

STEP  
DEMOCRACY  
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# STEP DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Stories of Change  
2020

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# Foreword



The year 2020 was an important milestone in Myanmar's progress towards democracy. The challenges of pursuing a sustainable and inclusive peace and of conducting credible and inclusive elections in November were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Myanmar just at the time when the election campaign was gearing up. In the end, Myanmar passed this test, with more than 70% of voters going to the polls to elect members of the Union legislature and State and Region Assemblies.

Election observers commended the efforts of the election administration, election contestants, citizen observers, media, and voters to overcome the challenges that COVID-19 presented to the conduct of Myanmar's general elections and found that voters were largely able to freely express their will at the polls. Although hundreds of thousands of voters were excluded by conflict or discriminatory practices, and although election procedures can still be further improved, there can be no serious doubt about the legitimacy of the outcome and about the democratic choice of the people of Myanmar.

While constituting an essential feature, elections by themselves do not build a democracy. The rejection of military rule on its own does not create a system of democratic governance that is sustainable and inclusive. This is why the European Union (EU) funded Support to Electoral Processes and Democracy (STEP Democracy) programme supports all key election stakeholders such as the Union Election Commission (UEC), political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) before and after elections to work towards inclusive and peaceful electoral processes to strengthen Myanmar's democratic transition.

In its second phase (2018-2021) and in its second year (2019-2020), STEP Democracy supported the UEC in the preparation of the 2020 elections during COVID-19 through International IDEA's embedded office by amending election regulations to enhance election observation and supporting the digitization of paper-based processes within the UEC. STEP Democracy worked with Facebook to introduce Facebook Community Standards for UEC sub-commission Facebook pages, and held workshops with the Danish Institute for Parties and

Democracy (DIPD) to improve communication with voters, disseminate information and counter misinformation. Civil Society organizations (CSOs) observed the 2020 elections and monitored social media based on methodologies developed in STEP strategic planning workshops with the support of Democracy Reporting International (DRI).

New voters, women and youth in remote areas benefited from a series of STEP voter and civic education activities organized by the Scholar Institute, Panna Institute and Badeidha Moe. International IDEA conducted civic and voter education in cooperation with the UEC with a focus on disadvantaged groups – for example through the TV broadcast series 'MyVote'.

STEP Democracy worked with political parties to enhance their internal democracy and give a stronger voice to women and youth within their internal structures. In STEP Democracy workshops and trainings, they learnt how to establish political party structures such as women caucuses and youth wings on region and state level. In order to navigate the challenges posed by social media, political party representatives attended STEP workshops, organized by DIPD in cooperation with Facebook, to learn about Facebook Community Standards, reporting mechanisms for hate speech and misinformation, and the process of page verification. Political parties also worked on conflict resolution skills in STEP trainings conducted for more than 170 political party representatives by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy / DEMO Finland on the principles of conflict resolution, increasing their mediation, negotiation, and dialogue skills. Policy positioning workshops for 25 political parties on regional level helped political parties to better define their election programmes ahead of the 2020 elections.

Increasing the participation of women in political processes remains a priority for STEP Democracy, and although some progress has been achieved, much remains to be done. The 2020 elections saw a slight increase in the number of women candidates elected to legislatures from 13% in 2015 to 17% in 2020. Of 1117 candidates in the 2020 elections, 89 young candidates (8%) were elected. On sub-national level, the STEP Women's Academy organized by DRI involved more than 1,500 participants and provided women municipal committee members with a platform to engage with township residents to outline and discuss municipal development plans and challenges and to respond to citizens' concerns.

All in all, we can look back at 2020 as a year of unprecedented challenges, but also of remarkable achievements. Democracy is not a linear process or a one-time endeavor, and it requires the consistent cooperation and sustained good will of many election stakeholders to ensure the full participation of all citizens in the democratic process – even more so in a country that has been ravaged by generations of conflict and remains scarred by decades of authoritarian rule. Looking ahead, STEP Democracy will build on these achievements and will continue to work towards achieving the goal of inclusive, peaceful and credible elections and sustainable democracy with Myanmar's stakeholders.

**MARCUS BRAND**  
Head of Mission - International IDEA in Myanmar

## About STEP Democracy

The programme 'Support to Electoral Processes and Democracy – STEP Democracy' supports inclusive, peaceful, and credible electoral processes and enhances the capacity of key election stakeholders – the Union Election Commission (UEC), political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) and citizens/ voters - to strengthen Myanmar's democratic transition.

STEP Democracy is funded by the European Union and implemented under the leadership of International IDEA, in partnership with the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD), Democracy Reporting International (DRI), and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD)/Demo Finland, as well as the Myanmar CSOs Scholar Institute, Paññā Institute and Badeidha Moe.

More information about the programme, its activities and achievements can be found in the STEP Democracy Factsheet [here](#)

## WHAT WE DO



Technical assistance to the Union Election Commission



Support to political parties



Strengthening CSO advocacy for reform



Civic and voter education

# Constructive Engagement between the UEC and CSOs

## Union Election Commission and CSOs Discussed Election Reform and 2020 Election Preparations



The participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) in public policy and electoral processes is still relatively new in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> Their presence has been felt in social and public life and has recently expanded to advocating for democratic reforms and strengthening civic engagement.<sup>2</sup> This was evident during the 2015 general election when CSOs played an important role in monitoring the election process and in improving voter education. In light of the restrictions imposed as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the limited number of international observers able to enter the country, CSOs have played an even more important role in the 2020 general elections: as domestic election observers and through their advocacy efforts with the UEC.

As stakeholders that are critical to a peaceful, transparent and credible electoral process, it is imperative that CSOs and the UEC build and maintain a trustful relationship between. Initiatives aimed at establishing a strong and constructive relationship between the two have been at the heart of STEP Democracy activities in 2020.

In March 2020, the STEP provided technical expertise to the UEC Working Group on election observation to draft domestic observation procedures which were informed by CSOs' perspectives and challenges. This initiative culminated in revised domestic observation procedures issued by the UEC in July 2020, which was recognized as an important step in consolidating the UEC-CSO relationship and in advancing electoral reform.

<sup>1</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-cso\\_partnership\\_strategy\\_2018-2020.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-cso_partnership_strategy_2018-2020.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/DRI\\_MM\\_CS0-Need-Assessment-Report-ANFREL-DRI-report-format-v6-2020-03-13-1.pdf](https://democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/DRI_MM_CS0-Need-Assessment-Report-ANFREL-DRI-report-format-v6-2020-03-13-1.pdf)

“  
The role of civil society organizations is essential in electoral processes. For the 2020 election to be free, fair, trustworthy, transparent and credible, the role of civil society organizations can be crucial.”

U Hla Thein  
*Chairman of the UEC*

STEP Democracy has worked with CSOs to strengthen their ability to constructively advocate with the UEC's. In 2020, these efforts focused on supporting the joint advocacy campaign "Vision 2020" and its wider CSO network by developing strategic advocacy strategies and emphasizing the benefits of a trustful relationship with the UEC and its Sub-Commissions, based on mutual goodwill. This work led CSOs to advocate for amendments to election by-laws, to increase the inclusiveness of elections with regard to migrant voters and women, and to enhance the transparency of advance voting procedures. In preparation for the 2020 elections, STEP Democracy worked with CSOs to develop domestic observation methodologies to ensure they can observe elections in line with UEC-issued procedures and international standards. This has been instrumental in enhancing the capacity of CSOs to observe the elections and issue credible election observation reports.

As the 2020 elections drew closer, the UEC saw itself confronted with increased public scrutiny. This scrutiny caused the UEC to be more cautious with its engagement with CSOs. Through its daily advocacy, STEP Democracy continuously advised the UEC to continue its path towards more openness and to highlight the benefits and importance of transparency and outreach to CSOs.

These efforts, gradually built up since STEP Democracy's inception, led the UEC to initiate a Conference with CSOs in July 2020, which was facilitated by STEP Democracy and CEPPS (a consortium of electoral assistance providers). The conference brought together representatives of the UEC and 76 CSOs from different States and Regions. The unprecedented event served to discuss the 2020 election preparations and to address CSO concerns related to domestic observation, inclusion and the conduct of elections during COVID-19. It provided an opportunity for CSOs to engage openly and to advocate directly with the UEC leadership. It also provided an opportunity for the UEC to update CSOs on preparations for the elections as well as its expectations from CSOs regarding their role in the elections. As the Chair of the UEC, U Hla Thein stated in his opening speech, "the role of civil society organizations is essential in electoral processes. For the 2020 election to be free, fair, trustworthy, transparent and credible, the role of civil society organizations can be crucial," thus highlighting the UEC's increased understanding of the key role CSOs play in an election.

In follow-up to the conference the CSO advocacy group Vision 2020 and several other CSOs continued to work together as a strong network. In August 2020, they initiated a follow-up meeting with the UEC to discuss COVID-19 challenges to the elections, voter list display and how to facilitate domestic observation accreditation. The UEC responded positively to the CSO request, despite differences in approaches to domestic observation accreditation. The increased UEC engagement with CSOs demonstrated how such initiatives have become important platforms of open communication in the run-up to elections.

In its final year, STEP Democracy will continue to work on strengthening a constructive relationship between the UEC and CSOs by engaging both sides in post-election review discussions to analyze challenges and lessons learned and agree on an agenda for further electoral reform.

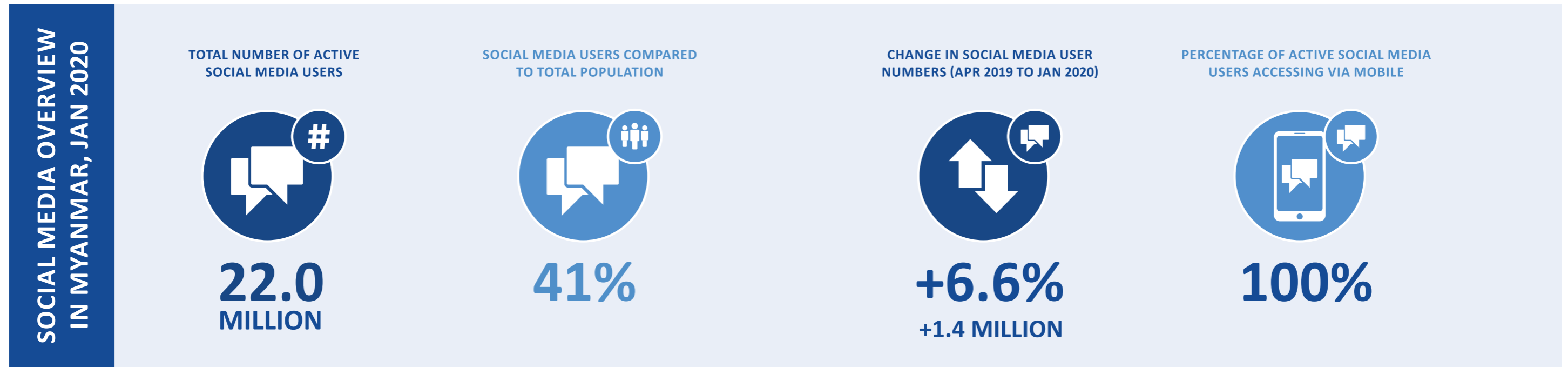
# Making Election Campaigns Safe for Social Media

## Tackling Fake News and Hate Speech

The rapid digitization and expansion of Myanmar's telecoms sector has made mobile internet cheaper and more accessible to a large portion of the population. This technological revolution has also completely transformed the political and media landscape in Myanmar, widely increasing space for expression and exchange, but also opening up serious risks of abuse and malfeasance. The increased mobile internet accessibility has seen social media, in particular Facebook, become an important tool in Myanmar politics and election

campaigning. Political parties, politicians and opinion leaders use the platform for their campaigns, to communicate their political objectives and to promote their candidacies. For citizens it represents an important source of information, as well as a platform to express their opinions on political and social developments. However, as recent global events have shown, on social media democratic processes are especially vulnerable to disinformation campaigns, the spread of fake news and hate speech.<sup>1</sup>

These significant improvements have changed the way Myanmar politicians and democracy CSOs think about social media and have helped them to increase outreach to voters and target groups in a legitimate and professional manner. Chit Hsu Thway from Myanmar Independent Living Initiative (MILI), a disability rights group, who attended an online advocacy training for CSOs said that "before the training, I was not aware of the importance of online advocacy. After this training, I learned of the effective role of digital advocacy, which is especially important for the pandemic period. In addition, I was able to learn how to conduct an effective digital campaign, for example, by creating posters, animations and using the Facebook page as my main social media platform instead of using an account. I will apply the knowledge in my organization's campaigns to support people with disabilities."



Given the important role of Facebook in Myanmar's 2020 elections, STEP Democracy convened a series of workshops, trainings and webinars for electoral stakeholders such as political parties, CSOs and the UEC. These activities provided platforms for participants to discuss and learn about the benefits and challenges of using social media in election campaigning, including learning from the experiences of other countries. Collectively, the activities contributed to identifying the main concerns and challenges of the stakeholders

as well as possible ways to address them. They also facilitated networking opportunities and established a direct contact between Facebook and Myanmar political parties. Thirty-eight political parties have received the blue badge on their Facebook pages, verified as authentic by the Facebook company. This verification process was a follow-up to two workshops aimed at enhancing political parties' capacities to conduct an effective and responsible political campaign on social media.

The activities also improved participants' awareness about the challenges that disinformation and hate speech pose to election campaigning. A participant of a political party workshop stating that "we gained a lot of new knowledge about social media campaigning, but we will have to work together with Facebook and other stakeholders to tackle the challenge of fake news, hate speech and misinformation."

As the elections drew closer, social media monitoring became more important in tackling hate speech and disinformation. STEP Democracy worked with national partner CSOs to monitor campaigns online by providing CSOs with technical support to develop their own social media monitoring methodologies. The focus of these efforts was on the freedom of speech and peaceful campaign environment, as well as on the specific challenges that women faced in online campaigning. The programme issued bi-weekly updates on the campaign online, provided data on the engagements and interactions achieved by parties and candidate Facebook pages and analyzed the main vectors of the online campaign.

Election observers confirmed that abuses of social media during the election campaign still occurred, but at a much lower level than had been anticipated, and with much better monitoring and reaction mechanisms in place than on previous occasions. Making election campaigns safer for the fast-paced social media environment contributed to the quality of the electoral process. More needs to be done to safeguard social media space from recurring threats, but a good foundation has been laid by the awareness raised and the networks established in 2020.

<sup>1</sup> <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/mobile-myanmar-impact-social-media-young-people-conflict-affected-regions-myanmar>

# Developing Mediation Skills: an Essential Tool for Conflict Resolution

STEP Democracy Helped Political Parties and the UEC to Mediate and Mitigate Disputes



Myanmar's third general election was held amidst the challenges of a deeply divided society with a complex environment that creates fertile ground for conflict, especially during the electoral period.<sup>1</sup> As in previous elections, in a number of areas, elections were cancelled due to conflict or a fragile security situation. Relations between parties and their supporters are often tense and contentious, prone to violence and characterized by mutual distrust.

The potential for conflict is present throughout the electoral cycle, and thus conflict resolution skills such as mediation and mitigation serve political parties well ahead of and after Election Day to ensure a peaceful process. It is thus crucial that stakeholders, at both the national and subnational levels, including the electoral administration and political parties, have the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to resolve electoral disputes.

In order to enhance the skills of election stakeholders' in conflict prevention, STEP Democracy convened a series of trainings for political parties at the sub national level. The trainings increased participants' awareness and understanding of conflict principles and improved their mediation, negotiation and dialogue skills in conflict situations. The trainings created an enabling environment for political parties to engage in open, honest and meaningful dialogue. As one participant stated: "In our experience, when we deal with opposition parties, we either have to give in or take all. Therefore, at first, we thought it was difficult or not possible to communicate and negotiate with opposing parties. This training gave us a platform and a basic understanding to discuss and negotiate to find common ground and solutions for the benefit of the country."

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/pw\\_146-myanmars\\_2020\\_election\\_and\\_conflict\\_dynamics.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/pw_146-myanmars_2020_election_and_conflict_dynamics.pdf)



Trainings with political parties were also conducted for the UEC and its sub-commissions from different States and Regions. The STEP programme developed an intensive 3-day 'core mediation' course which aimed to enhance participants' skills in engaging in dialogue, negotiation techniques, mediation methodologies, cooperation techniques and how to build trust and learn to work together in the long-term. It also provided a good opportunity for interaction between the UEC and political parties with a participant from an Election Sub Commission (ESC) stating that "this training was an opportunity to build a bridge between political parties and the Election Sub-Commission to understand how to approach complex local issues and to collaborate in election affairs."

After the trainings, 72% of participants said that they increased their knowledge, attitude and skills on the principles of conflict resolution with one of the participants stating that "after finishing this mediation training, I feel more confident to take up my role as a mediator. Previously I did not know much about mediation techniques. In my personal opinion, mediation is finding a solution that would be considered a win-win to both sides and thus makes all parties better. All the learning is very helpful for electoral processes and solving conflict. If we know more about conflict resolution techniques, we could enhance relationships between various actors."

While the 2020 elections were not without incidents and entirely free from violence, they proceeded peacefully and without conflict in the large majority of constituencies, including in most ethnic nationality areas. Gradually, experience in holding democratic elections grows, and the skills of resolving disputes amicably and on the basis of established procedures is gaining ground. With every successful electoral event, the capacity to practice democratic processes peacefully becomes more and more entrenched among stakeholders and helps a democratic culture to emerge.

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**72%** of participants increased their knowledge, attitude and skills (KAS) on the principles of conflict resolution



**436** women from **67** political parties trained

# Helping Political Parties to Effectively Engage in Democratic Reform

## Supporting Political Parties to Define Issue-based Policies and Practice Public Outreach



“  
The simulation of a townhall meeting is a good practical exercise for political parties to test their public identity and identify better solutions for the problems of the people.”

The positions and performances of political parties are regarded as crucial components in an effort to strengthen democratic values and long-term policy results.<sup>1</sup> In an emerging democracy like Myanmar, the public's recognition of these policy positions is still weak. When political parties define policy positions they identify “issues” to create their own electoral objectives, prepare responses to policy issues and develop positions to respond to unexpected political developments.

STEP Democracy conducted a 4-day advanced training on public policy and responsiveness for 21 new participants from seven political parties. The training contributed to enhancing the participants' understanding of party-policy orientation, from internal party policy management and electoral strategy to party identity, and external outreach. It also allowed political parties to learn about best practices and receive guidance on policy-based responsive government, and how to function as a constructive and effective opposition. The combination of theory and simulation was appreciated with a participant stating that “the simulation of a townhall meeting is a good practical exercise for political parties to test their public identity and identify better solutions for the problems of the people.” Another participant said: “This exercise reflects discussion in the Parliament. We can find a better solution through the debate of different ideas.”

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402382.2014.887871>

Building on previous similar trainings, STEP also held an advanced training for 29 alumni of earlier courses from 26 political parties in Yangon. The training aimed to enhance awareness and understanding of the participants' own party's values, and to develop the strategy for their campaign. More than 95% of participants increased their skills after the training and provided positive feedback on how to develop their own strategy for the 2020 elections.



One participant said: “As a politician, we are always thinking about how we can improve our country. We have our ideas and thoughts running in our head. This training provided us with the space to collect our thoughts and compile them in a tangible paper. This is what we really need to win in the coming election.”

A follow-up assessment of the trainings showed that 60% of participants continued to develop their party's policies and 40% took steps to develop a policy. In the end, party programmes and positions on policies did not appear to play a significant role in voter choices in the 2020 elections, which remained dominated by overall choices on the countries direction and by individual personalities. Under the surface, however, a reorientation to policy choices and responsiveness to the electorate's expectations continue to grow and is likely to increasingly inform political debate and electoral processes in the future. The seeds sown through this training for parties on policy development are expected to bear fruit in the years to come.



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Informing and motivating citizens to turn out and vote is an important element of ensuring that elections are inclusive and accessible for all. In particular first-time voters require credible and understandable information about voting procedures. This was particularly important at a time of heightened concerns and uncertainty as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Making use of the optimal mix of TV and online platforms and collaborating with DVB Media on the Free to Air TV Channel, Facebook, and YouTube, STEP Democracy produced a feature TV-series targeted at first-time voters. Each of the eight 'My Vote' episodes included a mini documentary, a tea-talk, and interviews with a total of 24 different electoral stakeholders: women voters, first-time voters, persons with disabilities and from different ethnic groups, representatives from the electoral administration, and representatives from civil society groups.

The purpose of the 'My Vote' series was to educate voters and highlight the specific challenges disadvantaged voters such as women, first time voters and ethnic minorities face when participating in elections. Each broadcast featured people who spoke about their understanding of democracy and the challenge they face as a disadvantaged group ahead of Myanmar's 2020 general elections. Focused on these challenges and in response to questions by civil society and voters, the Union Election Commission explained voting procedures, the importance of ensuring that all citizens can vote, and how election preparations were designed to ensure inclusive elections.

The broadcasts reached hundreds of thousands across the country: Yangon had the highest proportion of viewers (30%), followed by Mandalay (12%), Sagaing (7%), and Shan State (7%) as the top areas of outreach

through social media. On Facebook, episodes were seen by an average of 150,000 viewers. The top audience was the age segment between 25 and 34, followed by the and the age group between 18 and 24. Among those reached, 71% were men and 29% were women. It appears that men have more access to internet and mobile devices or simply had more time at hand to watch the series. Even Myanmar voters abroad in Thailand and Singapore viewed the MyVote program through YouTube channel.

The conventional TV programme reached even more voters. The DVB TV Free to Air Channel, usually reaches about 20% of the total population in Myanmar, i.e., around 6.7 million according to recent surveys. Again, male viewers outnumber female ones at a ratio of about 2:1. Urban and rural areas are covered equally well. According to the age group, the top audience is at the age group between 25 and 34.

Given COVID-19 restrictions, the MyVote voter education series served to sensitize the public on the benefits and importance of holding and participating in inclusive elections and provided a platform for key election stakeholders such as civil society organizations to engage with the Union Election Commission to answer questions on the election procedure and provide key election information.

**1,057,000**  
**PEOPLE REACHED**  
**8 MyVote EPISODES VIA**  
**— FACEBOOK**

## Gender and Elections in Myanmar

### Putting Commitments into Practice

Women in Myanmar have a long history of political participation, with their efforts instrumental in achieving key democratic milestones such as freedom from colonial rule and the transition to democratic governance.<sup>1</sup> Myanmar is also signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action which guide its national efforts to promote women's representation and participation in decision and policymaking.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in formal political and decision-making processes.<sup>3</sup> While much of this depends on wider societal trends and developments within political parties, electoral management bodies can help to advance gender equality by highlighting differences between men and women and by addressing systemic obstacles to more effective women's participation.



**93 UEC and 3,426 sub-commission staff trained**

The UEC's commitment to become a gender-sensitive and inclusive institution in line with its own Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and Policy and Action Plan (2019-2022)<sup>4</sup> is instrumental in contributing to this goal. Guided by these efforts, STEP Democracy has sought to help the UEC in implementing its strategy and take measures within its institution that enhance the UEC and its staff's understanding of gender concepts to inform their work and contribute to a more equitable participation of women.

Building on earlier support to the UEC to develop a training manual on the legal framework for the 2018 by-elections, STEP Democracy facilitated the inclusion of a gender module in the training manual for its sub-commissions for the 2020 General Election.

The gender module was developed by STEP's embedded office in the UEC and presented during a ToT for more than 300 participants (76 women/227 men) from State and Region sub-commissions, conducted by 50 UEC staff (26 women/23 men). Subsequently, the gender module was presented to 3835 (2137 men/698 female) newly appointed sub-election commission members in 78 districts as part of the overall pre-electoral training

**STEP Democracy facilitated the inclusion of a gender module in the training manual for its sub-commissions for the 2020 General Election.**

provided by the UEC. In addition to increasing the participants' knowledge, awareness and understanding of gender concepts and gender mainstreaming tools in elections, the module created an enabling environment for stimulating discussions on the gender context in Myanmar including on traditional beliefs and customs as well as gender inequality. The gender module was well received by training participants, with 80% stating they had an increased understanding and awareness of the importance of being gender aware in the conduct of elections.

This can count as an example for successful collaboration with the UEC, which took the initiative to put its Gender Action Plan into practice by reaching out to STEP Democracy in an effort to roll out gender awareness at scale through its own training programme. In this manner, commitments to gender equality can grow beyond words and strategic documents and can become part and parcel of the day-to-day work of the electoral administration at all levels. Tackling entrenched stereotypes is difficult under any circumstances and can be particularly challenging in the context of emerging democracies. With national institutions understanding and owning the commitments to advance women's participation and gender equality, a big step is made to eliminate long-standing discriminatory practices and attitudes.

<sup>1</sup> [https://myanmar.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/unct\\_mm\\_UNWomen\\_Report\\_Gender%20Situation%20Analysis.pdf](https://myanmar.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/unct_mm_UNWomen_Report_Gender%20Situation%20Analysis.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/NSPAW2013-2022\\_0.pdf](https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/NSPAW2013-2022_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://myanmar.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/unct\\_mm\\_UNWomen\\_Report\\_Gender%20Situation%20Analysis.pdf](https://myanmar.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/unct_mm_UNWomen_Report_Gender%20Situation%20Analysis.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://merin.org.mm/sites/merin.org.mm/files/publication/07032019\\_gender\\_policy\\_english\\_version.pdf](https://merin.org.mm/sites/merin.org.mm/files/publication/07032019_gender_policy_english_version.pdf)



# Empowering Women in Local Government

## Establishing a Network of Locally Elected Woman Committee Members



Myanmar was among the first Asian countries to grant women the right to vote in 1935.<sup>1</sup> It is also a signatory to a number of international agreements committed to gender equality which have guided its national efforts to promote women's representation and participation in decision and policy-making. The most notable of these is the National Strategic Plan on the Advancement of Women (2013-2022), which prioritizes women's equal participation and leadership at all levels of governance. In the 2010 and 2015 elections the share of elected women representatives in national parliament was 6% and 13.7% respectively. In the 2020 elections, that share rose to 16.4%. Despite this encouraging upwards trend, which is remarkable given Myanmar's electoral system and prevailing traditional attitudes, compared to global target of at least 30% women's representation, women remain underrepresented in the country's formal political and decision-making processes. Globally, experience shows that women with experience in local government have better chances to be elected on regional or national level. This is why STEP has focused on supporting women elected to local bodies as champions for women's empowerment.

The March 2019, elections to the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), a partially elected body functioning under unique legislation in a country that generally lacks local self-government, were held under universal suffrage for the first time. This presented an opportunity to increase women's participation in local government. STEP Democracy delivered a training for 38 women candidates, of whom 26 won a seat. What is more, women candidates used the training to establish networks and support each other in their new roles as women committee members. Building on

these achievements STEP Democracy in cooperation with the New Myanmar Foundation (NMF) designed a Women's Academy - a multi-dimensional approach focused on empowering women to effectively perform their functions, improve their communication skills and conduct outreach to their constituencies. Activities included a pre-training survey to assess participant needs and tailored modules to enhance networking amongst male and female committee members. A particular focus was on the inclusion of male participants, which proved effective as male participants increased their knowledge of challenges faced by women in politics. The trainings also enhanced communication and outreach skills of participants and were practiced during outreach events.



<sup>1</sup> Taken from the STEP Gender Assessment



Served as a catalyst for the establishment of a network of elected women in local government in Yangon

In eight townhall meetings - public outreach events involving more than 1500 people - participants gained confidence in public speaking and were inspired to conduct more such outreach events.

Daw Kyi Kyi Wai from Mingalardon Township stated: "I feel that the public was pleased to have direct contact with their representatives. I was able to demonstrate that I strive to provide the best service to the public and that I am here for the public." Other participants acknowledged the invaluable experience of meeting their communities and the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their needs, to gain confidence in public speaking, in answering questions from the public, and being able to communicate the challenges of their roles to the public. This represents a qualitative shift in the relationship between the general public and representative decision-makers, and provides a good basis for more genuinely democratic behaviours and attitudes at the local level.

While the activities served to increase the knowledge and awareness of participants, they also served as a catalyst for the establishment of a network of elected women in local government in Yangon. This network now serves as a mechanism for support and as a platform to exchange information. Through this network, elected women representatives have advocated for improvements in the YCDC governance structure and management system for dealing with blocked drains, damaged roads, stray dogs, street markets and squatters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the women's network also proved valuable

to share experiences, brainstorm and find solutions to COVID-19-related local governance challenges.

Outreach activities served to increase the visibility of elected women committee members amongst some influential policy actors, including the Mayor of Yangon, and enabled them to advocate for improvements in Yangon Region. The increased knowledge and awareness that participants gained from the trainings, combined with the support and confidence that they received from the women's network, has enhanced their skills to perform their duties as elected representatives. As Daw Nan Su Shwe Sin, a Municipal Committee Member stated, "explaining about duty and procedure in accordance with the law helps to increase knowledge of participants."

The design of the Women's Academy can be replicated across all regions of Myanmar. Implementing local partners have expanded and consolidated their capacity to conduct such trainings as a result of this cooperation. Yangon has proven to be a trailblazer for women's political representation in the November 2020 elections. Thirty percent of the representatives elected for Yangon Regional Assembly are women, the highest in any subnational parliament.

**" I feel that the public was pleased to have direct contact with their representatives. I was able to demonstrate that I strive to provide the best service to the public and that I am here for the public."**

# Empowering Women to Participate in Myanmar's Elections and Democratic Reforms

STEP Democracy Equips Women Politicians with Practical Campaign Management Skills



Myanmar's historic transition from direct military rule ushered in a host of reforms which have put the country on a path to democracy. Successfully managed general elections in 2015 were an important milestone in its democratic transition founded on broad engagement in democratic institutions and processes. The 2020 general election further consolidated this trend.

Despite considerable progress, women in Myanmar still face obstacles that prevent them from participating in electoral processes and democratic reforms on an equal footing with their male counterparts. While the percentage of women parliamentarians at the national level increased from 6 percent in 2010 to 13 percent in 2015,<sup>1</sup> a 2017 report by the Gender Equality Network "Gender and

Politics in Myanmar, Women and Men Candidates in the 2015 Election"<sup>2</sup> noted that women candidates were at a disadvantage from the outset and had to overcome several obstacles during the campaign period including limited financial resources, discriminatory attitudes from voters and limited access to media coverage. In the run-up to the 2020 general elections STEP Democracy therefore aimed at equipping women politicians with the knowledge and skills needed to participate more effectively in election campaigning, and ultimately to facilitate their increased inclusion in elected bodies. STEP held trainings to enhance the campaign management skills of women candidates, campaign managers and volunteer coordinators to campaign effectively in their respective constituencies.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/pw\\_146-myanmars\\_2020\\_election\\_and\\_conflict\\_dynamics.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/pw_146-myanmars_2020_election_and_conflict_dynamics.pdf)  
<sup>2</sup> [https://www.genmyanmar.org/research\\_and\\_publications](https://www.genmyanmar.org/research_and_publications)



**75% of participants agreed strongly that the workshop provided them with inspiration and ideas to promote the nomination of women candidates in their party.**



These trainings brought together female representatives from 24 different parties who were represented either at the subnational or the national parliamentary level. The training events provided platforms for learning, engagement and experience-sharing to enhance participants' knowledge and awareness of campaign management, and to provide them with practical tools needed to manage campaigns more effectively and responsibly.

As a participant from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) said: "Door to Door simulation exercises were very useful. It reflects the real situation and we need to deliver the message during a short time and identify the potential voters of the party. So, we had the opportunity to practice for the campaign."

According to an assessment of one such training, 75% of participants agreed strongly that the workshop provided them with inspiration and ideas to promote the nomination of women candidates in their party. A

participant from the PNO party stated that "it was good opportunity for us because we had international exposure by learning campaign strategies and practices from other countries - so we can learn and adapt from it. Getting to know experiences of a young woman MP from Denmark was inspiring and we got motivation."

Following the trainings, the PNO party leadership requested its women's wing to propose three female candidates, who participated in campaign management trainings for the 2020 elections, while another party, the CNLD, introduced an internal regulation that at least 30 percent of their candidates should be female. While these may seem as small steps, they are a significant departure from a legacy of marginalization of women in political party structures and set a good example for others.

These positive changes in behaviour point to progress in the relationship between women and political parties in attempting to ensure greater inclusivity and participation of women in Myanmar's electoral processes.

# Boosting the Campaign Skills of Young Politicians

Practical Campaign Management Training for Young Politicians



Despite making up more than one-third of Myanmar's population,<sup>1</sup> and being at the heart of efforts that have seen the country transition to democracy, Myanmar's youth continue to face challenges to their full political participation. Challenges include a lack of information, knowledge and capacity or self-confidence to effectively engage with decision makers.<sup>2</sup>

In order to enhance the capacities of young politicians to participate more meaningfully in the country's electoral processes, STEP Democracy conducted a three-day campaign management training for 53

young members from 23 different political parties. The training was aimed at potential young candidates, campaign managers and volunteer coordinators and provided them with knowledge and information of practical tools needed to campaign effectively in the 2020 elections. Topics covered included campaign research, developing a campaign plan, campaign messages, mobilizing resources for campaigns and social media campaigning.

<sup>1</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2019/08/23/youth-key-to-success-of-peace-processes-myanmars-stalling-democracy-and-the-fight-for-youth-voice-in-political-decision-making/>  
<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/24.%20CFR\\_Myanmar-Youth%20Participation2\\_DHF.pdf](https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/24.%20CFR_Myanmar-Youth%20Participation2_DHF.pdf)



# 55%

of participants stating that they would use their acquired skills for party activities for the 2020 ELECTIONS



The training succeeded in enhancing participants' capacities to campaign more effectively in the 2020 election with one participant stating, "the workshop provided me with a great opportunity to learn how young party members are actively involved in the campaign process in other countries. For me, it will be the very first time to engage with a political campaign in the 2020 general election. I gained a lot of motivation to pursue my political path."

Overall, the workshop equipped young politicians with necessary, fundamental and practical tools and techniques of campaign management, with 55% of participants stating that they would use their acquired skills for party activities for the 2020 elections.

The training also provided an opportunity for participants from the 23 political parties to share comparative experiences from other countries as well to learn, exchange information, network and discuss the potential role of youth wings in the campaign process.

**“The workshop provided me with a great opportunity to learn how young party members are actively involved in the campaign process in other countries. For me, it will be the very first time to engage with a political campaign in the 2020 general election. I gained a lot of motivation to pursue my political path.”**

# Empowering the Next Generation of Voters

## Providing Civic Education for Myanmar's Schools

Through their participation in human rights and democracy movements, students and young people have, historically, played a crucial role in Myanmar's efforts to transition from a military regime to a democratic country. Today, through their involvement in political and social activities they continue to be key actors in, organizing and mobilizing their communities in support to sustainable, peaceful and inclusive political processes.<sup>1</sup> According to the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census young people including adolescents (aged 10-14) and youth (aged 15-24) make up 28 percent of the country's population.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, a lack of knowledge on how to contribute and participate in political life and a lack of capacity and self-confidence to effectively engage with decision makers, among others, remain obstacles to young people's full participation in peace, development and democratic processes.<sup>3</sup>



**STEP** has developed a comprehensive civic education curriculum geared towards high school students aged **13-16**



Activities targeting underrepresented groups, including youth, are therefore a cornerstone of STEP Democracy's efforts to enhance the capacity of Myanmar citizens to participate more effectively in the country's democratic processes. STEP has developed a comprehensive civic education curriculum geared towards high school students aged 13-16.<sup>4</sup> The nine-hour curriculum, which serves as the basis for trainings, introduces democracy and explores notions such as diversity, leadership, elections, equality, democratic rights and responsibilities.

The first training, titled 'Nurturing the Leaders of Future Generations' was launched simultaneously in Ayeyarwady Region and Rakhine State in early August 2019 and served to enhance students' knowledge, awareness and understanding of Myanmar's democratic process and institutions as well as to equip them with the skills to exercise their rights and responsibilities as new generations of voters. A grade-nine student who participated in the training in Ayeyarwady's Mawlamyine Kyun Township said: "This training helped me learn about democratic principles, elections, and my duties and obligations. My understanding of democracy is freedom of living and equal rights."

Su Wai Phyo, a grade-ten student who participated in a training in Sittwe, Rakhine, stated: "I very much enjoyed learning about civic education through this curriculum. The methodology of asking us questions and allowing us to discuss and talk in front of others gave me confidence.

Before this training, I was a little bit afraid of standing in front of the class but now I can practice speaking in front of others. This civic education curriculum is different from other courses that we take in school. In other classes we learn by memorizing, but in this training, we learn through activities such as games and discussions with classmates. This also allows us to make friends with other classmates and become closer to the teacher."

This feedback from participants highlights the positive impact that the trainings have had in allowing young people to learn about, and explore, democratic values and practices which they can then share with their families and communities and which prepare them to engage in political life as future voters. The curriculum has been further refined based on feedback received and is being prepared to be rolled out at scale nationwide in cooperation with the education authorities.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/24.%20CFR\\_Myanmar-Youth%20Participation2\\_DHF.pdf](https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/24.%20CFR_Myanmar-Youth%20Participation2_DHF.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://myanmar.unfpa.org/en/node/15283>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/24.%20CFR\\_Myanmar-Youth%20Participation2\\_DHF.pdf](https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-04/24.%20CFR_Myanmar-Youth%20Participation2_DHF.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Funded through the EU STEP Programme

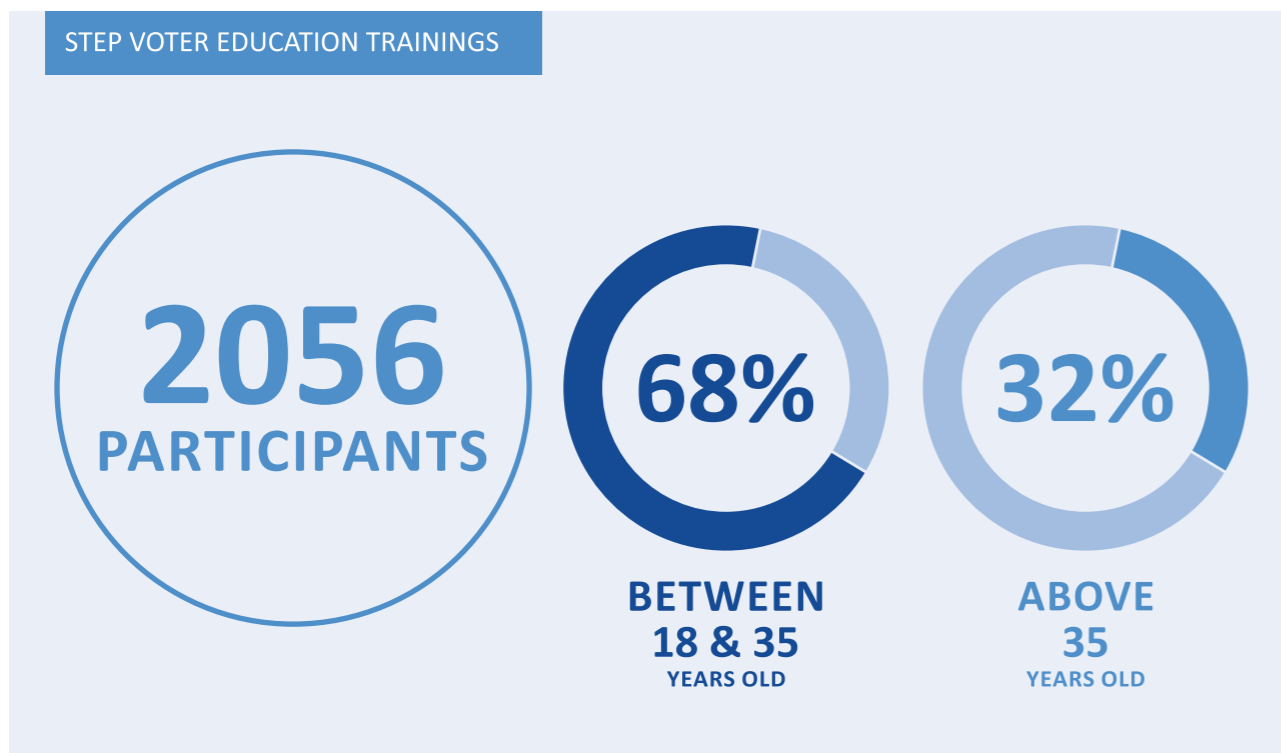
# Boosting Voters' Confidence and Understanding

## Mobilizing Citizens through Voter Education Training



Inclusive participation in electoral processes should provide opportunities to all citizens irrespective of race, gender, religion, and ethnic identity to influence public policy decisions and take part in democratic decision-making. As a country in democratic transition, informed and empowered citizens are crucial components of an inclusive election. However, historical legacies, cultural norms and traditions and low education levels often result in a lack of knowledge about political institutions and electoral processes and represent barriers that inhibit citizens to participate fully in the democratic process.

STEP Democracy trained citizens, particularly from under-represented groups to increase their knowledge and awareness about Myanmar's electoral process and to actively participate in political life on the basis of a "Voter Education Training Manual". In addition, STEP established a network of civil society organizations and voter educators in remote areas to mobilize communities to discuss elections and the benefits of voting. In order to scale up reach and impact, a Voter Education training of trainers (ToT) involved 30 participants (40% women and 60% men) from Mon, Kayin, Ayeyarwaddy, Chin and Sagaing. Participants practiced training facilitation skills, and learned about fundamental concepts of democracy, the electoral system, voting procedures, government structures and democratic institutions. After the training, 95% of participants demonstrated increased knowledge. One participant from the TOT Training said that, "by attending this training, I learned about the electoral system, electoral process, and the voting procedure. The advantages and disadvantages of the electoral system are a particularly interesting subject. After the training, I became more confident to conduct voter education training myself."



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One participant from the TOT Training



Various voter education training sessions increased participants' knowledge about voter rights and voting procedures. For instance, trainings were delivered to 239 participants (30% women and 70% men) in Matupi Township and to 40 participants (33% women and 67% men) in Mawlamyine Township, where interactive and realistic simulations of the voting process informed by election sub-commissions equipped trainees with the skills to participate in the elections confidently. After participating in a polling station display activity, a woman participant said that "before the training, I thought that I should vote for only one representative. But now, I understand that I have to vote for three representatives."

The trainings not only increased participants' understanding of voting and the electoral system but

also more broadly of democratic values, civil and political rights. They also contributed to motivating voters to share their new knowledge with their communities and mobilized them to engage in the democratic process to ensure a more inclusive election. The capacity built, especially through the TOT exercises, is expected to spread at scale across the population and is likely to increase turnout. These efforts which were combined with strong voter education drives by the UEC and on various media platforms helped to ensure very high turnout and confident voters following the procedures, including first-time voters.



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