

EXPLAINER

Context-Sensitive Approach Enhances ADB's Myanmar Programs



The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is implementing a context-sensitive approach in Myanmar to understand the context in which ADB operates, understand the interaction between ADB intervention and the context, and act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.

Introduction

Myanmar is undergoing a historic transformation toward democracy, a market economy, and peace and stability.

When ADB recommenced operations in Myanmar in 2012 after an absence of nearly 25 years, it began to develop a context-sensitive approach to better understand the challenging environment in which ADB would design and implement its projects and the potential impacts ADB activities could have within this complex dynamic.

ADB has a number of investment projects and grants in areas that are only recently emerging from active conflict, where parallel government and nonstate service delivery systems exist, where non-state armed groups continue to control territory and exert control, and where trust between government and communities is fragile and nascent. The stakes are high, as poorly planned initiatives that fail to account

for the complex dynamics may undermine Myanmar's transition process.

What is the context-sensitive approach?

A context-sensitive is acting with an understanding of the complex historical and contemporary environment within which *any initiative* is conducted and the potential impact and interaction any activity may have on that context.

It is a deliberate and systematic approach to ensure that ADB understands and minimises negative effects and risks and maximise positive effects. A context-sensitive approach is a tool for ADB to improve the quality of projects in Myanmar.

Why use a context-sensitive approach?

A context-sensitive approach at policy, country programming and project level allows staff to integrate risk mitigation strategies at early stages to improve designs, strategies and program specific actions that will improve project management and decrease reputation risk to ADB.

The approach incorporates piloting, learning and listening to diverse perspectives—including government agencies, local communities, the private sector, civil society, and supporters and critics alike—throughout the project design and implementation cycle.

Key issues addressed as part of a context-sensitive approach include research on conflict and historical context, consultation, stakeholder analysis, strategies to target key affected persons, improved service delivery models, models for community outreach, local coordination and information sharing.

Why was it necessary in Myanmar?

As Myanmar begins to emerge from decades of civil conflict and military rule, the peace in many areas remains fragile and nascent. Development operations conducted in these areas necessarily interacts with the conflict dynamic with positive or negative consequences. A context-sensitive approach is essential in designing and implementing projects that accounts for the possible impacts and adheres to the principle of Do No Harm.

How was the context-sensitive approach applied in Myanmar?

Initially, a conflict advisory team was retained by the MYRM to develop guidance for working in conflict areas and capacity building activities and knowledge sharing was initiated for resident mission and project staff and consultants. At the same time, MYRM developed and implemented a Civil Society Consultation and Participation plan that incorporated a context-sensitive approach for all its programming and operational support in Myanmar. The context and conflict approaches were merged and applied first in ADB's work in the Kayin and Mon States, both of which have a shared history of conflict.

With the objective of improving project preparation and development outcomes, the approach included forming an internal working group of all project leaders to share information and coordinate approaches and activities, developing guidance for project teams in engaging with ethnic armed groups, preparing stakeholder analysis, conducting detailed research on the history and current dynamics of the context and conflict.

Importantly, MYRM engaged a team of civil society experts to lead a series of consultations and one-on-one meetings with a wide variety of stakeholders. These included local and international CSOs, the private sector, development partners, non-state armed organizations, political parties, and government officials.

ADB Myanmar staff and consultants received special training to ensure they understood Myanmar's complex history and had the knowledge and skills necessary to work in conflict-affected areas. Expert consultations were organized with local project teams to ensure they had a clear and updated understanding of issues that could affect project implementation.

What would the risks/costs have been if a context-sensitive approach hadn't been adopted in Myanmar?

Prior to ADB's reengagement, a number of major investment projects carried out by international organizations and the private sector in Myanmar have been delayed, suspended, or cancelled when they have been poorly understood or believed to pose risks for local communities and the environment. In some development projects in Myanmar real or perceived lack of consultation, harm to the environment, and conflict dynamics fueled local and national opposition, led to significant financial losses, and were factors in exacerbating violent incidents.

As such, the risk and costs to ADB of not implementing a context-sensitive approach in Myanmar includes financial loss, project delays, forced project closures or withdrawal due to security concerns, endangering staff and beneficiaries, and reputational damage.

While the costs involved in introducing a context-sensitive approach may be relatively high in the early

project and activity phases, the approach ultimately pays off given the likelihood of successful activities, fewer delays and, ultimately, greater development effectiveness.

What were the results of the context-sensitive approach?

ADB reestablished operations in 2012, so its portfolio of operations is still nascent. To date, results of applying a context sensitive approach are seen in the project planning and early implementation stages.

ADB experience in Myanmar has shown that meaningful consultation and civil society participation builds local ownership of ADB-financed projects and provides critical local-level feedback—to both ADB and the government—which improves project results and development effectiveness.

"MYRM has devoted considerable resources to developing and implementing a context sensitive approach in our projects. While the results are difficult to measure, we are convinced that these efforts at consultation and engagement have greatly improved the effectiveness of project implementation."

Winfried Wicklein, ADB country director, Myanmar

"ADB's initiative to engage with civil society organizations (CSOs) in Myanmar through the Civil Society Advisory Group is an effective mechanism for regular consultation with CSOs in implementing and monitoring ADB's program to alleviate poverty in Myanmar. As CSOs can effectively serve as a bridge between the community and ADB, it is an excellent model for partnership and collaboration between CSOs and development partner."

Daw Pansy Tun Thein, executive director, Local Resource Centre (Member, ADB Civil Society Advisory Group)

What have been the main implementation challenges?

Changing mindset, processes and protocols in government to incorporate context and participatory development approaches remains a challenge. A tradition of top-down decision making and dearth of experience implementing this approach were—and remain—challenges, along with a lack of available resources from government to implement this approach. Some sectors of civil society remain suspicious of government, development and private sector motivations and while the trust deficit between government and civil society and communities is improving and transitioning towards a more constructive relationship, challenges remain.

What was learned in the process?

- Safeguards, consultations, communications, and conflict sensitivity issues are inseparable.
- Community and civil society expect to have a voice and information early on in project design through expansive consultations.
- Communities expect to be consulted on their own terms.
- Commitment and support by senior officers in the ADB resident mission is critical.
- Coordination support by local ADB officers or consultants is important, especially at the early stage of rolling out a context sensitive approach as government capacities may still be limited.

How can other ADB Resident Missions adopt the approach?

Successfully adopting a context-sensitive approach requires support from country directors, sector directors and senior management. Project teams often point to tight processing deadlines and shrinking technical assistance funds as constraints to actively involving stakeholders in lending operations. Context-sensitivity requires a deliberative and consultative approach, combined with analytical work, to understand the complex operating environment and then implement coordinated action across programs. Allocating ADB resident mission resources to support developing a context strategy, specific tools and resources for project teams, and conducting capacity development for ADB staff, consultants, government, private sector, civil society and local communities are also key elements in this approach.

To develop a context-sensitive approach,

- Commitment and support must come from the ADB country director.
- Sufficient resources need to be allocated.
- Resident missions need to develop resident mission-based knowledge and human resources to provide support to project teams.
- Consultation and context specialists should be embedded into resident missions.

Conclusion

Every environment where ADB operates has its own unique and complex history and contemporary dynamics, and ADB operations will impact this environment. A context-sensitive approach allows ADB to understand and predict how our operations may impact this environment and program in a way that maximize benefits and minimize negative impacts.

The context-sensitive approach pays off because it prevents complaints, helps mitigate financial and reputational risk, and results in projects that truly benefit stakeholders.

By encouraging the participation of all stakeholders in the design, implementation, and monitoring of all projects and operations, ADB's success rates and overall development effectiveness will rise.


Meet the expert



Paul Donowitz

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Paul Donowitz is the Senior Consultation and Participation Specialist (consultant) with the ADB Myanmar Resident Mission, specialising in civil society participation, context-sensitive approaches, and social safeguards. He has led ADB's efforts in designing and implementing innovative approaches to participation in Myanmar since 2013. Prior to joining ADB, Mr. Donowitz was the Campaigns Director and acting Myanmar Program Director for EarthRights International. A U.S. licensed attorney, Mr. Donowitz has over two decades of experience working at the intersection of human and environmental rights.

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