

## RE-EXAMINING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENERGY DEVELOPMENT IN MYANMAR AND THE WAYS FORWARD FOR ENERGY DEMOCRACY

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Public Protest Against a Hydropower Project  
in Myanmar

Source: Shan News

### Key Messages:

- Most of the energy development face public pushbacks partly because public comes last at policymaking process.
- Furthermore, public participation in policymaking is still low as well as the process is less inclusive and meaningful.
- Study found that public do not protest the projects per se, but they protest the policy and procedures of the policy implementation.
- In addition, challenges limit public participation in energy development process.
- Moving forward, power generation projects should be redesigned to include public participation at the early stages. Participatory design could be an option to do so.

### Planning to fail? Democratic deficits in Myanmar power generation development

A rapid economic growth in Myanmar has led to a sharp growth in electric power demand – 15-20 % per year (MOEE, 2019). This demand is driving by such forces as: the government's policy to increase the electrification access to cover nationwide by 2030 from the current 68% cover (World Bank, n.d.), and the yearly 0.6% growing population. To meet the growing demand, the country has since been developing power generation projects across the country - from hydropower to coal power plants. The two governments – the military- backed government and Aung San Suu Kyi-led civilian government – have prioritized the electricity sector. During the latter government, for example, the electricity and energy budget was at the top of the

2019-2020 budget list (Htwe, 2019). This clearly indicates how government policy focused on the power sector development. However, most power generation projects have failed to be implemented. Even though a project was feasible technically and financially (and environmentally), it could not be implemented on the ground. The projects have failed because they have faced public pushbacks. Limited public participation and engagement results in conflicts with the public during the projects' planning and implementation. This brief examined what the challenges to improve public participation are and outlined recommendation to overcome these challenges. Improving public participation will be largely the case in post-coup Myanmar, given lack of trust between state and society. In developing the policy brief, five key informant interviews from government officials to environmental activists were done and so did documentary analysis.



**Public Protest Against a Hydro Power Project  
in Myanmar**

Source: *The Myanmar Times*

## Findings: Challenges limit public participation

There are three main challenges that limit public participation in energy development in Myanmar. This includes institutional challenges, perceptual challenges, and capacity challenges.

When it comes to institutional challenges, first, limited and unclear procedures and frameworks related to public participation are largely the case to increase public participation as people raise the questions regarding the development process of the projects rather than the projects. Second, limited access to the information could be another case in which people rarely know the information regarding the project – if they knew, it came at the very last. This, in other words, makes the public concerned the projects. Third, limited access leads to corruption, which has been in Myanmar for years. Fourth, communication & coordination among the stakeholders, especially government agencies are the pressing challenges that need to be improved.

Regarding the perceptual challenges, trust could significantly have influenced public participation in the project development. Lack of trust among the government, investors and public including environmental activists resulted in the conflicts among them, delaying the project implementation. Moreover, different standing points among the stakeholders creates the gap in increasing public participation. In addition, lack of seriousness with

regard to the important of public participation could be another reason why public participation is low, whereas public participation is implemented as tick-box exercise, rather than it is a part of every policy making process.

Given historical weakness in institution and capacity building, capacity challenges impact inclusive involvement in decision making process. The main challenges, among others, include limited human resources, limited time for public participation, limited knowledge regarding the importance of public participation and financial capability.

In addition, public participation is not simple: it is politics; it links to landownership issues, resettlement, compensation, corruption, and others. Furthermore, it is the result of historical weakness in institutional building and over decades of political regime. In addition, it also directly related to power and benefits sharing between union and state government as well as between state and society. What is more, it is also related to culture, identity and values embedded in Myanmar society.

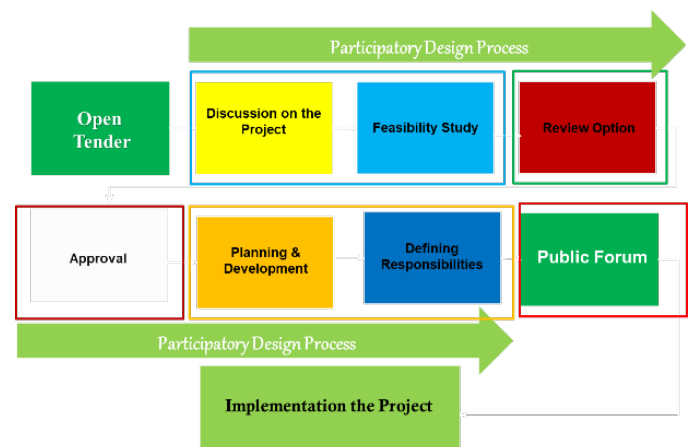


**Public Protest Against a Coal-fired Power Project  
in Myanmar**

*Source: Radio Free Asia*

## Policy recommendations: Ways forward

**First, participatory design matters.** The following participatory design should be integrated into current process in power generation sectors to have a meaningful and inclusive public participation.



**Fig. Proposed Participatory Planning Process**

*Source: Developed by Researcher*

# Policy Brief

- Firstly, tender processes are needed to be transparent. It should be done through only tender process, but not proposal. At the beginning stage of the project, government should submit the detailed balance information, such as the project area, the power generation sources, to the representatives who will be selected from project areas. The decision will be made based on recommendations from public. In feasibility study report, public participation report should be included as a report. Furthermore, not only government agencies & investors but also professional representative, environmental technicians and others' area who is related to the power sectors are also included in participant list both discussion on the project and feasibility stage. In review stage, the administrators from different government agencies, experts from relevant fields should be the participants. In approval stage, the administrators from different government agencies should include but the decision will depend on agreements of the previous stages. Regarding planning and development stage and defining responsibilities stage, the participants should be the government agencies, professional representatives, and professional stakeholders. In the last stage, it should be public forum and the relevant government agencies, investors, experts

from relevant field, general public and local people should be involved in participant list. The voice of people and concern will be considered in implementation stage.

**Second, communication matters.** The government must share the detailed information about a project by using the appropriate communication channel to the public not only to access the information from the public but also to share the information to the public. Furthermore, the public must not only receive the information but also have the opportunity to discuss it. In other words, the general public and regional government must be able to manage the project. National government has to share the power with the regional government. In other words, the government needs to reduce its centralization.

**Third, policy deliberation matters.** Not only technical consideration but also technical assumption should be incorporated into the existing planning process. These four levels should be integrated into the process: technical verification, situational vindication, societal vindication, and ideological choice because some kinds of factors are beyond the technical issues.

**More importantly, better public participation should be** that all stakeholders at all levels should be involved at the right time. Public should participate in every stage of the process of a project, especially the initial stage of a project. For instance, the public

should be involved from the beginning of the land allocation for the project.

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