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EVALUATION REPORT

UDF-MYA-12-514 – Empowered Civil Society Addressing the Democratic Needs of Rural Women in Myanmar

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Map of Myanmar (©UN)

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(i) Project data

This report is the evaluation of the project "Empowered civil society addressing the democratic needs of rural women in Myanmar", implemented from February 2014 to January 2016 inclusive by the Danish organization DanChurchAid (DCA), together with three community-based organizations (CBOs), all self-help women's groups (SHWGs) working as implementing partners:

- Shwe Inn Thu Women's Self-Help Group (referred to below as SIT), operating in Nyaungshwe Township, Southern Shan State;
- Shwe Kanbawza Self-Help Group (SKBZ), operating in Pinlaung Township, Southern Shan State; and
- Shwe Nyar Myay Self-Help Group (SNM), operating in Myaung Township,
- Sagaing Region.

The operating project budget was US$225,000. In addition, DCA provided a co-financing contribution of US$26,904. According to the project document, its main objective was to "strengthen institutional capacity of three independent CBOs working with rural women's groups to establish associations of self-help groups and promote inclusive participatory dialogue with authorities". The project's expected outcomes were:

- Three CBOs gain increased organizational management expertise and are equipped with the skills necessary to mobilize women in their communities on issues relating to empowerment and democratic rights;
- Women have increased domestic standing, skills and linkages to be able to actively engage and influence local authorities, service providers and private companies, on behalf of their communities;
- Advocacy and Action Points at village and township levels are formulated and implemented by SHWGs and associations.

(ii) Evaluation findings

The project was very **relevant** in all material respects. It was based on a thorough analysis of the socio-economic context of the target rural areas, and on a sound, well-judged understanding of the challenges faced by women in those areas. The project built on the experience of UNDP in the development of WSHGs, aiming both at enhancing the participation of women in community decision-making processes and at creating income generation opportunities. The relevance of the project was maintained – indeed enhanced – despite the significantly changed political context of Myanmar between the time the project was designed (2012-13) and the period of implementation (2014-16).

DCA designed the project in close consultation with the Implementing partners (IPs) – this helped ensure that their experience was taken into account, which was particularly important because the three local IPs were the backbone of the project's implementation, DCA's role being limited to coordination, financial management and aspects of technical support. The relevance of the project was closely related to the richness of the WSHG approach. The concept of WSHG evolved from the Self-Reliance Groups (SRGs) originally developed in Myanmar by UNDP in the

1990s. The project elaborated substantially on the UNDP SRG model, essentially by elaborating on three aspects:

- Transparency and accountability.
- Rights awareness and advocacy.
- Linkages with other community-level groups.

The project was highly **effective**, in that planned activities were implemented, and – more importantly – outcomes were achieved to a very satisfactory standard. It is difficult to identify any additional step that could have been taken to improve effectiveness. In that sense, the project was exemplary in its effectiveness, both in terms of the clarity of outcomes to be achieved (and activities to achieve them) and of quantitative and qualitative standards of achievement. In addition to excellent design and the lessons learned from past experience, the project also owed its high effectiveness to highly committed and skilled teams in the three IPs, and to effective technical support from DCA. A key element of this outcome's effectiveness was related to the savings and small grants activities. This worked in two ways: (1) by providing some starting capital resulting from encouragement to savings and from the use of project fund to provide short-term loans; and (2) by providing technical advice on income generating activities and in more generic skills such as accounting and marketing. The importance of the savings and grants activity must be emphasized because of its significant contribution to improving livelihoods and also because it is key to the sustainability of the SHWG concept.

The project was **efficient**, in the sense that good use was made of the financial resources available and genuine added value was achieved. Project management was excellent, with a good level of collegiality between DCA and the IPs, and appropriate levels of transparency. The project's overall performance, as well as its efficiency, owed much to the professionalism and commitment of its managers and staff, who consistently demonstrated, in interviews with the evaluators, an excellent grasp of the strategic and implementation issues related to the project.

Project management was excellent. Much of the project design was done by the DCA team in conjunction with the IPs, and a management team made up of DCA staff and IP managers monitored implementation closely. Information about budgets and spending was shared in a transparent manner. DCA effectively fulfilled its technical advice role, providing information and input into activities as required, and maintaining detailed records of activities and spending.

The project achieved substantial elements of **impact** at local level, in the sense that it raised awareness of voters' and women's rights, and initiated engagement between local officials and rural communities. Reports by IPs and evaluators' interviews with eight of local officials and groups of dozens of women members of SHWGs indicated that attitudes changed among both sets of stakeholders: officials' attitude towards community members became more open and constructive, while members of SHWGs reported that they gained self-confidence. To a more limited extent, the project also contributed to changing men's attitudes towards women's role in the community.

This is an example of a project where **sustainability** was, to the extent possible, included in the design – as confirmed by DCA's intention to continue working with SIT, using its own and other donors' funds. The capacity building activities aimed at the IPs explicitly included supporting them towards achieving a degree of financial independence, by providing technical advice on project design and management, and by helping the IPs develop internal governance and accountability systems.

(iii) Conclusions

- ***The project was very relevant, thanks to excellent analysis of socio-economic conditions and the use of a proven self-help methodology.*** The project partners ensured that the project design addressed needs, building on lessons learned from previous projects.

- ***The project design was relevant to the situation of rural women, irrespective of the political changes that took place at national level during its implementation.*** By focusing on women's socio-economic status and on democratic governance issues, the project helped initiate constructive engagement with local-level officials.

- ***The project was very effective, achieving planned outputs to a high standard, as well as expected outcomes.*** The project built the capacities of the implementing partners, while DCA helped ensure that outcomes were met to a high standard.

- ***The project was not sufficiently focused on advocacy concerning rights and democracy***. The project did not focus on rights and democratic participation as much as was anticipated in the project document.

- ***The savings and grants scheme was a significant contributor to the project's effectiveness.*** The project helped ensure that the Self-Help Women's Groups gained credibility and brought tangible changes to the livelihoods of members.

- ***The project represented genuine added value.*** Much of the resources went to training, while the savings and grants scheme was enhanced to reach over 15% of the budget. This helped ensure resilience and sustainability.

- ***Project management was excellent.*** DCA and its partners adopted a collegial approach, enhancing trust amongst partners. Despite variations in partners' performance, their professional skills helped ensure its effective implementation.

- ***The project achieved substantial impact at local level.*** The evaluators could identify tangible changes in attitudes among rural women and local officials. However, the project could have achieved a greater impact if it had also raised awareness among men about the importance of women's democratic participation.

- ***The project contributed to the IPs' sustainability.*** The capacity building activities implemented as part of the project clearly helped enhance the resilience of the IPs and their capacity to manage projects independently.

(iv) Recommendations

- ***DCA should continue working with the IPs to disseminate the project's approach.*** To the extent possible, DCA should encourage the IPs to establish more SHWGs in additional communities.

- ***The IPs should seek to disseminate their expertise on the establishment of SHWGs.*** It would be appropriate for the IPs to work with counterparts in other rural areas to disseminate the good practices developed through the project.

- ***DCA should consult with UNDP on the scope for dissemination of the good practices developed during the project, including to other agencies in the UN system.*** It might also help disseminate relevant practices to other agencies active in Myanmar's rural areas.

- ***Future projects of this nature should take this report's findings into account, and incorporate in their design elements highlighted above, including:***
    - ***A component addressing men.***
    - ***More deliberately addressing issues of rights and participatory democracy.***
    - ***Enhancing policy advocacy.***
    - ***Enhancing IP and SHWG resilience.***

II. INTRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

(i) The project and evaluation objectives

This report is the evaluation of the project "Empowered civil society addressing the democratic needs of rural women in Myanmar", implemented from February 2014 to January 2016 inclusive by the Danish organization DanChurchAid (DCA), together with three community-based organizations (CBOs), all self-help women's groups (SHWGs) working as implementing partners:

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- Shwe Kanbawza Self-Help Group (SKBZ), operating in Pinlaung Township, Southern Shan State; and
- Shwe Nyar Myay Self-Help Group (SNM), operating in Myaung Township,
- Sagaing Region.

The UNDEF grant was US$250,000, of which US$25,000 was retained by UNDEF for evaluation and monitoring purposes. In addition, DCA provided a co-financing contribution of US$26,904.

According to the project document, its main objective was to "strengthen institutional capacity of three independent CBOs working with rural women's groups to establish associations of self-help groups and promote inclusive participatory dialogue with authorities". The project's expected outcomes were:

- Three CBOs gain increased organizational management expertise and are equipped with the skills necessary to mobilize women in their communities on issues relating to empowerment and democratic rights;
- Women have increased domestic standing, skills and linkages to be able to actively engage and influence local authorities, service providers and private companies, on behalf of their communities;
- Advocacy and Action Points at village and township levels are formulated and implemented by SHWGs and associations.

To achieve these outcomes, the project was to carry out activities including:

- Workshops and training sessions for implementing partners;
- Establishment of SHWGs and training of their leaders;
- Participatory rural appraisals (PRAs) mapping resources and development needs;
- Capacity building and support to SHWGs;
- Small grant scheme for SHWG members;
- Social audits;
- Registration of SHWGs as cooperatives;
- Advocacy by SHWGs and Associations;
- Training with SHWG members and local authorities;
- Township public forums to address advocacy points;
- Exposure visit to the capital Nay Pyi Taw.

The project directly benefited the three implementing partners (IPs) and was designed to impact the lives of poor people in 36 villages – 12 in Myaung Township, 16 in Nyaungshwe and eight in

Pinlaung – with a total of just under 3,000 households comprising over 13,000 people, including about 7,000 women and girls.

The evaluation of this project is part of the larger set of evaluations of UNDEF-funded projects. The purpose of these evaluations is to "contribute to a better understanding of what constitutes a successful project, which will in turn help UNDEF to develop future project strategies. Evaluations are also to assist stakeholders to determine whether projects have been implemented in accordance with the project document and whether anticipated project outputs and outcomes have been achieved".[1]

(ii) Evaluation methodology

The evaluation started in April 2016 with fieldwork in Myanmar from 9 to 13 May 2016 inclusive. An international expert and a national expert conducted the evaluation. UNDEF evaluations are more qualitative than quantitative in nature and follow a standard set of evaluation questions that focus on the project's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and any value added from UNDEF-funding (Annex 1). This is to allow meta-analysis in cluster evaluations at a later stage. This report follows that structure.

The evaluators reviewed a comprehensive set of documents and reports:

- The complete set of project documentation submitted to UNDEF by project implementer DanChurchAid (DCA). This included the project document, mid-term and final reports, milestone verification reports (MVRs), as well as all report annexes (such as meeting reports, exposure visit report, village profiles, etc.);
- Background documents on governance in Myanmar published by the Government of Myanmar, the Asia Foundation and UNDP; and reports on conflict resolution activities and the impact of conflict on development in Myanmar, by the Asia Foundation, Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, International Crisis Group, etc.;
- Reports on the human rights situation in Myanmar, by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and reports by the Government of Myanmar and NGOs tabled on the occasion of the Universal Periodic Review of Myanmar in November 2015.

In addition to the standard evaluation questions agreed between UNDEF and Transtec, the evaluators addressed the following issues during the field visit:

- **Relevance: project design.** The evaluators clarified how much input the IPs had in the design of the project, and in the situation analysis on which it is based. They also considered whether the project design was over-ambitious in view of the IPs' capacity, even as developed by the project.
- **Relevance to context.** The political context in Myanmar – particularly in some of the project areas, where armed conflict had taken place previously –changed in dramatic ways since the project was designed in 2012. It was important to assess how the impact of these changes were (if at all) integrated in the project design and implementation. In particular, government policies on decentralization and authorities' attitudes towards civil society were considered.
- **Relevance: gender equality.** The project sets out a number of underlying causes for the lack of gender equality, and proposes appropriate action to support women. But it was not clear to what extent the project attempted to change the attitude of men, or sought

[1] See: Operational Manual for UNDEF-Funded Project Evaluations, page 6.

their support (or mere acceptance) for more gender equality. Related to that point was the issue of assessing the extent to which the project's analysis of the underlying causes of gender inequality/inequity went into sufficient detail to help action by the IPs.

- **Effectiveness: outcomes.** The evaluators attempted to assess the extent to which the beneficiary communities' experience of the outcomes is consistent with the data in the reports, which show a high level of achievement of the indicators.
- **Effectiveness: grant/match funding scheme.** The evaluators sought information about the scheme in general, and viewed a small sample of activities or outcomes resulting from the scheme. They also attempted to assess the conditions that helped ensure the success of the scheme, and their replicability in other contexts.
- **Effectiveness: consistency across IPs.** The evaluators assessed whether the project was equally effective in all three areas, and, if not, what were the factors causing differences. The institutional capacity of each partner was considered in this respect.
- **Efficiency: project management.** The evaluators looked at project management with a particular focus on the following aspects:
    - **Collegiality.** To what extent was management shared between DCA and the IPs? Was the management mostly top-down? Were the management skills of the IPs appropriate? How were conflicts addressed, if any?
    - **DCA support.** The reports suggested that the project was implemented with relatively little support from DCA other than the original design and the planned staff input (with a small amount of financial input to support this) to manage and monitor the project. The evaluators considered the extent to which DCA needed, if at all, to provide additional support in terms of management time, support visits, etc.
    - **Continuity of management.** The DCA focal point for the project changed during the implementation period. It was important to assess whether this change had an impact (positive or negative) on project management and efficiency.
- **Impact: advocacy engagement.** There were interesting elements of advocacy at local level in the project, including what appeared to be durable engagement with local authorities, both to apply pressure through advocacy and to support local officials through training. It was important to assess the extent to which officials were sensitive (in a positive or negative way) to this form of engagement, and whether it influenced their actions or attitudes, particularly towards women in the communities concerned.
- **Impact on IPs capacity.** The project involved a lot of training and capacity building of partners. The evaluators assessed the impact of these activities on the actual capacity of the partners, and particularly whether their resilience and ability to function independently have been reinforced.
- **Sustainability of structures.** The project was clearly geared towards ensuring sustainability, for example through capacity building. The grant scheme also appeared to be designed to outlast the project. The evaluators assessed the likelihood of the scheme, the SHWG and the IPs continuing to develop, without DCA support, or at least without the level of support that the project permitted.
- **Sustainability of government engagement.** A major element of the project was to engage authorities at local level. The evaluators assessed the extent to which local authorities have established sustainable ways to hold dialogues with civil society, and how this may develop in the context of Myanmar's decentralization policy.

(iii) Development context

Myanmar has been under military rule for almost 50 years, while the country experienced widespread Communist and ethno-nationalist insurgencies. Successive governments since independence in 1948 were unable to build a strong, effective and legitimate state. This impeded political and socio-economic development. International isolation made the situation worse. Today, reliable socio-economic data are still largely lacking. However, reports by development actors concur that Myanmar remains one of the poorest countries in Asia and lags behind most of its regional neighbors on most social and economic development indicators. The National Household Survey compiled by the World Bank for 2009-2010 – the latest available years – indicates that 25% of the overall population lives under the poverty line, with the worst conditions found in Chin (73%), Eastern Shan (46%) and Rakhine (43%) states and Tanintharyi (33%) and Ayeyarwady (32%) regions, as well as in areas directly affected by armed conflict.

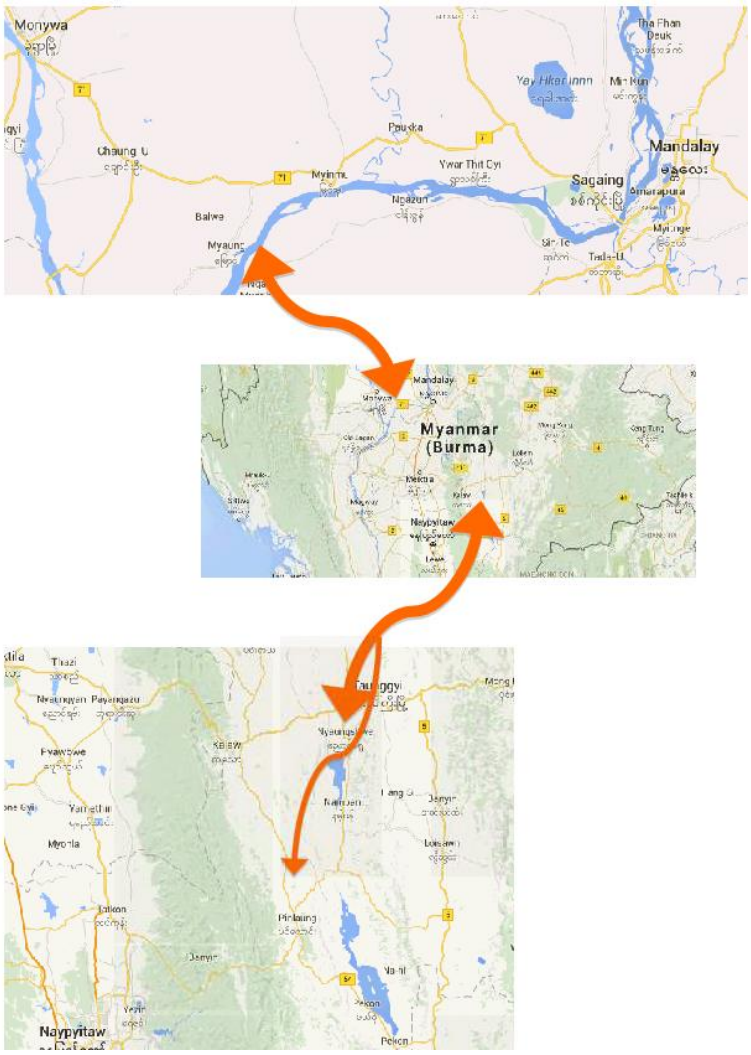
After the civilian government came to power in 2010, Myanmar has seen reforms both in social and economic realms. In early 2011, a new elected government headed by former general President U Thein Sein has embarked on an ambitious and comprehensive reform agenda, implemented through a sequenced framework known as "*Four Waves"*:

1. Political and democratic reforms;
2. Socio-economic reforms;
3. Governance and administrative reforms;
4. Private sector development.

Early results have included greater political freedoms, increased transparency, consultation and responsiveness in government decision-making; and improved economic growth, with GDP for 2016 expected to be growing by 7.5% (World Bank). Nevertheless, the country continues to face severe crises, including in its path towards democratization. During the project period (February 2014 to January 2016) gradual steps were taken towards reform. These included the release of political prisoners (in 2012, with further waves of releases subsequently); the lifting or suspension of many US and EU economic sanctions; electoral victories by the National League for Democracy (NLD, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi); and various trade agreements opening the way to inward investment. Myanmar, however, still faces major challenges, not least the need to secure sustainable peace with its numerous ethnic armed groups and address serious communal violence affecting Buddhist and Muslim communities.

The government tried to attract more foreign direct investments but still there are many barriers to attract environmentally sustainable investments that would benefit the wider public. Currently, foreign investors are mostly interested in oil, gas and natural extraction and very little went to manufacturing sector. As a result, the reforms carried out to date have failed to create many job opportunities for grassroots and middleclass people. It is mostly the economic and political elites, as well as the so-called "cronies" (businesspeople with close links to the military), who have benefited from the reforms. Weak and controversial land laws, land ownership disputes and land speculations have created obstacles not only for the international investors but also for the local businesses to develop further. Poor infrastructure and logistics, and frequent power cuts, are also hindering investment and development.

In many rural areas in Myanmar, agricultural business remains the main source of income for many families but the farmers are facing many problems due to climate change, water scarcity and problems with land-use rights. In many areas, local youths only work in agriculture in the



These enlargements of the Myanmar map (center) show project locations: Myaung township in Sagaing Region (top) and the townships of Nyaungshwe and Pinlaung in Southern Shan State (bottom). Map scales vary.

rainy season and move to other parts of the country in the dry season due to lack of opportunities in their native place. When working as seasonal migrant workers, elderly people and women have less mobility compared to the younger males. As a result, women have less income generation opportunities.

In the last 5 years, the government has started a decentralization process but at the local level, people have seen very little change and the bureaucracy operates as it used to. Red tape still remains, and corruption is widespread. At the lowest level, village/ward administrators are selected through indirect elections but at the township and district level, the administrative officers are civil servants accountable to the Minister of Home Affairs and not to the residents of the respective township or district. Civil society organizations working for the social and economic development in the community continue to face challenges in many areas because their ability to operate is very much dependent on the willingness of officials of the General Administration Department to support civil society and cooperate with it.

Women's ability to get involve in the social and political activities is restricted by many factors, including their traditional role in the family and community, and entrenched social norms. With the support of some civil society organizations and development agencies, women are gradually becoming more aware of their rights and more active in their community. In some rural areas, women are elected to position such as of ten-household and hundred-household chiefs, or village and ward administrators. In promoting the role of women in the society, it is critical to take a balanced approach so that men will better understand the important role of women in the society and are willing support the process.

Peace building

As a national priority, the current government has identified concluding comprehensive settlements to end all armed conflict in the country. Since August 2011, it has successfully negotiated bilateral ceasefire agreements with most of the ethnic armed groups, although serious armed clashes have continued to occur in some areas, in particular Kachin and North Shan States. According to the Government's five-step peace plan of 2013, the aim was to conclude:

1. A National Ceasefire Agreement;
2. A Framework for Political Dialogue;
3. An inclusive National Political Dialogue;
4. A National Peace Accord;
5. The demobilization of combatant soldiers and wider security reform.

Initial steps have taken place in 2014, but no comprehensive peace accord is yet in place. In some of the project locations, where armed conflict had taken place, tensions are still present despite the end of the violence, and the situation of demobilized combatants is not yet solved. The need for broader socio-economic development is also pressing, not least to address long-held grievances regarding inequality between central Myanmar and more remote areas mainly inhabited by ethnic nationalities. According to conflict resolution experts such as the International Crisis Group, land ownership issues and human rights grievances are among drivers of instability. Natural resource exploitation and the distribution of proceeds from such activity underpin a majority of unrest, especially where such resources are found and exported unofficially through porous border areas. Therefore peace initiatives will necessary need to address not only issues of land and access but also of resource sharing and securing border areas.

III. PROJECT STRATEGY

i. Project strategy and approach

Approach

The project is based on the recognition that women's participation in political decision-making in Myanmar is insufficient, "especially amongst rural and conflict-affected communities". Although cognizant of the wide-ranging changes that have occurred in Myanmar since 2010, the project document notes that the political and social reforms of recent years "have been slow to trickle down to the rural and ethnic areas" and that the "decentralization" of the reforms is progressing slowly.

In terms of power structures, the project document notes that the lowest tier of government in Myanmar (village, tract[2] and township) is in a "vertical", "top-down" command and communication structure. The document quotes a UNDP study indicating that women represent only 1% of the total membership of decision-making bodies at the local level. The project document also notes that the Government of Myanmar has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but has yet to fulfill its obligations in this regard in terms of female participation in political decision-making.

Against this background, the project document details three aspects to its approach:

- Rights-based approach. This consist in operating under an overall framework that recognizes the rights of citizens and the duties of those in power, including by engaging in civic and voter education.
- Empowerment approach. This is about building up capacity among CBOs and confidence among communities, through training and awareness raising on rights; support to association forming and advocacy; and mutually-funded income generation schemes.
- Action-learning approach. This is designed to follow up on the empowerment dimension, encouraging stakeholders to undertake advocacy towards government authorities, in an interactive way that is compatible with the political context, and bringing together different CBOs into common platforms.

The project document also referred to lessons learned from past experience, mainly concerning the appropriateness of working with women-only groups and the need to work with groups of under 20 members that are relatively homogenous in social status. Lessons on sustainability were also mentioned (building into the project the fact that some groups will collapse or decline), as were the overall benefits of a group-based approach to achieve behavioral change.

Strategy

The project strategy takes account of the traditional view that "a person's ability to represent their community in decision-making structures" depends on gender – males being expected to lead – and on economic standing. In the project strategy, the SHWGs are a response to that situation, in that they were designed to help enhance women's economic standing and to foster their leadership and democratic decision-making skills. The three locations selected by the

[2] A tract is a cluster of 5-6 villages.

project were described as particularly poor, where women experienced severe socio-economic disadvantage. Myaung Township is made up of isolated Burmese communities, facing challenges related to the relative remoteness of the area. Nyaungshwe and Pinlaung townships are both minority-population areas, in a state where violent conflict has taken place over years.

Building on previous projects involving empowerment for local CBOs, DCA developed the proposal based on the following strategy:

- To strengthen the three local IPs, so that they are in a position to help establish and support SHWGs across the area, while ensuring that their own governance meets appropriate standards of accountability and transparency;
- To support the establishment of SHWGs at village level, and to enhance the leadership and democratic participation skills of a critical mass of women leaders;
- To support networking among SHWGs and between the groups and other local associations, and to conduct advocacy towards government authorities at local, state and central levels.

The project approach and strategy are largely inspired by work done by UNDP since the 1990s in Myanmar, as part of its people-centered development approach. Several of the individuals who helped establish the IPs working with DCA on this project were former UNDP staff members.

Training session in Pinlaung, March 2015. ©DCA

ii. Logical framework

The framework below aims to capture the project logic. In view of the focus placed by the project document on outcomes and indicators, these are set out in separate columns.

Project outputs	Output indicators	Project outcomes	Development Objective
• Inception workshops: at national level and in each project area. • Organizational assessment workshops for IPs • Capacity development training for IPs (project management, financial management and anti-corruption, computer skills)	• IP organizational capacity • % of IP staff whose skills have increased	Three CBOs gain increased organizational management expertise and are equipped with the skills necessary to mobilize women in their communities on issues relating to empowerment and democratic rights.	To strengthen institutional capacity of three independent CBOs working with rural women's groups to establish associations of self-help groups and promote inclusive participatory dialogue with authorities.
• SHWGs established and leaders trained • Basic-level SHWG concept training (facilitation and meeting coordination, financial management, rules-setting) • Advanced-level SHWG training (impact of development on community projects. conflict management, gender sensitivity, networking, etc.) • Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) in 36 villages, including PRA training for community women • Women's empowerment training (including bookkeeping, social audit, small business management, group self-assessment) • Savings and small grants activity • Social auditing of villages • Establishment and registration of cooperatives	• % of community women who demonstrate increased self-confidence • Number of SHWGs established	Women have increased economic standing, skills and linkages to be able to actively engage and influence local authorities, service providers and private companies, on behalf of their communities	
• Training for SHWGs and local government officials on voter rights; governance and accountability; anti-corruption; women's rights; land user rights. • Formulation of advocacy points • Township public forums • Regional advocacy forums • Exposure visit to Nay Pyi Taw	• Implementation of SHWG action points • Implementation of advocacy at township level	Advocacy and action points at village and township levels are formulated and implemented by SHWGs and associations	

IV. EVALUATION FINDINGS

This evaluation is based on questions formulated to meet the criteria of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The questions and sub-questions are found in Annex 1 of this document.

(i) Relevance

The project was very relevant in all material respects. It was based on a thorough analysis of the socio-economic context of the target rural areas, and on a sound, well-judged understanding of the challenges faced by women in those areas. The project built on the experience of UNDP in the development of WSHGs, aiming both at enhancing the participation of women in community decision-making processes and at creating income generation opportunities. Nevertheless, the relevance of the project could have been somewhat enhanced by more deliberately addressing men's attitudes towards women, and by streamlining the advocacy strategy. These points are addressed below.

The relevance of the project was maintained – indeed enhanced – despite the significantly changed political context of Myanmar between the time the project was designed (2012-13) and the period of implementation (2014-16). In 2012, the NLD won a series of by-elections, with Aung San Suu Kyi herself entering parliament. In 2013, the state monopoly on newspapers ended, setting the stage for a broadening of media freedoms. This period was also one marked by the large-scale return of development assistance, supporting the development of institutional reform blueprints by the Union Government, including in relation to the decentralization of administrative decision-making powers, an issue of direct relevance to the economic development of rural communities. The project remained relevant throughout this period of change, as a result of three strategic decisions related to project design:

- The strong focus on the local (village and tract) level made the project relatively independent of political developments at the national level, since activities such as capacity building of SHWGs and livelihoods enhancement could be carried out in a self-contained manner. Of course, the project did benefit from the more open political climate since 2012, and would have suffered if the climate had evolved the other way. Nevertheless, the focus on the local level helped maintain its relevance regardless of national upheavals.
- The project was also strategic in its contacts with local officials: by targeting district-based officials in charge of specific tasks, such as developing animal husbandry or cash crops, the project was able to engage them in a dialogue on consensual matters. While such officials were less powerful than district administrators, they were also more likely to address communities' practical concerns relating to income generating activities.[3] By addressing low-level officials at a technical level, the project further helped build the capacity of local government, thus addressing an additional need.
- The project took a non-confrontational approach to advocacy, primarily based on bringing local officials together with community members to discuss specific, practical issues. Also, local officials were invited to participate on an equal footing in training

[3] District administrators are overseen by the General Administration Department, which is considered the backbone of Myanmar administrative structure and is headed, at Union Government level, by the Minister of Home Affairs, an army officer.

sessions designed for community members. This helped ensure that dialogue remained focused on specific livelihoods needs, and reduced the risk that communities would experience alienation from local authorities.

The project document had identified decentralization as a contextual issue that should be taken into account in designing activities. In practice, decentralization of decision-making has yet to take place in Myanmar, as it would require constitutional changes, and therefore a degree of consensus across the political spectrum. Development partners have noted that decentralization would also require a substantial increase in the institutional capacity of local authorities, if these are to be able to manage their affairs more autonomously. The project provided for local officials to be invited to participate in training sessions aimed at WSHG, and was in that sense tangentially addressing a broadly acknowledged need.

DCA designed the project in close consultation with the IPs – this helped ensure that their experience was taken into account, which was particularly important because the three local IPs were the backbone of the project's implementation, DCA's role being limited to coordination, financial management and aspects of technical support. Several IP personnel had previously implemented UNDP's WSHG concept, which this project largely replicated. Their long-standing experience working with rural women's groups was doubtless a key element that contributed to the project's performance, because activities were designed in the light of past IP experience on aspects such as the size and composition of women's groups, options for income generating activities, etc.

Could the project have been designed in a more relevant way in view of the needs identified? The evaluators' view is that the project was essentially as relevant in its design as could be reasonably expected, and that only marginal improvements could possibly have been made. The main potential addition to the design could have been the following:

- Addressing the issues of men's attitudes towards the role of women in the communities. The project correctly emphasized the need to build the capacity of women to take part in decision-making processes, but it could also have included an element addressing men, to encourage them to support women's involvement in such processes. In the absence of engagement specifically directed at men, the project ran the risk of appearing to be solely a support mechanism for women. Nevertheless, the project as it was designed was sufficient to achieve its main outcomes, including in terms of democratic and human rights awareness, for both women and men. Indeed, as the "Impact" section below will argue, the project helped achieve noticeable changes in men's attitudes toward political participation by women in community affairs.
- Specifying the meaning of advocacy in the context of the project. The project document, as it was written, suggested that engagement with local authorities on the part of newly capacitated SHWG would lead to policy advocacy. This was an over-ambitious formulation, based in part on the assumption that political reforms in Myanmar would move sufficiently forward during the project period to ensure that local authorities gain a degree of autonomy. This did not happen, and in any case the SWHGs and IPs, despite the capacity building, remained relatively weak organizations. The advocacy that they could more realistically be expected to engage in – as they in fact did during the project – concerned very specific administrative and livelihoods issues, such as calls for household registration and national identity documents, road building and land allocation. This point is reviewed in the "Effectiveness" section below.

The relevance of the project was closely related to the "richness" of the WSHG approach. The concept of WSHG evolved from the Self-Reliance Groups (SRGs) originally developed in Myanmar by UNDP in the 1990s, based on an original model developed by a South Indian NGO, Myrada, in the 1980s.[4] UNDP began developing SRGs in Myanmar in its Community Development in Remote Townships (CDRT) program in 1997, after piloting the model in 1994-96. The project used the "self-help" denomination instead of the original "self-reliance" wording, partly in recognition of the outside input that the groups need to be established and supported, at least in their early years: the groups are about self-help from day one, but they only become self-reliant after their members receive (and make practical use of) training from qualified field staff.

On the basis of UNDP's experience in Myanmar (and more indirectly of Myrada's in India) the project drew lessons with regard to the criteria for successful self-help groups. The project document noted that such groups work most effectively when they are all-female, or at least have a significant majority of female members. There are multiple reasons for this – the main ones being that the presence of male members tends to hamper equal participation by all members, and that male-dominated groups tend to enter into competition with political decision-making bodies such as village development councils, etc.[5] UNDP's and Myrada's experience also showed that effective groups also fulfill criteria including the following (set out, among other sources in Myrada's website):

- Relatively small size (20-30 members), so as to ensure effective participation in meetings, group management, etc.
- Regular savings, scheduling of payments, to be agreed by the group itself.
- Office bearers to be elected on an annual basis, or otherwise frequently enough to avoid entrenchment of power.

Advocacy by SHWG and IPs

With regard to advocacy, the project document's main focus was on training and on joint work by IPs and SHWGs to acquire advocacy skills and define advocacy topics. Interviews with SHWGs showed that actual advocacy activities conducted during the project were closely related to communities' practical concerns about livelihoods. They included issues such as:

- Requests for national registration cards. Remoteness and in some cases a history of violent conflict has resulted in citizens not being issued with ID cards, and also lacking household registration documents. This has civic implications (absence from voter registries, difficulties with school enrolment) as well as economic ones (market trading, access to banking services, etc.).
- Some SHWGs have also advocated for the renovation of access roads. The evaluators visited locations accessible only on a dirt road, which becomes impassable in the rainy season, making market access (for example) difficult.
- In some cases, advocacy focused on land, with a view to securing the recognition of land rights, and in one case to seek compensation in the form of alternative land after fields were flooded when a dam was built.

IPs reported that advocacy has mainly been directed to the local-level officials directly in charge of the issues, and not to the political decision-makers, as access to such people was often difficult.

[4] Myrada (the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency) originally developed its SRG approach as a channel for micro-credit and savings investment. See: www.myrada.org/history/

[5] A 2009 case study of SRGs in Myanmar, commissioned by UNDP, stated that, of about 4,000 SRGs functioning in December 2008, close to 3,900 were all-women. See: SRG Case Studies, Policy Unit UNDP Myanmar, February 2009 (accessible through the UNDP Myanmar website).

- Effective maintenance of records (attendance, meeting minutes, savings ledger, etc.) to ensure transparency and mutual trust.

The project document drew significantly on UNDP's experience in Myanmar, mentioning for example that several IP staff had been active as field workers for UNDP prior to the UNDEF application. Nevertheless, the project document regrettably did not fully acknowledge its intellectual "debt" to UNDP in the design of the project. In addition, as will be noted in the "Effectiveness" section below, some of the WSHGs established during the project were effectively reviving groups previously established under UNDP programs. While this fact does not detract from the IPs' merit in effectively implementing the project, it could have been more explicitly addressed in project documents and reports.

It should be noted, however, that the project elaborated substantially on the UNDP SRG model, essentially by elaborating on three aspects:

- Transparency and accountability. The project design ensured (through training and monitoring of SHWGs by the IPs) that the WSHGs adopted stringent anti-corruption practices for themselves and for related mechanisms such as village rice banks.
- Adding a rights awareness and advocacy dimension to groups' tasks. As mentioned above, the original SRG approach was focused on savings and credit. The WSHG methodology broadened the scope of action to engagement with authorities and civil education – including visits to Nay Pyi Taw.
- Working with associations. Another strategically significant addition to the SRG model was the provision that WSHGs would (with support from the IPs) develop links with village and other community-level groups and contribute to their capacity development, with a view to enhancing their organizational capacity, and eventually to involve them in advocacy.

Members of a SHWG, Myaungshwe, October 2015. ©DCA

(ii) Effectiveness

The project was highly effective, in that planned activities were implemented, and – more importantly – outcomes were achieved to a very satisfactory standard. Good budget management (and some luck with exchange rates) helped ensure that some additional activities could be carried out, mostly in the form of training workshop repeats; a second visit to Nay Pyi Taw was added, as was an exchange visit between two IPs. Two of the three IPs were also able to use funds saved under other budget lines to increase funding for small grants.

Against this excellent overall background, there were elements that limited effectiveness, mostly in minor ways. The main concerns were related to the marketing of the products made under the small grants procedure (communities experienced difficulties accessing markets in which they could sell their products), and to some of the policy advocacy plans (many of which proved somewhat ambitious in view of the capacity of the IPs and of the SHWGs). There were other circumstantial elements that hampered effectiveness to a limited extent, according to interviewees, though they did not compromise the fulfillment of the planned indicators. These elements are reviewed below.

It is difficult to identify any additional step that could have been taken to improve effectiveness. In that sense, the project was exemplary in its effectiveness, both in terms of the clarity of outcomes to be achieved (and activities to achieve them) and of quantitative and qualitative standards of achievement. In addition to excellent design and the lessons learned from past experience, the project also owed its high effectiveness to highly committed and skilled teams in the three IPs, and to effective technical support from DCA (see "Efficiency" section below). If anything, the policy advocacy element may have been slightly less effective than anticipated (or suggested) in the project document. Although that point is explored below, it did not hamper the overall effectiveness of the project because implementers achieved the planned outcomes regardless, and did so to a high standard.

Effectiveness at outcome level

The degree of achievement of the anticipated outcomes can be summarized as follows:

- *Three CBOs gain increased organizational management expertise and are equipped with the skills necessary to mobilize women in their communities on issues relating to empowerment and democratic rights.* This outcome was clearly achieved: the three IPs were clearly well organized and managed effectively. The IPs' staff members who met with the evaluators were highly skilled and could answer questions in detail and with a clear grasp of strategic stakes. They demonstrated an excellent grasp of the socio-political context in the communities they were supporting, and were able to present clear, long-term work plans. They were able to exercise independent political judgment – though some openly acknowledged that they were supporters of the NLD and had demonstrated a capacity to interact effectively with local authorities. The three IPs also clearly had the skills required to conduct civic education activities and to encourage rural citizens to take part in elections.

  It should be noted, nevertheless, that the IPs were not starting from a blank page into this project. The three IPs had existed before the project started and some had worked with DCA for years previously. Their founding members were former UNDP field workers who clearly brought a wide range of skills to the IPs, prior to project start. It would therefore be misleading to ascribe to the project all the skills demonstrated by the IPs. In that sense, the project document was being pessimistic where it stated that "organizational

management skills are lacking within the 28 staff and volunteers" of the IPs. This ambiguous sentence may be read to suggest that not all staff and volunteers had sufficient management skills at the start of the project, which was probably correct – but it also could be understood, incorrectly, to mean that no such skills existed among the staff.[6]

- *Women have increased economic standing, skills and linkages to be able to actively engage and influence local authorities, service providers and private companies, on behalf of their communities.* This outcome was achieved as well, essentially as a result of the effectiveness of the SHWGs, since women were running these groups on the basis of training provided by the IPs. Although the evaluators were not able to meet many groups, they were able to talk to a sample of group members, who consistently described how membership of the SHWGs enhanced their "self-confidence" and helped them acquire organizational and management skills. There were several examples of individual successes by women, which the women themselves ascribed to their participation in the project. These included, for example, being elected as 10-households or (in the case of one of the interviewees) as 100-household head, and in other leadership positions such as village development committees, rice banks, agricultural development committees, etc. There were also many instances of women who, as a result of their membership of the SHWGs, were able to start or develop income-generating activities (see box).

  A key element of this outcome's effectiveness was related to the savings and small grants activities. This worked in two ways: (1) by providing some starting capital resulting from encouragement to savings and from the use of project fund to provide short-term loans; and (2) by providing technical advice on income generating activities, such as training SHWG members in soap-making, animal husbandry, etc., and in more generic skills such as accounting and marketing.

  The importance of this savings and grants activity must be emphasized because of its significant contribution to improving livelihoods and also because it is key to the sustainability of the SHWG concept, as will be discussed below. Although generally very effective, the activity also faced some constraints, which interviewees highlighted:
  - The range of income-generating activities on which training was given was relatively limited. This had the effect that several households in the same village were often engaging in the same income-generating activities, thus competing against each other in a relatively limited marked. A typical example was the production of liquid soap: households were able to produce a fairly large amount of this product, but had difficulty marketing it because the village-level market was too small to absorb the entire production and because other markets (in nearby cities for example) were too distant, or required better packaging than was available.
  - The multiplication of households engaged in the same income-generating activity led to big increases in the supply of some products, causing the risk that prices could collapse.
  - IPs also noted that, though income-generating activities were welcome and made a tangible difference to livelihoods, they did not provide enough revenue to discourage migration of villagers to work as day laborers in cities or in more prosperous villages. Many migrant laborers would only return to the villages to

[6] The evaluators noted this ambiguity in their debriefing with DCA, noting that it had the effect of making the IPs look less skilled at the beginning of the project than they actually were.

work the fields during the rainy season, thus limiting their ability to make use of the savings and grants scheme. Nevertheless, to the extent it was targeted at permanent village residents, mainly women, the scheme did widen households' range of income generating options.

- *Advocacy and action points at village and township levels formulated and implemented by SHWGs and associations.* This outcome was achieved in the sense that the IPs and the SHWGs worked together to present demands to local authorities and more generally to engage in a dialogue with them, and in the sense that a substantial number of specific SHWG demands were fulfilled in the course of the project, or (in a small number of cases) were under consideration at the time the project ended. The effectiveness of the project in this respect was primarily based on the civic education and rights awareness training carried out by IPs with DCA support, and on the various thematic training workshops addressing issues such as governance, land use and advocacy strategies.

  Against this background of overall achievement, it must be noted however that there was little engagement in policy advocacy or in what the project document called "the area of democratic processes and rights". Instead, the bulk of the advocacy, as indicated above, focused on practical community concerns, such as road building and other infrastructures. Many households benefited directly from advocacy activities, for example by being granted land registration certificates (as well as individual documents such as birth certificates, etc.). Although the visits to Nay Pyi Taw also involved an advocacy element, that too was oriented more towards practical livelihoods needs than towards policy or democratic accountability issues.

Effectiveness at activity/output level

The project activities were implemented, to a very large extent, as planned. Indeed a number of activity indicators were exceeded compared to original plans. The Final Narrative Report (FNR) gives a detailed, activity-by-activity analysis, which demonstrates that project implementation closely followed the original blueprint. Against this background of achievement, the project did face challenges to its effectiveness, essentially because of external circumstances. According to IPs, the challenges were the following:

- The low education level of many villagers made it more difficult than anticipated to achieve the required levels of SHWG capacity building. IPs noted that some SHWG members were functionally illiterate: according to one IP, only about a third of women SHWG members could read and write fluently – this required training methodologies based on personal interaction rather than written materials and outputs, and limited the number of people who could assume leadership positions in SHWGs and other bodies, due to the accountability requirements.
- The highly seasonal character of agricultural work, intense in the rainy season, made it difficult at certain time to ensure SHWG members actually participated in meetings and other activities. Similarly, the fact that some members were migrant laborers who left their villages in the dry season also presented a challenge to IPs.
- IPs also faced the challenge of high staff turnover. Low salaries compared to the qualifications that the work demanded (and a degree of competition for staff among civil society organizations) made it difficult to retain staff, especially after they were trained and gained some experience. Though this did not apply to the more senior IP managers, whose ranks remained stable throughout the project period, it was an issue that impacted on some of the IPs, especially SKBZ, which works in a relatively remote area.

- There were also cultural challenges: in addition to the hostility of some men to efforts aiming at giving women a leadership role, there were also difficulties in relation to advocacy towards local government authorities. Due to a tradition of top-down political decision-making processes, local authorities had little or no experience of being exposed to "demands" coming from communities, and did not always respond favorably to pressure and what they may have perceived as politically-motivated "lobbying". To counteract this perception, IPs generally exercised sensitivity in their engagement with local authorities, highlighting the practical and legal aspects of community demands.

Overview of outcome indicators

The project document set out a battery of six outcome indicators, which were more qualitative than quantitative in nature. Generally speaking the indicators captured the essence of the outcomes and were appropriately used by DCA in the FNR to describe project achievements. However, the last two indicators, concerning advocacy by SHWGs and by local communities, were in practice impossible to assess separately, because advocacy was conducted jointly by SHWGs and IPs, with community input when necessary. The indicators were the following:

- *Organizational capacity of the IPs*. This is a mainly qualitative indicator, based on organizational assessments of the IPs. These assessments were never formally conducted, but interviews with the evaluators indicated that the IPs had developed effective management and accountability systems, in fields such as procurement, project cycle management, and internal governance.
- *IP staff skills.* The skills of the IPs' personnel met by the evaluators were appropriate to their tasks. As noted above, the IPs started the project with a good skill base, but staff acknowledged that training and technical support provided by DCA substantially enhanced their capacity to manage their activities and monitor the SHWGs. Despite concerns about staff turnover, the three IPs have been able to nurture and retain skilled staff.
- *Community women's skills and involvement.* This indicator too was fulfilled. A large number of women members of SHWGs told the evaluators that they gained substantially in knowledge about governance and community affairs, and acquired self-confidence to keep local authorities accountable. The numerous "success stories" described by DCA in the FNR, and by SHWG participants who met with evaluators, demonstrate that this mainly qualitative indicator was fulfilled.
- *Establishment of SHWGs and Associations.* This indicator was also met: 74 SHWG were established (against 72 planned), plus at least three others that were established by people from nearby areas inspired by the DCA model. According to IPs, the great majority of groups were still functioning at the end of the project period (though no precise figures were given to the evaluators).
- *Development of advocacy action points by SHWGs.* The reports and interviews with IPs and SHWGs demonstrate that a wide range of such points were developed and action taken to advocate for them. Reports also indicate that many of the action points were satisfactorily addressed by the authorities.
- *Development of advocacy action points by communities and associations.* In practice, this indicator proved impossible to distinguish from the previous one on action points developed by SHWGs, because the advocacy was largely conducted by SHWG members with support from the IPs and input from association and community members. Also, association representatives were often also members of SHWGs.

(iii) Efficiency

The project was efficient, in the sense that good use was made of the financial resources available and genuine added value was achieved. Project management was excellent, with a good level of collegiality between DCA and the IPs, and appropriate levels of transparency. The project's overall performance, as well as its efficiency, owed much to the professionalism and commitment of its managers and staff, who consistently demonstrated, in interviews with the evaluators, an excellent grasp of the strategic and implementation issues related to the project. The project's operating budget (excluding funds retained by UNDEF for monitoring and evaluation purposes) was US$225,000. The table below summarizes the way the budget was used.

Actual project spending compared to original budget in selected areas
Sources: project document, Financial Utilisation Report (FUR)

Item	Amount (US$)*	% of budget**	Remarks
Salaries	35,560	15.8	Slight overspend.
Travel	12,320	6.0	Significant underspend.
Contractual services	1,553	<1.0	Slight underspend (exchange rate gain)
Meetings and training	123,822	55.0	Significant underspend, partly thanks to exchange rate gains and despite additional training sessions implemented. Included moderate trainers' fees.
Fellowships, grants	36,143	16.0	Quasi-doubling of original allocation, as agreed with UNDEF, as a result of gains on other lines.
Advocacy	8,378	3.8	Underspend (exchange rate gain). Mainly printing costs.

: Rounded figures* *: The operating budget was US$225,000*

There was significant variation in the way spending was distributed, between the original budget and the actual use. This resulted from changes in the allocation of funds to the various budget lines – the changes had been agreed between UNDEF and DCA, and interviews also showed that DCA had discussed these with the IPs as well. Among the changes, the main one concerned the savings and grants schemes: this was almost doubled in size from US$19,905 to US$36,143, thus providing additional scope for SHWGs to act. The following comments may be made about the allocation of funds:

- Salaries represented a very reasonable proportion of the budget (15.8%). This is consistent with practice in many other UNDEF project budgets, where the salaries line frequently represents 15% to 20% of budgets. In this case, the salaries line was kept low partly because DCA contributed co-funding (US$26,904, or about 12% of the budget) that covered the salaries and costs incurred by its own staff. Variance on this line between planned and actual expenses was minor (under US$500).
- Travel costs represented less than 6% of the budget (original budget: 7%). This was explained partly by the fact that the cost of domestic travel in Myanmar actually dropped since 2013 as a result competition among domestic airlines and of the greater availability of cars, better roads, etc. Also, the effectiveness of the IPs made it unnecessary for DCA to carry out as many field visits as it originally anticipated.
- The contractual services line contained only one item: translation into Myanmar of the Anti-Corruption Manual. As a result of exchange rate gains, this cost just 60% of the original US$ budgeted amount, hence a saving of over US$1,300.
- Meetings and trainings represented a hefty 55% of the budget (against 59% in the original budget). This is a large amount, but fully justified in view of the central role

played by training and consultation meetings in the design of the project. This line included trainers' fees, which were very reasonable (US$100/day).

- The Advocacy budget line (under 4% of the budget) covered mostly the cost of printing handouts such as laws, voter education materials, the Anti-Corruption Handbook, etc. This line too was underspent by about US$3,500, largely as a result of exchange rate gains.
- The grants line, as indicated above, is the one that benefited from the under-spending in other areas. Instead of 8.4% of the budget, it was increased to 16% - this contributed to a substantial degree to the effectiveness and credibility of the SHWGs.
- Spending on other budget lines (equipment, office rental, communications, etc.) was consistent with plans and requires no comment.

Project management

As indicated above, project management was excellent. Much of the project design was done by the DCA team in conjunction with the IPs, and a management team made up of DCA staff and IP managers monitored implementation closely. Information about budgets and spending was shared in a transparent manner. DCA effectively fulfilled its technical advice role, providing information and input into activities as required, and maintaining detailed records of activities and spending. Some delays were experienced in internal reporting between IPs and DCA, largely due to the workload of the IPs, but these delays did not hamper the eventual quality and detail of the reports submitted to UNDEF.

It should be noted that the three IPs' performance in the project was somewhat different. DCA's view, confirmed by the evaluators, was that SIT and SNM were best organized, while SKBZ displayed weaknesses in management and effectiveness. This came down in part to lack of management experience among senior SKBZ staff. However, local conditions in Pinlaung Township (lack of access to officials) may also have contributed to weaker performance.

(iv) Impact

The project achieved substantial elements of impact at local level, in the sense that it raised awareness of voters' and women's rights, and initiated engagement between local officials and rural communities. Reports by IPs and evaluators' interviews with eight local officials and groups of dozens of women members of SHWGs indicated that attitudes changed among both sets of stakeholders: officials' attitude towards community members became more open and constructive, while members of SHWGs reported that they gained self-confidence addressing local governance issues, including in some case by seeking leadership positions.

It is of course impossible to attribute these elements of impact solely to the project, partly because the IPs had worked in many of the target villages in previous years, and partly because other factors were at play, including national trends towards democratization. Nevertheless, the testimonies of stakeholders, combined with the description by IPs of the changes in attitude they could witness among rural women and officials, indicate that the project played at least a contributory role towards these changes. To a more limited extent, the project also contributed to changing men's attitudes towards women's role in the community. Their experience of the outcomes of the saving and grants scheme, for example, encouraged several of them to seek additional income generating activities. There was also a sense of greater acceptance among men of women exercising a leadership role at local level (even though some men continued to note that this trend faces hostility).

How could the project have achieved a greater impact? In the evaluators' view, it could have done so with more sustained and more targeted engagement with men, and also with efforts to develop a policy advocacy agenda going beyond the practical livelihood issues addressed in advocacy to date, and seeking more systematic accountability to communities on the part of district-level officials. It should be recognized, however, that this is an ambitious and long-term agenda, which was never likely to be achieved in the two years covered by the project.

(v) Sustainability

This is an example of a project where sustainability was, to the extent possible, actually included in the design. The capacity building activities aimed at the IPs explicitly included supporting them towards achieving a degree of financial independence, by providing technical advice on project design and management, and by helping the IPs develop internal governance and accountability systems.

The injection of project funds, together with the sustained technical advice and mentoring provided by the IPs, have placed many of the SHWGs on course to achieve at least a degree of self-sufficiency. This is not to say that the groups have become resilient and self-sustaining, but that many have developed to the extent that they do not need day-to-day input by the IPs. Of course, the groups remain fragile, and the IPs recognize in particular that many groups depend on just one or two individuals whose engagement and dynamism carry the rest of the members. Should such individuals leave the group (or be, as some have been, elected to leadership positions), groups might be destabilized.

Despite these limitations, the project did achieve a substantial degree of sustainability in that the IPs have enhanced their resilience and that the SWHGs have, for the most part, also become able to carry on working without major IP input.

Voices of women, Mya San Village

In this village within Myaung Township, several women told the evaluators about the project's impact on their livelihoods. One described the training as "an eye-opener". She "understood how to talk to officials" and "learned about preventing corruption in [community] activities" such as the local rice bank – for example by sharing responsibility for holding cash and accounting for expenses.

Many women in the local SHG reported that they had been encouraged to vote, and had done so. However some also stated that they still did not understand how government worked. In a sign of increased understanding, however, village officials reported that there have been fewer invalid votes in 2015 than in 2010.

With regard to livelihood activities, women felt empowered by the new skills learned: not only production of goods such as shampoo and pastry items, but also administrative and accounting skills to manage funds. However, they also noted that market access remained difficult, particularly during the rainy season.

Women also reported that they learned to make better use of training sessions, asking more questions and seeking to apply acquired skills, for example in raising livestock. Many women praised the savings and loan groups formed as a result of the project.

(vi) UNDEF added value

The project benefited from the added value of the United Nations in two ways:

- In terms of design, UNDP's expertise in addressing poverty in rural areas was brought to bear in the present project, which used a similar conceptual framework to UNDP's in the use of self-help groups. Key IP staff had also acquired relevant knowledge by working earlier for UNDP.
- The project also benefited from the fact that the UN is known as a neutral actor, and appreciated for its contribution, in rural areas of Myanmar. The IPs repeatedly highlighted to local authorities the fact that the project was supported by a UN body, and this doubtless contributed to its acceptance.

Visit to Nay Pyi Taw, October 2015. ©DCA

V. CONCLUSIONS

(i) The project was very relevant, thanks to excellent analysis of socio-economic conditions and the use of a proven self-help methodology. The project design built on the lessons learned by UNDP with the implementation of self-reliance groups, and the implementing partners harnessed years of experience in rural areas to ensure that the project design addressed key needs in a realistic manner, adapted to the context.

(ii) The project design was relevant to the situation of rural women, irrespective of the political changes that took place at national level during its implementation. The project, by focusing on women's socio-economic status and on democratic governance issues, contributed to enhancing rights awareness in the targeted communities and to initiate constructive engagement with local-level officials.

(iii) The project was very effective, achieving planned outputs to a high standard, as well as expected outcomes. The project relied on training workshops and sustained consultations with stakeholders to build the capacities of the IPs and ensure the effective operation of the SHWGs. DCA's technical advice and input into the design of training sessions helped ensure that outcomes were met to a high standard.

(iv) The project was not sufficiently focused on advocacy concerning rights and democracy. Advocacy points concerned important livelihood issues, and access to social services. The project did not focus on rights and democratic participation as much as was anticipated in the project document.

(v) The savings and grants scheme was a significant contributor to the project's effectiveness. As a result of training based on UNDP's previous experience, the project helped ensure that the Self-Help Women's Groups gained credibility and achieved momentum, bringing tangible changes to the livelihoods of members.

(vi) The project represented genuine added value. The project's financial resources were appropriately used. Much of the resources went to training and other coordination workshops, while the savings and grants scheme was enhanced to reach over 15% of the budget. This helped ensure that the SHWGs achieved a degree of resilience and sustainability.

(vii) Project management was excellent. DCA and the IPs adopted a collegial approach, in which strategic as well as financial matters were discussed transparently, thus enhancing trust amongst partners. The commitment and professional skills of the IPs, acquired in part through the project, helped ensure its effective implementation.

(viii) The project achieved substantial impact at local level. The evaluators could identify some tangible changes in attitudes among some project stakeholders, including rural women and local officials. However, the project could have achieved a greater impact if it had also explicitly addressed men to raise awareness among them of the importance of women's participation in decision-making processes.

(ix) The project contributed to the IPs' sustainability. The capacity building activities implemented as part of the project clearly helped enhance the resilience of the IPs and their capacity to manage projects independently. The sustainability of the SHWGs was also appropriately addressed through training and financial support, with a view to making the group self-sustaining in future.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) DCA should continue working with the IPs to disseminate the project's approach. To the extent possible, DCA should encourage the IPs to establish more SHWGs in additional communities. DCA and the IPs should work together to identify sources of funding to help launch such new SHWG.

(ii) The IPs should seek to disseminate their expertise on the establishment of SHWGs. This experience, though not unique in Myanmar, is certainly one of the most positive ones in this field. It would be appropriate for the IPs to work with counterparts in other rural areas to disseminate the good practices developed through the project.

(iii) DCA should consult with UNDP on the scope for dissemination of the good practices developed during the project, including to other agencies in the UN system. While the project built on UNDP's own experience, feedback from DCA to UNDP might provide useful lessons to UNDP itself. It might also help disseminate relevant practices to other agencies active in Myanmar's rural areas.

(iv) Future projects of this nature should take this report's findings into account, and incorporate in their design elements highlighted above, including:

a. ***A component addressing men.*** Raising awareness among men about women's rights is necessary to contribute to reducing some of the challenges faced by women who seek leadership roles in their community.
b. ***More deliberately addressing issues of rights and participatory democracy.*** Addressing participatory democracy and human rights is important, in addition to advocacy on livelihoods, particularly in the evolving Myanmar context of decentralization and devolution of some powers to local and to regional/state authorities.
c. ***Enhance policy advocacy.*** A future project should develop a policy advocacy agenda going beyond the practical livelihood issues addressed in advocacy to date, and seeking more systematic accountability to communities on the part of district-level officials.
d. ***Enhance IP and SHWG resilience.*** It is important to note that, while substantial efforts have been made to address sustainability concerns at IP and SHWG levels, more remains to be done to enhance resilience. There is a continuing need for training and for ensuring that local capacities develop further. Support to IPs in identifying funding sources also remains necessary.

VII. ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: EVALUATION QUESTIONS

DAC criterion	Evaluation Question	Related sub-questions
Relevance	To what extent was the project, as designed and implemented, suited to context and needs at the beneficiary, local, and national levels?	▪ Were the objectives of the project in line with the needs and priorities for democratic development, given the context? ▪ Should another project strategy have been preferred rather than the one implemented to better reflect those needs, priorities, and context? Why? How appropriate are/were the strategies developed to deal with identified risks? Was the project overly risk-averse?
Effectiveness	To what extent was the project, as implemented, able to achieve objectives and goals?	▪ To what extent have the project's objectives been reached? ▪ To what extent was the project implemented as envisaged by the project document? If not, why not? ▪ Were the project activities adequate to make progress towards the project objectives? ▪ What has the project achieved? Where it failed to meet the outputs identified in the project document, why was this?
Efficiency	To what extent was there a reasonable relationship between resources expended and project impacts?	▪ Was there a reasonable relationship between project inputs and project outputs? ▪ Did institutional arrangements promote cost-effectiveness and accountability? ▪ Was the budget designed, and then implemented, in a way that enabled the project to meet its objectives?
Impact	To what extent has the project put in place processes and procedures supporting the role of civil society in contributing to democratization, or to direct promotion of democracy?	▪ To what extent has/have the realization of the project objective(s) and project outcomes had an impact on the specific problem the project aimed to address? ▪ Have the targeted beneficiaries experienced tangible impacts? Which were positive; which were negative? ▪ To what extent has the project caused changes and effects, positive and negative, foreseen and unforeseen, on democratization? ▪ Is the project likely to have a catalytic effect? How? Why? Examples?
Sustainability	To what extent has the project, as designed and implemented, created what is likely to be a continuing impetus towards democratic development?	▪ To what extent has the project established processes and systems that are likely to support continued impact? ▪ Are the involved parties willing and able to continue the project activities on their own (where applicable)?
UNDEF value-added	To what extent was UNDEF able to take advantage of its unique position and comparative advantage to achieve results that could not have been achieved had support come from other donors?	▪ What was UNDEF able to accomplish, through the project, that could not as well have been achieved by alternative projects, other donors, or other stakeholders (Government, NGOs, etc.). ▪ Did project design and implementing modalities exploit UNDEF‟ s comparative advantage in the form of an explicit mandate to focus on democratization issues?

ANNEX 2: DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Project documents UDF-MYA-12-514:

**: Denotes documents in Myanmar language, read by the national consultant*

- Project Document
- Mid-Term and Final Narrative Reports
- Milestone Verification Reports
- Financial Utilization Report
- PO Additional Note
- Exposure visit report*
- Association Registration Certificates*
- Report of Project Coordination Committee Meeting
- Village profiles*
- SNM Social Audit Report*
- Regional Advocacy Workshop Report*

External sources:

- Government of Myanmar: "Framework for Economic and Social reforms, Policy Priorities for 2012-15 towards the Long-Term Goals of the National Comprehensive Development Plan" (2012)
- Asia Foundation: "State and Region Governments in Myanmar" (Sep. 2013).
- UNDP: "Democratic Governance in Myanmar, Current Trends and Implications" (January 2014).
- Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, *Lessons Learned from MPSI's work supporting the peace process in Myanmar*. March 2014.
- Asia Foundation and Centre for Economic and Social Development, *State and Region Governments in Myanmar* (2013).
- Salai Isaac Khen and Muk Yin Haung Nyoi, *Looking at the Current Peace Process in Myanmar through a Gender Lens*. Catalyzing Reflections Series, Swiss Peace, May 2014.
- International Crisis Group, *Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks*. Asia Briefing No 143, April 2014.
- International Crisis Group, *Not a Rubber Stamp: Myanmar's Legislature in a Time of Transition*. Asia Briefing No 142, December 2013.
- International Crisis Group, *The Dark Side of Transition: Violence against Muslims in Myanmar*. Asia Report No 251, October 2013.
- International Crisis Group, *A Tentative Peace in Myanmar's Kachin Conflict*. Asia Briefing No 140, June 2013.

ANNEX 3: LIST OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

9 May 2016	
Yangon	
Thin Khaing	UNDP Senior Field Coordinator
Mani Kumar	Head of Programs, DCA
Katrine Gertz Schlundt	Global Funding Officer, DCA
Tha Zin Kyaw	Finance Officer, DCA
Aung Swe Myint	Program Officer, DCA
Tin Tin Mar	Program Officer, DCA
10 May 2016	
Nyaungshwe	
Hla Myint Hpu	Director, SIT
Hnin Hnin Ohn	Project Manager, SIT
Cho Phyo Ne	Township Facilitator, SIT
Myint Myint Swe	Community Development Worker, SIT
Khin Maung Shwe	Project Manager, SKBZ
Khin Myo	Village Tract Administrator, Pinlaung Township
Khin Mya	10-Households Head, Pinlaung Township
Group of 22 women, 3 men	SHWG and villagers, Nyaugshwe district
11 May 2016	
Monywa	
Than Htay	Project Manager, SNM
Khine Khine Oo	Community Trust Fund Manager
Nwe Yi, Lay Nwe	Township Facilitators
Hay Mar Lwin	Accountant
Township Agriculture Department official	
Township Livestock Department official	
12 May 2016	
Mya San Village, Oke Boke Tract	
Group of 40+ women, 12 men	Members of: 2 SHWGs; Village Development Committee; rice bank administrators; Agriculture Development Committee
13 May 2016	
Yangon	
DCA team (as above)	Debriefing

ANNEX 4: LIST OF ACRONYMS

CBOs	community-based organizations
CDRT	Community Development in Remote Townships
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
DCA	DanChurchAid
FNR	Final Narrative report
FUR	Financial utilization report
GDP	Gross domestic product
IP	Implementing partner
MVR	Milestone verification report
NLD	National League for Democracy
PRA	Participatory rural appraisals
SHWG	Self-help women's group
SIT	Shwe Inn Thu Women's Self-Help Group
SKBZ	Shwe Kanbawza Self-Help Group
SNM	Shwe Nyar Myay Self-Help Group
SRG	Self-Reliance Groups
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund
UNDP	United Nations development program