



Members of the FDA participating in fish patrolling, Thathon township, Mon State

## BRIEFING PAPER 2: INSTITUTIONALIZING THE COASTAL NATURAL RESOURCES

The original aim of the Gulf of Mottama Project was to establish a Coastal Natural Resources Management Plan that balanced local livelihood and conservation needs. Institutions responsible for the implementation of this plan – the Coastal Natural Resources Management Committees of Mon State and Bago Region – were created in the project’s second phase. Rooted in the government administrative structure, they nevertheless had provision for village level representation upwards and were expected to be transparent, participatory, and accountable bodies. Considerable thought was also given to the township-level management of resources, especially fisheries, in Fishery Management Units (FMUs) or Ecosystem Management Units (EMUs). As outlined in Briefing Paper 1, the military takeover in February 2021 rendered the realization of such plans impossible. Instead, the project focused on ensuring that the community-level institutions supported through the project would be robust enough to continue after project closure. In this Briefing Paper 2, each of these institutions, as listed in the text box, is described in turn. The Myanmar Coastal Conservation Laboratory is included, although it is a slightly different type of organization – being an offshoot of the international NGO, Point B.

### The locally led institutions established through GoMP support:

- Village Development Committees (VDCs)
- Fisheries Development Association (FDA)
- Coastal Farmer’s Development Association (CFDA)
- Local Conservation Groups (LCG)
- Fishery Conservation Zones (FCZ)
- Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs)
- Myanmar Coastal Conservation Laboratory (MCCL)

### VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEES (VDCS)

“We had to leave our old village in 2015 and totally resettle. We formed the VDC in 2018 and through it conducted many interventions supported by the project – a pond, water supply, road improvement, a seed bank, pig rearing... We have a well-functioning system now.” Man aged about 60, village in Bilin township (Koe Tae Su village)

According to one of the persons heavily involved in the planning of GoMP phase I (Eberhardt, pers.com), in 2015 the concept of a participatory, representative body that would oversee village development activities was not a novel one in Myanmar. Similar initiatives already existed, but in the coastal communities of the Gulf of Mottama, it was the first time that all village development activities were channeled through one organization. The VDCs were established as a representative body to lead the development of participatory village development plans and to identify village priorities. At the time of the democratically elected government, they had a strong role in advocating for the village and coordinating with the line agencies to mobilize government funding. Their membership, especially the VDC committee members, received considerable support through the project in building their capacities to function effectively in a transparent and accountable manner. This included attention to inclusiveness, especially supporting the active participation of women.

As the first institutions established through the project, the VDCs might be expected to be the most robust. However, the situation is not that simple given the change in context. Although all but one of the townships in the project area voted overwhelmingly for the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 2015 and 2020 general elections, life under

the military government has created major political frictions. (The township of exception, Chaungzone, voted for the Mon State Party at State level in 2020). Individuals who expressed strong sentiment against the military were forced to flee; economic difficulties fueled out-migration, whilst fear of conscription has driven even more to leave. In most cases, Village Administrators were replaced after the military takeover by appointees of the State Administration Council (SAC), and anyone who has remained working in government service (whether by conviction or lack of an alternative) is effectively labelled “pro-military”. Suspicion towards outsiders, including project staff, has also grown. The security situation meant that visits to some villages became impossible. Not all VDCs have managed to continue operation in the face of such a breakdown of social cohesion. There are also differences between the way in which VDCs in Mon and Bago were facilitated through the project, as discussed in Briefing Paper 8. These may in part reflect different social dynamics, but also the approach of different Town Cluster Coordinators. For example, in Bago, village tract leaders and administrators were considered ineligible for the position of VDC chair but instead had the role of patron – involving them without assigning authority. In Mon, the VDCs were free to choose their leadership, which meant that quite often village tract leaders and administrators were elected – at least at the beginning.

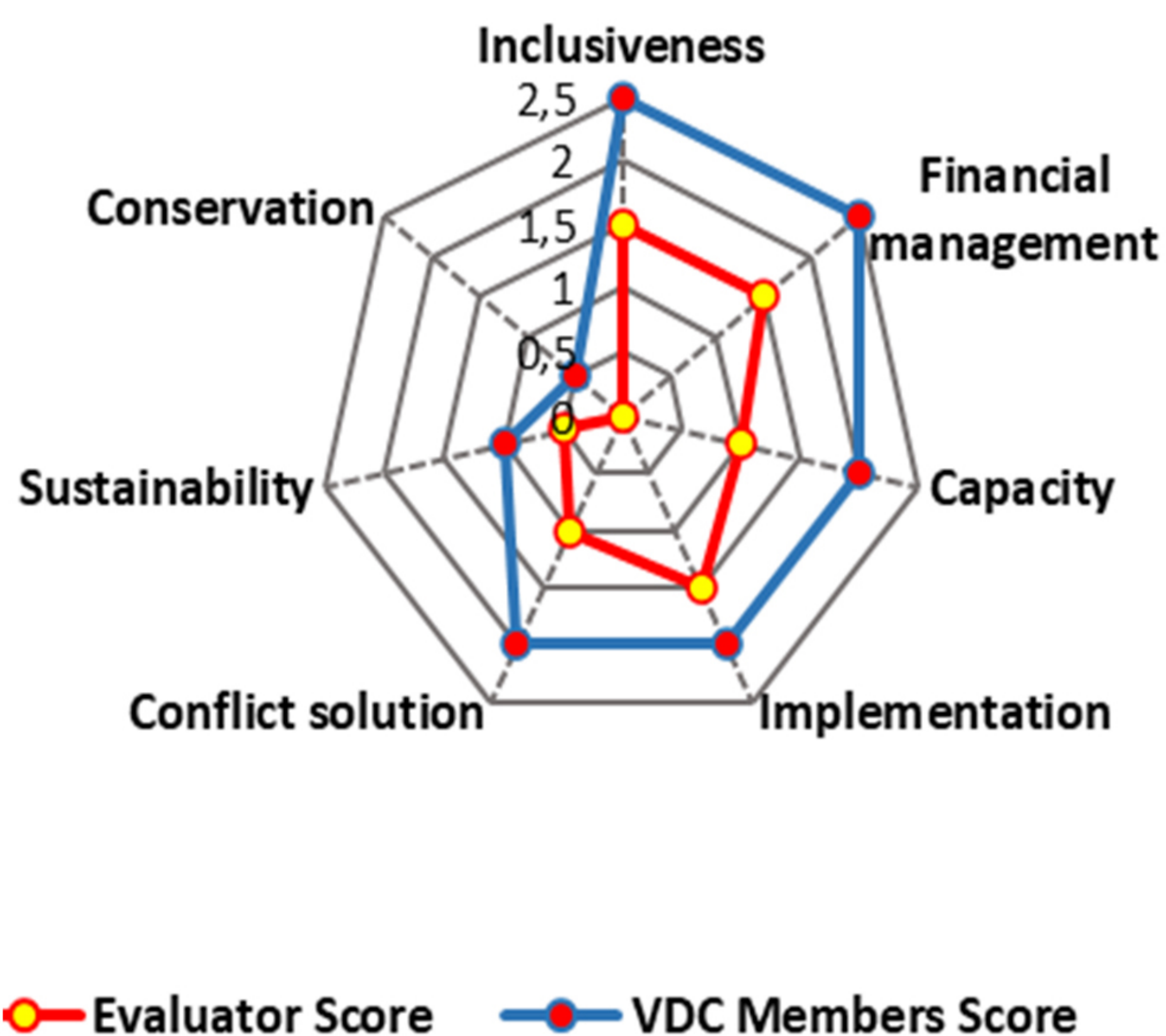


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VDC leading a road renovation, Paung township, Mon State

the example of Pha Lar Yay Zwar VDC provides an illustration. It is selected as being typical in some respects, although scores of course varied between VDCs. What is typical is that no VDCs rated themselves very highly on sustainability and conservation activities; some, however, expressed a strong spirit of inclusiveness and confidence in the management of their revolving fund – even if this was not fully shared by the evaluator (who typically gave lower ratings). The poor scores on conservation are disappointing for the project but understandable in the given context. Originally 25% of the interest gained through revolving fund loans was meant to be set aside for community development, including conservation activities. In practice, monitoring data shows that community development was often interpreted as the maintenance of village infrastructure – a necessary expenditure for which government funds have not, in recent times, been available. Regarding the overall robustness of VDCs – both their committees and whoever is active within the membership - there appear to have been quite substantial changes since 2021. This has both a positive and negative effect. A worrying tendency is that many individuals active in the VDC have numerous responsibilities, suggesting either “capture” by certain households or apathy amongst others. A broadly positive observation is the presence of many active, vocal women; project capacity building in this respect appears to have met with some success.

### Pha Lar Yay Zwar VDC Assessment - Members



A thorough analysis of the functioning of the 60 VDCs conducted in 2023 concluded that 46 were still operational, a number subsequently reduced to 41. In each of these VDCs, the project conducted a participatory assessment of their overall competences and the competences of their leadership according to seven criteria. These were ranked in the form of a spider's web diagram, with the external evaluator then adding his own evaluation

“It is difficult to get new VDC members as the active individuals have moved away. Also, some of the elders died from COVID, including the VDC Chairperson.” Man aged about 40, village in Waw township, May 2024

“We intend to continue with the VDC as it is a way of remaining united. But the development of this village is dependent on money being sent back by our young people in Thailand.” Man aged about 60, village in Waw township, May 2024

“We women have gained speaking skills. Previously we were shy to speak in such a gathering, but now we don't hesitate to speak out.” Woman aged about 40, village in Chaungzone township, May 2024

The functioning of the VDC revolving fund is discussed in a separate Briefing Paper (8); it is thus not detailed here, other than to note three points. The first is that the revolving fund was always perceived as a source of small volumes of affordable credit, 1- 2 % per month, or 12 - 24% per annum, for the poorer households in the village. This function appears to have been broadly fulfilled, although not for the very poorest households (who are often already in debt and may rightly hesitate to take further loans). The second is that the fund serves both as a divider and a connector, bringing together those in the village who use it, and separating them from those who do not. The third is that although the savings created through the revolving funds have resulted in an almost doubling of their value in Myanmar Kyat (MMK), inflation has been running at such a level over 2023 -2024 that their value in foreign currency has decreased by 70%. All these points noted, it is a fact that as of 2024, money is in short supply and demand for credit is very high in the GoMP villages. This is evident from the presence of many micro-finance institutions actively pushing credit at the government-set rate of 2.3% per month. The revolving fund is, therefore, a much-valued source of credit and is likely to be continued wherever VDC committees are able to manage it.

To conclude, the institutional robustness of the VDCs appears to vary considerably, and to be greatly determined by local community dynamics. In the final year of its activities, the project focused on reinforcing the capacities of the most promising VDCs in the expectation that they, at least, will continue beyond the project lifetime.

### FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS (FDA)

The fishing sector in Myanmar may be broadly divided into the “small fishers” and “large commercial fishing interests”. The former are people who gain their livelihood through fishing in small coastal vessels, or through harvesting fish in water channels or ponds (aquaculture). Sometimes this form of aquaculture includes fish feeding, but the fish are not intensively raised. Small fishers also include mud crab collectors, although they are generally the poorest individuals and may not always seek to join a group. The large commercial fishing interests are businesspeople; they may own many boats, fish processing units, and/or practice intensive aquaculture. Clearly the division between these two categories is not always precise. The larger fishing interests have their own organization, the Myanmar Fisheries Federation; outside this organization there are also unscrupulous businesspeople (widely known to be based in Kyiekhto) who practice illegal fishing using fine nets. Another illegal practice is the use of electric shocks, which like the fine nets, kill all fish indiscriminately.

The creation of a body representing the interests of the small fishers was always planned through the project, with the fisher groups at VDC level coming together in township clusters, and then federalizing at Regional or State level. This is in keeping with a model already imple-

mented elsewhere (supported by the consortium partner NAG) in the Regions of Ayeyarwady and Yangon. Whilst both Mon and Bago FDAs were established at township level in 2017, their evolution has been somewhat different.

The Bago FDA has a larger proportion of fishers practicing some form of aquaculture, although there are also coastal fishers within its membership. The use of electric shocks in water channels was a particular concern that brought them together, although the practice appears to be reducing simply because it is no longer very cost effective. Unfortunately, early problems in cluster functioning meant that reformation was necessary in 2020; this united Kawa, Thatapin and Waw township clusters into the Bago FDA. This is now operational, with a membership of 305 of whom 94 are women. Its committee is managing a fund (established with project seed money) that now amounts to some MMK 11.8 million and is used to provide affordable loans to the membership, mainly for fishing gear. The committee has applied for re-registration as required by the November 2022 Law of Association; it is anticipated that this will be granted before the end of project support.

The Mon FDA, which is largely comprised of coastal fishers, is larger and more advanced in its institutional establishment. With a membership of some 1,577 individuals spanning 44 villages within the townships of Kyiekhto, Bilin, Thaton and Paung, it has its own office in Kyiekhto, a clear organizational charter and vision (see text box), and already achieved re-registration in October 2023. Furthermore, it has established a link with the A Bank that allows its members to borrow to buy fishing gear at an interest rate of 1.5% per month. Of this, 1% goes to the bank and 0.5% to the FDA. This arrangement was made possible through the injection of a capital sum of 70 million MMK, provided through another project (LIFT). This capital serves as collateral. The committee estimates that nearly 1,000 of its members have benefitted in some way from the financial services offered through the FDA; of them, some 150 are women.



A fish collector and member of the FDA buying fish, Thaton township, Mon State

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### Vision of the Mon FDA

1. We will work to enhance the abundance of fish resources by cooperating with stakeholders in water resource related ecosystems, laws, and regulations.
2. We will collaborate with partner organizations to meet the basic needs of small fishers and develop enterprises.
3. By working as a group, small fishers will be able to access the market and increase their incomes.
4. By improving the capacity of the fisher's development association our organization will be strengthened and able to fulfill the long-term interests of small fishers

The FDAs regret that patrolling against illegal fishing is no longer possible, as the success of this strategy over the period 2017 – 2021 convinced them of its efficacy (see Briefing Note 7). However, as an illustration of the challenges and risks involved, it is widely known that at one time, there was a price on the head of the previous Mon FDA Chair of 5 million MMK, offered by the illegal fishing cartel. Fortunately, the reward was never collected.

Throughout 2024 the project has worked to further strengthen the capacities of the FDAs, including the organization of exchange visits with the Ayeyarwady and Yangon FDAs, building links between them. With the link to the A-bank, they are assured of further access to affordable credit and seem likely to be institutionally sustainable. They still, however, have a range of management issues to address – not least, the formulation of better, more detailed plans for the different types of fishing conducted by their members in different areas. As a final comment, the observation of a businessman in the fishing industry about the Mon FDA is pertinent.

“The project created a greater awareness on the part of small fishers about the benefits of conservation. It also provided them with the opportunity, during phase 2, to participate in the legislative process. They were always represented in parliamentary discussions. Through this they gained a sense of self confidence and self-worth.”  
Member of the Myanmar Fisheries Federation, May 2024.

### COASTAL FARMERS DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION (CFDA)

Unlike the FDAs, the establishment of the CFDAs was not explicitly planned through the project; they evolved through perceived need. An early activity by village farmer groups was the establishment of rice seed banks, both of local varieties favored for taste and of varieties better suited to the changing climate – with differing growing periods (from 90 to 145 days) or straw length. These reserves of seed grown by local farmers were part of preparedness activities identified in disaster risk reduction planning. The project also introduced and promoted good agricultural practices (GAP) that minimize pesticide and chemical fertilizer use, and sustainable rice production following the protocol of the Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP). Different varieties were tested in Farmer Field Schools, along with other innovations such as different applications of organic fertilizer, and methods to control the rapacious Golden Snail, an exotic pest that has become a very serious problem in recent years. Farmers-



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Members of CFDA sharing lessons on the Farmers Field Day, Bilin township, Mon State

groups also took part in drainage activities planned at the village level under Water Use Management Plans.

Seed that is distributed or sold to others as a specific variety must, under Myanmar law, be certified by government officials. This requirement meant that the seed farmers had to formalize their organization. Accordingly, a Mon CFDA was created in November 2018 and achieved registration in August 2019. The Bago CFDA, whilst established, was still awaiting official registration at the time of writing but had submitted the necessary documents. In both cases, the project provided seed money for a revolving fund to give farmers the opportunity to access affordable loans. Over time, farmer interest has grown, to a current Mon membership of 1,200 (200 women) spanning farmers in Kyiekhto, Bilin, Thaton and Paung. The current Bago membership comprises 696 (150 women) farmers from Kawa, Thanatpin and Waw. The CFDAs not only sell seed, but also organic fertilizer – both foliar sprays (produced from fish waste) and pellets (formed from rice husks, animal dung and other vegetal matter). Organic fertilizers are highly demanded in the period since the military takeover, which has seen the cost of chemical fertilizer increase by four to five times.

Both CFDAs employ staff; in the case of Mon, six full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, in Bago, four FTE. Recognizing the importance of sound technical advice given directly to farmers, the staff include young technical specialists who make regular field visits. Project funds were used towards staff salaries, but in decreasing amounts. In the last year of operation, the project contribution to salaries was 40%, on the understanding that this was to support reaching out to new, additional members; CFDA funds meanwhile covered the balance 60% (mostly for activities targeting current members). The Mon CFDA intends to re-register as an Association once its current registration expires (towards the end of the year) but as a precautionary measure, has also created a separate, self-owned company. This was a decision taken after a full review of different options from a legal, economic, and practical perspective, supported through the project. In planning future income-generation opportunities, the Mon CFDA company has already bought a plot of land on which to establish a seed cleaner and an organic fertilizer production unit.

The CFDA, especially that of Mon, appear to be well on the path to institutional sustainability. Their main constraints lie in the current difficulties in transportation (both from and to farmers), and in obtaining timely government certification for their seed. They are also limited in the volume of seed and organic fertilizer that they produce as this must be done following the seed production protocol. However, this does not represent a constraint to their continued existence.

“Farming is our livelihood. As long as there are farmers we will continue to exist as there is a clear need for us.”  
Mon CFDA member.

### LOCAL CONSERVATION GROUPS (LCGS)

Even before the project was conceived, a small national NGO named BANCA, the Biodiversity and Conservation Association, was active in the Gulf of Mottama trying to halt the hunting of shorebirds, some of which are critically endangered species. To this end, they identified well-known bird hunters and worked with them to change their livelihood. BANCA then became a project partner, and this work was incorporated, at least to some extent, into VDC activities. Nevertheless, conservation work has remained largely in the hands of a relatively few committed individuals, organized into Local Conservation Groups. They work to raise awareness within their communities and to organize communal conservation activities such as mangrove planting. Another important task of the LCGs is monitoring bird and marine mammal populations. When conducting monitoring, the members are paid daily wages, and reimbursed for transport, food and (where necessary) accommodation costs. Most are men aged 30-40 as much of the monitoring is conducted in boats, which are considered unsuitable for women. Apart from this regular monitoring, they also record findings of marine mammal strandings and/or deaths.

The commitment of LCG members appears to be high; many are motivated by a deep appreciation of the natural world and enthusiasm for what they do. They also have concerns about the feasibility of continuing their work without having their own funding mechanism. As already noted, the foreseen source – derived from the VDC revolving fund – has not materialized. BANCA is of the opinion that it will always be possible to raise funds for LCG activities from conservation organizations. Whilst this may well be true, it does mean that the LCGs seem unlikely to become independently functioning bodies in the near future.

“We can continue to do our work with very little additional support. We have the boat and the knowledge; we just need money for the fuel and perhaps some additional equipment. We feel accountable to future generations that they will also see the same marine resources.” LCG member, village in Paung township.

### Fish Conservation Zones within the Gulf of Mottama

Name	Township	Year	Area (ha)	Form of protection
Ta Naw Kyun	Waw, Bago Region	2023	10	No take zone
Thein Za Yat	Kyiekhto, Mon State	2023	10	No take zone
Mu Thin	Bilin, Mon State	2024	20	No take zone
Ko Tae Su	Bilin, Mon State	2024	600	Seasonal closure
Baing Laung	Paung, Mon State	2024	600	No take zone 200ha; Seasonal closure 400ha



Members of Local Conservation Group (LCG) monitoring shorebirds, Kawa township, Bago Region



Members of Local Conservation Group (LCG) planting mangrove plantation, Paung township, Mon State

### FISH CONSERVATION ZONES (FCZ)

The substantial amount of research into the Gulf of Mottama ecosystem that was funded through the project laid the base for the targeted spatial planning of conservation efforts. Although ambitions for township level management units had to be scaled back, it was important to at least secure some protection of the most crucial fish spawning grounds. In the last two years of operation, the project therefore focused on demarcating such areas and working with the communities immediately concerned to establish a responsible body. As a result, five Fish Conservation Zones (FCZ) were identified, all of which are spawning grounds of the much-prized Hilsa fish (*Tenualosa ilisha*). They are listed in the table below.

In establishing the FCZs, the project also consulted with the relevant VDCs, LCGs and FDA. In each case a fund is being established, overseen by the FCZ management committee, that will ensure maintenance activities can be conducted. Whilst due capacity building in the management of this fund has been conducted, it is of course unfortunate that the FCZs are only being established late in the project life with little time to continue support. Alternative sources of funding to continue engagement are therefore being explored by one of the project partners.

### COMMUNITY FOREST USER GROUPS (CFUGS)

Community forests are a legal category of forest, recognized under Myanmar forest law since 1995. They generally comprise a 30-year grant of use of State land, rather than a transfer of outright ownership. Obtaining community forestry status is quite a complicated and often lengthy process, with the result that they are not a widespread forest category within the country. In the Gulf of Mottama, where the project has supported the creation of community mangrove forests, the situation is further complicated by the cyclical pattern of land erosion and deposition by the sea. New mudflats have potential to be planted with mangroves – but they are also areas traditionally used for mud-crab collection and for rice cultivation, once salinity levels allow.

An early project success was the creation of Kar Te community forest, a 121ha (300 acre) site of existing mangroves that was officially registered in 2019 following close collaboration with the Forest Department. Within this area, a pilot mud crab raising venture within a mature mangrove forest was also started and successfully continued. The Community Forest User Group, CFUG, is reported to be functioning well. Three more community forestry sites have been identified and are in the process of being registered (see table). However, under the current government, there is clearly some hesitation within the community. The main reason is that full identity card details are required from every participating household; obviously for those in fear of the military, this is information that they are unwilling to share. Here the project must tread very carefully, recognizing sensitivities and ensuring that those who feel unable to sign now are not excluded from future membership if the political situation changes.

As a legally registered body, CFUGs have a status that should allow them control over the land – something that is particularly important in the current context of increased interest in mangrove planting for carbon credits. This is also being conducted in the project area by at least one company; in several instances in Bago Region this has resulted in conflict with villagers who are being denied access to mudflats that they consider to be theirs by tradition (see also Briefing Paper 7).

#### Community mangrove forests under establishment

Name (village)	Township	Area (ha)	No. households	Type
Sel Eain Su	Paung	40.5	140	New mangrove plantation on mudflats
Wae Pa Tan	Paung	121	500	Mature mangroves in good condition
Zee Gone	Paung	40.5	90	New mangrove plantation on mudflats



Farm input shop (Shwe Yar Mannya Shop) operated by CFDA Mon, Kyiekhto township, Mon State

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### MYANMAR COASTAL CONSERVATION LAB (MCCL)

As part of its support for conservation and monitoring community perceptions, the project worked with an international NGO originally based within Mawlamyine university, known as Point B. To conduct action research, this organization selected and trained young people, mainly post-graduate students, who have a particular interest in nature conservation. These young people now have their own organization, the Myanmar Coastal Conservation Laboratory, although they remain formally attached to Point B.

Although the MCCL was not envisaged in the project design and has partly evolved through necessity following the 2021 military takeover, it does represent a body of knowledge and enthusiasm for conservation that has developed through project support.

“Birds are easy to see, so people connect with them. But marine mammals are really important in the ecosystem too - and because people don't often see them, they don't connect with them so readily. We're the only group working on marine mammals in Myanmar – we want to continue this work.” Member of the MCCL, May 2024.

### CONCLUSION

The changing political, social, and economic context in Myanmar has forced the Gulf of Mottama project to adapt and modify the way in which it has promoted institutional mechanisms to manage the area on a sustainable basis. It has not been possible to realize the original concept of coastal resource co-management under one umbrella institution. However, a number of strong local institutions committed to supporting both livelihood and conservation needs are expected to remain after project closure.

## Highlights of experience

•The institutions established to represent the interests of one specific livelihood – notably the CFDA for farmers and the FDA for small fishers – seem to be the strongest and most likely to continue after project closure. Both have incorporated conservation principles in their activities and advocacy work. Similarly, the LCGs seem likely to continue, given their strong commitment, although they are not financially self-sustaining and will need external support to conduct activities.

•The different interests within a village are not easy to bring together under a united body; at a time when social cohesion is being eroded by outside forces, it is not surprising that some VDCs have fractured. However, the continued functioning of some two-thirds of those established is a testament to earlier strong capacity building. The VDC revolving funds are likely to serve as the glue that maintains them – or the tension that breaks them apart.

•The most recently created institutions, notably the FCZs and CFUGs – as well as the MCCL – are institutionally the weakest. Further external funding (which may well be forthcoming from varied sources) will probably be required to ensure their institutional sustainability.

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