGs tend to lack the kind of elite linkages that we find to be critical to the success of village institutions in general. Labor groups are the most important example of this. Not only are these associations of

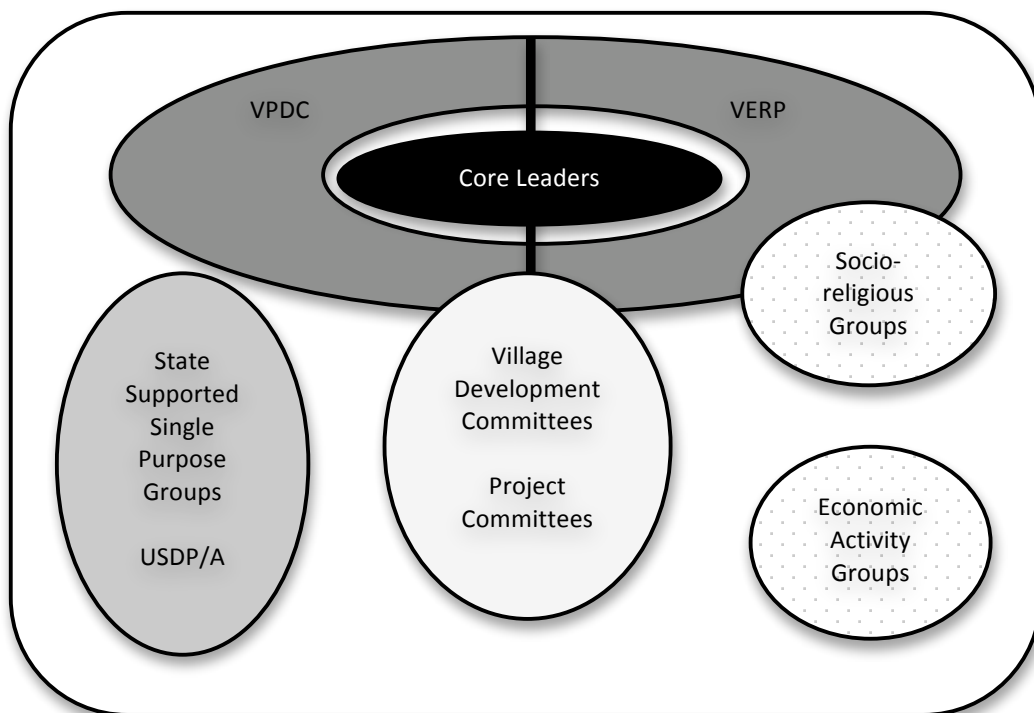


poorer groups in the village, they are also established with a view to organizing the poor vis-à-vis the richer landowners. As mentioned, the evidence base is thin, but it is important to further examine the distinctiveness of EAGs of the poor, and the factors that either undermine their effectiveness or enable them to emerge as a counterforce to elite dominance. This point becomes more apparent when we adopt a leadership lens to understand village dynamics.

### 1.4 Summary: Framework of Village Level Institutions

Based on the data collected in the Delta a basic mapping emerged which revealed three distinct domains (village administration, single purpose interest groups, traditional associations) distinguished by their relationship to the state and their role in the village. This basic typology was found to hold true in the Dry Zone. While the actual institutions may vary between villages, categorizing institutions by types enables analysis of the underlying structures that determine institutional effectiveness (Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1: Framework of Village Institutions**



This process of institutional analysis reveals a number of important insights into the way that villagers interact both with each other and with the state. Key to this is the importance of the village administration, which we find to be based on a blending of state and social sanction. Given the small size of the village unit, it is unsurprising that this tends to dominate the broader framework of local institutions. Important distinctions do however emerge. The involvement of the village administration in other institutional domains is critical to their effectiveness, and this relationship takes a number of different forms.

In general, the state supported single purpose groups necessarily involve the formal leaders in the village, who act as the main conduit to relay instructions from the tract or township level. In

many cases, the state supported single purpose groups are formed in name only—it is the formal leaders who end up taking on the responsibilities of the group, including mobilizing participation and revenue. In this sense, state supported single purpose groups are extractive, and participation tends to be on the basis of compliance.

In no cases were the state supported single purpose groups found to act as an alternative space for leadership in the village. Yet despite the lack of ‘embeddedness’ in the local space the state supported single purposed groups were by far the most prevalent in both regions studied. The analysis suggests certain systemic challenges when considering the potential of these institutions to take a more active role in the local space. This also raises important questions about the reason why the VPDCs have emerged as such socially recognized institutions, which we explain below through an examination of the synergies with local leadership.

The framework shows that there is a strong informal overlap between the core leadership and development committees, as well as social and religious organizations. In the former case, it is well established that the effectiveness of externally supported groups depends largely on these linkage with the effective leaders in the village. In the case of social and religious committees, the relationship is ensured through the inclusion of the elders in the core administration. Yet, as with state driven committees, it is important to emphasize the fact that these relations are led by the core leaders and that it is rare to find alternative sources of influence emanating from outside this core group. This analysis also suggests that the lack of elite engagement in the EAGs is one reason why these organizations remain underdeveloped.

By thinking in terms of distinct categories of village institutions it is possible to assess some of underlying drivers and tensions in the local space. On the basis of data collected from the Delta and the Dry Zone, we find little reason to suggest that the basic framework of these local institutions differs, despite local and regional variations. We do however find that local leaders play a critical role in shaping the actual dynamics of the local space. In the next section we look more closely at the interplay of leaders and institutions at the village level.

## Part 2: Basis of Village Authority – Between Society and the State

Village leaders play a critical role in everyday life in rural areas in Myanmar. They mediate between the village and the township administration, and take on a number of important roles to address the limitations of the formal governance system. Part 1 highlighted the importance of the core leaders in the village who occupy a central position in village affairs. This Part draws on the twenty case studies of village leadership to show how the capacity and internal dynamics of the core leaders determines the way that institutions are shaped at the village level.

While most villages shared common features in terms of the broad structure of institutions, there is a significant degree of variation in terms of the leaders, their capacity and their relations. With this in mind, the following discussion aims to highlight some of the general patterns of village leadership and some of the processes that play out on the ground.

The concept of a village leader is open to interpretation, and the way in which the term is translated can significantly influence responses. The most direct translation of leaders is *Kaung Saung*. However the research teams tended to use the verb *Oo Saung Thee*, and asked the villagers "Who mainly leads in village affairs?", as this was felt to have less direct connotations. In the first phase of the research in the Delta the teams used reputational sampling to develop a broad sample of different types of leaders<sup>11</sup>. Based on the analysis of data, a structured analysis was developed for the Dry Zone research that focused on identifying the centers of power in the village.

### 2.1 Differentiating Leadership

Just as there are many different types of institutions at the village level in Myanmar, there are many different types of leaders. Some leaders are more important than others, and their importance can vary depending on whom one asks. During this research a number of different methods for identification and analysis were tested, which highlighted the importance of distinguishing between three main 'strata' of leaders: core, secondary, and tertiary.

The **core leaders** are roughly characterized as playing a central role in a wide range of aspects of village life, including handling administration, meeting township officials, resolving conflicts in the village, leading community development initiatives (including fundraising) and, helping villagers when they are in need. Most importantly, core leaders are recognized by all people in the village. As such, the core leadership is best understood as a sub-group of the VPDC/VERP. With few exceptions, core leaders hold an 'officially' recognized post as part of the VPDC or VERP, and most have held one or more posts in the past. In most cases the senior most VPDC members are considered as a part of the core leadership, but some exceptions were found where a more powerful leader supports a weaker 100 household leader or village tract Peace and Development Committee (PDC) member.

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<sup>11</sup> The average age of the main VPDC member in both the Delta and the Dry Zone was 44 years. The village elders in the Delta were older (average 62 in the Delta and 48 in the Dry Zone). All of these leaders were men. The only women 'leaders' were found to be participating in NGO supported development committees or livelihood groups in the Delta, and social-religious groups in the Dry Zone.

The **secondary leaders** share many of the characteristics with the core leaders but tend to limit their engagement in village affairs to acting as advisers to the core leaders. Secondary leaders tend to be recognized more for their role in social and religious affairs. They play a background role in village administration and conflict resolution, and are rarely involved in day-to-day interaction with township or tract authorities. Importantly however, the secondary leaders have the capacity to challenge the decisions or actions of the core leaders, especially when they act collectively, and are seen as capable of mobilizing direct links to the local administration.

This latter point sets the secondary leaders apart from the **tertiary leaders** who are active in specific aspects of village affairs, normally as members of the state or non-governmental supported SPIGs or social or economic groups. Unlike the other two categories that are dominated by male 'elders', there was found to be some space for youth and women in this third category. However, there are clear limits on the effectiveness of these leaders who tend to rely, in part, on the support of senior leaders or external (NGO) support.

## 2.2 Dominant Elites

Disaggregating village leadership highlights the extent to which traditional elites dominate village affairs and are integrated into the front line of the formal administration. Selections for VPDCs are carried out at irregular intervals, but tend to produce new leaders. As a result it was rare to find that a single leader occupied the post over two or more terms. However, a closer reading of the history of the VPDCs in the Dry Zone villages showed that in six out of ten villages the post of VPDC leader was under one family and this was a pattern that stretched back for a number of generations (see Annex A).

There is a high level of expectation placed on the VPDC member to serve the village in a personal as well as a professional administrative capacity. It could be argued that the role of the VERP in nominating villagers for the VPDC plays a role in perpetuating elite dominance, but there is cause to suggest that these decisions carry with them a strong social sanction in the village.

### **Box 2.1: Taking Responsibility for Villagers' Failures**

Case 1: The farmers of one village in the Dry Zone were unable to repay their debt to a fertilizer dealer from the township center in time because of a decline in yield due to insufficient rainfall. Consequently, the VPDC leader pawned his land and repaid the debt of his villagers. However, most of the farmers failed to repay their debt to the VPDC leader.

Case 2: A fertilizer dealer from the township center wanted to distribute fertilizer in another village. Being friends with the dealer, the VPDC leaders helped to distribute the fertilizer on credit. However, the dealer asked the VPDC leader not to give credit to some farmers who had a history of default with other fertilizer dealers. The VPDC leader did not accept the demand because he wanted his villagers to be treated fairly. So, he guaranteed the repayment of those farmers with a default history. Eventually, most of the farmers including the farmers on the default list were unable to repay their loan in time and the VPDC leader had to sell his motorcycle to repay their debt.

Case studies reveal a number of examples of leaders directly supporting villages with their own funds, or using their own funds rather than mobilizing contributions from the community (Box 2.1). The latter was particularly common in the Delta, where post-Nargis relief activities often

require contributions. As the Third Social Impact Monitoring report shows, it was common to find that wealthy leaders of the village provided contributions on behalf of the community, and that many community-led initiatives were financed directly by such leaders (TCG 2010).

The degree of responsibility placed on leaders suggests a broad characterization of leadership as an extension of a traditional notion of a village leader as the large landowner who supports a wider set of social and religious activities in the village. This characterization is, however, complicated by the formal role played by the core leaders. Often this formal role imposes additional burdens on the leaders that have limited direct benefit for the village. Examples of this include mobilizing and organizing election committees in the village, or mobilizing membership fees for the USDA/P<sup>12</sup> and other state supported single purpose groups.

While the better off elites can play a benevolent role in the village, it was equally common to find evidence of misuse. A number of cases were found where the poorer groups expressed grievances against the core leaders and felt a broad sense of distrust towards them. There were however no examples where poorer groups were taking independent action against the core leaders.

Given that formal responsibilities are not inconsiderable it is important to examine what the incentives for the elites are to accept formal posts on the VPDC, and whether there are financial or other gains from working with the administration. Unsurprisingly, issues of corruption and bribery were considered too sensitive to broach directly during this research, though some cases encountered offer some insights into the issues. A number of cases were mentioned where VPDC members had allegedly paid to ensure their selection, which can be taken as an indication of an expectation of rewards from holding office. It is therefore surprising to find cases that indicate that these privileges are not guaranteed, and can be challenged by direct petition (Box 2.2).

#### **Box 2.2: Demanding Accountability**

The township authorities provided the farmers with four barrels of diesel. The tract president sold the diesel and used the money for himself. This action provoked complaints from fifteen farmers from two different villages, who sent letters to the township authorities. They also filed a case with the township court. The group was led by the ex-village heads of the two villages. However, the tract president had a strong friendship with the township level authorities. Thanks to his network, the township judges decided the case was an act of libel, and fined the complainers. The complainers did not give up and filed the case with the divisional court and finally won the case. The divisional court was about to sentence the tract president, however, the township PDC requested that special consideration be given, and requested the petitioners to accept a light penalty of a fine and termination of the position. The request was accepted, and the tenure of the tract VPDC president was terminated. The township authorities and the tract president endorsed the son of the tract leader as his successor.

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the leaders interviewed suggested that these demands were often unreasonable, like selling USDA calendars, and leaders chose to contribute all the money themselves. One member of the VPDC had spent the previous three days walking to all the villages in the tract to discuss with local VPDC members the appointment of election committee members.

## 2.3 Competition among Leaders

Competition between elites tends to be limited, and very few cases of open factionalism or conflict were encountered in the sample villages. Formal authority is vested primarily in a single VPDC leader or group of leaders, and there is sufficient space for other important leaders to be recognized as part of the broader administration. One reason for this is that the dominance of important families tends to reduce competition and act as a barrier to entry for the non-elite. Core leaders do not tend to forge the kind of alliances with tertiary leaders that could give rise to factional lines emerging in the village<sup>13</sup>. Rather, the implicit divide is between the elite and the non-elite, where the latter neither have the will nor capacity to compete. As with many aspects of village life, this is one important aspect that could be prone to change, as discussed in the last section.

Where conflicts between leaders do occur they tend to resemble family feuds and are therefore difficult to overcome. As one member of a conflict-ridden village surmised, “The deteriorated village road reflects the villager’s disunity.” Conflict normally results from neglect by a leader, or overt dominance by a family. Such conflicts rarely result in open confrontation, but tend instead to undermine the villagers’ capacity to solve their problems through collective action. As a result, conflicts tend to dampen the dynamism of village leaders rather than stimulate competition between them, and therefore nearly always have a negative impact on development.

## 2.4 Accountability – Social and Formal

Interestingly, it was common to find evidence of functioning systems of accountability that extend beyond the village leaders.

### **Box 2.3: How the Village Removed an Unpopular Leader**

An ex-military man was appointed by the village tract president as the formal village leader, right after the events of 1988 when no one in the village wanted to take the position. However, the villagers disliked him because he showed off his power and frequently created reasons to collect money from villagers, and then used it himself. Two ex-village leaders attempted to topple him with the help of two young villagers, by collecting signatures from the villagers. They received only signatures of 17 out of the 100 households in the village. Undeterred, they submitted the complaint letter to the township administration. When the village leader heard the news of the complaint he sought help from a regiment stationed nearby by branding the petition as an act of defying his authority. At the same time, the ex-leaders used their networks at the township level. Subsequently, the township authority sent a letter to the regiment not to interfere in village affairs. In addition, the village leader received a letter of termination from the township authority.

The township authorities, including the township PDC units and the local army unit, play an important role in selecting VPDC members. As mentioned above, this tends to be carried out in consultation with the village elders. It is not uncommon to find cases where the villagers

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<sup>13</sup> The development of alliance across social classes, and hence the emergence of factional rifts between leaders and their ‘groups’ tends to be a result of political competition based on supra-local identities. This analysis suggests that the process of ‘political development’ is relatively nascent in Myanmar, but could change very quickly with the emergence of political identities and competition within the political system.

initiated cases against their VPDC leaders on account of malpractice. In such cases, the VERPs play a major role in mobilizing protest, mostly using formal channels. As the case described in Box 2.3 shows, where these complaints are not heard at the township level it is possible that higher levels of grievance redress can be effective.

There were some important regional differences in terms of the willingness of villagers to address complaints to the township level. While this was relatively common in Dry Zone villages, few similar cases were found in the Delta. One reason for this relates to the level of external aid. The only cases of corruption that were recorded in the Delta related to the misuse of humanitarian relief funds, and it was reported that villagers tended to withhold complaints for fear of the NGOs withdrawing aid (TCG 2010). Far fewer complaints were expressed about VPDC members, who were widely regarded as being under immense pressure in handling external assistance (ibid).

Further research would need to be carried out to test whether external assistance has indeed weakened what appears to be a relatively well-developed system of formal accountability. It would also be important to assess whether the patterns encountered in the Dry Zone can be generalized to other parts. However, there does seem to be cause to suggest that the effectiveness of formal accountability systems is underpinned by a strong sense of social accountability within the village. At times, this can be effective enough to influence the decisions of the authorities (Box 2.4). Alternatively stated, these cases seem to suggest that the township authorities are not capable of acting against the will of an effective village leadership.

#### **Box 2.4: Working around the Administration**

One day close to the 2008 referendum, the USDA township mobilizer came to a village and gathered the villagers to approve the constitution. One person from each household had to attend the meeting. At the meeting, people told the mobilizer that they would not cast the ballot under the 100 household leader whom they did not like. So, the mobilizer promised to help the villagers change the leader.

The mobilizer did not, however, deliver on his promise. Consequently, the villagers decided to protest by refusing to comply with township orders. For example, they did not grow plants as directed by the township authority, nor did they produce their quota for seeds. They also refused to make the contributions to local funds collected by the township authority. As a result, the 100 household leader had to personally pay the share for one of the villages. After a while he could no longer afford to do this and resigned from the position.

Thereafter, four VERPs sent a letter of complaint to the township authority expressing their disapproval of the candidate they proposed as a replacement, noting that the man was implicated in a sex scandal. At the same time, they proposed the name of their own preferred candidate. The township ordered the village tract PDC to solve the problem. The tract president came to the village to talk to the elders. Then he called a meeting with the whole village and recommended the selection of the elders' preferred candidate.

## **2.5 Factors Affecting the Capacity of Village Leadership**

The discussion above has highlighted the extent to which the *de facto* system of local administration supports the engagement of multiple leaders, and the extent to which they can act as a basis for relatively legitimate and effective management of local affairs. The analysis also indicates the extent to which a breakdown of relations between leaders can affect social

cohesion and collective action. Villagers are critically dependent on the capacity of their leaders, and the specific character and configuration of leaders play a major role in defining the village.

This research does not provide a basis to generalize about patterns of village governance. The research does however serve to highlight the significance of the variation between proximate villages that are due to factors that are deeply rooted in specific village histories.

To illustrate this point it is useful to compare four villages in the Dry Zone sample that are part of the same village tract, and hence shared a similar administration system. Comparing the general features of leadership of these four villages highlights the extent of the variation in terms of the internal dynamic of the village, and the impact this has on village life. This analysis suggests that there are at least two aspects of village leadership that differentiate villages. The first is the nature of the capacity of the core leaders, which can be assessed in terms of the number of core leaders and their background. The second is evidence of any internal conflict, which is indicated by complaints against the formal leaders as well as unwillingness of the broader group of secondary leaders to participate in village affairs.

While this research is focused on the village as a 'space' it is important to consider the extent to which the patterns and practices within the village are shaped by the immediate context. These include:

- The level of trust or confidence that ordinary villagers have in their core leaders
- The relationship between the core and the secondary leaders, or the relation between elders and the formal administration
- The relationship between the village (leaders) and the village tract administration
- The relationship between the village and the other villages in the tract.

Tract relations were found to be especially important in the Dry Zone, where tract level PDC members and VERPs played an important role in selecting village leaders and in resolving conflict within villages. In the Delta, the role of the tract was limited by the influence of external aid providers who tended to deal directly with villagers. As a result, there was a high degree of competition between villages over the allocation of funds, which in turn increased the pressure on village leaders (TCG 2010).

## 2.6 Scope for Regional Variation

Local events, issues and actors can play a major role in shaping the configuration and effectiveness of local institutions, due in part to the degree of informal authority that is conferred on the village leaders. This operational framework sets out some of the key forces and lines of interface that can shape these local adaptations. The comparison between the Delta and the Dry Zone villages highlights the fact that the 'rules' of the game change between regions, and therefore the pattern of local institutions need to be continually tested and reappraised. Given the fact that the 'rules' that govern local institution are not formalized, it is possible to find major differences in the basic framework. Two important examples of this, from the Dry Zone, are the discovery of a tract level VERP committee and the apparent change in the 'rules' of VPDC selection.



The impact of the cyclone Nargis had limited impact on the basic patterns of local institutions. The sheer scale of the death toll was reflected to a degree by the turnover in the village leadership, but this tended to follow similar patterns and even family control. The instigation of aid committees and various non-governmental development committees did little to undermine the role of core leaders of the VPDC and VERP, and the effectiveness of the former was critically dependent on support from the latter.

There is however cause to suggest that broader social and cultural factors are likely to influence regional variation in local institutions. One important contrast noted here was the presence of Christian organizations in the Delta, and the extent to which these groups blurred the line between NGO supported VDCs and socio-religious organizations. The second important difference, which has not been explored here, is the extent to which heterogeneous villages differ from those inhabited by a single community or religious groups. The sample villages in the Delta provide some opportunity to explore these issues, with the broad suggestion that minority groups in the village tend to lack an autonomous representation in the core administration of the village, through there was little evidence of tangible tension or challenges to marginalization. This is an issue that would require further investigation.

With regard to the extent to which local institutions are controlled by a dominant elite, further analysis would need to pay attention to ways in which regional differences in social and economic relations affect the way in which local institutions function. Whether or not different occupational patterns can influence the relationship between the leaders and the non-leaders would also need to be explored in future research<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Research in the Delta suggests that the fishing community tends to lack voice in what is largely a land-based system (TCG 2010).

## Part 3: Implications

The village remains an important formative unit in Myanmar. This paper has set out a broad framework of the institutional space at the village level and has explored the influence of local leaders. As stated at the outset, this 'operational framework' draws on limited cases from two specific areas of a diverse country. As such, the application of this framework would need to be tested and developed further based on experience of other regions.

### 3.1 Building Effective Institutions

Based on the analysis it is possible to suggest a number of implications that should be considered by development agencies that are seeking to promote community development in Myanmar:

1. **Engaging with core leadership:** External intervention by state and non-state actors has played an important role in promoting a diverse set of local institutions, organizations and associations at the village level. There is however cause to suggest that the effectiveness of these committees is dependent on the relationship with the core leadership that holds considerable sway in village affairs. It is difficult for new leaders to enter into the center of the village administration. Rather they depend on the core leaders for support. Recognizing the importance of these linkages by formalizing the role of core leaders in new development committees is likely to improve sustainability, capacity and coordination of participatory institutions.
2. **Understanding the dynamics of core leadership:** Conflicts within core institutions will affect development outcomes. The importance of the core leadership implies that external agencies need to take care to understand the dynamics between elites and help foster cohesion where relations have been damaged. Equally, it is important to understand the extent to which the core leaders support the poor and the reasons for any breakdown in the relations between groups of elites and non-elites, especially larger landowners and the landless. Where these relations are strained, the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs will depend on addressing the underlying tensions. The third important dimension of leadership that needs to be assessed is the relationship between the villages within the tract, and the opportunities that exist to strengthen alliances or overcome competition and conflict.
3. **Fostering the broader aspects of leadership without compromising effectiveness:** This research has highlighted the wide range of roles played by leaders in the village, and the role they can play in terms of personally supporting village development initiatives. While it is important to build on this important community asset, there is a danger of further burdening leaders to the point that they become less effective. The experience of an expanded aid program in the Delta highlighted the pressure on leaders as they set out to manage multiple providers amidst increased expectations.
4. **Strengthening the voice of the poor through institutional design:** The analysis has identified some important gaps in local institutions. One of the most important of these

is the limited development of self-sustaining livelihood groups. Another is the limited effectiveness of externally supported SPIGs. While the lack of engagement of core leadership can be argued as a cause of this, it does not necessarily offer an effective solution. Core landowners are unlikely to emerge as leaders of labor or subsistence farmer groups, or associations promoting effective hygiene or micro-credit. Indeed, the extent of elite dominance might act as a constraint on potentially effective leadership. In such cases the development of associations between villages might be an important means to overcome village level constraints.

### 3.2 Deepening the Understanding of Change

More broadly, this analysis has sought to present an alternative view of the local space in rural Myanmar that is based on the everyday experience of the villagers in two regions. The analysis highlights stark differences between the meta-view and the grassroots and some important ways in which the latter could reflect a very different picture on the macro-level.

In setting out to open the space for a more informed debate on local institutions and development strategy in Myanmar, it is important to highlight the limitations of this analysis and suggest research priorities to address them. By suggesting a framework and focusing on key patterns or trends, it is important to test the extent to which these are transferable, over time and space. It is acknowledged that the findings of this research cannot be generalized beyond the areas in which fieldwork has been carried out. There is immense scope for significant variation in the ways in which formal and informal institutions function in other regions. The second important priority is to track, over time, some of the important institutions and relationships that have been highlighted here, and to do so in conjunction with a broader analysis of the local space.

This paper has sought to highlight the extent to which local analysis can shed new light on some of the pressing questions of today. The discussion finds cause to suggest that there is a conscious blurring of state and society, which has added to the effectiveness of the state but also reveals various stresses. Furthermore, the analysis has demonstrated the uniqueness of the synergy of informal and formal authority that underpins the village administration. This synergy enables the state to be both penetrative and responsive, where its local presence is achieved by drawing in the powerful rather than asserting its choice of candidates. This in turn presents a view of local society as comparatively traditional, dominated by largely benign elites and entrenched social divisions.

This analysis suggests that the current USDP is, at the village level, a relatively weak organization that has not integrated itself into the core leadership nexus in the village. At the same time it is recognized that the recent election outcome suggests that the USDP is more integrated at the township level, and therefore could potentially permeate local networks. As with many of the questions explored, a more complete picture requires a view of the levels above the village. Even without this, however, it can be suggested that the entrance of a new, well resourced, networked organization would imply significant reshaping of the basic institutional framework in the village. Monitoring these changes and further testing and developing the kind of assumptions about village governance that have been initiated in this paper would merit attention.

The state faces considerable challenges in asserting direct control at the very local level and is forced, by necessity, to enter into alliances with locally powerful elites whose relationship with the administration is both pragmatic and limited. This powerful nexus does not seem to imply an ideological compromise, and there is little evidence of polarization among local leaders based on relations to the state. Rather, there seem to be strong indications of demands for accountability of the local state. Just as the involvement of the local elites is critical to the effectiveness of community level development it is implied that engagement of and with the local administration to this effect is inevitable. Understanding the lines between institutions and the state is perhaps the most challenging issue facing donors engaging in development in Myanmar. This paper has sought to provide some evidence to stimulate this debate.

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