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THE CHANGE  
WE WITNESS

Stories from Myanmar

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# THE CHANGE WE WITNESS

## Stories from Myanmar

# THE CHANGE WE WITNESS ACTIONAID MYANMAR



## Introduction

Since ActionAid established a presence in Myanmar the country and its people – as well as the organisation itself – have undergone extraordinary changes. Through four stories from the field, this booklet attempts to capture ActionAid Myanmar's innovative approach to development and explore the extraordinary efforts by ordinary people striving to cope with emergency, conflict, poverty and injustice in this unique context



» ActionAid interns and Fellows organised a 'dignified community-led emergency response' even though they were not familiar with that term at the time

In 2006 a repressive military regime had ruled Myanmar for more than half a century. Citizens were denied even the most basic human rights, and civil society organisations had little space to operate. The non-violent Saffron Revolution in 2007 showed a massive demand for democratic reform and human rights, but the military responded with brutal force and put an end to the uprising within months.

At this time ActionAid had a limited presence in Myanmar. The organisation had to keep a low profile and develop innovative approaches in order to reach out to remote and vulnerable communities and avoid crackdowns, arrests, and deportations – which were then legitimate concerns. One such approach was the Fellowship Programme.

Fellows are young, energetic people with leadership potential elected by their own community. ActionAid equip them with the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to stimulate participatory, community-led development. They act as change-makers in their villages, serve as direct links between ActionAid and remote communities, and engage with local authorities to facilitate sustainable local development and access to rights and justice.

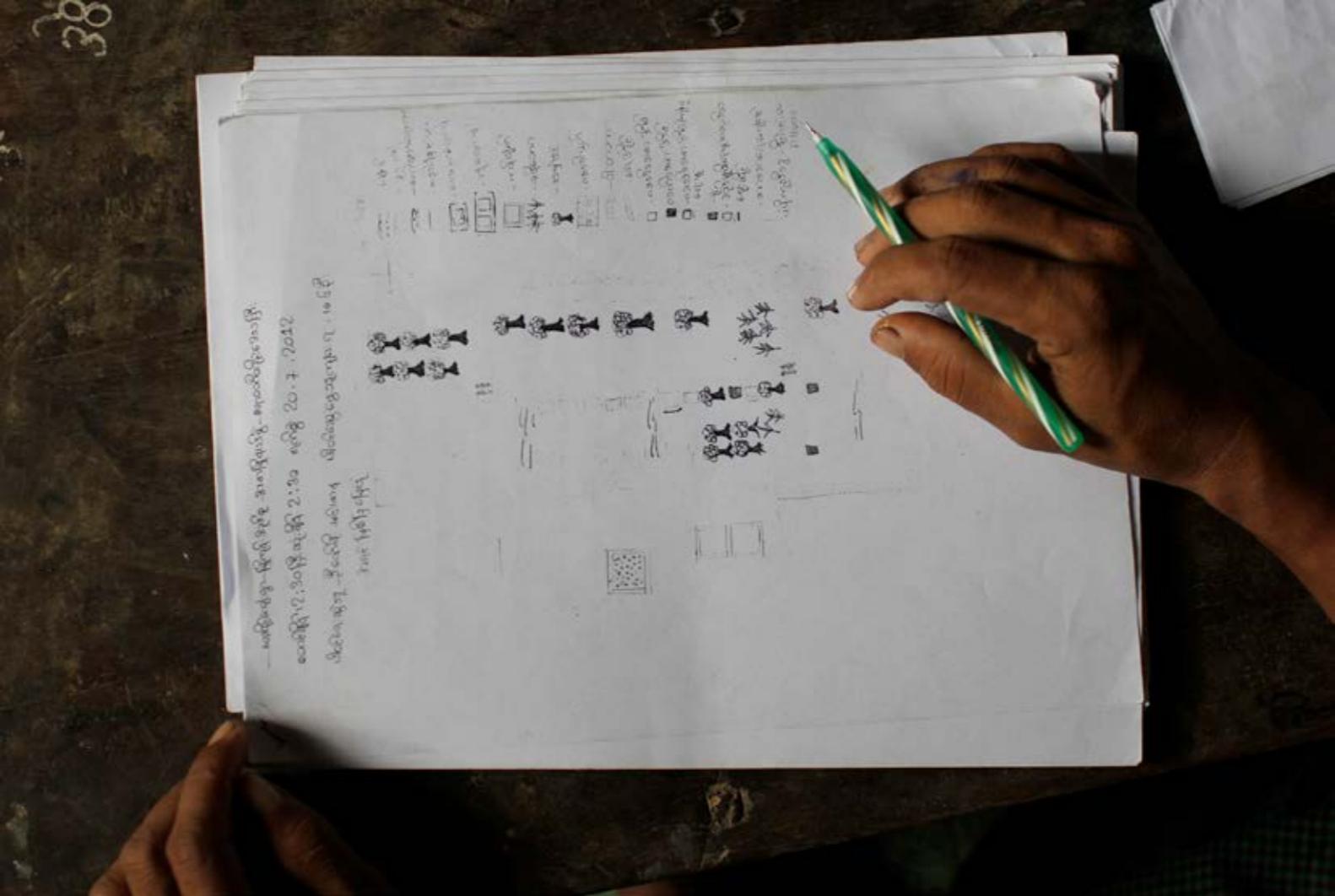
In May 2008, the Fellows were severely tested when cyclone Nargis, the worst

natural disaster in the country's recorded history, made landfall. In the immediate aftermath, ActionAid relied on interns and Fellows to provide emergency aid, since the regime would not allow international NGOs access to the affected areas.

Tragic as Nargis was, its aftermath galvanized civil society groups in a manner previously unheard of. Villagers who had been utterly unprepared for the disaster, organised and raised their voice; the regime was forced to listen; and eventually the country opened up for international NGOs to assist with emergency aid, disaster preparedness, development and, with time, the human rights situation.

*For this booklet we re-visited villages in Ngapudaw Township, Ayeyarwaddy Region, where the Fellows initiated an early recovery intervention in the immediate aftermath of Nargis. We hear how ActionAid interns and Fellows organised a 'dignified community-led emergency response' even though they were not familiar with that term at the time.*

In 2010 parliamentary elections were held for the first time in twenty years, a quasi-civilian government took power and initiated a series of political, economic and administrative reforms such as establishing a National Human Rights Commission, releasing hundreds of political prisoners (including democracy-



 ActionAid uses the village books as baseline documents and the long-term vision is for the village book to be adopted into the government-led bottom-up planning process

icon Aung San Suu Kyi), abolishing pre-censorship of the press, opening up to foreign investment, and introducing a bottom-up approach to national planning.

ActionAid Myanmar engaged actively with the new government to support the reform process and over the years extended its reach to 700 communities in 9 States and Regions through partnerships with 17 local and international organisations.

Working with local partner organisations is of high priority. ActionAid recognises their role in the struggle against poverty and injustice and their legitimacy in promoting and claiming the rights of the Myanmar people. Over the years former Fellows have formed their own community based development organisations and continued their work as ActionAid's implementing partners.

*For this booklet we visited such partner organisations in Kayah and Rakhine States. In Demoso Township former Fellows used the new-found rights and freedoms to organise public consultations about the Kayah State ceasefire agreement, which put an end to half a century of armed conflict. In Rambree Township former Fellows focussed on changing attitudes and behaviours that oppressed women for generations by introducing the concept of Women's Rights as well as gender policies adopted by the new government.*

Another innovative methodology developed by ActionAid is the Village Book, which is an essential part the Fellows' assignments. Employing various participatory rural appraisal tools Fellows facilitate a number of village meetings. During these meetings the villagers collect vital demographic data about their own village, which is otherwise hard to find in Myanmar; analyse their situation using visual tools such as problem trees, seasonal calendars, dream maps and cobweb diagrams; and prioritise their own context specific action plan. The Fellows compile all this in one comprehensive village book, which serves as a reference document in the following implementation process.

Meanwhile, ActionAid uses the village books as baseline documents and the long-term vision is for the village book to be adopted into the government-led bottom-up planning process.

*For this booklet we visited villages in Pyapon Township, Ayeyarwaddy Region, where the authorities have made the historic decision to adopt all Village Books into their planning process, allocating much needed funding for the realisation of the communities' own action plans.*



# NGAPUDAW TOWNSHIP AYEYARWADDY REGION



## Disaster and Development

Cyclone Nargis was a devastating reminder of the need for cooperation with international organisations on disaster preparedness, development and human rights. Against all odds ActionAid's interns and Fellows managed to provide crucial emergency aid in the immediate aftermath when international aid was not allowed by the military regime

» I was thinking whether I would live or die ... and I prayed. At midnight the water began to recede and I found shelter for the night under some debris – Naw Eh Paw Lay



When Cyclone Nargis made landfall in Myanmar's densely populated Ayeyarwaddy Delta on 2 May 2008 millions of people were affected and hundreds of thousands lost their lives. It was the most devastating and deadly natural disaster in the country's recorded history. Not only due to the high intensity of winds and storm surges but also because the military government failed to take appropriate action.

While the cyclone was undoubtedly tragic, its aftermath galvanized civil society groups in a manner previously unheard of under the repressive military regime.

In the immediate aftermath ActionAid Fellows, with no emergency experience or funds available, volunteered to provide a dignified community-led emergency response that helped affected communities overcome shock and trauma, regain their livelihoods and find new hope for the future.

Further, Nargis made the military government open up to cooperation with international NGOs – not only on disaster preparedness, but a much broader range of poverty reduction and rights based issues as well.



In Padauk Kone village, Labutta Township, 23-years old Naw Eh Paw Lay noticed the wind increasing during the day. Enrolled at the university in Patheingyi, the capital of Ayeyarwaddy Region, she had been living in the village since classes had been suspended during the saffron revolution in August 2007.

»Around 4 pm the wind got a lot stronger and many of us ran to the only place we knew to take shelter: the church. After a couple of hours the sea level was increasing and waves began rolling into the village. At one point a huge one hit the church, which made the whole structure collapse. People washed around in the water and many died right there in front of my eyes,« she said.

Naw Eh Paw Lay got hold of a floating wooden beam from the church, which she held tight for several hours while the night grew darker.

»I was thinking whether I would live or die ... and I prayed. At midnight the water began to recede and I found shelter for the night under some debris. Next morning I realised that 130 people from my village had died that night. Of the 90 people who had taken shelter in the church only 20 of us survived. We had lost everything – our houses, and our livestock had been swept away by the waves,« she said.

The survivors gathered during the



» I was shocked. The situation was much worse than I had expected. Dead bodies, broken boats and trees were floating in the river. It was silent as a cemetery – Saw Lin Htet

following day to build temporary shelters. Food and clean water supplies were destroyed. Many survived on coconuts. Many were badly injured and in desperate need to be hospitalised but it was impossible to go anywhere because all boats were destroyed.

»We were not sure whether anyone knew about our situation, whether anyone would come to help us,« she said.



At this time ActionAid's operations in Myanmar were limited to one project manager and three interns all based in Yangon. Additionally, 75 Fellows (young, unpaid village volunteers) had been trained and were now working in remote, rural communities across the country.

»It was nearly impossible to get credible information from the ground so I went with another intern to meet our Fellows in Pathein. From there we immediately set out to assess the situation. I was shocked. The situation was much worse than I had expected. Dead bodies, broken boats and trees were floating in the river. It was silent as a cemetery. And the smell ... one of my colleagues vomited,« said Saw Lin Htet, who was then an intern with ActionAid.

On May 7 the interns arrived in Naw Eh Paw Lay's village.

»We could see limbs buried in the rubble of the church, several people were badly injured and everyone was desperate for food and clean water. I was angry with myself for not bringing extra rations, but our boat was too small. Still people thanked us for coming, for not forgetting them,« said Saw Lin Htet.

After two days Saw Lin Htet, with support from local partner organisation Pathein Myaungmya Association, arranged for another boat to rescue the wounded in Naw Eh Paw Lay's village.

»We all wanted to go, but there was not enough space in the boat and, more importantly, we did not dare to leave. Bad people from other parts of the country had come to steal our property and occupy our land ... it was really horrific. But after two weeks the smell became so foul that everybody left to temporary camps except from a handful of strong men who stayed to protect our land,« said Naw Eh Paw Lay.

Four months earlier ActionAid had established its fellowship programme in Pathein and local Fellows came to help Saw Lin Htet with the initial emergency response. Fellows from the rest of the country joined over the coming weeks. Between themselves they called the operation "Action without Aid". Due



» I used all the skills I had learned during the first fellowship training. At least I knew how to get started: by assessing the damages and needs of each family – Ko Naing Gyi

to political restrictions it was nearly impossible to access or handle financial aid at first, even though international donors were eager to help.

»Honestly, I did not know how to manage an emergency back then. But no one in Myanmar did, really. I did not know what to do, so I asked people in the villages what they needed and helped them get that. What we did is called a dignified community-led emergency response – but I didn't know that at the time. I only learned that later when sharing my experiences with international staff,« said Saw Lin Htet.



One Fellow named Ko Naing Gyi, 25, was in Pathein for a meeting and got involved with the emergency response right away.

»I had no experience with such a chaotic situation. People were traumatised and many became frustrated, which was not easy for me to deal with,« he said.

After helping out in the temporary camps in Pathein for a couple of weeks he went to the field with the assessment team. While most emergency efforts were centred on Labutta, which was the worst

affected area, the ActionAid team also assessed the situation in Ngapudaw Township. They found that many of the villages were badly damaged, but since there were few casualties they had received little or no help. As they returned from the assessment they decided to start an early recovery intervention in the 17 worst affected villages in Ngapudaw Township.

»I was sent to Oak Po, a village of about 500 people, where I arrived and met the villagers on 28 June. I used all the skills I had learned during the first fellowship training. At least I knew how to get started: by assessing the damages and needs of each family,« said Ko Naing Gyi.

At first Ko Naing Gyi distributed food – rice, oil, salt, chilli – then he organised a village meeting and mobilised people to renovate the road, establish water drainage and build two new wells.

It was a challenge to get everyone to agree about the priorities, remembers Thramu Naw Eh Mwee, the wife of the local pastor who is now the treasurer of a local community based organisation, which was formed in the aftermath of Nargis.

»We had to prioritise and negotiate many difficult compromises. Everyone was affected and wanted as much help as they could get, even if they were not the most vulnerable,« she said.

» Before I was just the pastor's wife. But now I have taken on the responsibility of organising village development activities and ensuring interfaith cooperation. This gives me a whole new position in the village – Thramu Naw Eh Mwee



But in the end it did pay off to involve everyone in the decisions.

»Before Nargis the Christian and Buddhist communities in the village couldn't cooperate. But the recovery process forced us to understand each other and work together to cope with the situation,« said Thramu Naw Eh Mwee.

When financial aid finally began to trickle through, the villagers of Oak Po agreed to set up a self-help group with just a fraction of the funds.

»Over the years this has financed a public toilet, the village jetty, renovation of and furniture for the nursery school, and four community pigs. We also have an emergency fund that provides loans without any interest – instead we ask people to give a voluntary donation if they can afford it,« said Thramu Naw Eh Mwee.

Oak Po recovered and even improved compared to the situation before Nargis. It took time and a lot of hard work and compromises, said Thramu Naw Eh Mwee, who also experienced achievements on a personal level.

»Before I was just the pastor's wife. But now I have taken on the responsibility of organising village development activities and ensuring interfaith cooperation. This gives me a whole new position in the village,« she said.

Saw Eh Kler, the owner of a small grocery shop in Oak Po, agreed.

»Before Nargis it was a miserable situation in this village – bad living standards and bad attitudes. People were poorly educated and neither respected each other or the law. Ko Naing Gyi not only distributed food, but also a philosophy. The process he facilitated was a milestone for village development and brought about many positive changes,« he said.

Ko Naing Gyi returned to his original placement village four months after Nargis. Today he works as a programme officer with Pathein Myaungmya Association.

Meanwhile, a new Fellow, Naw Po Po Htwe, 23, has taken over where he left.

»Long time ago this village had a school, but it burned down in a huge fire a few years before Nargis. Now we have rebuilt it and hired a teacher. To finance this work I collected a small fee from each family and organised a funfair and a football tournament, through which we raised a larger sum. I also wrote a proposal to ActionAid who contributed further funds. The villagers volunteered all the necessary labour, they even made the bricks for the school themselves,« said Naw Po Po Htwe.

»» The new school has a much stronger foundation and a better structure than the old one. Now children from the surrounding villages come to attend our school – Thramu Naw Ka Paw Wah



Thramu Naw Ka Paw Wah, 41, is the school headmistress in the neighbouring village of Kone Ka Lay. During cyclone Nargis she sat on the floor of her house holding her baby tight in her arms. The roof blew off, the rain pelted down, but she did not move. Only when dawn broke she went out to assess the damages: The entire village was destroyed.

»The most painful thing for me to see was that the school had collapsed entirely,« she said.

One day soon after two young men arrived in Kone Ka Lay. They introduced themselves as Saw Ler Set and Saw Eh Thaw, they were Fellows and wanted to help with the reconstruction, she recalls. They distributed food, mosquito nets, and sanitation kits. Then they engaged the village in a discussion about the situation.

»They helped us rebuild the school and even add a middle school. The new school has a much stronger foundation and a better structure than the old one. Now children from the surrounding villages come to attend our school,« said Thramu Naw Ka Paw Wah.

The Fellows also facilitated the rebuilding of the jetty and the road and construction of five new wells. Today Naw Hser Say Gay Paw, 29, has taken over as a Fellow in Kone Ka Lay. She has introduced saving and loan groups, a grocery shop that serves as a revolving fund for village development purposes, and night tuition for the children.

»Right now I am preparing the school budget for the Township Education Department. They have promised to recognise our middle school if we hand in a budget, a curriculum, a school profile and the number of students and teachers. Once the school is recognised the government will cover 70 per cent of the budget,« she said.

Village Leader Saw Moo Taw said living conditions have improved dramatically.

»More people have tin roofs, telephones and solar panels now. With the renovated road and jetty we have access to get inspiration and new technologies from nearby villages and towns,« he said.

A Fellow named Saw Eh Ni Thein facilitated the early recovery intervention in Natmulu village, a few hours further away by boat.

»He discussed our situation with us and also helped us decide how to use the financial aid he brought. We agreed to invest in a communal rice paddy field,

» We agreed to invest in a communal rice paddy field, establish a rice bank, reconstruct the school, and build a new well  
– Saw Haro



establish a rice bank, reconstruct the school, and build a new well. Saw Eh Ni Thein put in great effort and stayed a whole year,« said Saw Haro, 71, a retired farmhand who lost his house to Nargis.

After Saw Eh Ni Thein left Natmulu Naw Eh Paw Lay took over. Surviving Nargis she resumed her studies when the university in Patheingyi reopened in June 2008 with support from ActionAid and local partner organisation Patheingyi Myaungmya Association. She has been a Fellow since graduation. Naw Eh Paw Lay is particularly satisfied with the effect the rice bank has had on village life.

»Most people are daily labourers and any unexpected expense could force them to take on loans from moneylenders. The interest rates are often 100 per cent a year so most people need to take on new loans to repay the first, and so on. But the rice bank have let this village escape the debt cycle,« she said.

Another concrete sign of Natmulu's successful recovery is the village's increasing population.

»People see our village as exemplary because we are so united. Before Nargis we were 40 households in the village, now we are 62 and 5 families are planning to move here soon. This gives us a much stronger voice with the local administration,« said Saw Haro.



Saw Lin Htet was promoted to programme officer soon after Nargis. Today he works as Program Manager, Fellowship & Capacity Building, with ActionAid and organises the recruitment and training of new fellows. Visiting Ngapudaw for the first time in five years, meeting people and witnessing the improvements was a joy for him.

»Right after Nargis everything was destroyed, and people were tired and worried. I recognise all the people and places, but wow, it is amazing to see the differences,« he said.

»Before Nargis people kept quiet in this country. It was not allowed to be more than four people at a meeting and politics were considered dangerous. But in the aftermath of Nargis people did not care about these restrictions. Everyone convened to express their feelings and frustrations; they raised their voices about their needs and rights. This forced the government to take the people into their considerations. And witnessing how much help the NGOs provided the government's perspective on NGOs also changed, which allowed us to continue and even dramatically expand our operations.«

# DEMOSO TOWNSHIP KAYAH STATE



## Conflict and Reconciliation

Half a century of armed conflict and human rights violations has left wounds in many corners of Myanmar, which are difficult to heal. Former fellows, who grew up during the conflict, used their unique position to help provide public consultations and reconciliation following the ceasefire agreement in Kayah State



» Over the years we have tried to get justice for victims of a number of cases of human rights abuse – Ko Li Reh Angelo

On 7 March 2012 a ceasefire agreement was signed between the government of Myanmar and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), which put an end to over half a century of armed conflict in Kayah State.

Since independence in 1948 the country has been ravaged by conflicts between the central government and minority groups demanding independent ethnic states, or some measure of autonomy.

Conflicts have increased over exploitation of natural resources, land and agricultural products, forced labour, internal displacements and a range of other human rights violations.

ActionAid and partner organisations have engaged with communities in several conflict affected areas. The Fellows here faced some of the most challenging placements possible, navigating between both sides of the conflict, while promoting development and negotiating respect for human rights.

Many ceasefire agreements were signed and quickly broken over the years. In Kayah State a 1995 ceasefire lasted only three months. When the 2012 agreement was signed, a group of former fellows devoted their time to organise public consultations. The reform process of the new quasi-civilian government gave them hope that their work could bring about a lasting peace.



Ko Li Reh Angelo was only three years old when he first witnessed the conflict in Kayah State.

»Just before the school day was over, we heard shots from the village. One soldier died, and several houses near the army camp caught fire,« said Ko Li Reh Angelo, who was born in Kay Lar village in Phruso Township.

There was only one teacher employed by the village school. Terrified by the battle, she left to her hometown the next day and never returned. Ko Li Reh Angelo's parents sent him to live with an uncle in Phruso town, where he would be safer and have a chance to go to school. After college he found good work opportunities in Yangon, but when his father passed away in 2000 his mother requested him to return to the village.

»The village was still unsafe. Most young men lived in the forest to avoid being taken by the soldiers. The army often needed porters or, even worse, human shields when they moved troops from one place to another,« he said.

First Ko Li Reh Angelo became a teacher in the local school but when the conflict



» I did not get into much trouble, but I was forced to sign a document saying that I would discontinue my work – Ko Nan Ri

escalated in 2003 he was pressurised to become Village Tract Leader.

»Nobody wanted the position because it entailed a lot of negotiating with both the army and the armed group. You had to please everyone equally in order to avoid either side threatening you or beating you up,« he said.

The position, which he held for three years, sparked an interest in him for village development.

»While I was the village tract leader we improved the access to clean water and built a rural health centre,« he said.

He armed himself with copies of the Army Code of Conduct and other relevant documents, which proved useful in reminding the soldiers of their duty to respect and protect civilians and their property.

»The documents gave me the courage to confront the soldiers and ask them to defend their actions. They never beat me up, but sometimes they did threaten to arrest me,« he said.

He also had a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and used his position to spread awareness about the controversial topic in the village.

»I figured that if I did not do it no one would,« said Ko Li Reh Angelo.

In 2007 he became a Fellow through ActionAid's local partner organisation.

»As a fellow I learned more about the basic theories of development – how to identify the essential needs of the people and ensure consensus and participation in development activities. We built a pipeline to provide clean water from the mountains to my placement village and we established a savings and loan group, which financed a nursery school after a couple of years,« he said.

Ko Li Reh Angelo and a handful of other fellows also had the chance to attend ActionAid's Human Rights Defenders training.

»It was very useful for us. Over the years we have tried to get justice for victims of a number of cases of human rights abuse,« he said.



In 2010, the first national elections in two decades were to take place in Myanmar. ActionAid's local partner organisation was providing civic education about elections to the local population who had practically no experience.

Ko Nan Ri was busy establishing a rice

» I would like to ask what they mean by “the people”, because the conflict did nothing good for us. We were displaced and lived in constant fear – U Saw Ya Ko



bank and saving and loans groups in his placement village, Htay Su Phyar, when he joined the civic education efforts.

»At the time not even the headman was elected here, the position simply rotated. I showed people how to make a tick the correct way, so their vote would be declared valid. I told them not to leave their identity card in the ballot box, which some thought they should. I explained the political structure of the upper and lower house,« he said.

Talking openly about politics had not been allowed before, and was still considered somewhat dangerous. Most villagers were afraid to get arrested if they attended Ko Nan Ri’s meetings.

»The villagers that did attend my meetings were suspicious. Some thought I worked for a political party and wanted their votes. I explained that I was only telling them how to vote, not who to vote for. They accepted this after a while, but kept worrying for me because of the events that followed,« he said.

In March 2010 ActionAid’s local partner organisation had been instructed to close its office and seize all activities in Kayah State.

»I did not get into much trouble, but I had to sign a document saying that I would discontinue my work. This did not make us stop though – we just kept

a low profile from then on. The more pressure the more eager I became to continue my work,« he said.



In 2011 the fellowship programme was phased out in Kayah State, but Ko Li Reh Angelo, Ko Nan Ri and 10 other former fellows – who all grew up during the conflict – were not ready to quit. They decided to start their own organisation to continue development work with the communities they had engaged with as fellows.

»In Kayah all the other NGOs were religious. We wanted to form an organisation that had no religious affiliations. It was difficult and we needed funds,« said Ko Li Reh Angelo.

In April 2012 the former Fellows managed to establish the Local Development Network (LDN), which is now ActionAid’s local partner organisation in Kayah State. Ko Li Reh Angelo estimates that the Fellows used to spend half their time on conflict related issues.

»Now, with the ceasefire, we can work much more efficiently on actual development,« he said.



 We have a huge hydro power plant right here, which provides electricity to the entire country, but there is no electricity in the villages of this state – U Augustin

When the current ceasefire agreement was reached in March 2012, the Local Development Network was determined to ensure proper public consultations.

»The sustainability of any ceasefire depends on a strong community engagement. If people are not aware about the actual agreement both sides can break it with impunity at village level,« said Ko Li Reh Angelo.

In May 2012 the Local Development Network and 11 other local civil society organisations founded the Kayah State Peace Monitoring Network (KSPMN) to support public consultations and monitor the ceasefire.

Cooperating with both sides of the ceasefire agreement they organised more than 20 public consultations over the next one and a half year. Before each consultation they met with local villagers to explain the aim of the event, emphasising that everyone should feel free to ask questions and raise their concerns.

»We need to encourage villagers to ask questions – they are very afraid after decades of random threats and torture during the armed conflict« said Ko Li Reh Angelo.



U Saw Ya Ko, 50, heard about the state and township level consultations and wanted to go.

»But I could not manage to travel eight miles there or to take time off from work – back then I was a casual labourer, I had to go to the forest each day to cut wood to earn my daily survival. I had to prioritise,« he said.

Only when a village level consultation was organised, he had the chance to attend.

»This is a conflict area and we all suffered a lot because of that. Both sides said that they were fighting for the people. I would like to ask what they mean by “the people”, because the conflict did nothing good for us. We were displaced and lived in constant fear. But when I had the chance I did not have the courage to ask the question,« said U Saw Ya Ko, who has since become the headman of Htee Thee Kalo village.

In nearby Semie Sodar village, retired health worker U Augustin, 56, was also uncomfortable asking questions, but he appreciated the chance to read the



»» The land grabbing case was one I really wanted to raise. Personally I had lost 2.5 acres. This was a third of my land so of course it had a big impact on my life  
– U Saw Maw

ceasefire agreement and listen to others' questions and responses.

»In the 1995 ceasefire there were no public consultations. It is important to have because most villagers have no idea what a ceasefire is, why and how the agreement is made or if it is strong enough to last. These things are important to understand. The public consultations also gave us the opportunity to demand electricity. We have a huge hydro power plant right here, which provides electricity to the entire country, but there is no electricity in the villages of this state,« said U Augustin, who made his son ask questions on behalf of the village.

It was a welcome surprise when U Saw Maw, 52, received an invitation to attend a public consultation about the 2012 ceasefire in Kayah State, which had put an end to half a century of armed conflict.

»At the last ceasefire, in 1995, we had no consultations, so this was definitely an improvement. It made me feel that my right to speak out about my concerns is now respected,« said U Saw Maw, who lives in Htay Su Phyar village, Demoso township.

At the beginning of the consultation, which he attended in April 2013, copies of the ceasefire agreement were distributed and explained.

»The points of the agreement were good, I took special notice of two things: that the army promised to return confiscated land and that it would not expand its presence in Kayah State any further,« said U Saw Maw.

All participants were then divided into groups to discuss specific concerns of each village tract, which were to be presented to representatives of both sides of the ceasefire agreement. U Saw Maw's group raised the issue of land ownership. The army had confiscated 20 acres of land from his village tract in 1997, which they now asked to have returned.

»The land grabbing case was one I really wanted to raise. Personally I had lost 2.5 acres. This was a third of my land so it had a big impact on my life, my children's education and the health of my family,« he said.

The government representative promised to forward the complaint to the Farmland Investigation Committee.

»When I left I was satisfied that we at least had the chance to raise the issue with such important persons. Later I have heard that there is a good chance that my land will be returned to me within the near future,« he said.

RAMBREE  
TOWNSHIP  
RAKHINE  
STATE



## Gender and Civil Society

Gender inequality enforced by deeply entrenched beliefs and traditions is often a barrier to development in Myanmar. Brought up to trust that ‘men are leaders, women are followers’ the Fellows of Rambree Township internalised the concept of women’s rights during trainings, and went on to spread awareness and change attitudes in their communities



» We feel it inside if we break the norms. We are afraid to be criticised; of what other people might think of you or your parents; that someone should call you a prostitute – Ma Khine Khine Soe

It is generally recognised that women empowerment is one of the most effective tools for development; whether one measure in terms of economic progress, education, or health.

While Myanmar women are a visible part of society, they often have significantly less, if any, decision making power and representation in positions of leadership and government from village to national level. Young women are brought up to believe that men are natural leaders, women followers – that the ideal woman is quiet, passive, supporting and accepting. Most new Fellows have been brought up with these beliefs and have never heard of gender equality or women’s rights till they join their first training.

Fellows from Rakhine State generally agree that the issue is more entrenched in their home State than other parts of the Nation. They also recognise that they have a unique position to change the mind-sets in their communities.



»There are so many social norms and traditions in regard to women’s role in society around here,« said Ma Khine Khine Soe, 31, a former Fellow from Rambree Township, Rakhine State.

She begins to list what is considered inappropriate: if girls sit alone on their balcony, if they walk around alone, speak in a friendly way with boys. The list seems to go on forever.

»Compared with other parts of the country Rakhine traditions are more repressive to women. We feel it inside if we break the norms. We are afraid to be criticised; of what other people might think of you or your parents; that someone should call you a prostitute. I grew up here so I just accepted the norms,« she said.

During her first fellowship training she initially felt uncomfortable around the young men.

»But when I met female fellows from other parts of the country and heard about their work and achievements I thought to myself: If they can, why can’t I? So I began talking to the male Fellows during the training, and I soon realised that it had no bad impact,« she said.

When she began working in her placement village she was often confronted by men who would not accept that women could lead village development projects.

»That just gave me more strength and motivation. For each achievement people’s perception started to change, and they became more cooperative, which was very satisfying,« she said.



» Most men around here work and provide for their families while the women take care of the house. My husband and I work and save together  
– Ma Khin Saw Myint

One such achievement was establishing a rice bank in one of her placement villages, Kan Dawt Pyin.

»Just about every household was indebted to private moneylenders who would charge up to 100 per cent interest rates per season. The rice bank operates with a much lower interest rate and the profit goes back to the village, not to some rich moneylender. Every year the number of people taking loans from the rice bank is decreasing,« she said.

At first the local authorities did not approve of the project. They worried that people would not repay their loans, which could lead to conflicts eventually involving the police.

»They watched us closely at first, but no one failed to repay. This year the profits from the rice bank was enough to buy a communal generator, which supplies electricity to the entire village,« said Ma Khine Khine Soe.

Six other villages in the area have since established similar rice banks.

Other former Fellows in Rambree Township agree that the inequality between men and women is a deep-seeded issue.

»Before I became a Fellow I believed that men were meant to lead, and women to follow. That is what my parents told me since childhood, and what was generally accepted in my village. If a girl could read and write there was no need for further education. I had never heard about women's rights, or the fact that women can actually become village leaders until I attended ActionAid trainings,« said Ma Mya Than Khin.

During the trainings she would pick up all publication she could find about women's rights and bring them back to her village to share with other women.

»One of the older men in the village wouldn't accept that women could take on a leading role, but then I brought up the example of Daw Aung San Su Kyi – she is a woman, and the chairperson of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy. This made him accept my point,« she said.



Ma Mya Than Khin facilitated the women in her placement village to set up a savings and loan group. While she had their attention she engaged in talks about women's rights and equality.

One member of the group was Ma Khin



»» The kids prefer to watch football, but I am more interested in international news and knowledge about health and other issues that can improve our lives – Ma Khin Saw Myint

Saw Myint. At the time, her family could barely survive from operating one rice mill, their only source of income. The 29-year old mother of one never lacked ideas of how to improve the family's income, but she had no money to act on them. Until Ma Mya Than Khin in 2009 suggested establishing the savings and loans group.

»No such group had ever been formed by women in this village. At first the men did not believe it would last long, they were convinced we would start quarrelling and messing it all up. But we had a plan and proved them wrong,« she said.

With a modest loan Khin Saw Myint made an initial investment in ten piglets. The profit of raising and breeding the piglets let her repay her debts and invest in new sources of income. Today she owns six pigs for breeding, 150 chickens for egg production, two rice mills and a small betel plantation.

»We are not like other families in Chaung Bwee village,« she said.

»Most men around here work and provide for their families while the women take care of the house. My husband and I work and save together. His primary responsibility is to operate our rice mills while I am in charge of our chicken farm, the betel plantation and our finances – but we help each others with everything,« she said.

The 21 members each pay a small monthly fee and charge a low interest rates on loans, which has been donated towards the communal generator, renovation of the bridge and the well and installation of a satellite dish at the monastery, allowing all villagers access to information – and entertainment.

»Most people go there every night. The kids prefer to watch football, but I am more interested in international news and knowledge about health and other issues that can improve our lives,« said Ma Khin Saw Myint.

Soon after the first self-help group was established other women followed the lead and founded two additional saving and loan groups.



Ngwe Tin, 32, established three similar saving and loans groups in her placement village. The 90 members have taken loans to pay for their children's education and invest in small-scale businesses opportunities. With time they hope to provide financial support to communal projects as well.

»When I arrived in the village women never took part in any meetings. They



» I would be very happy to see a female Village Administrator elected here in my life time, it would be good with a role model like that – Daw Sein Myint Tin

assumed it was none of their business and the men did not invite them. I had received a training about Women's Rights from ActionAid in Yangon and when I returned, I shared what I had learned with women in the villages,« said Ma Ngwe Tin.

She kept the village up to date about the current political changes in Myanmar, with a special focus on initiatives that encourage equal opportunities for women.

»Women have started to attend meetings and weigh in with their opinions. We have also become aware that women can be Village Administrators and some are interested in running for the position,« she said.

Some men accepted the women's agenda, others disapproved.

»The trust in women is still low because, historically, women never had leading roles in this society. I think it is important that we elect a female Village Administrator. She would be a much needed role model for other women and prove to men that women are equal. But most women have very low self confidence, not least because of their low level of education,« said Ma Ngwe Tin.

The members of the saving and loans group agree but only a few dare to run for the position of Village Administrator.

»I am convinced I could easily do the job – it seems quite simple and I have been involved in village development activities for several years. But I have only passed high school and I worry whether that will be sufficient education. It will also be difficult because I have so many domestic chores since I got married. However, I have decided to try for the elections in 2015,« said Ma Moh Moh Win, 31.

The other women in the self help groups are supportive.

»I would be very happy to see a female Village Administrator elected here in my life time, it would be good with a role model like that. I will support Ma Moh Moh Win cause I do not have the confidence to try myself. I only finished 5th grade,« said Daw Sein Myint Tin, 43.



The male Fellows in Rambree are as committed to women's empowerment as the female.

»Educating people about Women's Rights have proven to be an extremely important part of our work. According to tradition women here accept to follow their husband's decisions whether good or bad,« said Ko Tin Htun.



» We had become a very united group, none of us could imagine losing that. So we signed a document promising one another that we would never give up  
– Ko Tin Htun

In one of his placement villages he witnessed how the village headman would get drunk and beat up his wife. The wife seemed to accept it and other men turned a blind eye to the problem.

»One day I sat down with him and shared about the equal rights of women and that violence is not OK. I showed him a diagram, which illustrated how his wife was actually worked a lot harder than he did. After our discussion he stopped beating her,« he said.

Ko Tin Htun believes it is crucial to improve women's access to education and income to prevent this kind of abuse. Otherwise they have little other choice than to accept their fate.

»Today, divorced women have no opportunity and very low status, they cannot stand on their own feet and provide for themselves,« he said.

In 2010 Tin Htun had to ask for financial help from his own wife.

One year earlier, the Fellows in Rambree Township had learned that their placements were coming to an end. The leader of ActionAid's local partner organisation in Rakhine State suffered from severe health problems and had decided to terminate all activities in Rambree Township.

»We were all deeply upset and agreed

that we could not stop now. The people who had welcomed us in their villages and supported our work had too many expectations now, they counted on us. We had already seen how much we could achieve even with very less money, such as providing clean water in a village. And on a personal level we had become a very united group, none of us could imagine losing that. So we signed a document promising one another that we would never give up,« he said.

This turned out to be a difficult promise to keep. The Fellow's stipend had hardly been enough to make a living, and now they did not even receive that.

»We all took up part time jobs and I sold two acres of land to continue our work. It was a painful time. Too often we felt stressed out and sad, but found consolation in each other,« he said.

After a year the Fellows wanted to go to Yangon for a meeting with ActionAid but they could not afford the bus ticket, even though it would be reimbursed upon arrival. Only when Ko Tin Htun asked his wife for help, she pawned her only gold bracelet to send them off.

In Yangon ActionAid helped the Fellows form their own organisation, the Rambree Township Development Organisation, which became ActionAid's local partner organisation the following year.

# PYAPON TOWNSHIP AYEYARWADDY REGION



## Planning and Cooperation

Current efforts to institutionalise a bottom-up approach to national planning and development in Myanmar are hampered by a lack of reliable data and analysis from the many remote villages of Myanmar. ActionAid's community-led Village Book concept has provided the solution for the authorities in Pyapon Township



»» That is why we cooperate so closely with ActionAid and local partner ASA; to get information from the Fellows in villages we could not reach otherwise – U Nyan Soe

The communities ActionAid work with have intimate knowledge of the challenges they face as well as potential solutions. Often, all that is needed for sustainable development at village level is someone to facilitate the process of analysing the situation and developing concrete action plans.

Acknowledging this, ActionAid has developed the Village Book concept. Employing various participatory rural appraisal tools Fellows facilitate a number of village meetings. During these meetings the villagers collect vital demographic data about their own village – which is otherwise hard to find in Myanmar; analyse their situation using visual tools such as problem trees, seasonal calendars, dream maps and cobweb diagrams; and prioritise their own context specific action plan.

The Fellows compile all their findings in one comprehensive village book, which serves as a reference document in the following community-led implementation process. Meanwhile, ActionAid uses the village books as baseline documents and the long-term vision is for the village book to be adopted into government-led bottom-up planning processes.



After several years of active engagement and trust building in Pyapon Township the authorities made a historic decision to incorporate all village books in ActionAid's target area into the local planning process, allocating budget to help realise the communities' action plans.

U Nyan Soe, Assistant Director of Pyapon District Planning Department, has 32 years of experience in his field. Through most of his career planning was conducted top-down, but with the recent reform process the government of Myanmar also introduced a bottom-up approach to the planning process; expecting U Nyan Soe and his peers to collect needs assessments from all villages and prioritise plans accordingly.

»I appreciate the new bottom-up approach but it is challenging to implement with limited staff and budgets and many very remote villages in the township. That is why we cooperate so closely with ActionAid and local partner ASA; to get information from the Fellows in villages we could not reach otherwise. I like how the village books give such a detailed overview of the village level planning process. On top of that the books are so simple and easy to understand, even illiterate people will have everything explained through maps and drawings,« said U Nyan Soe.

Cooperation with NGOs is a relatively

» We have made a detailed village book with a prioritised action plan. The library is complete and now we are focussing on providing electricity, water, job opportunities and medicine in the village – Ma Maw Maw Aye



new concept, said U Nyi Nyi Lin, the Chairperson of Pyapon General Administration Department.

»We have only worked with NGOs since cyclone Nargis. At first I was not convinced that it was a good idea. I thought all NGOs were in opposition to the government; that they would actively work against us. But my impression now is very positive,« he said.

U Nyi Nyi Lin confirms that all 30 village books in Pyapon have been accepted in the township level plan and will be submitted to the regional government who will provide much needed budget to support the action plans.

»The ActionAid village book concept is very effective – it benefits the community by letting them identify their own needs and it support our work by increasing participation in the planning process, all thanks to the effort of the Fellows. Sometimes the villages cannot afford the implementation of larger projects, which is another reason why it is important to link with the authorities. We hope ActionAid will expand to work in all villages in the township,« said U Nyi Nyi Lin.



One of the 30 villages ActionAid has engaged with in Pyapon is called Hti Tan Yin. It was a challenge for the Fellow, Ma Maw Maw Aye, 21, to initiate the village book process here. Despite her good intentions she could not convince any of the 50 families to attend her first village meeting because they prioritised their daily work and family life.

»I was very young so the villagers were not impressed with me at first. I knew I had to find strong allies so I explained the Abbott about my intentions and during his sermons in the monastery he encouraged people to participate in the village book process. This helped me a lot,« she said.

The Abbott endorsed Ma Maw Maw Aye because he was intrigued with the village book concept.

»I encouraged people to attend her meetings and told them that only if we stand united we can make a really good village book. I think a village book is a really good tool for keeping a record of what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done,« said Abbott, U Eain Da Ka.

However, persuading people to participate in the process was not her only problem.

»It was very stressful for me to speak in front of people. I was extremely shy and had no experience. People also kept complaining about how time consuming



»» The way Ma Maw Maw Aye works with the youth makes me believe that they will develop this village together – U Eain Da Ka

the process was. But the trainings I received through the Fellowship programme helped me become more confident,« she said.

During the meetings people agreed that a library was their first priority, followed by electricity, a fence around the drinking water pond, job opportunities and a medical dispensary.

30 villagers formed a library committee and made the necessary plans and budgets. It took one and a half month to build and the Pyapon General Administration Department contributed two thirds of the construction costs.

»Since I was young, I have wanted our village to have a library to improve the low level of education around here. A long time passed since then. We were too poor and not united enough to cooperate around building it. Ma Maw Maw Aye made us spend a lot of time working on our village book, but it was definitely worth the time when it was accepted into the township plan, which helped us get funding and build a library together,« said U Myo Myint, 58, who is now in charge of the Library Committee.

Ma Maw Maw Aye is now recognised as a confident young leader in her community.

»We have made a detailed village book with a prioritised action plan. The library is complete and now we are

focussing on providing electricity, water, job opportunities and medicine in the village,« said Ma Maw Maw Aye.

The Abbott is also impressed with her work and happy to have helped her along.

»The way Ma Maw Maw Aye works with the youth makes me believe that they will develop this village together ... both in terms of economic progress and people's mentality. She is doing a great job and we can see her achievements already. This village is very poor and the children are not educated, but now they can find knowledge in the library, which will help them decide between right and wrong, live well and contribute to society,« said U Eain Da Ka.



Ko Naing Lin Htet, a Fellow in the more remote village of Yae Sai, initially faced many of the same obstacles.

Only a handful of people showed up when he organised his first village meeting, because most people are casual labourers and cannot afford to take time off from work.

He found a strong ally in the village headman, U Zaw Moe.



» I told people: "this is our chance to speak up and receive the support we actually need. If we do not invest our time, we might lose out on a unique opportunity"  
– U Zaw Moe

»I wanted to motivate people to attend the meetings. So I reminded them of the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. At that time we were in desperate need of mosquito nets but only received blankets, which we had no use for in the hot climate. I told people: "this is our chance to speak up and receive the support we actually need. If we do not invest our time, we might lose out on a unique opportunity",« said U Zaw Moe.

Soon nearly everyone participated and appreciated the process even though it was time consuming.

»Everyone got to speak, no matter his or her position in the village – we were all equals,« he said.

U Zaw Moe recalls how odd it was when Naing Lin Htet asked people to draw a dream map, a seasonal calendar, a problem tree.

»I had never tried anything like that before. At first I couldn't see the purpose, but I trusted that it would benefit us. And now I can see how it has made me think differently and given me a much better understanding of our needs as well as our resources,« said U Zaw Moe.

The village prioritised their needs: a bridge across the creek, renovation of the main road, construction of a school, a meeting hall and a small clinic.

»Sometimes I felt sorry for spending so much of people's time without any immediate benefits. But after finalising the village book we have had so many achievements that I do not need to worry about that anymore,« said Ko Naing Lin Htet.

Facilitated by another Fellow a neighbouring village was already planning to build the bridge, so the villagers of Yae Sai focussed on their remaining priorities. They soon completed the road and are now working on the school and the clinic.

The process also led the villagers to investigate their rights to fish in the creek. Local businessmen had long prevented them from doing so, claiming that they had an exclusive license.

»While drawing the resource map we all came to think that it cannot be true that we do not have the right to fish in the creek. So we talked to our local member of parliament and he said we definitely have the right to fish in certain months. We are now engaging with the authorities at township level to find out more about our rights. Having developed a comprehensive document such as the village book makes it easier for us to get support at from the township, because everything is well documented,« said Ko Naing Lin Htet.

Zaw Moe is very satisfied that the village

» Sometimes I felt sorry for spending so much of people's time without any immediate benefits. But after finalising the village book we have had so many achievements, that I do not have to worry anymore – Ko Naing Lin Htet



book has now been adopted into the township level development plans.

»Now the authorities know our needs and will support us,« he said.

Both U Zaw Moe and Ko Naing Lin Htet feel that the process has increased the general level of trust and cooperation within the village. It has also heightened the awareness of women's rights.

Drawing a cob web diagram, it became clear to U Zaw Moe that women have much less opportunities when it comes to

work, decision-making, security, property and so on.

»I never thought about that before,« said U Zaw Moe.

»Men have come to understand and appreciate the chores that are traditionally carried out by women. Personally I am helping my mother chop wood and cook our meals, which had never crossed my mind before I became a Fellow. Some of my friends still tease me, but many others have taken my example,« said Ko Naing Lin Htet.

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ActionAid is an international organisation, working with over 15 million people in 45 countries for a world free from poverty and injustice. We facilitate communities to identify their own needs and collaborate with them and allies to bring sustainable change in their lives.

ActionAid has been working in Myanmar since 2006. We have an MoU with the Ministry of Social Welfare and Relief and Resettlement as well as with the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation and we are registered as an INGO with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Our current annual

budget is now around 10 million USD. ActionAid Myanmar, in partnership with 17 local and international organisations, supports more than 700 communities in 9 states and regions – around 200,000 people. Along with community-led, self-reliance work, ActionAid Myanmar is actively involved with policy making at the national level.



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