



Photo Credit: Benjamin Medam

# **PATHWAYS TO GOOD GOVERNANCE**

**Supporting Changes in Norms and Behaviors  
Among Local Decision-makers in Myanmar**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

July 2020



Since the 1990s, the world has achieved almost universal consensus that good governance—broadly defined as *the use of authority in the public interest*—is a both a desirable end in its own right and a necessary ingredient for achieving economic growth and political stability. Increasingly, donors and governments have focused on how to address and transform the *normative* aspects of good governance—encompassing internalized values and principles such as inclusion, transparency, and neutral rule of law. Although these general principles of good governance do not necessarily need to be associated with any one political system, they have significant and natural overlap with democratic norms—the values and principles associated with democratic institutions. These normative aspects of good governance are especially important during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as community decisions to comply with public health measures are driven in part by the extent to which government actions are perceived to be fair, transparent, and trustworthy.

The *Pathways to Good Governance* study is motivated by the question of *how* to support the adoption of good governance norms by decision-makers. Trainings are the dominant modality for shifting governance norms in fragile contexts; an estimated US \$15 billion is spent annually in aid for such trainings.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the ubiquity of this programming approach, there are significant empirical and theoretical gaps for explaining if, how, when, and why holding *trainings with decision-makers* lead to changes in norms and behaviors. This gap stands in contrast to the comparatively rich literature which asks how *citizens* and *communities* are mobilized to pursue democratic outcomes and hold governance actors accountable.<sup>2</sup>

This study aims to address these gaps by examining how training decision-makers in normative governance principles can lead to new behaviors. We seek answers to this question by conducting a case study of Promoting Sustainable Peace and Resiliency (PROSPER), an EU-funded good governance program implemented by Mercy Corps in Myanmar’s Kayah State from 2016-2018.<sup>3</sup> PROSPER was a complex, multi-part program, designed to support peace, reconciliation, reintegration and development in Kayah State, Myanmar. Within the larger program, this report considers only PROSPER’s governance activities, which engaged a broad range of governance actors in multi-day trainings designed to educate them on normative good governance concepts and provide them with technical skills for carrying out these principles, such as community engagement, network-building, facilitation, and prioritization of projects according to community needs.

Our research is novel in two respects. First, the aim of this study is theory-building rather than program evaluation. The rationale behind this approach is that having well-specified theories of change is a pre-condition for better program design and evaluation. Second, this study focuses on the initial steps of the causal chain by focusing on the linkage between a training and participants’ norms and behaviors instead of long-run impacts such as legitimacy, safety, and prosperity. While these types of long-run impacts are the ultimate goals of most governance programs, we posit that developing an empirically-grounded account of the link between governance trainings and participants’ behavior is a first necessary step towards

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<sup>1</sup> Denney, L., Mallett, R. and Benson, M., 2017. Service delivery and state capacity: Findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

<sup>2</sup> Solhaug, T. (2006). Knowledge and self-efficacy as predictors of political participation and civic attitudes: with relevance for educational practice. *Policy futures in education*, 4(3), 265-278.; Doherty, K. L., & Webler, T. N. (2016). Social norms and efficacy beliefs drive the Alarmed segment’s public-sphere climate actions. *Nature Climate Change*, 6(9), 879.; Finkel, S. E., Horowitz, J., & Rojo-Mendoza, R. T. (2012). Civic education and democratic backsliding in the wake of Kenya’s post-2007 election violence. *The Journal of politics*, 74(1), 52-65.; Boas, T. C., Hidalgo, F. D., & Melo, M. A. (2019). Norms versus action: Why voters fail to sanction malfeasance in Brazil. *American Journal of Political Science*, 63(2), 385-400.

<sup>3</sup> Known as Paung Si Lett in Myanmar Language, meaning “United Hands”

understanding how such trainings can have broader impacts, both on their own and in combination with other types of programs.

This study was conducted retrospectively during 2019 and uses interviews with program participants, governance actors, and Mercy Corps team members to identify the underlying pathway connecting the good governance trainings to behavior changes by program participants. The working theory presented here is a first step towards more closely linking theory, evidence, and program design in the governance sector, and this study invites further refinement through program piloting and rigorous testing in Myanmar and in other comparative contexts.

The governance context of Myanmar, though unique in many respects, shares significant similarities and challenges with transitional and conflict-affected states, especially those who espouse a desire to pave a democratic trajectory for their future. In 2015, Myanmar held relatively free and fair parliamentary elections, resulting in meaningful representation for its 53 million citizens for the first time since 1990. In doing so, Myanmar provided a signal to the world community that it was serious about emerging from its status as a hermetic and authoritarian state, through a process of political liberalization—including the pursuit of ‘good governance’, and even democratic norms for its society. Despite this hopeful note, Myanmar faces an array of complex governance challenges—most notably ongoing ethnic conflicts around the country, the worst of which has evolved into a protracted humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State; imperfect civilian control of the armed forces; and ongoing challenges to its sovereignty by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in contested ‘control areas’ scattered throughout the state.

Since Myanmar’s emergence from full military control in 2015, international actors have responded rapidly, working alongside Myanmar’s government to deploy Democracy and Governance (D&G) programming throughout country. These programs have targeted both the demand side of governance—citizens and civil society—and the supply side—politicians, bureaucrats, and informal governance actors such as traditional leaders and armed groups. The Mercy Corps program which we examine, PROSPER, is just one of the many good governance programs deployed in Myanmar during this time, but it is nonetheless notable as the first to be implemented in Kayah State and also for the diversity of governance actors included in its programming, including local and state elected leaders, state-level bureaucrats, political parties, EAOs, and civil society organizations. The wide diversity of participant type is a key feature of our study, as it enables us to identify intermediate mechanisms and behaviors common among diverse local decision-makers, in contrast to other interventions which are limited to a single decision-making role.

## **Key Findings: How and When Governance Norms Lead to Behavior Change**

- **Trainings lead to emergent behavior change through two intermediate mechanisms: role conceptualization (understanding and internalization of norms) and increased normative know-how (practical frameworks for good governance action).** The PROSPER training allowed participants to gain a deeper understanding of good governance principles like inclusion and rule of law, and this understanding was internalized into conceptions of their governance roles. Greater role conceptualization increases intention to carry out behavior and willingness to undertake costly efforts to act on these norms. Additionally, the training provided participants with practical know-how for putting normative principles into practice, such as through community engagement and facilitation. Increased know-how lowers the barrier to action for those who wish to carry out good governance behaviors and increases confidence to undertake action.
- **Three major categories of behavior result from these mechanisms: pioneering, supporting, and protecting.**

- Pioneering behaviors refer to *new* actions or roles that governance actors attempt in pursuit of normative goals, such as establishing new programs or experimental attempts to use laws for community benefit. *Ex: A small political party in Kayah initiated their first village youth and women's groups, using models introduced in PROSPER's training.*
- Supporting behaviors incorporate principles and know-how into *existing* activities and roles, for example by more effectively including minority viewpoints in ongoing community meetings or improving processes for community engagement and feedback. *Ex: Elected local leaders shifted from directive leadership styles, towards more consultative approaches.*
- Protecting behaviors refer to any actions meant to *guard* democratic institutions or norms from backsliding, such as ensuring rule of law by protecting constituents from misuse of the legal system by powerful actors or taking part in collective action (e.g. protesting) against perceived non-democratic actions in the governance space. *Ex: Local leaders throughout the state took collective action to protest the backsliding of consultative patterns between the central state and village leaders – successfully protecting at least some of these norms.*
- **The pathways to behavioral change are mediated by a variety of individual and local-level factors.** Although the following list of is far from comprehensive, the following findings emerged from the analysis:
  - At the *individual level*, behavior change is most likely to occur when governance actors have a high degree of autonomy, motivation, and many opportunities for community engagement within their roles. In addition, the effectiveness of a training is mediated by the education level and language fluency of participants.
  - At the *local level*, the diffusion of content beyond the primary participants through follow-up trainings was a particularly effective strategy for broadening the impact of the workshops conducted by Mercy Corps. In a case in which this diffusion saturates a locality, the dispersion of the norms may create a resilience against democratic backsliding due to shocks such as a sudden change of leadership.
  - Finally, *civic organizations and groups* (CSOs, women, youth, and elders) are often pivotal in translating these norms into action, either by partnering with other governance actors or providing public services directly. Though these groups were not included in the original program design for PROSPER, the results of 'add-on' trainings for CSOs indicate they are important actors for the emergence and resilience of good governance in a local area.

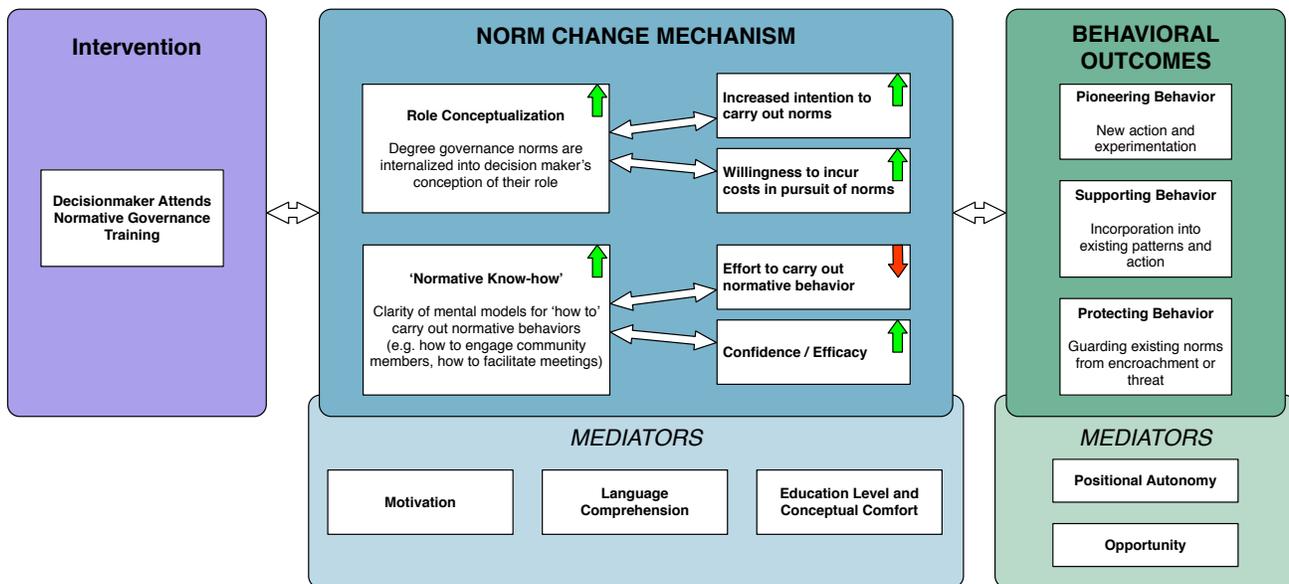


Figure 1: Diagram of Working Theory Presented in Paper

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The working theory developed in this study leads to recommendations for multiple audiences, who all share the common goal of improving governance outcomes in transitional and fragile states worldwide: researchers, practitioners, and donors.

For researchers, the working theory has the potential to contribute to ongoing literature on democratic consolidation, institutional change, and political behavior. It does so by addressing an existing gap in the literature concerning how normative governance interventions shape the behavior of decision-makers. The working theory presents a set of hypothesized causal mechanisms, which can be tested in future empirical studies and rigorous evaluations.

For practitioners, our research offers a more nuanced typology for discussing how normative training programs shape governance behavior, which may add specificity to program design and evaluation. For instance, a program designer or monitoring and evaluation team might consider how to apportion their focus between the two intermediate mechanisms identified: role conceptualization and normative know-how. Similarly, organizations may ask what *type* of behaviors their programs are looking to engender in decision-makers: supporting, protecting, or pioneering, which may differ by context. Protecting behavior may be a priority in countries with recent and significant democratic gains, such as Myanmar in 2020. However, other countries may be looking to re-establish democratic momentum; trainings in such contexts may focus on supporting behavior.

Finally—and most tentatively—the results of this study lead to recommendations for bilateral and multi-lateral donors, this study illustrates the need to effectively evaluate the complex mechanisms by which donor-funded programs purportedly affect governance outcomes. Governance is a product of both institutions and more intangible social processes, which makes it uniquely difficult to conceptualize and measure across development contexts. Yet, there is clear evidence that effective and normatively good governance forms the foundation for stable and prosperous societies, and promoting these institutional arrangements continues to be a priority for advancing human well-being. The empirically-grounded theory

presented here serves as a proof of concept for further studies that rigorously measure the impacts of normative governance interventions.

Moreover, our findings highlight that political transformation is a process. Democratic advances, exemplified in moments such as the 2015 elections in Myanmar, donors should provide ongoing support for transforming governance norms, rather than focusing solely on single moments, such as elections or political transitions.

This kind of ongoing support is necessary develop democratic institutions and norms which are both deeply internalized and resilient to unexpected shocks and crises. This linkage is on display during the current global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Good governance norms are intimately tied to the development of public trust in governance institutions, which is a key factor when implementing public health measures, including dramatic restrictions on the movement and behavior of a national population. Donors should continue to support good governance programming throughout the COVID-19 response and should devote resources to piloting programming that supports and strengthens good governance norms amidst the pandemic response.

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### About Mercy Corps

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\* Suggested Citation for Full Study: Hakiman, Kamran and Ryan Sheely (2020). Pathways to Good Governance: Supporting Changes in Norms and Behavior Among Local Decision-makers in Myanmar. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.