

Barriers to Citizen Participation in Local Governance for Effective Public Service Delivery in Karenni State, Myanmar

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Abstract

Citizen participation is widely recognized as a vital component of democratic governance and effective public service delivery. However, meaningful civic engagement remains severely limited in Karenni State, Myanmar where there are conflict affected and politically fragile regions. This research examines the barriers that hinder citizens from actively participating in local governance, especially in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup. This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and document analysis to identify how the local governance system is structured, how public services are delivered and the extent to which citizens are involved in these processes in Karenni State. The findings indicate key barriers to citizen participation as fear and insecurity, limited capacity, shortage of access to information and communication, economic and financial hardship, and conflict-related challenges. These barriers not only limit public engagement but also weaken the foundation for effective and public participatory local governance. Addressing these challenges is essential to develop participatory mechanisms to empower citizens, build trust in local institutions, and ensure that governance structures reflect the needs and voices of all community members, especially those most affected by conflict. These obstacles erode public trust and also significantly impede the effective public service delivery. By addressing the challenges, this research recommends strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, promoting inclusive participation through leadership and capacity building training, improving communication infrastructures and fostering stronger collaboration among local governance actors.

Keywords – citizen participation, barriers, local governance, public service delivery

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, the democratic resistance movements have spread across the country. In many territories, such as Kachin, Kayin (Karen), Chin, and Kayah (Karenni) States, where ethnic minorities have been struggling for self-governance and been strictly controlled by the military, the people reclaimed their territory and strengthened the local governance structures.

This paper examines citizen participation in local governance and its role in effective public service delivery in Karenni State. The study is based on desk research and qualitative findings drawn from semi-structured interviews. Since the coup, local governance systems in ethnic states like Karenni have faced major disruptions, creating both challenges and opportunities for citizen engagement. There are four main stakeholders in the local governance system of Karenni state. The main stakeholders include local administrations, which consist of township administration councils (TACs) and village tract representatives, civil society organisations (CSOs), citizens, and the departments of the Interim Executive Council of Karenni State (IEC), all of which are responsible for delivering public services. The targeted group consists of TAC members, CSO members, citizens, and IEC representatives. By identifying the barriers that hinder active participation, this research aims to support local and international organizations in developing strategies to empower communities and strengthen governance.

The paper first analyzes the significance of citizen participation in local governance and public service delivery, focusing on the structure, practices, and mechanisms currently operating in the Karenni State. The current local governance system in Karenni State is called the Multi-Level Inclusive Governance System (MIGS). Analyzing the MIGS, the system is established by the Karenni model of governance. The Karenni model of governance, which is developed by the interim government of Karenni State, is established through the four key lenses. The four key lenses are legitimacy: how do citizens participate in the current bottom-up governance; inclusivity: how are women and ethnic minority communities represented at each level of governance; hybridity: how does emerging bottom-up governance function in a territory with multiple ethnic-based pre-existing administrative structures; and sustainability: how does emerging bottom-up governance facilitate the political reconciliation process of Karenni society from decades-long military-imposed divisions (KCSY et al., 2024). The paper then explores key

barriers to citizen participation, categorized into legal and policy-related, economic, technological, and security and conflict-related challenges.

Subsequently, the study draws on case studies to illustrate common obstacles faced in similar contexts. Finally, the paper proposes strategies to enhance citizen engagement and improve the effectiveness of public service delivery in Karenni State, offering practical recommendations based on the findings.

2. Problem Statement

Building a federal system in Myanmar from a bottom-up approach is the one of the realistic solutions for Myanmar's current political crisis. South (2021) argues that Myanmar definitely requires a plan for a federal political settlement at the top level, but this should be paired with work to cultivate the skills needed to pursue federalism "from the bottom up" (p. 453). According to South (2021), this plan consists of the drafting of state-level constitutions (which should involve all relevant stakeholders, similar to the NCUB process in the 1990s) and enhancing the EAO's local administration and governance capabilities. In enhancing local administration and governance capabilities in control areas of EAO or revolutionary forces such as Karenni state, enhancing the role of citizen participation in local level governance is essential. The main factor behind this is that citizen participation in local governance is crucial for effective public service delivery by enhancing democratic decision-making and ensuring accountability. However, in conflict-affected areas like Karenni state, various barriers hinder citizen participation in local governance. Weak legal frameworks, fragile institutional structures and insufficient policies discourage citizen participation. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, low education levels, and limited public awareness, further challenge citizens' capacity to engage effectively. Additionally, technological limitations undermine participation mechanisms, particularly in areas with poor infrastructure and digital access.

As a result, low citizen participation leads to unresponsive service delivery, exacerbating social inequalities and undermining the legitimacy of governance structures. In conflict-affected areas, limited participation may contribute to instability, exacerbate grievances, and interfere with peacebuilding efforts.

2.1. Research Objective and Research Question

This research paper aims to identify and analyze the key barriers that hinder citizen participation in local governance in Karenni State, Myanmar and to explore how the barriers impact the effectiveness of public service delivery and to provide recommendations for enhancing inclusive and participatory governance in conflict-affected areas. This research aims to answer the following research question: “What are the key barriers that prevent citizen participation in local governance for effective public service delivery in Karenni State, Myanmar?”

2.2. Research Methodology

This research project used a qualitative research method to investigate the structure of local governance and public service delivery in Karenni State, focusing on citizen participation. This research relies on primary data, which was collected through semi-structured and open-ended interviews conducted both online and offline with 10 key stakeholders, including members of Township Administration Councils, experts in Karenni Local Government, CSO members in Karenni States, and citizens in that area. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of roles and townships across Karenni (township under IEC and hybrid administration). The interview questions list and the profiles of interviewees are located in the Appendix. Ethical integrity was prioritized at all times by the research team. Advance appointments with key informants were arranged and made at secure and safe times and locations. A majority of the participants were individuals with lived experience of conflict-affected areas, and thus, utmost care was taken not to inflict emotional or physical harm. The team employed a code of ethical practice and had a strict "do no harm" principle, which enabled all interviews to be voluntary, confidential, and respectful. Informed consent was obtained before each session, and no personal data was stored or shared in public spaces.

This research relies on primary data, which is collected through face-to-face online and offline interviews. The secondary data is gathered from existing published academic research, articles, reports, and policy documents on governance in conflict-affected or transition zones. This approach examines data from various sources to provide a holistic view of local governance, citizen participation, and public service delivery in Karenni State. It assists in identifying patterns, bottlenecks, and potential avenues for strengthening governance systems to be more inclusive and effective.

3. Literature Review

Local governance is the participation of local citizens, local administration representatives, civic society organisations and private-sector actors in the process of decision-making and administering local affairs at the local level. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2009:173) explains local governance as “a set of institutions, mechanisms, and processes through which citizens can express their interests and needs, mediate differences and exercise their rights and obligations at the local level (as cited in Malemma & Nel-Sanders, 2021). Local governance is also a form of decentralized governance which authorises the local representatives and local citizens to manage their local affairs such as public delivery services, by addressing the needs of local citizens. Efficient local governance with the citizen participation system maintains the democratic culture among citizens. The key features of local governance are decentralization, citizen participation, accountability and transparency, service delivery and local legitimacy.

At the local level of the governance system, citizen participation performs the essential function of improving the quality and accountability of public service delivery. According to Arnstein (1969), citizen participation in decision-making, planning, and monitoring local affairs leads local governments to better align services with the needs of local communities. Citizen participation also improves transparency, reduces corruption (Fox, 2015), and promotes the sense of ownership by the citizens (World Bank, 2008). Mechanisms such as public meetings and consultations, social audits, and participatory budgeting (Fung, 2006) enable citizens to voice their concerns and recommend improvements. Last but not least, citizens' active participation reinforces democratic governance and makes public services more effective, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all, especially those from marginalized and underserved groups.

4. Conceptual Framework: Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation

The concept, the ladder of participation by Arnstein (1969), provides a clear framework to measure the degree of citizen participation in a local governance system. In the work of the ladder of participation, Arnstein (1969) extensively explains the degree of citizens participation in decision-making processes of community development programmes and projects. In the concept of Arnstein (1969), it includes eight rungs by categorizing into three levels which are non-participation, degrees of tokenism, and degree of citizen power. Under non-participation level, there are two rungs, which are manipulation and therapy. Non-participation indicates that citizen participation is very low in governance and administration. Under degrees of tokenism, there are

three rungs, which are informing, consultation and placation. Degrees of tokenism points out that citizen participation is medium. Under degrees of citizen power, there are three rungs, which are partnership, delegated power and citizen control. Three rungs from this level represent high and genuine citizen participation.

Arnstein's ladder of participation is a contextual framework that fosters the degree of citizen participation. In the context of Karenni, this concept assists to identify where the citizen participation currently lies and how political, legal, technological and social barriers hinder citizen participation. In the case study of Khayelitsha, which is a township from a democratic country, South Africa, Malemane & Nel-Sander (2021) explain that the ladder of participation concept helps describe citizen participation in local governance affairs (p. 4). Compared to the Khayelitsha study, Karenni's current local governance system is eligible to measure the degree of citizen participation by using the ladder of participation because Karenni's current local governance focuses on citizen participation and inclusivity to align with future federal-democratic political systems. According to KCSY et al. (2024), MIGS, the current local governance system in Karenni integrates emerging bottom-up systems with existing ethnic resistance organization (ERO) administration to establish a more representative, inclusive, and rule-of-law-based system of governance. Therefore, the concept of Arnstein aligns with the goals of researchers which are finding structural and contextual barriers to citizen participation in local governance.

Current Structure of Local Governance in Karenni State

This paper examined the current local governance configuration of Karenni state and the formation of its local governance structure. Currently, there are sixteen townships in Karenni state. This township formation is new after the 2021 Myanmar military coup and is under Karenni Model of Governance, multi-level inclusive governance system (MIGS). According to KCSY et al. (2024), and semi-structured interview, the report states that three different bodies of local governance structures are township-level administration councils, village tracts representatives, and village-level administration. In three different levels, township-level administration councils play an important role in delivering the public services. The researchers concluded that there are three different structures of local governance in Karenni state based on the three different methods of forming township administration councils (TACs).

Method 1: Electing Full Members of Council with Local Election

The first method is electing full members of township administration councils (TACs) by holding local elections. In Pekon township, local citizens fully and directly elect all member positions for every level of local administration. A member of the township administration council stated that the council, in collaboration with local administration, elected full members through local election. The citizens elect all representatives of village and village level through local election (L1, interview, April 2025). In the same way, the citizens elect all the members of township administration council through election for township level administration (L1, interview, April 2025).

Method 2: Forming Township Administration Council with Elected Members and EAOs Representatives

In addition to method 1, forming a township administration council with elected members and EAOs representatives is the second method for forming township administration councils (TACs) in Karenni state. Through forming TACs with this method, TACs typically consist of seven to nine members, including one representative from each ERO operating within the designated township (KCSY et al., 2024). In the majority of townships, TACs are formed by three ERO representatives and six elected officials (KCSY et al., 2024). While The positions of township administration council such as chairperson and vice-chairperson are appointed by local EAOs, the remaining positions such as secretary or regular member are elected by citizens (L4, interview, May 2025).

Method 3: Forming The Township Administration Council without Election

The last method is forming the township administration council without election. In this case, local administration council by the members of local ethnic resistance organizations (ERO) without election. Currently, the township administration council of a township from Karenni is formed by a joint administration by the KNPLF and KNPP, aiming to form a new model of governance or to operate existing systems (L3, interview, May 2025). These two organizations, KNPLF and KNPP are local EROs of this township.

5. The Role of Citizen Participation in Local Governance and Public Service Delivery

At the local level of the government, the processes of decision-making, policy formation, implementation and public service delivery need to inform on their own means in alliance with the

needs at the local level. Public service delivery is typically a highly complex undertaking, which involves plenty of transactions between service providers and the citizens (UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence, 2016). In case of effective implementation, citizen participation plays a crucial role in the involvement of the community members. The participation of the residents encourages them to raise their voices in matters that directly affect their lives, communities and the whole society. Citizen participation not only makes effects for the local governance structure, but also to embody the principle of democracy. The government can better align policies, promote inclusive development, reduce corruption and mismanagement, and encourage public officials to be more responsible when the citizens are involved in identifying and monitoring the needs at the local level. The active engagement of individuals and communities in the local governance may highly enhance accountability and transparency, build social cohesion, encourage sustainability and effectively improve public service delivery.

The role of citizen participation in public service delivery is not a newly founded one since the citizens have actively participated in the government systems, especially the local governance in the deliberation of local issues, the selection of their community leaders and the public affairs. In the previous centuries, we have witnessed a profusion of citizen engagement initiatives, such as community development committees, citizen satisfaction surveys, public consultations, participatory planning, budget consultations and social audits. Using such initiatives, citizens seek solutions to specific problems in the public sector by engaging constructively with public officials as the political leadership.

5.1. The Necessities to Implement Effective Citizen Participation in Local Governance

The citizen participation can be directed by public forums and community consultations or indirect by representations. However the participation is directly or indirectly, the several key necessities are required to implement the effective citizen participation. The legal and policy frameworks need to guarantee the right to participation through the citizens by means of decentralized governance law and public consultation policies and the institutional mandates should be strong and clearly stated. The local governance needs to form the institutional mechanisms such as grievance redress systems and feedback channels, inclusive representation from women, youth and other marginalized groups, and the formal platforms of town hall meetings, participatory budgeting and open forums.

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5.2. Mechanism and Situation of Citizen Participation in Current Local Governance Structures of Karenni State

The interview results reveal that there are both formal and informal ways for people to participate in local governance and public service delivery in three different structures of local governance in Karenni State. Although both formal and informal methods exist, citizen participation remains limited and often uneven. There are structured platforms such as village meetings, township councils, and coordination groups where civil society organizations, village leaders, displaced communities, and armed actors come together to make decisions. However, in most townships, these platforms involve selected representatives rather than open participation from the wider public. One of the interviewees who is a member of the township administration council (TAC) stated, “when we talk about participatory or indirect approaches and platforms, we can say that some spaces exist, but there are also issues such as security concerns that prevent full participation”. (L4, interview, May 2025).

The policy of the Interim Executive Council inspires efforts to increase inclusion, particularly regarding gender and ethnic representation, by encouraging at least 30% female participation. In a report of five CSOs, IEC Chairperson Khu Oo Reh mentioned, “The Interim Executive Council is putting together and building a governance system that is all-inclusive and in accordance with fundamental values such as unity, collective leadership and collective decision-making, transparency, responsibility and accountability, recognition of diversity and minority rights, and ensuring and strengthening women’s participation (KCSY et al., 2024). In most townships, local administration councils aim to follow the Interim Executive Council’s policy that encourages at least 30% female participation. However, most are still men in the decision-making process. A member of the CSO stated, “In most committees, there is participation from various age groups and genders. However, up to now, the majority of participants are still men. Men are more involved in these processes, so in some ways, it becomes a matter of access and opportunity.” (C1, interview, April 2025). A KSIP member also mentioned, “[genuine inclusion of women] is still challenging; participation and decision-making [agency] are not the same (KCSY et al., 2024). As a result, women are sometimes invited to join committees. But according to interviewees, many of these women were invited rather than stepping forward themselves. Even when they join, they often hesitate to speak up or take the lead. This is partly due to a lack of confidence and the belief, still common in some communities, that leadership is a man’s role. One of the interviewees, a member of the administration council, mentioned this situation: “when it comes to gender, sometimes women’s rights are being discussed more, so women are being invited to participate. However, when it comes to taking on leadership roles or stepping to the front, some women either don’t want to or don’t feel confident enough to accept those roles. That does happen” (L2, interview, May 2025).

Young people are beginning to take more active roles, especially in newly formed committees. Older people are still included, but some say they feel physically or mentally less able to engage. There is no strong evidence of exclusion based on ethnicity, and interviewees noted that people from all backgrounds have opportunities to join. However, social norms, traditional expectations, and internal doubts continue to limit full and equal participation. Although the foundations for participatory governance are present, more support and encouragement are needed to make it truly inclusive and effective for everyone.

5.3. The Level of Citizen Participation in Karenni's Local Governance

Based on the primary data, the level of citizen participation in local governance in Karenni is mostly between consultation, placation and partnership rungs from the Arnstein's concept. According to a member of CSO, this person states, "mainly, when we talk about the levels of participation, they are involved in things like consultations and gathering suggestions from the community. And at times, they also take part in making decisions equally and participating equally in the process" (S 1, interview, April 2025). Mostly, citizens are consulted through communication channels such as public meetings. In addition, there are cases of placation where citizens and the members of CSO are in advisory positions of local administration councils.

As the partnership level from concept, method two of forming township administration councils (TACs), which is forming township administration councils with elected members and EAOs representatives, indicate that citizens have shared power to influence the final decision. Strongly different from the 15 townships from Karenni state, Pekon township reaches citizen control level because all the different local governance bodies are fully elected by local elections. As stated by member of Pekon' TAC, "As for the grassroots-level community discussions, the selection process happens step by step—starting from the village tract leaders. These leaders then coordinate and pass it up to the village-tract administrators. From there, it moves on to the township council members. In the process we observed, the final stage involves electing township council members through a selection system that begins with the village administrators and proceeds upward step by step (L 1, interview, April 2025). The levels of citizen participation vary based on the three different model of governance. In model 1 and 2, citizen participation reach to degrees of citizen power from Arnstein's concept. The researchers conclude that the level of citizen participation in model 3 is under degree tokenism because township administration council is formed by the members of local ethnic resistance organizations (ERO) without any election. Forming without election points out that there is no citizen power and control in decision making process for local affairs including public service delivery. Although there is no citizen power and control in decision making, there is consulting between members of TAC and citizens (L3, interview, May 2025). Therefore, the different model of governance impacts the degree of citizen participation in Karenni state.

5.4. The Role of Citizen Participation for Effective Public Service Delivery of Karenni State

Currently in Karenni state, the local administration councils and sub-councils deliver public services such as healthcare, education and services related to humanitarian. In Karenni, there are many different sectors, for example, healthcare, education, and humanitarian assistance and those kinds of services are already in place (S1, interview, April 2025). However, local administration councils such as township administration councils (TACs) have the barriers and challenges to deliver the effective public services on one hand. According to a member of TAC, he states, “when we talk about effective service delivery, at the moment, we still are not able to provide services in a truly effective way” (L4, interview, May 2025). On the other hand, citizens are experiencing challenges to receive public services from local administration councils.

Citizen participation in public service delivery can improve service relevance and quality as the citizens can reflect the actual needs and priorities of the community and lead to better outcomes. According to a member of a civic society organization from Karenni state, she revealed, “from my perspective, I believe that public participation is crucial when it comes to delivering public services. Whether it is in healthcare, education, or humanitarian support, like we mentioned earlier, we cannot approach these situations with a one-sided effort alone. The reason is that the necessary information needs to come directly from the ground level. That means the required collaboration and participation must be present. I believe that input and involvement from the community make the delivery of services much more effective. That’s why public participation plays an important and essential role in the process” (S1, interview, april 2025). Public officials may apply citizen participation to gain specific indigenous knowledge that can assist them make public services better fit the requirements of the community (UNDP, 2016). To be effective service delivery, citizens need to have a genuine willingness to participate. (L4, interview, May 2025). The main reason behind having the barriers and challenges to delivering effective public services is that citizens are experiencing barriers to participating in local governance of Karenni state. Therefore, having the barriers to citizen participation in local governance of Karenni play as the barriers to implement the effective public service delivery.

6. Barriers to Citizen Participation in Local Governance of Karenni

This paper examined the barriers to citizen participation in Karenni local governance for effective public service delivery and reviewed various academic literature and findings on barriers to citizen participation, categorizing them by type to facilitate the collection of primary data. Gaventa and Valderranma (1999) identified six barriers to citizen participation in local governance

based on several studies. Six barriers include power tensions between local authorities and citizens, legislative and policy obstacles, insufficient financial resources, and a lack of skills among citizens to participate. In addition, the research scholars also found out that the citizen participation mostly failed in those systems, where local governmental officials are not ready to disseminate powers to citizens (Andersson & Van Laerhoven, 2007; Blair, 2000; Brinkerhoff & Azfar, 2006; Eguren, 2008, as cited in Rafique et al., 2021). Although many countries have enacted the laws related to citizen participation to enhance the degree of citizen participation in the local governance (Andersson, 1999; Andersson & Van Laerhoven, 2007; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Onyach-Olaa, 2003; Robino, 2009; Speer, 2012; Waheduzzaman, 2010a, as cited in Rafique et al., 2021), citizens and CSOs have technical and organisational barriers to engage authoritative decisions (Avritzer, 2012; Devas & Grant, 2003; Wampler, 2004, as cited in Rafique et al., 2021).

The implementation of citizen participation for effective public service delivery in local governance of the Karenni State is not easy as the area is fragile and conflict-affected. After the military coup in 2021, local governments and community ties got even weaker, and fighting intensified, mainly in remote areas where many folks don't have access to basic information about what their local leaders are doing or how decisions are made. The open-ended questions, which are not only based on the previous scholarly research and findings but also exploring the possible barriers to citizen participation, are prepared in this research paper. Based on the on-ground data and secondary data, the researcher found that the citizens mostly encountered the security and conflict-related barriers, financial and economic barriers, capacity and resources barriers, barriers of social norms and its impact and a few legal and policy barriers.

6.1 Legal and Policy Barriers

During the previous centuries, Myanmar was under the control of the military where the government focused only on their profits. Citizen participation in Karenni State was already limited before the 2021 coup. Foundationally, 2008 constitution the local governance structures were controlled by the central government and limited the authority of the local government. Due to the centralized governance system, citizens have little legal standing or channels to influence local policy or service delivery decisions. Lack of a local governance framework for participation made citizens have no legal guarantee to participate in governance structures. On the other hand, the Association Registration Law (2014) made the NGOs and CSOs to register and the government

can deny or revoke. By indirect means, the ability of CSOs is reduced to support or facilitate citizen participation in local governance.

Related to the previous laws and policies which were alive for centuries, the citizens are afraid to participate in the local governance processes. The interim governance system is not really stable and perfect, but the local governance made no restrictions in citizen participation and hopefully welcomed the citizens for the active engagement. However the opportunities are on, the citizens are still traumatized and afraid to participate in the governance system. According to one of the interviewees (E1, interview, May 2025), as the more awareness citizens gained, the more encouraged they wanted to participate but the long-suppressed fear that had lain dormant for years prevented them from participating properly. In the point of public service delivery, citizens have desires to participate in it. The lack of essential capacity and resources becomes problems in promoting citizen participation in Karenni State.

6.2 Capacity and Resources Barriers

The capacity and resources barriers are one of the main factors to focus on the citizen participation in Karenni local governance. The primary data indicates that there are two barriers within the capacity and resources category. According to several studies from Gaventa and Valderranma (1999), this barrier is the one of the main barriers to citizen participation in local governance. The first barrier is that citizens need skills to participate in the local-level governance of Karenni State. The citizens need professional skills, such as educational, technological, and social awareness, for effective participation in local governance. According to an interviewee who is a member of a civil society organization, the interviewee states, “these days, during the transitional period, we’ve had to go and work with the people who are already there. In that context, their main qualification is really their own capacity or ability. When that capacity is limited, they still have to carry out certain responsibilities. In such situations, some people have experience and know what to do, but others don’t. So, in those cases, these things become challenges and obstacles for them (S1, interview, April 2025). In order to have citizen participation, it is necessary for the relevant authorities to provide awareness, resources, and permission (C2, interview, May 2025). Not having skills to participate is a kind of capacity and resource barrier to citizen participation for effective public services delivery.

Under the category of capacity and resource barriers, the second barrier is the barrier which is related to technology and devices. This barrier is limiting access to the internet and technological

devices. In the days of artificial intelligence, the internet and the latest technologies play a crucial role in enabling citizens to participate in local governance and administration, as well as in delivering public services. Currently in Karenni, there is no mobile network, and access to the internet and technology is limited. An interviewee mentioned the communication barrier as “currently, there is no mobile phone network available, so we have to rely on Starlink. However, due to the high cost and communication difficulties associated with Starlink, it is challenging to establish fast and efficient communication and to create a situation that enables broad public participation” (E2, interview, May 2025).

According to the primary data, two dimensions of capacity, skills and technological access have drastically cut off communities from opportunities to participate in governance processes. Importantly, this barrier reveals that citizen participation is not only a matter of rights and engagements, but also matters of infrastructure and access. Participation must be enabled through sustained investment in capacity-building and access to communication, digital inclusion. Without the necessary training or equitable access to digital tools, citizen participation becomes fragmented and unrepresentative.

6.3 Financial and Economic Barriers

The third barrier is a barrier related to the financial and economic situation of citizens. This research explores whether financial and economic situations, such as economic hardship or poverty, lead to difficulties for the citizens in participating with a question. This barrier is a common barrier to citizen participation in decision-making and it is found in several studies. The studies revealed that the management of financial resources by higher authorities and the limited financial resources for local activities play a common barrier to citizen participation (Mutizwa-Mangiza et al., 1996; Blair 1998, as cited in Gaventa and Valderranma, 1999). However, the researcher found out that financial and economic barriers that hinder citizen participation in Karenni are different from the previous studies. In Karenni, this barrier occurs due to different contexts and reasons.

As Karenni State was regarded as a conflict related area under the political situations, citizens had to flee from home and stayed at camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The people are entirely dependent on humanitarian aid and lack access to employment opportunities, and they need to focus on their economic and financial stability for their livelihood matters. By

contrast, their interests in local governance systems are waning as the financial and economic situations play a critical role in daily lives.

The primary interview data reveal that economic situations, such as hardship or poverty, create difficulties for citizens in participating. According to an interviewee who is an engaging citizen in educational communities in Karenni state, he mentioned, “the people there don’t really pay much attention to governance. As mentioned, the main thing is that they’re focused on their basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter, and they are facing serious economic difficulties. They are so occupied with trying to solve those problems that they can’t afford to care about anything else. And there are still other issues too. For them, participating in governance does not seem critical. What matters most is simply surviving” (C1, interview, April 2025). These statements underscored a crucial insight: economic precarity can depoliticize communities, not out of apathy, but out of necessity.

When basic survival becomes the central concern, participation in governance processes appears both inaccessible and irrelevant. This precarious economic situation pushes local governance and civic matters far down their list of priorities. Without addressing basic needs and restoring economic stability, any effort to promote citizen engagement in Karenni risks being superficial or ineffective.

6.4 Security and Conflict-Related Barriers

As the fourth barrier, conflicts and security concerns are one of the barriers to citizen participation in local governance. Since the 2021 military coup, wars and conflicts between the Myanmar military and Karenni revolutionary forces have been occurring in Karenni state. On one hand, this situation led to the rise of local-level governance, which includes local citizens and is led by local citizens. The emergence of this type of local governance is one of the fundamental conditions for bottom-up federalism. On the other hand, ongoing conflicts are a barrier to citizen participation in local governance at some point.

Conflicts and displacement due to conflicts have negatively impacted citizen participation in governance because everyone naturally wants to stay in their own place (C1, interview, April 2025). Having to move from one place to another affects their ability to participate (C1, interview, April 2025). In addition, as security concerns, some of the citizens do not want to participate in the complex political conflict (L4, interview, May 2025). These barriers were not included in the studies of finding barriers to citizen participation in local governance from Gaventa and

Valderranma (1999) because the background political context is completely different. As the current political situation of Karenni state is ongoing conflicts, security and conflict-related barriers play as one of the main barriers to citizen participation in local governance.

6.5 Barrier of Social Norms and Its Impact

The last barrier to citizen participation is social norms and their impact. This barrier plays a role in hindering citizen participation, especially for the women, and it is not the impact of laws and policy. According to an interviewee who is a member of township administration council (TAC), the interviewee revealed, “for us, just like in other townships, the pathways we’ve taken toward IEC also include the guideline that 30% of participants should be women. In our Township as well, within the township council and village tract leaders, women, particularly those who are middle-aged or younger, have been included more intentionally” (L1, interview, April 2025). Although there is no law that limits women's participation, the impact of social norms affects the engagement of women in local governance. According to a member of CSO, the interviewee straightly mentioned, “in these ethnic regions, participation in such matters is often seen as the responsibility of men and it's part of a traditional mindset. Some women also still lack self-confidence. So overall, men are more involved. Other groups, including youth, are now participating too. As for women, about half of them are involved to some extent, but it hasn’t yet reached the level we were hoping for. The number of women participating is still relatively low” (S1, interview, April 2025). The impact of social norms mainly affects the psychological conditions of women to participate in local governance. Due to the impact of social norms, women often feel worried or uncertain about themselves when it comes to making decisions related to local affairs. (L4, interview, May 2025). Similar to security and conflict-related barriers, researchers found social norms as barriers that were not mentioned in previous research. In Karenni state, the Barrier of social Norms is one of main barriers to citizen participation in local governance.

7. Comparison between The Mechanism and Situation of Citizen Participation in Local Governance of Pakistan and Karenni State

Karenni State and Pakistan both have ways for citizens to participate in local governance. However, the methods employed and their effectiveness vary significantly. In Pakistan, different local government laws support official ways for citizen participation, like Citizen Community Boards (CCBs), Citizen Awareness Committees (CACs), and consultation platforms (Rafique et

al., 2021). Although these platforms exist, participation often remains symbolic. Officials mostly inform citizens about decisions rather than involving them in the decision-making process. Most government representatives believe citizens should not be part of actual governance tasks. As a result, public participation is usually limited to fulfilling donor requirements rather than genuine engagement. The barriers to citizen participation stem from bureaucratic attitudes, lack of interest from officials, and political dominance. These factors prevent citizens from exercising their legal right to participate (Rafique et al., 2021).

In contrast to Pakistan, Karenni State offers both formal and informal ways for the citizens to participate, including village meetings and coordination groups. However, these are usually limited to selected representatives, which restricts broad public involvement. The Interim Executive Council of Karenni state promotes inclusion by having policies encouraging at least 30% female participation. Despite this, men still dominate most decision-making spaces. While ethnic diversity is respected, social norms and a lack of confidence among women and young people limit their full engagement. Although participation is always encouraged, participation is not always fully fulfilled in practice, especially in leadership roles (KCSY et al., 2024).

The main difference is in government attitude and public opinion. In Pakistan, active discouragement by local bureaucrats is considered unnecessary or even detrimental. In Karenni State, there is more policy-level commitment to facilitate inclusion. However, cultural barriers and asymmetrical access hinder complete implementation for citizen participation. Both places struggle with moving from symbolic to meaningful participation. While the barriers in Pakistan are primarily institutional and political, those in Karenni are more social and cultural in nature. In conclusion, though both settings are designed to facilitate participatory governance, Pakistan's attempt is thwarted by political interference and bureaucratic resistance, while Karenni State demonstrates greater intention but requires additional assistance to break through social barriers.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined how local governance is structured, how public service delivery is currently being implemented, and what the barriers are to citizen participation for effective service delivery in Karenni state. As primary data, the data include interviews with local citizens, members of township administration councils and local administrators, members of the Interim Executive Council (IEC) and civil society actors. The study also incorporates secondary data, including

policy documents, academic literature, case studies, and reports from NGOs. The researchers derived the following key findings from both primary and secondary data.

There are three methods for forming local administration councils. The three methods point out that the current governance system is a hybrid and semi-formal model. Apart from one township, the system is shaped by collaboration between local EAOs and local citizen representatives. While this structure is implemented in the local context, it remains fragmented, under-resourced, and lacks legal/formal recognition. Formal and informal mechanisms for participation, such as village meetings, township councils, and coordination platforms involving civil society and local leaders exist. However, citizen participation remains selective, uneven, and often indirect based on the township. While the Interim Executive Council (IEC) promotes inclusive governance by including gender and ethnic representation, actual participation, particularly by women and marginalized groups, is still limited. Many female participants are invited rather than self-motivated, and confidence or social norms often restrict their influence in leadership roles.

As for the public service delivery, basic services such as education, healthcare, and humanitarian support are delivered. While some areas receive support through humanitarian networks and mobile communications, conflict-related displacement has significantly hindered access and responsiveness. The main factor behind having the barriers and challenges to delivering effective public services is that citizens are experiencing barriers to participating in local governance. Economic hardship, conflicts and displacement, traditional and social norms of gender roles, and lack of confidence among marginalized groups, particularly women, are barriers that limit inclusive citizen participation. As the capacity and resources barrier, capacity and resources for improved citizen participation are demanded because citizens need skills to participate in the local-level governance of Karenni State communication. In order to have effective public service delivery by the township administration councils, citizen participation needs to be enhanced. In addition to participatory skill demand, the lack of mobile networks and reliance on expensive alternatives like Starlink cause it hard to communicate quickly and receive public services.

The researchers recommend four key actions to address the barriers which are identified in Karenni State's local governance for effective public service delivery. The first action is to strengthen the legal and institutional frameworks that support local administration councils. The

formal recognition and structured guidelines can help to reduce fragmentation and improve legitimacy and accountability.

The second key action is to enhance the inclusive citizen participation by providing leadership and confidence-building training. This training should be particularly focused on women and marginalized groups. The researcher recommends voluntary participation, rather than relying on invited participation as voluntary involvement can lead to more meaningful and empowered engagement for effective public service delivery.

The third key action is to improve communication infrastructure. Expanding dependable mobile networks such as Starlink is critical to enhancing the access of citizens to information and services. In addition, civic education and citizen participation in local governance training should be provided to build community capacity. This training is essential to ensure that citizens have the skills and knowledge to engage effectively.

The last key action is fostering stronger collaboration among local governance actors. This collaboration should include EAOs, civil society, and citizen representatives. The stronger collaboration between different actors from Karenni's local governance will enhance coordination, transparency, and responsiveness for effective public service delivery. Furthermore, this collaboration can help reduce the concerns and barriers related to the impact of ongoing conflicts, thereby improving citizen participation. These combined key actions can contribute to a more inclusive, effective, and participatory local governance system that delivers effective public service in Karenni State.

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Annex I - Interview Questions

1. Can you describe the current structure of local governance in Karenni State?
2. Do you know who are primarily responsible for public service delivery in the townships of Karenni state?
3. In your own words, what does citizen participation mean to you?
4. Do you think citizen participation plays a role in improving public services? Why or why not?
5. What does "effective public service delivery" mean to you or your community?
6. Are there any formal or informal channels where citizens can participate in Karenni State's local decision-making (e.g., meetings, committees, online platforms)? (All but not expert)
7. If such channels exist, who usually participates in these platforms, and who tends to be left out? (by age, gender, education, ethnicity, etc.) (follow-up to question 5)
8. If such channels exist, what challenges do citizens face when trying to participate in them? (Follow-up to Q5)
9. Has anyone in the community been involved in decisions about local development, budgeting, or services? If so, how were they involved? If not, please share the reasons for their lack of involvement.
10. Have you personally accessed the public delivery services provided by the local Up administration or council in Karenni State? (e.g., healthcare, education, humanitarian aid, etc.)
11. What are the main challenges or barriers that affect how services are delivered in Karenni State?
12. Are there any laws, regulations or policies that limit the ability of citizens to participate in Karenni State's local governance?
13. Do you think economic hardship or poverty makes it difficult for citizens to participate?
14. Does the security situation (e.g., conflict, displacement, militarization and displacement) affect citizen participation in Karenni State?
15. Do people face digital or technological barriers when trying to engage with local Governance (e.g, no internet, lack of devices)?
16. As a civil society organization, which barriers should be addressed first to improve service delivery in Karenni State?

17. In your experience, do citizens participate in delivering public services?
18. If citizens participate in, how they participate in delivering public services? (E.g. participating in the planning process, implementation process, or monitoring of public services?)
19. When local administration council or governance introduces a new plan or project related to public service delivery, do citizens participate in those plans and projects?
20. If so, how citizens participated in? For example -
- Only informed after decisions are made.
 - Consulted but not guaranteed to influence the final decision.
 - Allowed to share in decision-making equally.
 - Given authority to design or control the project themselves.
21. What kind of support (training, awareness, resources) would help citizens participate more actively in local governance?
22. Are you satisfied with the quality and fairness of public services in Karenni State? Why or why not? (Citizen/CSO)
23. In your view, what criteria or standards should be added to ensure more effective and inclusive public service delivery?

Citizen's Question – 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 22

CSO's Question – 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23

Township Administration Council's Question – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 17, 18, 20, 21, 23

Expert's Question – 1, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23

Annex II - List of Interviewees

No	Code number	Interviewee's role	Gender	Interviewee's township
1.	C1	Citizen	Male	Hseebu
2.	C2	Citizen	Male	Mawchi and BP 13
3.	C3	Citizen	Male	Loikaw and IDP Camp-2 (HoSe, BP14)
4.	S1	CSO	Female	DeMoSo
5.	S2	CSO	Female	Loikaw
6.	L1	TAC	Male	Pekon
7.	L2	TAC	Male	Mae Se
8.	L3	TAC	Male	Loi Nan Pha
9.	E1	Expert	Male	BP 13
10	E2	Expert	Male	Pekon

***The role of interviewees is kept by the researchers with the interviewees' consent, but hidden to mention due to security concerns upon the political situations.