

Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminar

Summary Report 2

Comparing Forms of Local Governance in the Presence, or Absence, of the State



Introduction

On 13 May 2026, the Renaissance Strategic Centre at ARDD, in collaboration with ODI Global, convened the second session of the Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminar Series. The series consists of four seminars designed to collectively explore the evolution from activism to governance, culminating in a policy-oriented brief.

The second seminar focused on two broad pathways of governance; each illustrated through a case study. The first examined governance efforts within and alongside the state, and the methods activists employ when entering politics, navigating institutions, and engaging with existing power structures. The second explored governance models that have emerged beyond the central institutions of the state, either because of state absence or in direct opposition to it. These included alternative systems of service delivery, aid provision, and political administration.

1. Models of Governance (with)out the State – Karenni

The Karenni State case study provided a striking example of a governance model constructed outside conventional state structures. With the exception of a decade of relative stability between 2011 and 2021, Karenni State, like much of Myanmar, has experienced almost continuous conflict since shortly after independence in 1948. Participants reflected on how this brief period of openness and relative peace shaped the response to the 2021 military coup, creating space for a parallel focus on governance alongside armed resistance.

On 9 April 2021, the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) was established by a coalition of ethnic armed organisations, political parties, elected representatives, civil society groups, youth and women's organisations, and local experts. This was followed by the creation of the Interim Executive Council (IEC), an effort to develop political and administrative institutions in the midst of conflict. Extending from village to state level, these structures were designed not only to address immediate governance needs but also to lay the foundations for a future democratic transition, with authority ultimately intended to be transferred to elected representatives. As a result, building systems of education, healthcare, and public administration became a priority alongside resistance to the Myanmar military.

Participants highlighted the complexity of constructing functioning economic and financial systems under conditions of fragmentation and insecurity. This challenge was compounded by the need to maintain unity among a diverse coalition operating under constant pressure. Approaches included encouraging private enterprise and small businesses as a means of sustaining local economies and reducing dependence on external assistance. In the Karenni context, an additional measure involved promoting the use of the more stable Thai Baht rather than the volatile junta currency. Such initiatives were viewed not only as mechanisms for generating local income, but also as contributing to a degree of economic autonomy and stability.

In terms of engagement with the international community, one of the more innovative ideas emerging from the Karenni governance experiment has been the proposal for an IEC–donor Trust Fund to support local governance structures. Developed with the involvement of several donors, the initiative seeks to balance external financial support with strong local ownership and accountability. Discussions have focused on two complementary funding windows: one managed primarily by respected Karenni community representatives, with the IEC acting as an implementing partner, and another jointly overseen by donors and the IEC, supported by robust transparency, grievance, and financial management mechanisms.

Inclusivity emerged as a central theme throughout the discussion, both in terms of incorporating the broadest possible representation of Karenni society and ensuring that space remained open for groups not yet fully persuaded by the governance project to participate at a later stage. Participants described the Karenni experience as pursuing inclusivity less through rigid institutional design than through participation, representation, and the preservation of political space. Civil society, youth and women's organisations, professionals, and armed actors have all been incorporated into evolving governance structures, while recognising that inclusivity remains an ongoing process shaped by the realities of active conflict.

The relationship between civilian governance and armed organisations also emerged as a recurring theme. In Karenni State, the manifesto of the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) explicitly envisages the eventual subordination of military structures to civilian authority once the latter is capable of assuming responsibility. To facilitate this transition, one of the KNDF's senior commanders also serves as Vice-Chair of the IEC. Policing, judicial functions, and prison management have already been transferred to civilian institutions. Participants noted that the clear separation between military and policing responsibilities, combined with well-defined command structures, has helped build confidence in emerging institutions of law and order.

2. Models of Governance (with)in the State – Lebanon

Lebanon was used as a case study to explore governance within existing state structures, highlighting a markedly different set of challenges from those encountered in Karenni State. Participants reflected on reformist efforts within the Lebanese political system and the difficult transition from activism to governance, a shift requiring a fundamentally different set of skills, relationships, and political instincts.

Initially, activist groups sought to build alternative ecosystems outside the state through independent media, NGOs, think tanks, lobby groups, and international networks. These structures enabled them to challenge entrenched political interests and mobilise public support. However, once reformist actors entered electoral politics and secured representation within government, the nature of their engagement changed fundamentally. Participants observed that governance is not simply about articulating demands or advancing ideals, but about implementation, resource allocation, coalition-building, and negotiation within highly constrained institutional environments.

The budgetary process was cited as a particularly revealing experience for activists entering government. It exposed the extent to which political priorities are shaped not only by principle but also by economic realities, institutional constraints, and competing demands. Reformists who had previously focused on advocacy and protest found themselves confronting the practical challenge of translating demands into policy.

Participants emphasised that long-serving bureaucracies and political institutions possess their own interests, alliances, and internal rivalries. Activists entering government therefore discovered that meaningful reform requires not only challenging existing structures but also engaging with them. New political movements, often fragile and resource-constrained, must cultivate allies within administrative systems if they hope to implement policy successfully.

This transition frequently requires a profound shift in organisational culture. Movements built around protest and resistance must evolve into organisations capable of governing, negotiating, and surviving politically. Participants noted that younger activists often adapted more readily to these demands than older generations whose political identities had been shaped primarily through opposition to the state. In some cases, movements responded by creating separate structures focused respectively on activism and governance, though these arrangements occasionally generated tensions regarding priorities and identity.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the risk of fragmentation. Entering government often produces tensions within activist ecosystems, as cooperation with institutions previously criticised can be perceived as compromise or co-option. Participants observed that reformists frequently lose some supporters precisely at the moment they gain greater political influence. The challenge therefore becomes maintaining legitimacy amongst supporters while simultaneously building the alliances necessary to achieve tangible results.

Ultimately, participants concluded that reformist actors entering government must learn to operate within existing institutional frameworks while retaining their capacity for change. Success depends not only on the strength of their political vision, but also on their ability to develop technical expertise, build coalitions, navigate bureaucracy, and demonstrate results. Progress is therefore rarely transformational or immediate. More often, it is gradual, incremental, and achieved in stages.

3. Models of Movement Survival – Georgia

In addition to contexts where activists either entered existing state structures or built alternative governance institutions, a third reality emerged during the discussions: that of movement survival. Rather than focusing on governance itself, activists in this context are primarily concerned with preserving the movement under conditions of increasing repression.

The experience of Georgian civil society illustrates this dynamic. Amid escalating restrictions on civic space, activists and NGOs face growing pressure through legal measures, intimidation, criminalisation, and the threat of imprisonment or exile. Participants noted that activist movements are often treated by the wider public as alternative political actors long before they possess either the organisational capacity or resources required to govern. This can generate unrealistic expectations, contributing to burnout, organisational fatigue, and fragmentation, as demonstrated by the experience of the Shame Movement during 2019–2020.

Participants reflected on a central strategic dilemma confronting activists operating in restrictive environments: whether political momentum must be awaited, or whether it can be actively generated. Regardless of the answer, there was broad agreement that movements must preserve the organisational foundations necessary to take advantage of future political openings when they arise. This requires maintaining platforms through which activists can deliberate, coordinate, and sustain collective action over time. Physical spaces, financial resources, and organisational structures were all identified as essential to maintaining cohesion once the initial energy of mobilisation begins to dissipate.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion concerned the challenge of internal organisation and collaboration. Participants highlighted what they described as a limited culture of deliberation within parts of Georgian civil society. One participant, drawing on conversations with activists from both Tbilisi and other regions, observed that many individuals involved in civic mobilisation do not describe themselves as activists, preferring instead the term “active citizens”. Similar trends have been observed in studies of social movements elsewhere in the region. Participants suggested that the label “activist” can carry an implicit expectation of political success and responsibility that many individuals are reluctant to assume, particularly under conditions where success appears uncertain.

The discussion also highlighted frustrations regarding both opposition political parties and civil society itself. Participants described widespread disappointment with opposition parties, which are often perceived as unable to develop a coherent strategy or agree on political leadership. Some contributors argued that opposition parties have increasingly adopted activist methods themselves, exposing them to repression while failing to provide the strategic direction many civil society actors seek.

At the same time, participants noted similar challenges within the activist community. Numerous smaller groups operate independently, with limited coordination beyond participation in larger demonstrations. The disconnect between organisations based in the capital and those operating in other regions was identified as a particular obstacle. Participants observed that movements centred in Tbilisi often assume a leadership role without fully recognising that regional communities may possess distinct grievances, priorities, and reform agendas. This combination of limited collaboration, weak deliberative practices, and hierarchical organisational cultures was seen as constraining the broader effectiveness of civic mobilisation.

Several participants argued that overcoming these challenges may ultimately require forms of leadership capable of unifying disparate groups around a common agenda. While views differed on what such leadership might look like, there was broad agreement that the absence of effective mechanisms for coordination remains a significant weakness within the current movement landscape.

The Georgian case was also discussed in terms of the role of international actors. Beyond supporting dialogue and civic space, external funding can help sustain movements during prolonged periods of political stagnation. At the same time, participants cautioned that the source of such funding can shape perceptions of legitimacy and create vulnerabilities. In increasingly restrictive political environments, foreign support is often used by governments to portray civic movements as externally driven rather than locally rooted. Particular reference was made to the impact of the Foreign Agents Law, which participants argued has significantly constrained the ability of NGOs to undertake accountability and advocacy work. Under such conditions, many organisations have increasingly shifted from seeking direct political influence towards information-sharing, awareness-raising, and advocacy-oriented roles.

The Georgian experience therefore highlights a distinct challenge from those observed in Karenni State and Lebanon. Rather than focusing primarily on building governance institutions or reforming existing ones, activists are preoccupied with preserving organisational capacity, maintaining legitimacy, and ensuring the survival of the movement itself until more favourable political conditions emerge.

4. Cross-Cutting Themes

Several themes emerged consistently across the three case studies despite the very different political contexts in which they operate.

From Activism to Governance

A recurring observation was that activism and governance require different skills, organisational cultures, and forms of legitimacy. Mobilising people around a cause, while essential, does not automatically equip movements to govern. Across all three cases, participants highlighted the need for activists to develop technical expertise, organisational capacity, and a deeper understanding of the institutions through which political change is implemented.

This transition often creates internal tensions. As movements evolve, questions arise regarding the balance between loyalty and capability, principle and pragmatism, and mobilisation and implementation. In some contexts, this has led to the incorporation of professionals and technical experts, while in others, movements have developed separate structures focused respectively on activism and governance.

Legitimacy and Authority

One of the more striking comparative findings concerned the sources of legitimacy.

In Karenni State, legitimacy appeared to derive less from formal legality than from responsiveness, participation, and the ability to deliver services under exceptionally difficult

circumstances. Taxation, administration, and governance structures were accepted not because they rested on recognised legal authority, but because they addressed practical needs and reflected a shared political project.

By contrast, the Lebanese discussions highlighted how formal legality does not necessarily translate into public legitimacy. Participants noted that activists entering government often become associated with the failures and dysfunctions of the state itself, resulting in the erosion of public support even where reform efforts are genuine.

The Georgian case suggested a third dynamic. Activist movements often enjoy significant public trust despite possessing neither formal authority nor governing responsibilities. Yet sustaining this legitimacy over time becomes increasingly difficult under conditions of repression, fragmentation, and limited political opportunity.

Taken together, the discussions suggested that legitimacy is increasingly derived not simply from legal authority, but from responsiveness, participation, competence, and demonstrated effectiveness.

Generational Change

Generational differences emerged across several contexts. Both the Karenni and Lebanese cases suggested that younger activists often adapt more readily to the demands of negotiation, institution-building, and governance. Having come of political age in a more interconnected world, they frequently appeared less constrained by historical political divisions and more willing to engage pragmatically with existing institutions.

Older generations, while often possessing greater political experience, were sometimes described as carrying deeper distrust of state structures and stronger attachments to earlier forms of political mobilisation. Participants stressed that neither approach was inherently superior, but that generational differences increasingly shape how movements organise and pursue change.

Communication and Political Narratives

The importance of communication emerged repeatedly throughout the discussions. Participants emphasised the need for movements not only to articulate a clear political vision, but also to communicate effectively with supporters, institutions, and wider constituencies.

In Georgia, disinformation and propaganda were described as central tools used to undermine activist movements and justify state repression. In Karenni State, participants highlighted the challenge of communicating political objectives and governance priorities across highly diverse communities operating under conditions of conflict. The Lebanese discussions focused on the importance of engaging with public narratives and media cycles in order to maintain support while pursuing often slow and incremental reforms.

Across all three cases, communication was viewed not simply as a matter of public relations, but as a central component of legitimacy, trust-building, and political survival.

International Engagement

A final recurring theme concerned the role of international actors. Participants recognised that external support can provide essential financial resources, technical expertise, and political visibility. At the same time, they repeatedly cautioned that poorly designed international engagement risks distorting local priorities, undermining legitimacy, or creating dependencies.

This challenge was particularly evident in discussions regarding donor funding, where short-term or heavily restricted forms of support can weaken movements by limiting their ability to demonstrate tangible results. Participants stressed the importance of approaches that strengthen local ownership, accountability, and sustainability rather than imposing external agendas.

5. Conclusion and Introduction to Seminar 3

Across the three case studies, a common question emerged: what happens after mobilisation?

While activism is often associated with protest, resistance, and demands for change, the discussions highlighted the more difficult challenge of sustaining legitimacy, organisation, and influence once movements confront the realities of governance. The experiences of Karenni State, Lebanon, and Georgia illustrate three distinct pathways through which activists seek to navigate this transition.

The case studies can be viewed through the lens of Hirschman's (1970) framework of *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*¹. Karenni State reflects a form of collective exit, where dissatisfaction with the state has led to the construction of alternative institutions, public services, and governance systems outside central authority. Lebanon represents a combination of voice and loyalty, where reformist actors have sought to transform existing institutions from within while maintaining engagement with the state. Georgia highlights the challenges of sustaining voice under conditions of increasing repression, where shrinking civic space raises the costs of political participation and creates pressure towards what some scholars have described as a third response: silence².

Taken together, the three cases suggest that governance is becoming less exclusively tied to formal state structures and increasingly linked to the capacity of institutions, whether formal or informal, to demonstrate responsiveness, participation, and effectiveness. Legitimacy, in this sense, appears to be earned through performance and public trust as much as through formal authority.

The discussions also highlighted the fragility of many emerging governance arrangements. While they demonstrate the potential of bottom-up approaches to strengthen participation, representation, and accountability, they also reveal the continuing challenges of security, revenue generation, legality, and long-term sustainability. The transition from activism to governance remains neither linear nor guaranteed.

¹ Hirschman, A.O. (1970). *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Harvard University press.

² Burgess, K. (2012). Migrants, Remittances, and Politics: Loyalty and Voice after Exit. *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 36(1), 43–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45289547>

For international actors, the central question increasingly appears to be not whether to engage with such emerging forms of governance, but how to do so without distorting, depoliticising, or undermining the local processes already underway.

The seminar also identified a number of issues requiring further exploration in the next phase of the series. Among the most significant was the role of diaspora communities, particularly the distinction between diaspora actors operating inside and outside political processes, and the different forms of influence, support, and pressure they exert.

Participants also highlighted the unintended consequences of some forms of international assistance. Where donor funding is short-term, unpredictable, or heavily constrained, movements find themselves with too little long-term support to demonstrate tangible results, leaving them vulnerable to accusations that they are little more than externally funded actors rather than legitimate local political forces.

These questions point directly towards the focus of Seminar 3, which will examine the relationship between the diaspora and emerging governance models, the role of international systems, and the importance given to transitional justice. As governance increasingly extends beyond the boundaries of the formal state, Seminar 4 will address the challenge for international actors to determine how such emerging forms of authority can be recognised, supported, and held accountable without undermining their local legitimacy and compromising the notion of the Nation-State.