

**THE MEDIA'S
ROLE IN
CITIZEN
ENGAGEMENT
EVIDENCE
FROM BURMA**

Media and audience research: a key part of BBC Media Action's work

BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity, uses the power of media and communication to support people to shape their own lives. Working with broadcasters, governments, other organisations and donors, we provide information and stimulate positive change in the areas of governance, health, resilience and humanitarian response. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) supports us to work with the media in 14 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and we have projects in more than 25 countries overall. This briefing was prepared thanks to DFID funding.

Contributing to the evidence base

This project will contribute to state–society relations and support the empowerment of individuals to hold their government to account. Using research, evaluation and learning reviews, it also aims to contribute to the evidence base on the role of media and communication in development.

The content of this briefing is the responsibility of BBC Media Action. Any views expressed should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself or of any donors supporting our work.

Acknowledgements

This research briefing was written by Chris Larkin and Sophie Baskett, and summarises a research report by Chris Larkin and Muk Yin Haung Nyoï. The authors thank David Jodrell and Ed Pauker for their input.

Page 3 image: Men sharing news, Burma, credit: Paula Bronstein, Getty Images

Page 5 images: Burmese citizens, credit: BBC Media Action

For further information please contact:
BBC Media Action, MC3A Media Centre
201 Wood Lane, London W12 7TQ, United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 8008 0001

Fax: +44 (0)20 8008 5970

Email: media.action@bbc.co.uk

Web: bbcmediaaction.org

Copyright © BBC Media Action 2014

Printed on paper from recycled and sustainable sources

Commissioning editors: Pam Vallance and

Kavita Abraham-Dowsing

Design: Soapbox, www.soapbox.co.uk



Access to public service media can influence greater citizen engagement in Burma

People who have regular access to public service oriented media² are more likely to be actively engaged in governance processes, compared with those who have no regular access. These are the findings of a BBC Media Action study, which spoke to 1,388 individuals in Burma, also known as Myanmar, to understand the public experience of governance processes and the potential role for media in strengthening citizen engagement.

The evidence presents a compelling case for the need to improve access to quality, balanced sources of information in Burma. The study suggests that one way to do this would be strengthening local public service media.

Why strengthen citizen engagement?

It is widely recognised that the people of Burma have a crucial role to play in the democratic transformation of their country. In order to demand accountability and set expectations of responsiveness, citizens need to be informed of their rights and empowered to make their voices heard. They need to be motivated and confident to participate in dialogue and decision-making about issues affecting their lives. It is thought that without this level of citizen engagement, there is a danger that new political settlements and reforms will not be owned by the public.

The ward administrator and MP are the government but they have never even seen this ward. They don't come to the ground. So, what can they do for us? We cannot communicate with government.

Older man, Yangon

The context of citizen engagement in Burma

The public in Burma face numerous challenges to achieving genuine and inclusive citizen engagement.

Decades of political oppression in Burma have meant that even informal discussion of social issues, let alone overt political action, has been a risky pursuit and is continued to be perceived as such by many. BBC Media Action research found that overt political activity was almost non-existent, with less than 1% of survey participants reporting ever taking part in a protest or demonstration. Even informal discussion of important issues was low, with 46% of participants reporting that they never engaged in such discussion with family or friends.

More than two-thirds of the population of Burma reside in rural areas, geographically distant from their leaders. This isolation is reflected in the finding

that less than 1% of respondents reported ever attempting to contact an MP. And although 44% of participants reported attending local ward or village administration meetings, just 12% reported having ever raised an issue with a village or ward official.

Focus group discussions and interviews with key informants revealed the perception that political processes and reforms were not relevant to people's everyday lives. Poor access to information had an impact on how knowledgeable people felt in discussing governance issues. Also identified as barriers to citizen engagement were restrictive cultural and social norms and hierarchies that excluded women, youth and poor people from decision-making processes, and continuing uncertainty about freedom of expression and association.

Establishing the range of citizen engagement³

To establish a clearer picture of the spectrum of citizen engagement in Burma, participants' patterns of responding to four knowledge and behaviour indices were observed. These were:

- Factual knowledge of political processes
- Discussion of important issues with family and friends
- Attending village/ward meetings
- Raising issues of importance with a village or ward administrator

Segmentation analysis⁴ was conducted to understand how participants might group together based on these knowledge and behavioural characteristics.

The research study

A multi-method research study was conducted in June and July 2013.

In total, 1,224 individuals were interviewed as part of a household survey across 11 of Burma's 14 states and regions. The sample was representative of the age, gender and urban/rural distribution of the population in those states and regions. Another 164 individuals participated in focus group discussions and key informant interviews. This qualitative research was conducted in communities in urban Yangon, and rural villages in Karen State, Magwe Region and Ayeyarwady Region.

Segmentation analysis was conducted to group participants according to type of citizen engagement. Regression analysis was conducted to understand the association between media and citizen engagement, while controlling for confounders.

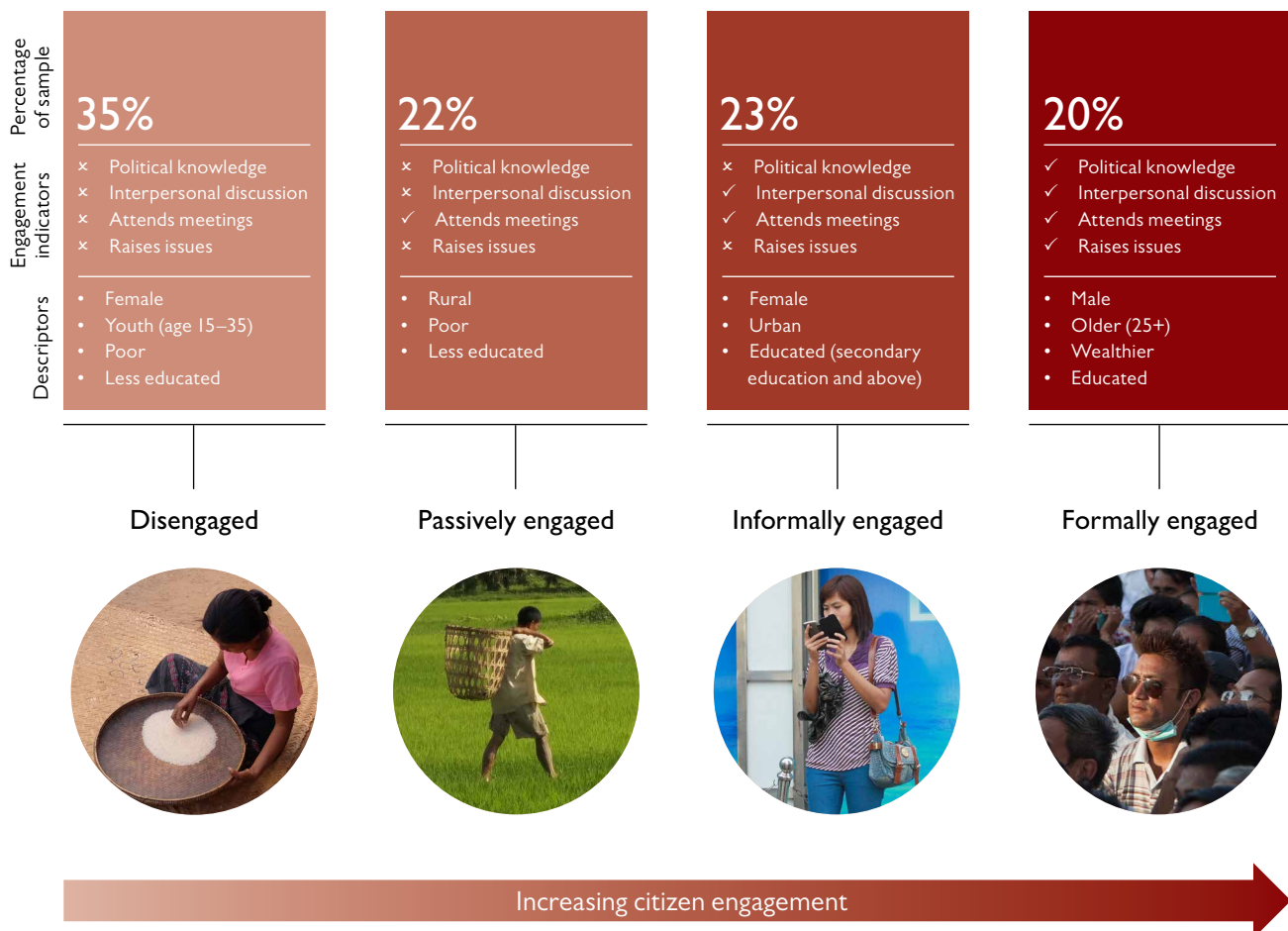
This analysis identified four groups into which participants could be categorised, reflecting varying levels of citizen engagement among the population of Burma. These groups were labelled on a scale of increasing engagement created for this study: disengaged, passively engaged, informally engaged and formally engaged. More than one-third of survey participants (35%) were categorised as disengaged – these people demonstrated low levels of political knowledge and discussion, never attending local meetings or raising issues of importance with local administrators. This group was predominantly young, female and disadvantaged in terms of education and wealth. Those who reported more active engagement – whom we categorised as formally engaged due to their attendance at meetings and propensity to raise

issues – tended to be older males, with higher levels of wealth and education.

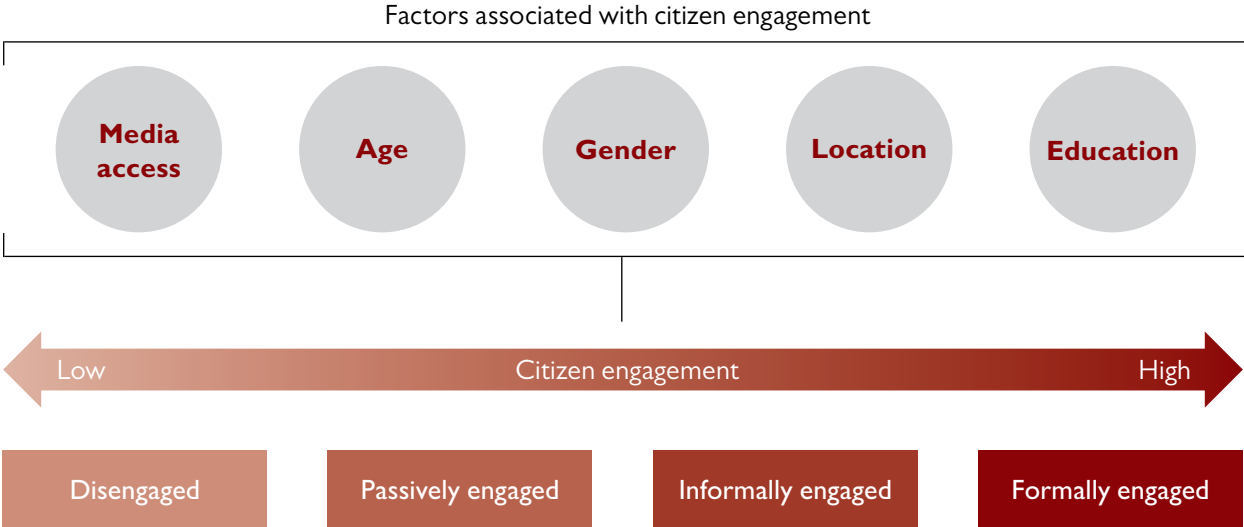
Targeting support

Categorising citizen engagement in this way can be useful in identifying those who need most support or encouragement to engage with governance processes. For example, supporting an increase in engagement among the disengaged group could mean designing media communications or initiatives at community level. These would be specifically targeted to prompt interest in governance processes or to build confidence and motivation among women and youth to engage in discussion.

The four engagement segments identified in this research



The relationship between media and citizen engagement



Having established an understanding of how levels of engagement might vary within the population, the research sought to understand the extent to which media has an influence. Previous BBC Media Action research in Nepal evidenced that listening to political debate programmes influenced political participation.⁵ To what extent might this be true for media in Burma? Statistical analysis⁶ of the survey data revealed that media access is significantly associated with citizen engagement in Burma.

Having regular access to at least one public service oriented (PSO) media source increased

the likelihood of being formally engaged rather than disengaged – even when the effects of the demographics listed above were accounted for.

Regular access to a public service oriented media source had a stronger association with engagement than a participant’s age, gender, urban/rural location, ethnicity, literacy level or purchasing power (income). Having a university education was the only characteristic that had a stronger association with engagement. The table below shows the extent to which each characteristic increases the likelihood of being formally engaged rather than disengaged.

Characteristic		Increases the likelihood of being formally engaged by
Media	Regular access to PSO media (versus no regular access to media)	10.5 times
	Regular access to other media (versus no regular access to media)	2.2 times
Education	University education (versus no schooling)	33.3 times
	Secondary education (versus no schooling)	7.9 times
	Customary primary education (versus no schooling)	4.2 times
Gender	Male (versus female)	2.3 times
Age	Each one-year increase in age	1.1 times
Location	Urban (versus rural)	No association

Key findings

This research presents a picture of a public in Burma that, to varying degrees, lacks knowledge, confidence, motivation and opportunity to participate in governance processes and make their voices heard.

However, the study provides objective evidence that a relationship exists between people's media access and their level of citizen engagement. Access to public service oriented media increases the likelihood of being formally engaged rather than disengaged. Even when accounting for those characteristics that can act as barriers for the individual to engage in governance processes – being female, being poor and living in rural areas – the effect of media on engagement is significant. A similar effect was found when observing the likelihood of being informally engaged rather than disengaged, and the likelihood of being formally engaged rather than informally engaged.

This evidence suggests that improving citizen access to public service oriented media and information could increase levels of engagement across different groups in the population. As such, strengthening the media sector in Burma could support greater engagement of millions of people across the country.

People who have knowledge about the law speak out. For us, we mostly stay at home and we don't understand about laws, so we have to endure it, whether it is right or wrong.

Older woman, Yangon

Implications

Based on these findings, BBC Media Action suggests that media could be supported in Burma to strengthen citizen engagement in the following ways:

Raising awareness and reducing knowledge deficits: High-quality, balanced media can be a crucial source of impartial information on individual rights and government policies.

Acting as a platform to raise issues and connect leaders with the public: Media can enable citizens to air their views, pose their questions and hear directly from politicians and other decision-makers.

Stimulating discussion and participation among the general population: Media can provide a safe space to engage in, and observe, discussion of social and political issues, while preserving an individual's anonymity.

Promoting greater inclusion of marginalised groups through media: Creative programming can confront problematic cultural and social norms, and address controversial or taboo topics in a way that traditional news media might not currently have the freedom to do.

Endnotes

¹ In this report the term “citizen” refers to individuals who are recognised citizens as well as those who face challenges to their citizenship rights.

² A public service media is, by definition, one that seeks public benefit rather than commercial gain. It serves the entire population and ensures a high technical standard, with a balance of views and a range of topics. The level of information provided by different media outlets in Burma varies widely. Local FM radio stations and television stations do not produce their own news, and the information provided by the state media lacks completeness and diversity of perspectives. While the quality of Burma’s 350-odd weekly journals and newspapers cannot be verified, private publications do provide perspectives beyond those of the government, as do international radio and television stations. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, international radio, international television, news-producing non-state local broadcast media, and non-state-owned newspapers are classified as “public service oriented media”. All other media, such as state and non-news-producing local media, are classified as “other media”.

³ This study uses citizen engagement rather than the standardised measure of political participation used across BBC Media Action; these are different but overlapping constructs as is reflected in the literature. While citizen engagement includes latent measures such as political knowledge and political discussion, as well as some culturally appropriate manifest measures (such as attending a village meeting), the standardised political participation measure that BBC Media Action uses concentrates on manifest measures of participation, such as participating in an organised effort to solve a problem, contacting national, local or traditional leaders, and attending council meetings.

⁴ Segmentation analysis observes how survey participants cluster together based on their responses to a number of different questions. The analysis separates participants into groups such that each participant is more similar to other participants in his/her group than to participants outside of that group. A two-step cluster method was used in this study to distinguish a number of engagement groups based on four key indices: factual political knowledge; interpersonal discussion; attendance at ward or village administration meetings; and raising issues of importance with a ward or village administrator.

⁵ BBC Media Action (2013) How do political debate programmes influence political participation? A case study from Nepal. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publicationsandpress/research_nepal_debate_political_participation.html.

⁶ The method of analysis used was regression. Regression is a statistical tool that estimates the relationship between different characteristics of an individual. In this case, the analysis explored the relationships between an outcome of interest – citizen engagement – and several different characteristics of the individual that potentially influence that outcome, such as age, education or media access. The analysis aimed at understanding how engagement increases or decreases, as those other characteristics increase or decrease. In estimating the relationship between one characteristic, such as media access, and the outcome of interest – engagement – the analysis “controls” for the influence of the other variables. For example, the regression analysis will account for the influence of age on engagement when estimating how much influence media access has on engagement.

BBC Media Action is registered in England & Wales under Charity Commission number 1076235 and Company number 3521587.

Registered office: Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA, United Kingdom

