

LIVE Q & A | Doing Research Assessment in Myanmar

These are live questions and answers that were asked during the webinar, 'Boosting social science research in Myanmar' held on 27 May 2020, based on the results of the Doing Research assessment in Myanmar. The answers have been edited for clarity, and to maintain anonymity. The answers are provided by the team that implemented the DRA in Myanmar, and further elucidated by the GDN team where necessary.

Q. There is almost no research culture in Myanmar, beside NGO institutions and some major universities. I would like to know, how can we put this culture in(to) the Myanmar context?

A. There is also no clear understanding of what research actually is. This needs to be a starting point. Once researchers in Myanmar can envision what research and research culture means, and what it will demand from them to create, we can start to take steps towards building a greater research culture.

Q. How can we integrate "research" in the Myanmar context? By advocating with policy makers to use (it) in higher education?

A. A good suggestion, but there is still a long way to go for this to happen. The good news is that due to Covid-19, we got more requests from government parliamentarians following the debate. They need more evidence-based policy research. This provides us with a unique opportunity to restructure our research system.

Q. Is there any administrative body (e.g., Institutional Review Board) which protects the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research studies in Myanmar?

A. There are committees in universities that approve research, but there is not a structured ethical review process. Research is also approved by Ministries. We are not aware of a body that protects the rights of participants.

Q. What happened to the Burma Research Society? Might there be something to learn from that history about how to set up a new Research Council?

A. The society was abolished in 1980. Myanmar historian U Than Tun accused Gen. Ne Win of destroying it. We will need to take stock of the modern research needs of Myanmar, and set up systems that work, taking lessons from history as needed.

Q. Was the DRA study able to evaluate the research capacity in the areas of the Ethnic Armed Groups, some of which even have institutes of higher learning?

A. Not as we wish to cover them. MIPS/ CDES have done a lot of work on peace building and we did interview one of their researchers.

Q. This webinar has focused on developing systems between HEIs and the national government. Is there interest from communities or private sector actors in evidence-based research? Can local researchers be champions here?

A. Yes, there is interest from a number of local NGOs, but then research hits a diffusion issue. Local researchers can certainly become champions.

Q. It was mentioned during the webinar that the fragmentation of the National Research System in Myanmar makes it vulnerable to donor program agendas. In terms of evaluating the lack of coordination among international donors, does this cause research fragmentation? Second, how to encourage international donor coordination?

A. These are indeed important areas to follow up in the next study. Without a national research agenda or priorities, research will likely remain fragmented.

Q. Research in Myanmar seems to be directed by donor interests and, therefore, very difficult to conduct research in areas deemed to be low interest/low priority. Do you have suggestions to open this research landscape up (especially to get more Myanmar researchers involved)?

A. Both our government and development partners need to recognize this unfortunate trend of internationalization of Myanmar studies. The DRA study in Myanmar found that there is a critical mass needed to transform it into a more sustained and long-term relationship.

Q. Social research depends on how dynamic social discourses are. How the government values or de-values evidence as the basis for policymaking, and influences how social research are valued and viewed. How is the quality of discourse and evidence-based policy making in Myanmar? Is it moving towards progress?

A. We hope so. But for now, popular opinions are more important than evidence, furthered by the Facebook phenomenon.

Q. What are the ways forward to promote research in social sciences? What are the steps one can do in the next 3 years?

A. The National Education Sector Policy adopted in 2016 is good guidance. All you need is to reorient priorities for research-policy linkage.

Q. What about the role of external funders? How can they coordinate, when the domestic authorities do not appear to do it themselves?

A. Some co-ordinate amongst themselves, but this will likely only improve when there is an internally coordinated research body.

Q. Is there anyone in the conference from the Independent Journal of Burma Studies or Institute for Strategy and Policy or EmReF? It would be interesting to hear comments from these groups. Were they interviewed in the research?

A. Yes, researchers of ISP and EmREF were interviewed in this DRA study in Myanmar.

Q. Is there any interest shown from the private sector in funding of social research?

A. Not so far. There are some opportunities there, especially with MNCs targeting nationwide consumers, especially in FMCG/ telecom sector.

Q. Do you have any recommendations for how to ensure the independence and autonomy of a national research body?

A. It might be helpful to understand that representation of researchers suffers from a gap between public and private researchers.

Q. Interesting to hear about barriers to research uptake. In the collaborative project 'legacies of detention' it is intended to encourage 3-way conversations between academia, state authorities and civil society. Does anyone else have experience with this in Myanmar?

A. There are a number of policy consultations that involve these actors, but more from the views of organizers / policy actors of the government. Not the other way around from academia to policy.

Q. How does 66D come into play for the researchers specifically?

A. It is an indirect way of discouraging open discussions on government performance and policy. So far, no academic has ever been persecuted under this law though.

Q. Which sampling method was used for your DRA study in Myanmar?

A. We used a two-stage clustering sampling method, but we could not randomize it because we don't know the population of the researchers in the country, as a first study. There is room for large improvements on this.

Q. Can Myanmar's 'informal network' of social science researchers contribute to the Covid-19 response? Funding is bound to be focused toward this now.

A. Studies on the impact of COVID-19 and rapid feedback to government might help inform decision making about responses, but the request for this research should come from government to social science researchers.

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