

Civic Engagement between MP and their Regional Community

Open Myanmar Initiative

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I. Introduction

Members of Parliament (MPs) have three major responsibilities, including the responsibility to represent their constituencies. This means MPs are responsible for helping and protecting the people who voted for them in accordance with the existing law and their authority.

As representatives, MPs have to present the people's needs and difficulties to the government. This task can be effectively carried out through actions such as approving laws required for the country and monitoring the government instead of the people.

Therefore, MPs need to strengthen their activities on their representative duty. MPs also need support and assistance to be effective representatives. Moreover, there is also need to upgrade the capacities of MPs as well as their support staff.

In order for MPs to be effective representatives, it is necessary for them to improve their level of knowledge on topics such as understanding the existing political situation through the voters, the role of Parliament and representatives, and citizen rights and responsibilities.

By increasing their own awareness on these topics, citizens can also collaborate with MPs evaluate and criticize the performance of Members of Parliament and the government, monitor the government through MPs and participate and contribute to the legislation process.

Only if those needs, between members of Parliaments, can be fulfilled, transparency, accountability, responsibility and collaboration can be strengthened.

Only if those representative duties are carried out effectively, regional development can be progressed more and more.

The Relationship of Parliament to Citizens

The research paper "Citizen Political Engagement" published by the Hansard Society includes interest in voting, interest in politics, political awareness and knowledge, awareness and understanding of parliament and its process, effective citizen participation in the political decision making process, and satisfaction with the performance of parliament as key measurements¹.

¹ Joel Blackwell, Brigid Fowler, and Ruth Fox. Audit of Political Engagement 15. Report (London: Hansard Society, 2018).

The research paper was commissioned following the 2001 UK elections, which saw the lowest voter turnout in 80 years. The paper aimed to measure citizen political engagement. The authors found that citizen political engagement is correlated to the political accountability of Members of Parliament and the government. Answerability and enforceability are two critical indicators in measuring accountability. Transparency and concrete, timely information sharing are necessary for both. So it is put forth that the fundamental needs of the people to be able to question their representatives and make requests should be met through government action².

The accessibility of concrete and timely information is correlated to citizen political engagement. In this research paper, we measured citizen political engagement by relating political accountability to measuring citizen political engagement.

II. Research Method

When we learned the collaboration between local people and MPs, we mainly asked the questions based on transparency, information sharing and cooperation as primary needs.

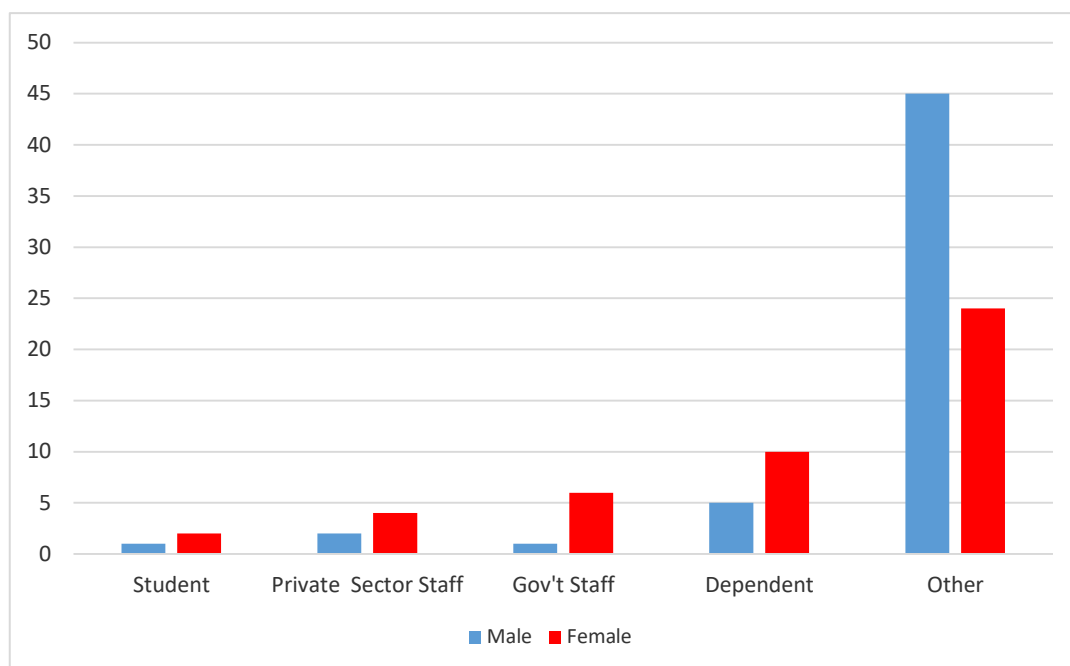
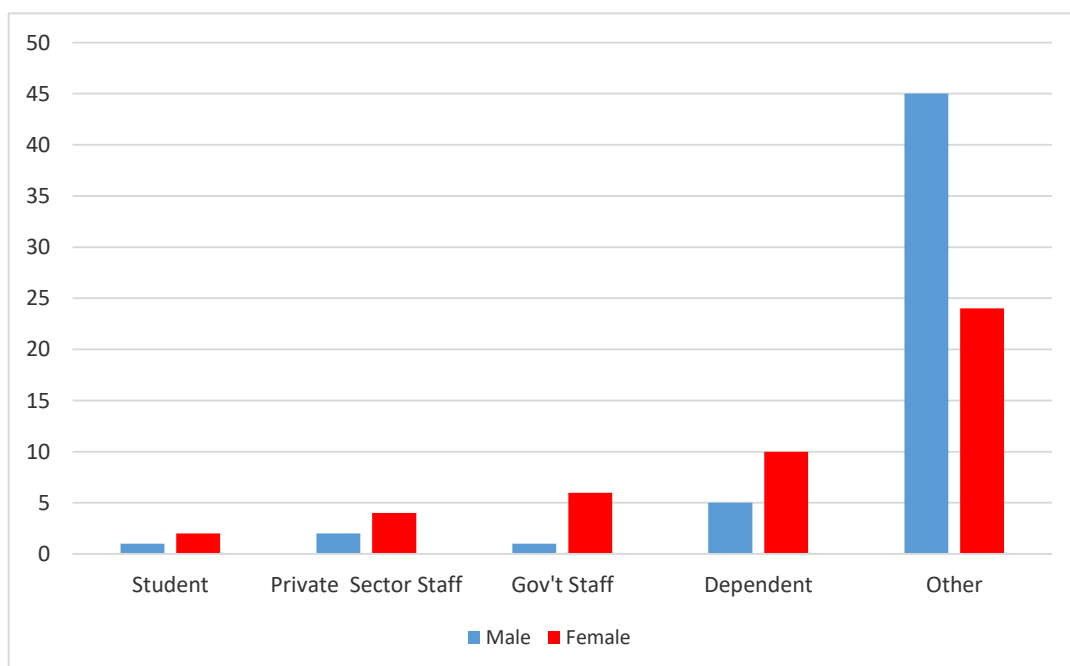
We asked interviewees a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions. Quantitative questions included the education levels of interviewees, some question related to MPs, and questions regarding information sharing. Qualitative questions included questions about transparency, collaboration and the development sector. We asked the specific numbers of interviewees who are proportionally marked in accordance with the ratio of population of villages and wards of the Townships.

For we asked the questions to the specific numbers of interviewees, there is no restriction about gender, education levels and occupations and we just mentioned on that we found.

For the data for our research, we collected a small survey and data from native people of Monywa Township in Sagaing Region and Taunggyi Township of Shan State. We collected the data not only from urban areas, but also from the villages surrounding those areas. We accumulated the data from 20 wards and 6 villages of Monywa Township and Taunggyi Township. After collecting this data, we interviewed Members of the National Parliament (Amyotha Hluttaw) and Members of the People's Parliament (Pyithu Hluttaw) in Monywa Township and Taunggyi Township.

The following chart contains demographic data including the ages, education level, and occupations of the local people who participated in our survey.

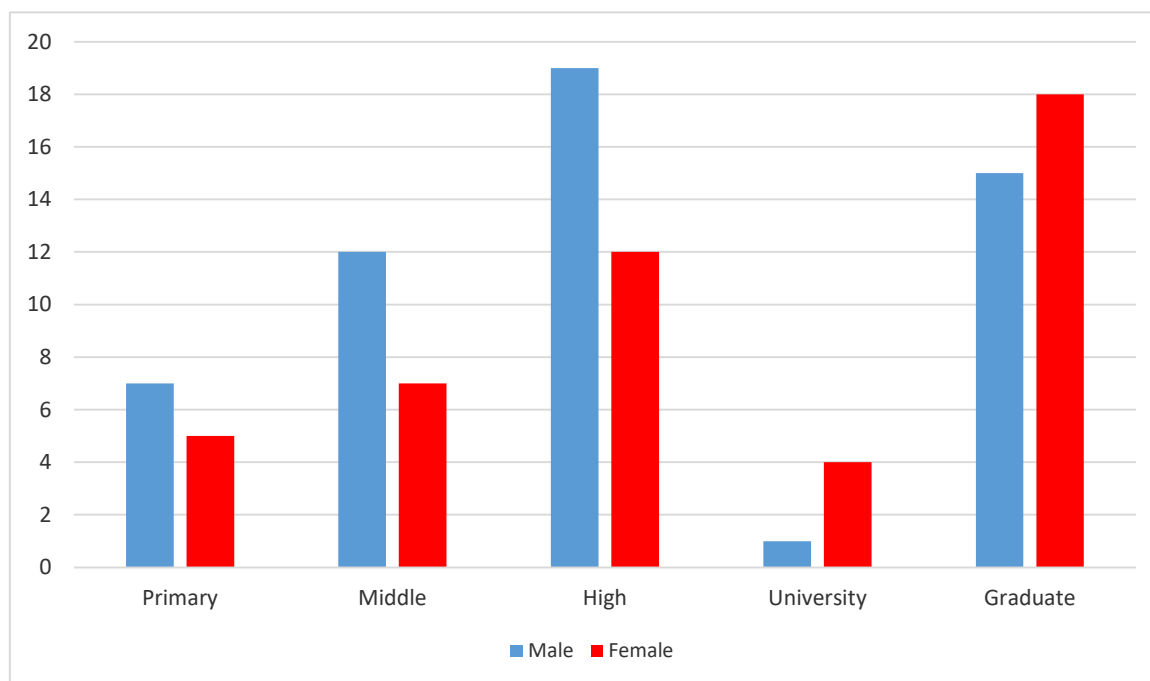
² Tammie O'Neil, Marta Foresti, and Alan Hudson. Evaluation of citizens' voice and accountability: review of the literature and donor approaches (DFID, 2007).

Figure 1. Distribution of Interviewee Age by Gender**Figure 2. Distribution of Interviewee Occupation Type by Gender**

For the survey, we determined the population ratio according to villages and wards. We conducted the survey randomly according to the specific population numbers, and have listed the occupations of interviewees in accordance with our findings. We divided occupations into different sectors such as private sector staff, company staff, government staff, dependent persons, teachers, lawyers, traders, farmers, workers, and people with positions

of authority in villages and wards. These positions of authority include the head of a village or ward, head of 100 families, head of 10 families, members of political parties, social welfare organizations, non-government organizations, and others.

Figure 3. Distribution of Interviewee Education Level by Gender



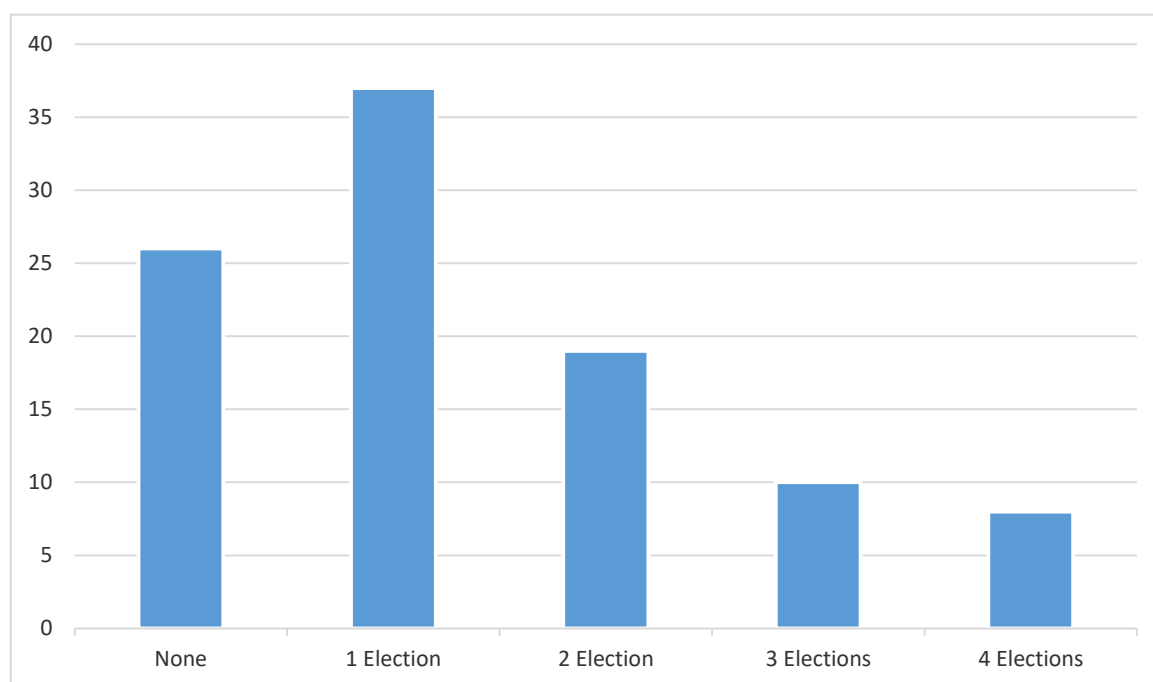
When we reviewed the distribution of education level by gender, we found that more men than women have a primary school education while more women than men have attained a high school or graduate level of education.

III. Research Findings

Voting in the Elections

In response to the question “have you ever voted in an election?” 26% of interviewees answered that they had never voted in an election and 74% answered that they had voted. When we asked the 74% who answered that they had voted which elections they had voted in, we received the following responses.

- 37% voted just in the 2015 Election
- 19% voted in both the 2012 by-election and the 2015 general election
- 10% voted in the 2010 general election, the 2012 by-election, and the 2015 general election
- 8% voted in the 1990 general election, the 2010 general election, the 2012 by-election and the 2015 general election

Figure 4. Number of Elections Interviewees Voted in

Parliament Member Performance

We found that Members of Parliaments make personal visits to their constituencies and hold public hearings there when Parliament is not in session in order to carry out their representative duties effectively. However, it is difficult for them to cover the entirety of their constituencies during these visits because they have limited time and money, and their constituencies include many villages and wards. We found that Members of Parliaments thus primarily target the areas where development project are being carried out when they make these visits. During these visits and public hearings, MPs met with locals to discuss the needs and obstacles faced by residents as well as the development projects in these areas. They submitted this information and data from the discussion, information about obstacles faced by locals and their demands to the relevant departments as continuations.

Information on Local Residents

While the performance of the Members of the Parliaments is crucial, the awareness and understanding held by local residents regarding the parliaments is also important.

The performances of MPs regarding regional development are strongly impacted by the interest that locals have in parliaments as well as their knowledge of the Members of Parliaments who represent their regions.

As part of our survey, we asked local residents whether they knew about the parliaments and if so, how much they knew. Twenty-nine percent responded that they knew nothing at all, and 38% said that they knew just a little about the parliaments. Twenty-seven percent said that they had a good amount of knowledge regarding the parliaments and added that they parliamentary news. Six percent stated that they know quite a lot about the parliaments, are familiar with their laws and by-laws, and have partially participated in it. See Figure 5 for further information.

Sixty-two percent of interviewees responded negatively to the question “have you ever seen your

parliamentary representative?” Seven percent of interviewees answered they had known (or) had seen their Member of National Parliament (Amyotha Hluttaw) and 8% of interviewees answered had known (or) had seen their Member of the People’s Parliament (Pyithu Hluttaw). Twenty-three percent stated that they had seen (or) had known both Members of the People’s Parliament (Pyithu Hluttaw) and Members of National Parliament (Amyotha Hluttaw). See Figure 6 for further information.

Sixty-seven percent of locals interviewed said that they thought they had to tell the Members of Parliaments who represented their region about their needs and difficulties, while 26% responded that they don’t need to do so. Seven percent answered that they were unsure.

In the survey, of the 67% who said that they should share their needs with their representatives, some said that they supposed they had to share all of their obstacles with their representatives. See Figure 7 for more information.

Figure 5. How much do you know about the parliaments?

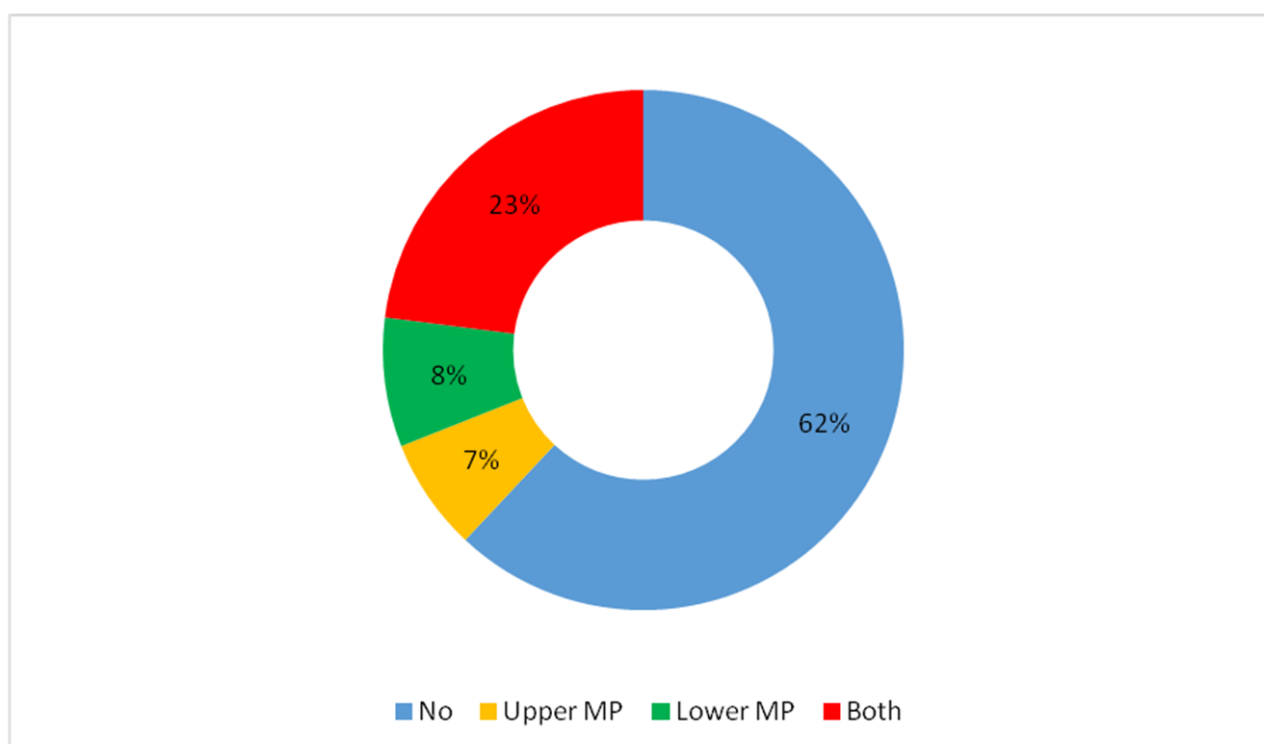
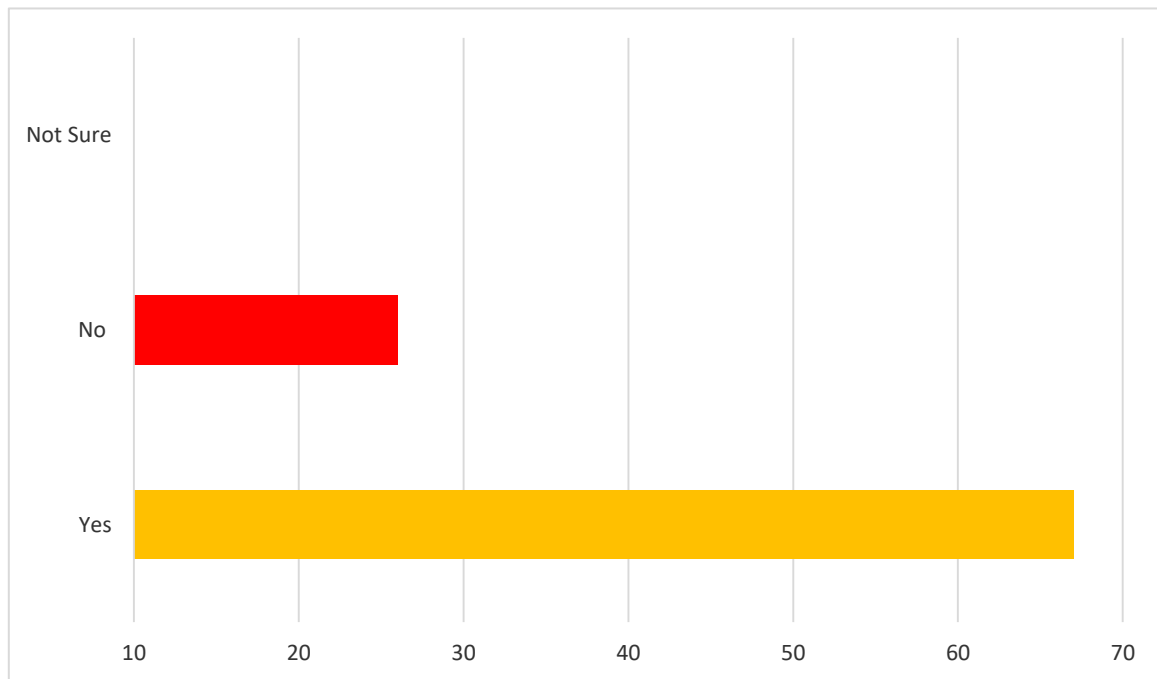
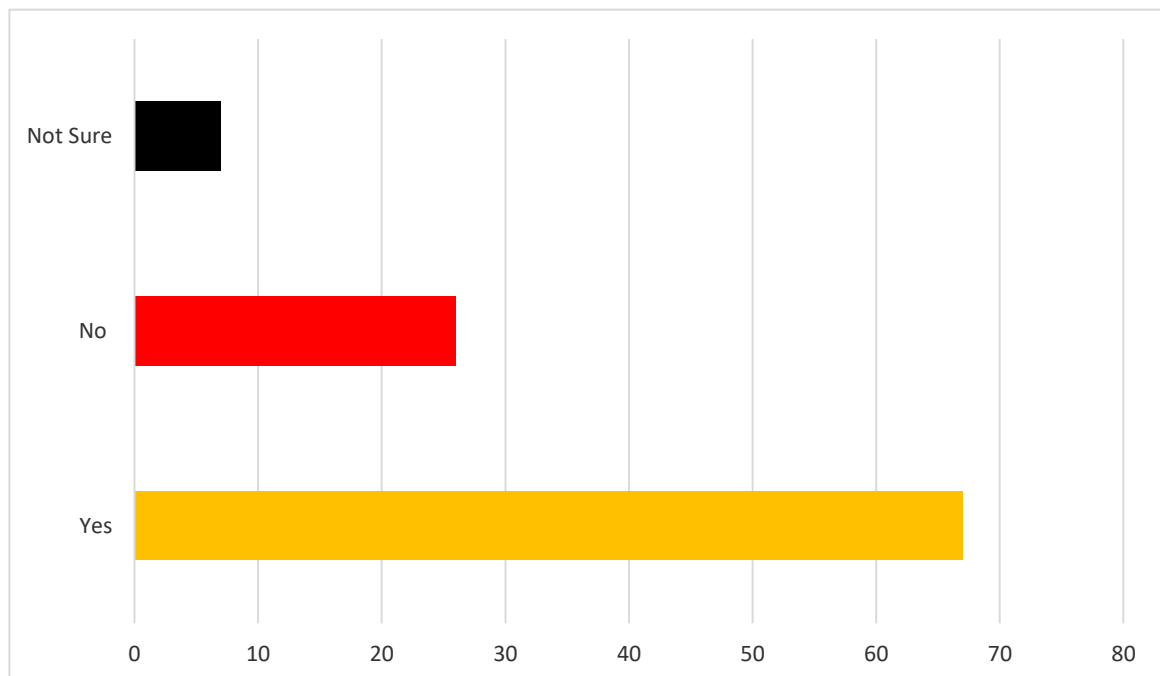


Figure 6. Do you know your local representatives?**Figure 7. Do you think that you have to share all of the needs and difficulties facing the region to Members of Parliament?**

Contact with Local Representatives

During the periods that parliaments are in session, or when the Members of Parliaments were unable to make visits and hold public hearings, the representatives gave their phone numbers and addresses to locals during public hearings to give them a channel through which to submit complaints or information about local difficulties and challenges.

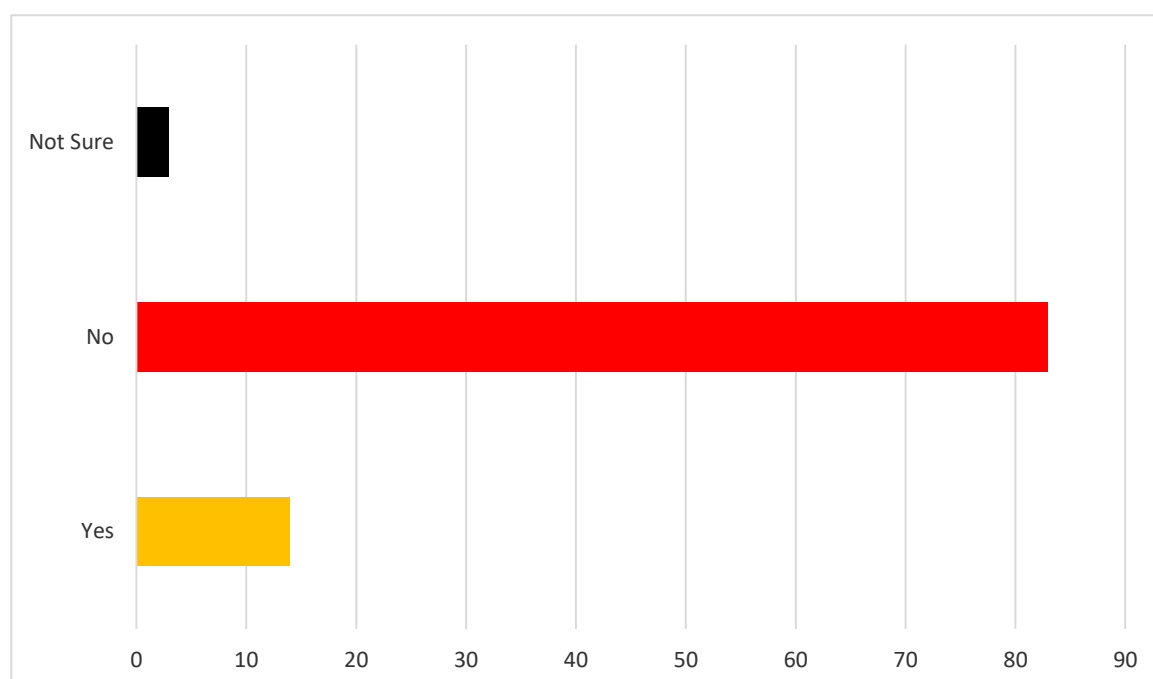
Members of Parliament arranged to contact their constituents through the offices of the Township MPs as well as village and ward party offices. They also offered to connect via social media. This required the aid of other party members.

Community Opinion on Public Relations and Communication with Members of Parliaments

We found that locals were hungry for visits and public hearings led by the Members of Parliaments who represent their regions. Local residents stated in the survey that they want their representatives to make visits to their regions and they also would like to share their difficulties and obstacles with their representatives.

But in response to the question “Do Members of Parliament or their assistants come to your area and ask about regional obstacles and needs?,” 14% answered “Yes” and 83% answered “No”. Three percent said that they didn’t know. These responses are illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Do Members of Parliament or their assistants come to your area and ask about regional obstacles and needs?

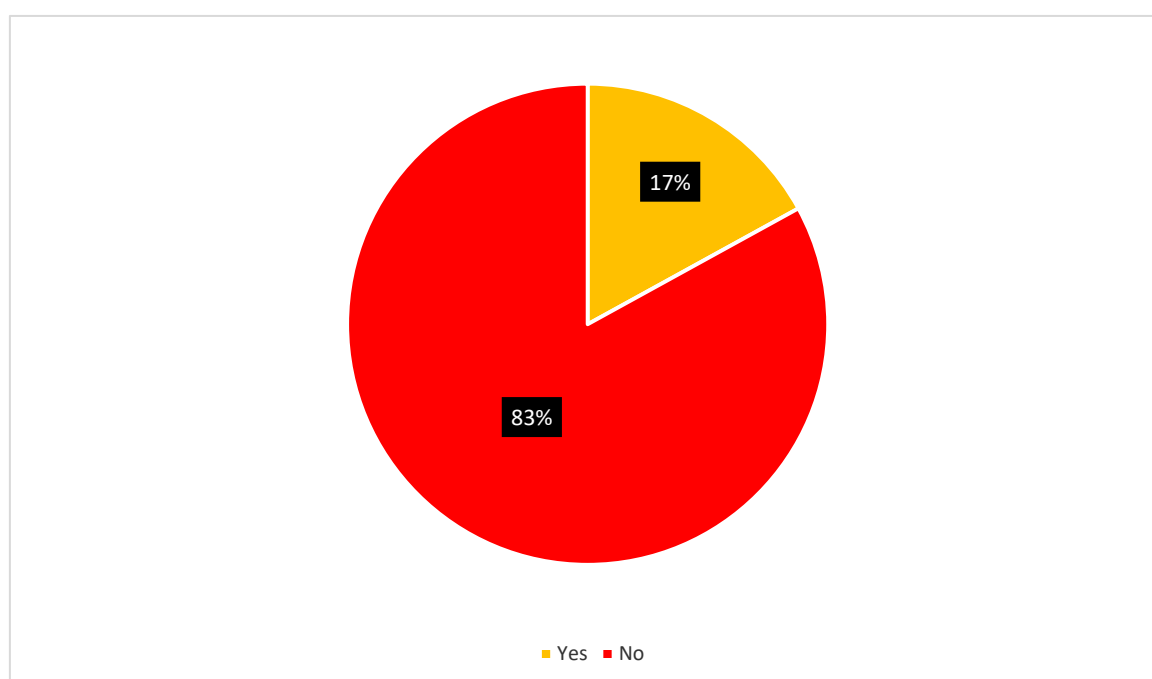


Information Sharing

Members of Parliaments talk to their local communities about their activities inside the Parliaments at public meetings. Seventeen percent of MPs said that they share information with each other while 83% said that they do not.

Interviewees answered that information sharing between MPs and connecting communities are still weak even though Members of Parliaments and their assistants engaged in these activities when they reached out to their local communities directly. Social media and news updates are also ways that MPs engage in these activities.

Figure 9. Do you share information with other MPs?



Collaboration and Development

Members of Parliaments engaged in discussion and problem solving regarding regional obstacles facing the areas they visited and held public meetings. Afterwards, they negotiated and cooperated together with local governments based on the outcome of their visits and public meetings. The sectors where the most cooperation occurred were infrastructure (roads, bridges) and development projects. Cooperation can also be found in the education, agricultural, and legislative sectors.

Even though there was not always enough money to complete some of the tasks that MPs wished to do in cooperation with local governments, those tasks were finished thanks to donations and funding provided by local residents. Most of the tasks are carried out using funding from the Members of Parliaments Regional Development Fund (100 million MMK).

Twenty-nine percent of interviewees said that there was collaboration between Members of Parliaments and

local people, while 65% answered that there is no collaboration. The remaining 6% said that they did not know. Collaborations were found mainly among Members of Parliaments, local administrative bodies and some local residents who were working for local development. See Figure 10 for more detail.

Most interviewees said that there has been development in the infrastructure (roads, bridges) sector.

Some interviewees stated that roads and bridges are developed by locals themselves without help from the government. Some interviewees stated that public health, business, and electricity sectors were properly developed. There were also interviewees who said that there had been no remarkable development. This information is shown in Figure 11.

Figure 10. Is there collaboration between MPs and local residents?

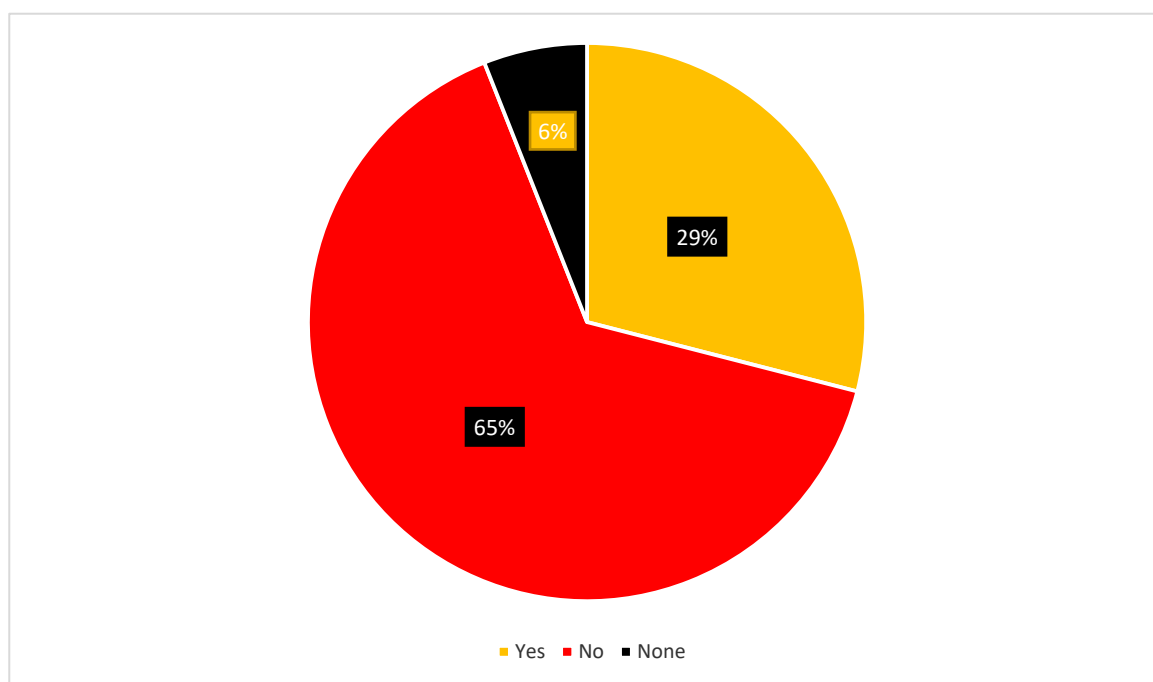
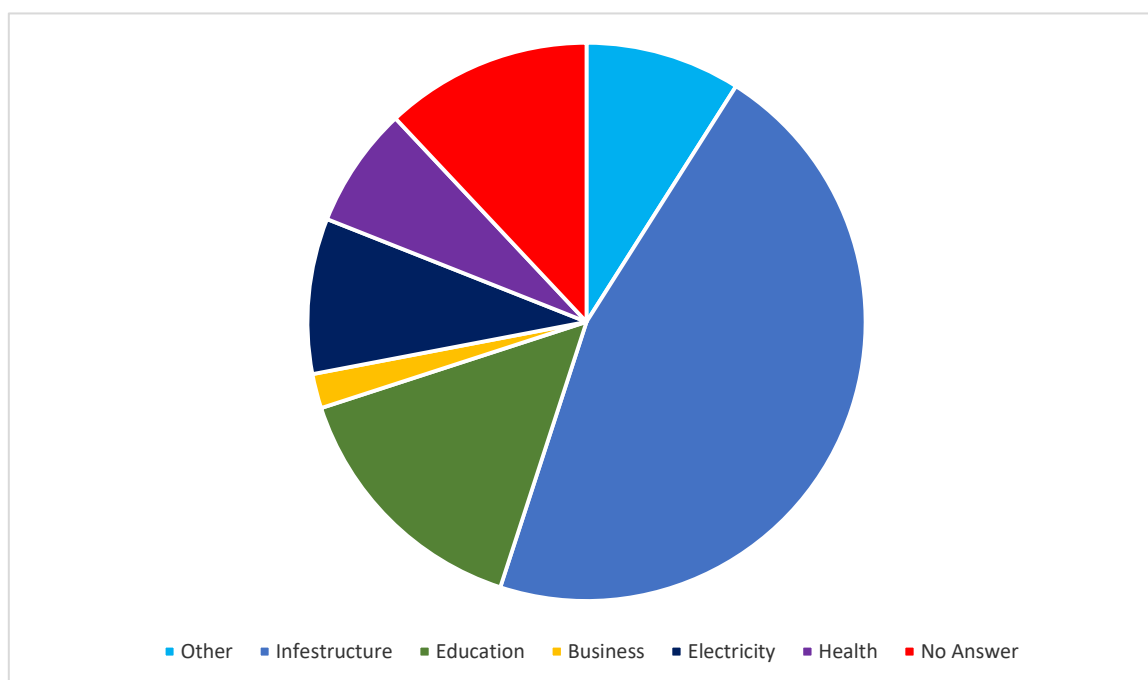


Figure 11. Have these sectors been developed?

IV. Recommendations

Mately communication and treating between Members of parliaments and their voters can support their performances concerning with representative duties to get much better benefit.

People, the voters, must keep track of their representative's performance, assist them, and share the difficulties and challenges they face with Members of Parliaments. Doing so promotes the responsibility, accountability and transparency of the representatives. Moreover, it can help regional development progress. According to the survey and findings, just 33% of interviewees said that they know about the parliaments even though 74% had voted in elections before. We found that just 38% of residents surveyed knew which Members of Parliaments represented their region.

The survey found that even though people are actively voting in elections, they still lack knowledge and interest in the parliaments and their representatives. Additionally, people don't know very much about the duties, authority, and capabilities of Members of Parliaments.

To fill this knowledge and interest gaps, Members of Parliaments and their relevant parties and organizations should work to raise awareness among communities and effectively share knowledge with locals about Parliament. As Members of Parliaments stated in our survey that they get information from community members through the Township Representative Offices, it seems like a good path for contact. In addition, Township Representative Offices should be more active in communicating information from the voters to the MPs and informing voters of the duties, responsibilities and performances of representatives.

Moreover, if MPs can share information about parliaments, information sharing between representatives and the tasks they are working on, it will improve community awareness and increase public knowledge. Greater community awareness can in turn increase the level of public interest, collaboration, and monitoring of the tasks

being carried out by MPs. This will contribute to regional development as well as elevating responsibility and accountability among the public, government and parliaments.

Members of Parliament should place a particular emphasis on explaining their duties and level of authority to the communities during their public meetings. Low community awareness of these issues reduces public interest, collaboration and information sharing and also debilitates the performances of Members of Parliaments as a consequence. If there is lower citizen participation and assistance in the process of monitoring government and legislation, MP performance will also be weak.

We found that 67% of interviewees answered that they thought they should share information regarding their challenges and needs to MPs. We also found that citizens placed a greater emphasis on having direct dialogue with Members of Parliaments than on other methods of sharing complaints and problems. Yet, just 14% of our interviewees said that Members of Parliaments or their assistants come to their regions and ask about local issues. Therefore, we may conclude that Members of Parliaments need to hold more public meetings and discussions and make more frequent visits.

Eighty-three percent of interviewees stated that there was no information sharing between Members of Parliaments and local people. When these responses were broken down by age, we found that youths and elderly citizens were less interested in getting information. If Members of Parliaments can share information and engage with the public through social media, it will be strengthened and improve communication. Moreover, through this type of communication and information sharing with local people, community engagement and collaboration will progress.

We found that 29% of interviewees answered there was collaboration between Members of Parliaments and local people. In those collaborations, we also found that the infrastructure (roads, bridges) sector was the sector with the greatest amount of development and collaboration. To elevate collaboration between Members of Parliaments and Local people, engagement and communication with the public and need to be strengthened. If collaboration is increased, transparency, responsibility and accountability between Members of Parliament and local residents will also be strengthened and regional development will progress as a consequence. Finally, if public engagement and communication are strengthened, Members of Parliaments can be more effective in the tasks of legislation and monitoring government process. ■

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