

CRITICAL STORIES OF CHANGE



The fellowship programme in Myanmar

Let's do it together for our village

'Pu paung hsaung ywet doh ywar a twet a si a sin'

act:onaid

Introduction: What is a ‘change maker’?

Change makers are individuals who facilitate change. They might galvanise communities into action or influence an organisation to work in a different way. The change that they are part of can be sustainable over the long term. Individuals like this exist everywhere within the context of ActionAid’s work; they are sometimes ActionAid staff members and they are sometimes community members. The motivation for this publication is to explore how and why ‘change makers’ achieve change in order to understand how ActionAid can better support individuals, staff or partners to achieve change in the future. This particular story focuses on change makers in ActionAid Myanmar’s fellowship programme and tries to understand what change has happened in Myanmar, and how and why it has happened.

Sharing critical stories of change

Development organisations often make claims for their work. Yet in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is just one of many players. What we rarely get to know is how significant our contributions are amongst the other factors that influence outcomes.

This publication is one of a series of critical stories of change that tell of the role ActionAid

plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. In their openness, self-criticism, analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are not just self-congratulatory ‘good practice case studies’. Critical stories of change aim to explore – from the perspectives of different stakeholders – how change (both negative and positive) and potential change actually happens, as well as exploring who benefits from these changes. We hope that these stories will capture the full complexity of an organisation’s development interventions and experiences, as well as providing insights for all those engaged in the struggles against poverty and injustice. This story is especially relevant to those working in oppressive contexts.

Aung Kyaw Thein, a former ActionAid Myanmar staff member, said about development, “If you want to achieve the objective, don’t worry about the details”. When critiquing a project, it is easy to be tied up with the details and to forget about the achievements in terms of the overall vision. While there are aspects of critique in this story, it aims to keep the overall processes and motivations of the fellowship programme at its heart. Questions raised touch on the role of youth in development; the nature of a rights-based approach, and how ActionAid and other development agencies can learn from the fellowship methodology.

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Abbreviations

ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency	MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
AAI	ActionAid International	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
AAM	ActionAid Myanmar	OWG	Operational working group
CAF	Community accountability file	PRRP	Participatory review and reflection process
CBO	Community based organisation	SHG	Self-help group
DFID	Department for International Development	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
DRR	Disaster risk reduction	VDC	Village development committee
HRBA	Human rights-based approach		
INGO	International non-governmental organisation		

Setting the context

ActionAid International is an international development agency whose aim is to end poverty worldwide. Formed in 1972, ActionAid now supports over 25 million of the world's poorest and most disadvantaged people in 43 countries.¹ ActionAid works in partnership with local organisations, standing with poor people and working with communities to strengthen their own efforts to overcome poverty, regardless of their identity, gender or beliefs.

ActionAid's initiative in Myanmar began in 1999, implementing small projects with local institutions through its regional office in Bangkok. A full-time country coordinator was placed in the country in 2007, supported by a small group of local volunteers. The main aim was to develop young leaders through the fellowship programme and to implement small peace-building projects.

The operational context of development in Myanmar is very challenging, and the position of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) remains somewhat precarious. ActionAid Myanmar (AAM) has worked hard to develop and maintain good working relationships with government officials at all levels. ActionAid has a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation and a tri-partite agreement with the Ministry of

Fisheries and Livestock. In addition, a high percentage of national staff means that operations can continue if foreigners are asked to leave.

When Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar in May 2008, ActionAid was able to respond quickly because it had trained a cadre of fellows who were able to move quickly to the affected area. From a budget of US\$400,000, ActionAid Myanmar suddenly had US\$3.2 million to spend over nine months. The cyclone response has led to further funding, and ActionAid currently employs more than 40 full-time staff. ActionAid Myanmar is working in Kachin, Kayah, Kayin and Rakhine states and Ayeyarwaddy and Mandalay divisions with local partners.

Situation in Myanmar

Despite considerable natural resources, Myanmar in southeast Asia is one of the poorest countries in the world.² This is largely due to isolation and mismanagement.³ There has been a military-led government since 1962. Once the world's biggest exporter of rice, Myanmar now imports food goods. High inflation means that these are beyond the

¹ ActionAid is used as shorthand for ActionAid International throughout the text. ActionAid Myanmar is always specified.

² Myanmar, officially the Union of Myanmar – and formerly Burma, before being renamed in 1989 – is situated in southeast Asia, and is bordered by Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh.

³ The UN Development Programme estimates that Gross Domestic Product

(GDP) per capita in Myanmar is the 13th lowest in the world. The average Myanmar family spends 75% of that income on obtaining adequate food supplies. Myanmar also has the highest rate of HIV and AIDS in southeast Asia. Malaria, a preventable disease, is still the leading cause of mortality.

reach of many of the country's citizens. Socio-economic conditions are deteriorating while rights and basic services are being denied: 30-50% of annual expenditures are spent on the military whilst health and education receive only 1.1% of public finance allocation.⁴ This has a negative impact on quality education. While official statistics suggest that 83.3% of children in Myanmar attend school, ActionAid's community assessments reveal that less than 50% of children have access to formal education. Of those enrolled, many drop out before their third year.

Lack of investment in health services means that access to reproductive health services are very limited with a consequent high maternal mortality rate of 316 per 100,000 live births and an infant mortality rate of 75 per 1,000 live births.⁵ A challenge for development is the lack of grassroots and people's social change movements. This is partly because there is no freedom of association or assembly. Civil society organisations are regarded with mistrust and suspicion, and are suppressed. In addition, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and foreigners are not allowed in many parts of the country, restricting potential for community work. ActionAid is one of relatively few INGOs operating in Myanmar and its presence now is no guarantee for the future.

Myanmar is a union of around 100 national races, each with their own dialect. Although accurate figures are hard to come by, it is generally agreed that the major races are Burman 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7% and Rakhine 4%. Chinese, Indian, Mon and other nationalities

make up the remaining 12%. Around 80% of the population are Buddhist, 4% are Christian – mainly the Kachin, Chin, Karen and Eurasians due to the efforts of missionaries. 4% are Muslim and a smaller percentage are Hindu and different Chinese religions.

The Union of Myanmar is composed of seven states and seven divisions. Broadly, the states are each of a different ethnic group, whilst the divisions are predominantly Burman. States and divisions are then divided into districts, townships, village tracts and villages. The socio-political context is hugely varied and is governed by ethnic group and geography (the climate ranges from mountainous and cool in Kachin State on the Chinese border to hot and humid in the Ayeyarwaddy division). States and divisions are the more distinct because multiple different languages are spoken throughout the country with around 135 spoken in total. One outcome of differences is the emergence of independence/autonomy movements, which has resulted in conflict.

Since ActionAid is concerned with supporting the most marginalised communities, it works in the remote area of Ayeyarwaddy and in the central dry zone. In these states the populations are largely non-Burman and the context is generally of poverty, displacement and conflict. Within communities, power relations between genders is relatively equal compared to neighbouring India. However, society is patriarchal. The village head is always male, and at higher levels of government men dominate, which is indicative of local decision-making power and practice. Government sponsored bodies have been set up, including the Myanmar National

⁴ UNDP presentation to the Myanmar Humanitarian Partnership Group Meeting, 26 January 2010: "Economic overview, challenges, opportunities and programmatic responses".

⁵ UNICEF. The State of the World's Children. UNICEF, 2007.

Committee for Women's Affairs (MNCWA) and the Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association (MWEA), which shows some acknowledgement of inequality. However, although both men and women currently work in different waged employment, women tend to represent a minority of waged workers and spend more time working in the unrecognised care economy. There is also an age hierarchy. Young people are expected to look up to older members of the community, and are not expected to challenge the power of the elders.

Communities interact in different ways with the external world. Interactions depend on language

ability and the opportunities provided by the socio-political context. Geography plays an important role, since infrastructure is very poor. This means that those living in the western or northern hills are cut off from the capital unless they are prepared to undertake long, uncomfortable journeys, or expensive flights. Technology is also limited in these areas and this further restricts contact with the rest of the country and the outside world. Being remote is a barrier to investment, which is already low as a result of economic sanctions. Low local investment impacts on wage employment, and means that there is little opportunity to improve local livelihood opportunities.



Dry zone in Myanmar

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How is ActionAid Myanmar operating in this context?

In the challenging political context of Myanmar, ActionAid is promoting a fellowship programme to support the development of young leaders. The programme develops their capacity to facilitate processes of participatory and empowering change in communities, which helps communities to become more self-reliant. This is strategic, since community-based fellows can continue their work even if ActionAid is asked to leave the country.

Fellows are young energetic men and women who are committed to working towards grassroots development. The majority of fellows are between 20 and 30 years old. They come from different minority groups, depending on the location of the programme. They have either seen their own community or other communities struggle as a result of the external environment. For some, an acknowledgement of inequality and poverty is the motivation for becoming a fellow, for others the fellowship programme is perceived as a way out of a context of inequality and poverty since the training is thought to lead to better waged work. The fellows' experience in volunteerism and community activism means that they will have had prior knowledge of working with communities. Most fellows are graduates or have at least completed high school. The diagram explains the fellowship programme process in more detail.

Fellows undergo an initial intensive six-week course of training, after which they live in a community (either their own community or another) with the aim of supporting this community to “stimulate change and development, according to the communities’ priorities”.⁶ Follow-up training supports fellows to deepen their work.

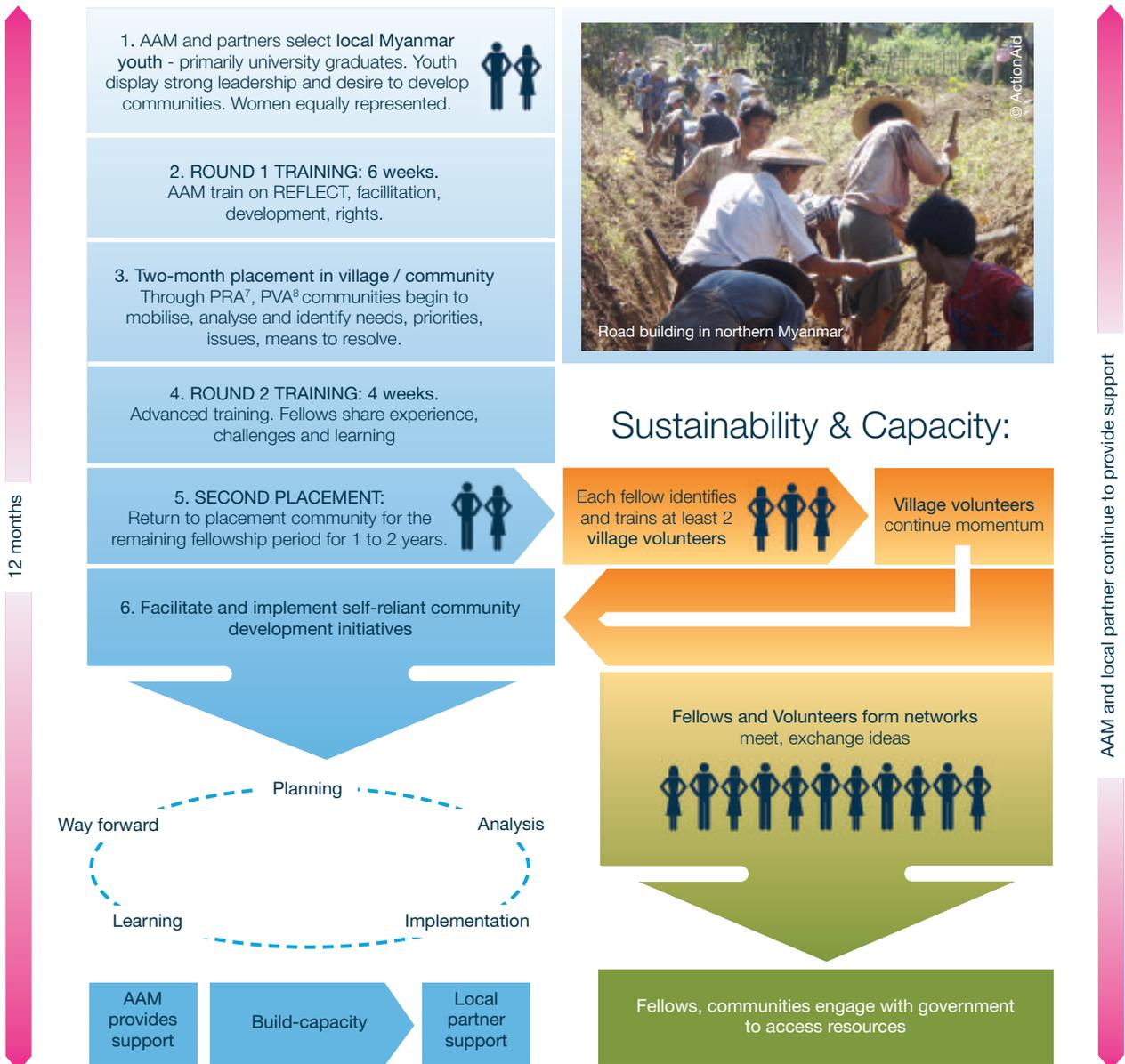
It is important to understand that fellows are not intended to become community leaders as such, particularly those from outside their own communities. Rather, the role of fellows is to facilitate and galvanise potential community leaders into action, and thus they are better described as ‘community facilitators’ or ‘community motivators’. They also play the role of mediating between different groups in the community. By linking different people within and outside the community, and creating the space for debate, they enable further linkages to take place. They bring together the elements to make fire, and then add the spark.

“The value of the fellow is someone who can motivate and facilitate.”

Member of Village Development Committee, Labutta township, Ayeyarwaddy division

⁶ ActionAid. The Change Makers. ActionAid, 2010.

Fellowship programme diagram: process flow



7 Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): A participatory process that uses different tools to generate the knowledge and opinions of rural people in the planning and identification of development projects and programmes, as well as the management of these programmes.
 8 Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA): Developed by ActionAid, communities come together and participate in analysing their own vulnerabilities and the means to reduce their risks from these vulnerabilities.

The advantages of working with and through fellows means that ActionAid Myanmar (AAM) is able to:

- work in remote and ethnic minority areas prone to conflict or that were previous conflict zones
- penetrate divisions with a high need, and where other INGOs have limited presence, as these areas are prohibited to foreigners and can only be accessed by Myanmar nationals
- mobilise communities and bring people to work together on self-identified development priorities
- ensure sustained development, since fellows are in communities for long periods of time
- harnesses the desire of local youth to develop their own communities
- preserve the strong self-reliance culture that is prevalent among the people of Myanmar
- nurture local youth leadership in the context where there is a huge leadership gap caused by lengthy military rule.



Fellows on a training programme

What did ActionAid set out to do in the fellowship programme and why?

The formal objectives for each fellowship project are distinct according to each different context. For example, in Kayah there is an element of conflict resolution, whereas in Ayeyarwaddy, the focus is on disaster risk reduction. Broadly, ActionAid is attempting to encourage positive development practice in Myanmar with the aim of achieving peace and justice. ActionAid believes that young people who are placed in communities for extended periods of time without project funding, and who are trained in participatory methodologies, will build community knowledge and capacity for change. Self-help and *Reflect* groups⁹ that are supported by fellows help communities to make decisions around their priorities for development.

The objectives are outlined as follows:

- to strengthen the capacity of communities to actively engage with state and non-state actors to mobilise resources
 - to facilitate networks of fellows, community volunteers and community based organisations (CBOs) to link people at various levels and to strengthen civil society.
- to train young people as ‘change makers’ in social development theory and participatory methodologies
 - to mobilise community members through the establishment of functioning self-help groups in communities, such as *Reflect* circles
 - to support the community to analyse the causes of their poverty and to identify strategies to overcome these
 - to support and build community capacity to undertake self-identified activities and to facilitate ongoing development processes

⁹ Reflect is ActionAid’s participatory approach, initially designed to address adult literacy but used in Myanmar as a way of bringing together vulnerable community members collectively to discuss, analyse and take action in a collective way.

What is the change and how has it happened?

The programme has resulted in multiple intended and unintended changes. It is important to acknowledge that these changes are all the more remarkable because of their context. The very act of bringing communities together in groups to discuss their issues and how they can address them is fundamentally different to existing practice, and contrasts with the work of many other NGOs that tend to provide material support.

Meeting together and putting self-reliance into practice: Mo Kaung Township, Kachin State

“With the advice from Sayama Lu Jar [the fellow], we formed a self-help group (SHG) and a rice bank. Our SHG is called Surin, which means growth/prosperity in Kachin. The SHG has altogether 30 members and the rice bank committee is made up of 10 members. Each committee has its own rules and regulation set by the members. At the moment, only around 17/18 members are able to save the money on a monthly basis. I could say that villagers here now realize the importance of saving money. Instead of using all the money that they make, they try to save it as well.”

Community member, U Hla Aung

“So far, our saving is 200,000 kyats (approx £125). What we would like to do is to buy a three-wheel car for our village. We all can use it for emergencies and it will become convenient for all of us.”

Community member, Daw Lu Nan

This story first outlines the changes that take place within individuals as a result of the fellowship programme and tries to understand what supports these changes to happen. It then looks at changes within communities and beyond. Third it gives a critique of the project, outlining what might prevent it from achieving its aims even more effectively. Finally, it outlines what lessons the fellowship programme has for the rest of ActionAid and for other development agencies in and outside Myanmar.



Fellows on a training programme

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Methodology for the report

It is useful to analyse quantitative and qualitative data when measuring change. Quantitative data is useful to see the physical changes that have taken place in the community. For example, the number of new health centres, new bridges or village development committees (VDCs) set up. However, quantitative data is less effective at analysing change in behaviours since it does not acknowledge the process through which these achievements are completed. Qualitative data is more effective at doing this, and this story relies on qualitative data to a large degree.

In order to gather this data, a number of in-depth interviews were held with key stakeholders over ten days. In addition there were focus group discussions in two Kachin villages and five Delta villages. The data from these focus groups was analysed, and where there were synergies across the different stakeholders, points have been made in the text. One or two quotes have been given to illustrate a point made by several stakeholders. Verbal quotes are reported as they are said. In some cases, names are changed where a fellow wanted to remain anonymous. Where there were key points of difference, we went back to key stakeholders to discuss issues in more detail, to check where these were random cases, or whether the feeling was indicative of a wider trend.

Change in individual fellows

The first major change is in fellows' own personal behaviour and attitude. Fellows felt increasingly self confident following their training and their time in communities. This can be described as gaining the 'power within', where an individual recognises his or her own capacity. (See the section *What lessons can be learnt for ActionAid?* for more information about what is meant by 'power within' and ActionAid's rights-based approaches.) For example, one fellow, Bogalay, said, "I am not a powerless woman anymore". In discussions, fellows indicated that they felt their attitude had changed. They had become more participatory, more open, better able to listen and less ready to criticise or react. Another fellow, Lu Jar, commented, "I used to be quick to lose my temper, but I am now able to listen, and am more humble". Another commented, "I was a

princess in my own house, now I have to explain everything carefully in my new situation".

Change in personal behaviour is the result of multiple factors. First, fellows are motivated. Motivations are different: some fellows apply for the fellowship programme because there is a lack of employment prospects in Myanmar and they hope that the experience will help them to gain experience or indeed a job. Others are motivated by the learning, and enter into training with great enthusiasm. Others already have community experience and are keen to develop this further to be able to address injustice more effectively. For example, before he became a fellow, Lee Reh Angelo (see case study) had already worked to mobilise young people because he could see that there was a difference between the youth in his community and those in other communities.

Individual story of change: Lee Reh Angelo

Lee Reh Angelo completed high school in Kayah and then worked as a lecturer on Kayah culture in the Kayah literacy project. He was elected by community members as a village leader from 2002–2006. He initially tried to organise young people in the community because he could see that there was a difference in disadvantage between youth in his community and in others. As well as seeing challenges in the village (for example, it was very difficult to get drinking water), he also saw opportunities. There were a lot of untapped human and natural resources in the village. Angelo had a good relationship with a local organisation because of his work as a village leader. He was selected to be a fellow and attended ActionAid's fellowship training.

The training, he said, changed his practice. He had previously been interested in development but he did not understand the different theories of change. As a village leader, he said, he practised top-down development. However, following the training he used more participatory methods. He has seen for himself that these are more effective at sustaining action and more satisfying for himself and the community. He also has the knowledge and skills to get people involved.

“PRA tools are effective at mobilising people,” he explained. “My favourite is the resource map as it makes people see what the resources are in the community, and then I use the problem tree and compare the two so that we can see how to resolve the problems with the available resources. I also like the dream map.”¹⁰ However, it was not all easy. Only five people turned up to Angelo's first community meeting, and there did not appear to be much enthusiasm to experiment with his new methodologies. He then changed his strategy and joined the villagers with their work in the farms, talking to them as they worked. This was more strategic and his commitment to village work enthused the community to get involved with what he was doing. After time, and with the support of a community volunteer (trained by Angelo), things improved. One step was to bring together the multiple existing groups so that there was one village development group that represented the village.

Angelo then used the dream map methodology and worked with the village group to identify the village's priorities. They decided that it would be useful to have a bridge that would join the neighbouring village. The funding for this bridge was shared between the government, the village and the project.

After identifying the issue of water scarcity, the village contacted the government and received the funding to build a pond, with the result that fresh water is readily available.

¹⁰ Resource maps, problem trees and dream maps are participatory planning tools. More information can be found here: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/tools/toolkits/communication/Problem_tree.html

Angelo has seen that these tools work to create effective outcomes for villagers in other placement villages. For example, in one village many people complained about the lack of sand for building materials. However, when the community knowledge was pooled in a resource map, the community found that there was sand not far away.

He said that he has gained more respect from the community now since he treats everyone more equally. In addition, he suggests that it is now easier to work at the township level with other stakeholders and decision makers because they acknowledge the seriousness of the community work since it is so organised and structured in a much better way.



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Village map Ayeyarwaddy division

This altruistic attitude may derive in part from a spirit of community volunteerism and background of self help that is supported by all religious affiliations in Myanmar. At the monastery, Buddhists will be taught to be good to people, and at church communities they will be advised to serve people. For some fellows, religion is the specific motivating factor. For example, one fellow, Naw Paw Mu Nah, wanted to study theology but had to support her mother. She was told by her pastor that development was like theology as there were shared values of ‘working with the people’. Whatever the reason, self-motivation can drive fellows to make the most of the opportunity to achieve their personal aims.

Second, change in individuals is catalysed by the fellow’s attitude. The majority of fellows have a ‘can do’ attitude, a strong sense of purpose and a desire to succeed – even against the odds. For example, Angelo was placed in a village in Kayah state where he did not speak the language, and where even Burmese language was a struggle for many people. Rather than giving up, Angelo tells of how this prompted him to find a person who would act as a volunteer in the village and work with him to achieve what was needed.

There is a relationship between fellows’ relatively young age and their positive attitude, and their potential for facilitating change. Fellows are sufficiently confident in themselves to be able to act as advocates for change. Yet, because this is often the first comprehensive training and work that they have done, they are open to new ideas as they lack experience. For example, 40-year-old Sao Noi Tun Naing, who is unusually old to be a fellow, comments that older people may be less likely to have the ability to mobilise youth and others in communities. This is potentially due to their perceived power – younger people may not be so respected, but they are less of a threat. Sao Noi Tun Naing notes that it is important to have a balance of experience in any batch of fellows.

Third, change in individuals is stimulated by training that is universally seen as a very positive experience.¹¹ Training is for an initial intense period of time, varying from four to six weeks in Kachin to one month in Ayeyarwaddy division. The first round of training varies according to region, need and project concept (new ways are being piloted taking account of current feedback). For example, the Kayah training includes conflict resolution training and the Ayeyarwaddy training includes disaster risk reduction and psycho-social care.

There is currently a four-week second round training after a two-month placement, following which fellows can request training according to the needs of the village. Saw Lin Htet, the ActionAid training officer, said that training is 'like an injection'. He explains how other trainings in Myanmar tend to be lecture-based, following what the influential Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire would call a 'banking' concept of education. This is where the learner is considered as a passive recipient of knowledge with no participation in the learning process. The consequence is the teaching can be inaccessible and learning can be restricted as a result. One fellow confirmed that training in Myanmar, like decision-making in general, tends to be 'rather top down'.

Thus the first reason that the training creates change is that its participatory nature is an exciting and inspiring experience. It provides the opportunity for those attending to discuss issues in a safe space and fully involves fellows as active participants. Being part of such a training experience drives individual change, as it improves learning and promotes change in behaviour through learning by example. One

fellow said, "I learnt to listen and to be participatory rather than to be like a teacher and bossy". Second, training is effective, as different tools are used and developed that enable fellows to see how they can create change if they are more systematic about how they organise their work. Many fellows acknowledge that the ability to use tools effectively to complement their existing community work is one of the highlights of the training. It appears as if the knowledge gained in an experiential manner, followed by being able to put that knowledge into practice in communities, is an effective way of enabling people to change their individual behaviour and to have the confidence to alter power dynamics.

"I learnt a lot from the training, and have become a lot more systematic, and can see how I can do more."

Sao Noi Tun Naing, fellow

"I now have learnt questioning techniques in order to seek information. Before, I did not dare to speak to the village headman but now I can even give him advice whenever necessary."

Naw Paw Paw, ActionAid's 2009 Participatory Review and Reflection Process (PRRP)

¹¹ It is worth noting that the training attracted comments among older fellows who suggested that it could become repetitive, and that there could be a better training needs assessment to check that training was fulfilling the fellows' requirements.

The third reason that change is created is because training is ongoing throughout the placements, so participants' knowledge is continually developed. For example, the British Council and ActionAid Myanmar jointly support fellows to develop their capacity further through an intensive five-week training course. This was also the case for a previous week-long leadership training course funded through the United Nations Democracy Fund project. This develops fellows' belief in their 'power within' as they build their confidence and increase their knowledge. For example, fellow Saw Bain Del said, "After I attended the advanced level leadership training, I gained in-depth understanding of leadership skills. Now I can effectively perform my role...in the community."¹²

In conclusion, the participatory training enhances fellows' self-confidence. Fellows then learn the skills to manage community development, and their motivation is maintained by the ongoing development of their knowledge and skills.

“The most important thing I learnt was about gender. It made me think differently about being a woman. My idea about poverty has changed. A lot of changes have come into my mind and it is not an exaggeration to say that I saw the world differently after my first round fellowship training. I felt I was valuable and important and could bring change for my community. With that determination, I am thirsty for knowledge.”

Ma Khin Lin, Rakhine fellow



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Village life Ayeyarwaddy division

¹² KDN fellow, referenced in ActionAid's 2009 PRRP.

Another major change is that fellows become ‘counter cultural’ and have the courage to go against gender, age and religious norms to change power relations between individuals. This can be described as having turned power within oneself into power to act to change systems. Unequal power between men and women creates gender discrimination. Some women fellows suffer discrimination or verbal abuse when they enter communities. For example, one female fellow was initially accused of being homeless and a prostitute. Women have to use their own reserves of confidence and power within to stay and to try to deal with changing this power dynamic.¹³

Fellows are also challenged because they are young and are thus not traditionally given a voice within communities. Lu Jar commented how she “had personal problems in the beginning and older people looked down on me” since “the culture is that you have to respect the elders”. Society’s norms impact fellows’ attitudes. Khin Lin described how, before being a fellow, she “followed all the social norms and rules of being a good woman. I acted as if I am the typical Rakhine lady. Praise from the society made me behave as a very weak woman who dared not to do anything wrong according to the society. I have to admit that I was not brave enough to do anything concerned with the community work because I thought it is wrong for a good woman to work with men in the village.” The turning point for her was becoming a fellow and she described the change with great excitement.

Fellows have had to be active to create change. For example, fellows have encouraged elders to trust them by showing that they have

something to offer by working first with more amenable youth groups. This was effective in a village in Ayeyarwaddy where one older woman commented that her peer group saw the value of a fellow: “We know the past but the present and the future are not known and here youth can assist”. Fellows also challenge counter-productive religious practices. Naw Delaysher, in the Ayeyarwaddy division, challenged the religious practices in her village and succeeded in getting the local priest and monk to talk to one another. When they posed together for the community calendar, it was a physical demonstration of their improved working relationship.

What enables power within to be converted into power to act? Power within can automatically lead to power to act but there are catalysts to the process. One factor is the value that is attached to the concept of a ‘fellowship’. The very fact of having this title gives a sense of place and mission and means that a space is created in the community for fellows to be able to put their work into action. Fellows take on a change ‘role’, which comes with the title, and the space that the title creates means that communities accept that fellows will play this role. This creates a sense of power – a positive relationship between change actors that creates action.

“I am not here to bring or give some distribution, but I just bring myself for you and nothing else. So you can tell me – how I can help you?”

Naw Paw Say Htoo, Ayeyarwaddy fellow

¹³ The Change maker, (video). YFS Productions, British Embassy, Rangoon, 2008.

Building the power to act also comes about because fellows spend a long time in their villages. They build up dedication and loyalty and a sense of the potential of power with their fellow community members. This is despite (or because of) real challenges at the beginning of placements. For some it is a month and others six months before they begin to feel comfortable and accepted. Initially, there are repeated examples of communities not turning up to fellows' meetings, and of fellows being sent away on the pretext of not having the right documentation. This can be because the community did not want a fellow. Naw Paw Mu Nar remembers one village member saying to her, "If you are not bringing anything, why do you come here at all?" In such circumstances, it is perhaps amazing

that anyone does remain a fellow. However, the initial challenges may be the reason why fellows become so attached to their villages.

It is interesting to note that, in focus groups, whilst fellows talk about how they would like to make the experience less challenging, the project team feels that challenges are a significant part of the learning and change process. However, there are various factors that combine to ensure fellows are accepted. It appears to be easier to adapt if fellows are in their own village, or if they have had prior contact with the village through family, or if the headman or religious leader is an advocate of the process. It also helps if they are introduced to the selected village by a local organisation (the fellow's mother organisation¹⁴ or a member of



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Saw Brinal fixing a plough

¹⁴ The mother organisation is the organisation in the Operational Working Group (OWG) that the fellow is connected with. They would have had a prior relationship with this organisation. The OWG is a group of organisations working with the project team.

the operational working group) rather than by ActionAid as an INGO. In cases where these factors do not exist, it is when a village leader such as a headman or a religious leader champions the fellow that the fellow is more readily accepted. At the same time, fellows can support themselves by working on different entry points. In order to gain trust, former fellows advise that it can be helpful to:

- work with children at first, as this can gain the respect and trust of adults
- work with existing faith-based organisations
- get involved with all community activities: an Ayeyarwaddy community noted specifically how the fellow joining in all the activities of the village, including cleaning, made them respect her more
- build up a relationship with a community volunteer who can act as a bridge between the fellow and the other community members.

“My welcome to the village was not warm. I was introduced by the project manager to the village headman who accepted me to work for the village. The problem, on the other hand, was the disagreement and refusal from the village tract leader. He called the village headman and asked for the approval letter for my stay in the village. He said that my stay was illegal since I did not have any permit from the government. One day, he called and inquired my purpose for coming to work in this village. He suspected me because he thought I came here with the interest of politics. He was doubtful when I told that I came here to work for the community development. He undermined me saying ‘how can a young woman do social change work in a village?’ He mocked me saying that I could not make any difference being a woman. I took all his remarks as a challenge. It is my good fortune that the village headmen and other village people liked the idea of my stay in the village. They negotiated



Naw Aw Paw taking care of a village child

with the village leader to get his approval. 'The dawn comes after the dark' is true in my own experience. Finally, he allowed my stay on the conditions that the village took responsibility for the consequences of my work in that village."

Ma Khin Lin, Rakhine fellow

"Before I came there were two groups of people in the village belonging to two different denominations. They did not communicate with each other before but now there is also better understanding between the two groups. In order to bring about changes in this relationship I visited them often and I tried to be careful not to talk any ill about any other group. My technique to bring these two groups together was through the children. I worked with the children and the parents had to meet as they brought their children to me. They now have a better understanding of each other and now all the committees or groups that are formed in the village are a mixture of the two groups."

Naw Paw Say Htoo, Ayeyarwaddy fellow

To support fellows to build their power to act, there has to be sufficient support (from partners, from each other, from the community and from ActionAid). This will contribute to continued motivation. Fellows have a relationship with other fellows through cluster group meetings (small geographical clusters of fellows meet each month and then there is a quarterly meeting where all fellows meet). Continued motivation and support is also provided by a fellow's mother organisation, by the local head man and by the pastor. The mother organisation is a particular motivating and success factor.

"Here I would like to explain how we fellows network for learning and experience sharing. We have 15 fellows altogether working for 15 villages. These 15 villages are clustered into five and we regularly meet each other among the clusters. We share what is happening in

the village and swap information among ourselves. For example, this time, on behalf of my village, I put agriculture on the agenda. I heard how another fellow had piloted growing peanuts using local knowledge. I brought this information to my village and the villagers were really enthusiastic about it. Some villagers went and met with the farmers from the pilot village. We heard how the other village grew ground nuts as the second crop in the winter. When we started sowing the nuts, my friend brought the farmers from his village to share their experience. Harvest season in that year ended with a great yield of peanuts. The yield was unbelievable. The point is all the villagers tasted the fruitful outcome from the collective work using local knowledge and wisdom."

Ma Khin Lin, Rakhine fellow

It is worth noting that, once change starts to take place 'success breeds success', as fellows and communities begin to see and experience the changes that can happen and the difference that this makes. "We get our motivation through success," said one fellow. "We grew in understanding [after the bridge was built]. Before I thought kids don't need to get involved, but then I realised we have something to add." Another confirmed, "I did not know what to expect and did not even have self-confidence to perform my job as a fellow. After seeing villagers' involvement I am very happy and that also helps me gain my self-confidence." Maintaining community motivation is the most challenging aspect of a fellows' work. This is especially the case when other development actors come into communities bringing project funds that can undermine communities' self-reliance plans.

Change in the community

“It was like a window being opened, or like we were blind when we didn’t have a fellow.”

Community member, Ayeyarwaddy division

Report by Sonya Ruperal, Business Manager of the International Emergencies and Conflict Team (IECT), June 2010

“I visited an Ayeryarwaddy village, which has 144 households and approximately 444 people. We visited a family that had previously hosted a fellow, who had now phased out of the village, and where one of the community volunteers, Ma Malar Win, was living with her parents. They related that during Cyclone Nargis in early May 2008 the village lost all its houses and most of their food stocks. For the first two weeks the villagers helped each other to repair their houses and shared out any remaining food. After two weeks external organisations came, starting with a local coffee shop/bakery business that distributed rice, and followed by other organisations distributing food and non-food items. Food distribution continued for six months.

ActionAid Myanmar came to the village in July 2008 with a different approach. A fellow came to stay in the village. The family relates that if the fellow hadn’t stayed there wouldn’t have been so many changes that have benefited the village. These include the building of a bridge and road that benefit 1,000 families and provide access in case of a need to evacuate the area if a cyclone warning is given. The fellow helped villagers to organise themselves and develop a disaster risk reduction (DRR) action plan. The community identified the need for the bridge and road in a DRR community meeting that was facilitated by the fellow.

ActionAid Myanmar provided US\$700 through the fellow for DRR action plans, but the bridge cost US\$2,800, so the village connected with other organisations to raise the remainder of the money and community members provided their labour for free. The fellow also spent time working with the villagers and helping them to write proposals for funding. Activities are continuing from their plan even though the fellow no longer lives in the community. The fellows have been able to initiate a process whereby the community builds on the capacities and skills gained, and take ownership of their own development. The fellows have

also been able to mobilise the village community to implement activities that would help them to develop their village and subsequently reduce their risk to disasters. Village development committees and youth committees continue to meet, and action plans continue, facilitated by volunteers who are trained by fellows in participatory methodologies. Visits are regularly made to support village volunteers by the project team and the former fellow.”

“I do not have any concern about leaving [my village] since I developed seven village volunteers and I believe in their capacity. When I went back to my placement area [after being away], I was welcomed heartily by my community, which was totally different to the first time I arrived in the village. In my absence, the volunteers took my role of facilitation, and kept on working for the community. The women were doing well and the amount of money in the self-help group is increasing in incredible leaps. The use of latrines was sustainable and there were improvements in personal hygiene. I am pleased to see all the improvements and the way the village committee is working for the village.”

Ma Khin Lin, Rakhine fellow

Community Cohesion

The first intangible achievement has been the increased sense of community cohesion. All communities said that they were better at working together across religious, ethnic, age and gender differences and had succeeded in shifting the power dynamics that had prevented this. An example of such a change with regards to religion is in the Delta. In one village, the Buddhist monk and the priest had not previously worked together. As a consequence, their supporters hardly interacted on village wide plans and activities. The fellow, Naw Delaysher, said that one of her main achieve-

ments was facilitating cohesion between the two sections of the village. This was achieved over time, by working at first with the children. The children would come to her house, and she would get involved with village activities. As she built up trust, she encouraged the parents to stay longer when dropping off their children, and thus parents from different religions met each other frequently. This, combined with Naw Delaysher’s conversations with the religious leaders, led to a greater acceptance of the differences between groups. One village development committee member commented, “now we have discussion between the two communities, we are quite proud as there are no divisions between people because of their religion, which is quite special”. Naw Delaysher also ensured that youth had more voice in community processes that had been traditionally led by older people. As well as coordinating the setting up of a village development committee, she set up youth committees. These started through organising activities for young people after church. The group developed as Naw Delaysher used participatory tools learnt on the training to work with the young people to find out their community needs and to plan for action. The groups then raised money by organising a funfair. As the village development committee could see the proactive nature and achievements of the youth committee they listened to their needs. One villager commented, “before young people were staying in the house eating, now they are linking and gathering and thinking about what they should do”.

At face value these changes take place as a result of a fellows' leadership and persuasion skills. The villagers certainly report the change as such. For example, a woman in an Ayeyarwaddy division village said, "people who were excluded are now included because of her [Naw Delayshe's] facilitation" and another commented "if she hadn't come the young people wouldn't have talked to each other".

Can it be as simple as a fellow talking to people and suggesting they work together? How are the elements of conflict addressed in this process? Moving forward, how are decisions made to ensure that the opinions of different groups are listened to? Given the need to change power dynamics between generations, incomes and genders, and the complexity of changing these power dynamics, it is unlikely that such an achievement can be made so simply. So what are the reasons? One explanation for communities changing to work better together may be the increased sense of power within individuals in different groups. This power may stem from having been recognised and included.

A woman in another Ayeyarwaddy village focus group shared this thought: "It is different to the past, because in the past it was top down, now everyone at different levels participates because of the systems, everything – even if starting very small – is participatory, in the past, we heard about things, but only from the top levels". The fellow there, U Hla Aung, confirmed that, "Villagers in general now gain a better understanding of development and community participation also has increased".

The act of sharing power and actively recognising different groups contributes to the sense of power amongst individuals in those groups. In an adjacent village, a focus group discussion mentioned that, although their headman had previously made good decisions on behalf of the community, it was a positive experience to be part of the decision-making team and to have ownership over decisions. Exploring this further, why would those with power want to share power? Power sharing may be for strategic reasons: those in power may recognise that there is strength in numbers – for example, there may be extra value to be derived from having entire communities supporting a project. For example, if a village head wants to build a bridge, then doing so with the support of the community will facilitate the process. This might require working with existing village structures to ensure that there is participatory decision-making.

Community self-reliance is to some extent contextual.¹⁵ Lack of state support means that communities in Myanmar do not enjoy their rights. There have been few NGOs providing services, and communities are very isolated from one another because of poor infrastructure, and lack of connective and accessible technology. This lack of support has meant that communities have needed to remain self-motivated and have had to do things themselves in order to achieve community development. This is especially pertinent in the Delta, where the external shock of Cyclone Nargis created both a renewed sense of urgency about community development and, in some cases, a sense of cohesion and power amongst those who had survived.

¹⁵ After Cyclone Nargis, communities were afraid of becoming beggars and relying on handouts. Communities objected to the concept of cash for work. The ActionAid country representative, Shihab, remembers a community asking an NGO, "Why are you paying us to clean out our own ponds? We can do that ourselves, if you want to give us money then you

should give it to other things". The community pooled the wages earned and collectively made the decision about how money should be spent. The increase of NGOs within a country may change this dynamic as communities begin to expect project funding and disregard existing community decision-making structures in an effort to attract funding.

Building bridges – a story of community change

Sao Noi Tun Naing is from the Kanti Shan ethnic group. Prior to being a fellow, he was involved with the Shan literature and culture organisation, which is a part of the operational working group (OWG). He got involved in the fellowship programme when ActionAid contacted the OWG. He struggled at first, but learnt a lot from the training. It gave him the knowledge and tools to be more systematic, he said. “I learnt to keep promises, and be on time in order to gain respect...and I learnt active listening. I have learnt to be more organised, documenting meetings, doing research and planning.”

Sao Noi Tun Naing has initiated work in his own and neighbouring villages. His talent is working with both Shan and Kachin groups. His age and ability brings him respect. He feels his capacity and confidence has increased through having been on exposure visits to Vietnam and India.

One of his first placements was in a Kanti-shan village among five Kachin villages. There is a history of resentment between the two groups: the Kanti Shan are not only minorities, they are also Buddhist, whereas the Kachin are mainly Christian. Sao Noi Tun Naing remembers how, when doing the village map, they disagreed about where resources were located. However, they did agree that the bridge to the nearby market was damaged.

As the bridge belonged to all of the villagers, it was decided that villagers would have to consult with the five nearby villages in order to ask permission to fix the bridge, in spite of years of tension. When the other village representatives heard the plans, they determined that they would also like to contribute to the building of the bridge. It was decided the bridge would be a joint project, with each village providing a bullock and cart and some labour for transporting wood. The bridge became a symbol of the strengthening of the trust built between the villages and between different groups.

The difference in this case was that, whilst in the past people would work together, it would usually be to follow top-down instructions. This was actually collaborative.

Since then the spirit of unity has continued. A representative committee meets regularly, and the meeting place rotates between the different villages. Even religious buildings are used and all are welcome to each place.

Although they now had a bridge to go to the nearby market, the six villages decided that they would like to make a market to serve their villages. Gradually they raised funds and began building their market, which quickly expanded to recognise the need for women to form a credit union to provide loans for those who wanted to become traders. Sao Noi Tun Naing used his technical training on credit unions and his understanding of peace-building between communities to help engage each of the villages in the projects.

Catalysts for change

Another reason for the increase in community cohesion across different religious, gender and ethnic lines is the fellows' knowledge of participatory tools and methods. These act as a catalyst for change, turning potential conflict into useful debate and transforming power gained from working with others into power to act. A number of villages recognised that the tools and systems have been largely effective in facilitating discussions. A community member from an Ayeyarwaddy village acknowledged that, "before we were weak at analysis; post Nargis there is a more systematic approach". There is pride in this increased knowledge, and there is confidence that this will mean that the processes are sustainable. One village leader in Ayeyarwaddy village said, "Even if everything is destroyed again, we'll still have the tools and systems".

A further reason for increased cohesion and power is the increased accountability and transparency in villages. Like the word 'participation', these terms are often used glibly in the development sector. However, they are central to community empowerment in Myanmar and are the issues that came up first when communities were asked to describe what they were proud of achieving. All communities emphasised the importance of working together in an accountable and transparent manner. There are several indications of transparency. For example, transparency boards outline the costs of community projects so that there is accountability both between community and donor and within the community. Accountability packs outline why vulnerable groups are eligible for resources; and senior staff and visiting teams hand out business cards so that any villager can call if there is a problem. These are all symbolic of real changes being put into practice.

Another achievement following the increase in community cohesion, and one facilitated by the increase in cohesion, has been the fact that power gained through working with others has transferred into power that enables people to challenge external power dynamics. As a result of information and knowledge dissemination within and outside the villages, villagers dare to ask questions about unfair practices. For instance, in a village in the Ayeyarwaddy division, Naw Susana described how a vulnerable group felt their village leader was not fairly distributing relief intended for the village. The group asked for clarification about how the relief item distribution list worked and asked the village leader about his unjust and unfair practices. The group pressure meant that the leader, realising that he could not maintain his position of power, did not continue with the unfair practice. This improved the solidarity and participation of the group, and their confidence to demand justice.

The shift from 'power with' into 'power to' can also partly be attributed to the fellows' tools and systems and particularly the analysis of power and duty bearers. Fellows' work includes doing a stakeholder analysis that analyses the type and strength of relationships between community groups and decision makers. The analysis is used to find resource support from township authorities (local government) as well as to try to position themselves strategically with regards to those in power and to try to leverage change. This attempt to secure state involvement and commitment is the first step to building accountability between states and citizens. In addition, whether or not commitment is secured, it is important to acknowledge that the capacity built amongst fellows and communities to demand change means that, where and when there is opportunity for advocacy, they will be ready to take it.

Seeking support from the government

One fellow in Mo Kaung township, Kachin State finished high school in 2002. University was very expensive and so she farmed in her community. Two years later she was asked by the headmaster if she could teach in the local school supported by the community. When the school couldn't afford to keep her on, she became very depressed. She told us that it is hard for young people in Myanmar at present. Any job opportunities that exist go to those with education and those not from minority groups. The reason she became a fellow was to “break out of the trap”.

She was enthusiastic about the fellows' round one training. She explained how, following the training, she was good at dealing with people, and more knowledgeable, whereas in the past she had been quite short tempered.

When she came back to her village, she started working with existing groups, particularly religious groups. The groups did not have that much confidence or direction when she arrived, but she managed to turn this around by bringing in the alternative methodologies and tools such as *Reflect*.

The fellow found it very difficult to galvanise action at the beginning. The support she got was mainly from friends, and from the fellows' cluster. The cluster group, she explained, runs on a rotating leadership and provides a feedback mechanism for fellows.

She explains how her biggest achievement was in supporting the community to build a road. Her village sat on the border between two different districts. The road between neighbouring villages was really poor. The fellow and the village development committee connected with the local government authorities to ask them to support the project. The compromise agreement was that the government would provide a vehicle to compact and flatten the land and the community would provide the fuel for the vehicle.

One villager reported, “We initially coordinated with government officials and explained that we would like to build this road. We received neither information nor assistance from them. We discussed the issue with our fellow when she arrived. She gave us a lot of help and villagers were also encouraged. From [the project team] we received funding – 700,000 kyats (approximately £437). When we calculated the contributions from our side, the voluntary time and daily labour work was worth 1,600,000 kyats (approximately £1000). We did not wait [for] the assistance from government even though they helped us later [with a truck].”

In her second placement village, the fellow explained how she organised a talent show, which brought together eight villages. On the day of the show she held cross-village *Reflect* group exchanges, bringing together women's groups, youth groups and men's groups from different villages. Organising the show introduced the concept and value of sharing experience

and ideas in order to achieve goals. Afterwards there was an increase in the level of participation in village groups. For example, the savings and loan group increased by 200%. The money saved is used to continue to build roads and is facilitated by village volunteers trained by the fellow, helping to make sure that the learning continues after she has gone.

Creating lasting change

There are a number of changes that go beyond the project objectives. First, the presence of the fellowship programme has meant that local organisations have been strengthened. In Kachin and Kayah fellowship projects, the partner project team works with an OWG, which is comprised of a number of smaller local organisations. As mentioned, these organisations select fellows and mentor them, providing pastoral support and ensuring their security. The unique thing about the OWG is

its breadth of coverage. In Kayah, the OWG includes ceasefire groups, religious groups and different ethnic and cultural affiliations. Bringing these groups together is a considerable achievement. And strengthening their capacity is worthwhile. Second, other development agencies have learnt about the process. For example, under a shelter project funded by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), ActionAid Myanmar and the fellows ensured that decisions should be facilitated by the village development committee (VDC) with the participation of the community.



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Community self reliance - road building in northern Myanmar

UNHCR Shelter programme: participation in process

At least one public meeting was conducted at village level to orient the community to the project and to identify the target beneficiary families recommended by the community through supervision of the village headman and the members of the village development committee (VDC). A supervising committee was also formed out of the VDC in the meeting. The meeting minutes and list of identified families were kept with each selected beneficiary in a community accountability file (CAF).

The selected beneficiary families were formed into a small team consisting of five to seven members to ensure the work was conducted according to the schedule and to support each other – particularly women-headed households, elderly people and people with disabilities.

Each beneficiary provided a detailed list of requirements for the rehabilitation of each house. This was produced with the house owner (beneficiary) and small teams, validated by the supervising committee, and compiled as the purchasing list.

The purchase team comprising representatives of beneficiary groups and supervising committee members, including ActionAid Myanmar and partner staff, collected quotations from different suppliers and selected the type and quality of materials. The final purchase order list was decided for both tool kits and renovation materials in a meeting of the purchase teams from different villages, as well as the project teams.

In the village, the committee supervised the distribution and the receipt of renovation materials for each and every beneficiary household. One copy is kept with family in the CAF, one copy is kept with the VDC and one copy is provided to ActionAid Myanmar finance.

The implementation process was discussed and updated by fellows in meetings at cluster level and township level and also through village-wide updates. Four coordination meetings and five monitoring visits were conducted by the project team on the process and its progress.

The process worked so well that UNHCR sent in documenters to record it as best practice. Similarly, the British Council, having seen the impact and potential of working with fellows in Yangon, are now keen to continue similar practices in other cities, and to get more

involved in community work. Finally, the fellowship approach is being used in consortium projects such as the LIFT project, through which ActionAid is working with partners to address people's livelihoods.^{16, 17}

¹⁶ The similar programme is a volunteer programme. Volunteers are from the community in which a project is being implemented. Their role is similar to fellows as it aims to ensure there is someone working alongside the community to implement the project, and to respond to any queries, but different because volunteers typically have been educated to 10th standard and receive less training (two rounds of seven to ten days).

In addition they are not expected to work full time.
¹⁷ LIFT is a multi-donor trust fund comprising the Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union (EU), AusAid, Sweden, Netherlands and Switzerland. It is targeting livelihoods work. ActionAid is working with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Myanmar as (lead agency) and a local partner, ECODEV.

The fact that there were trained fellows whose capacity was ready to be deployed for emergency work meant that ActionAid's Cyclone Nargis response was quick and sustainable. A cadre of trained and experienced development workers could easily be deployed to the affected area to work with communities with psycho-social care, cleaning and development approaches. ActionAid's 'Myanmar Cyclone Nargis Response report' noted that "engagement with the local community volunteers for emergency response was the most valuable experience of ActionAid". Community volunteers helped to build community capacity

and voluntary spirit. They are very active in ongoing work such as DRR. "Trained community volunteers can provide more effective support than outsiders as they have a good understanding of the local culture and people as well as being acquainted with the situation in the Delta area," according to the report.

A final unexpected outcome of the project is the enthusiasm of fellows to continue in community development. Although some fellows leave the programme (many to work in their mother organisation), generally fellows want to stay on in the development sector.

Summary motivators of change amongst communities and fellows

1. Participatory training works in this context to change behaviours when combined with the experiential learning of tools and systems (power within, power to).
2. Fellows' age means that they are well placed to facilitate community change processes; they are not threatening to community power structures; and have enthusiasm and energy to create change (power within, power to).
3. Spending a considerable period of time in the village enables change, since it means that ongoing relationships can be built up (power with).
4. Support from mother organisations, project teams and ActionAid provide ongoing motivation for fellows (power with (power gained through working with others) further increases people's sense of power within themselves).
5. Community willingness to change gives fellows confidence to continue to act (power with (power gained through working with others) creates power to act).
6. The sense of struggle experienced by the fellows supports change since it leads to self realisation (power within).
7. When a community or fellow begins to see success, change moves faster as it is motivational (power with leads to power to).
8. The title 'fellow' creates space. Communities give the fellow a chance to occupy the created space, and fellows take this space to bring the community together. There is an acceptance created on both sides (power with).

What factors make it harder for the programme to achieve its full potential?

First, short project timeframes can hinder long-term change. Building community empowerment processes can take a long time, and when funding is short term the community is left vulnerable. In addition, a short timeframe can also demotivate fellows. There is considerable concern amongst some fellows regarding their future employment. However, whilst it is worth ensuring a supportive timeframe, it is clear that ActionAid and partners cannot promise to employ fellows following their placements and fellows are encouraged to organise their own groups for support.

Second, lack of clarity about the role of different organisations can be a barrier to change. At the beginning of the Kachin programme, for example, the relationship between fellows, the partner and the mother organisations with the OWG was not clear. Originally, fellows reported to the project team directly. Now the fellows are the responsibility of their mother organisation in the operational working group in terms of security and pastoral care while the project team provides training and supports the OWG – providing capacity building. The relationship has thus improved but it is worth acknowledging the importance of clarity to the ongoing programme. For example, communications between fellows and the mother organisation might result in increased dedication. A number of fellows were not aware of what the fellowship programme was about and what it was for. For example, Aye Kyaw, a fellow in Kachin, said, “I didn’t know anything about the training; I went into it like a blind person”. This currently has not been a problem since fellows have

been motivated by the training.

Third, the situation in the country after elections, and the types of partners that will emerge for ActionAid to work with, will have implications for the fellowship project and needs to be considered in any ongoing analysis. In terms of the country context, current analysis suggests that there will be increased investment from foreign companies in Myanmar, and increasing opportunities to be involved in international issues and debates. This will entail risks and opportunities. One risk is that this will impact on different parts of the country at a different rate, and involve different actors and people to varied degrees. It is likely that the opportunities for taking part in the benefits of globalisation will be taken by those who have existing wealth and power and who speak a foreign language such as English, and those who live in urban areas. This will accentuate existing power dynamics because those who already have advantages and power will be able to access more advantages, thus increasing the inequality between people. This may impact on relationships between young people. ActionAid will have to be aware of how these wider contextual norms play out on the fellows’ interrelations and attitudes. In terms of partner organisations, ActionAid will have to carry out continued analysis around partners’ beliefs and understanding. ActionAid has experienced that the fellowship programme does not work well with hierarchical, patriarchal organisations, where the practices and norms can be contradictory to what the fellows are trying to achieve.

Fourth, other development organisations may undermine the self-reliance approach, creating challenges for community change. U Hla Aung, a village elder in Kachin State said, “We have bad experience working with NGO/development projects. [Other development organisations] had implemented projects for farmers but they did not complete their implementation activities. They actually did quite a lot of work but this was mostly on the surface.”

Other villages confirm that development projects such as building wells and schools can be unhelpful if there is no prior community participation. The village priority may not be addressed, and in addition, work is often left unfinished. Lee Re Angelo reported that the funding NGO finds it difficult too. One NGO carrying out a sanitation project in one of his placement villages asked, “Why is the community not joining in with the building work?” Angelo had to explain that it was because there was no participation in decision-making from the beginning and so the project was not understood or valued. However, in some cases the presence of project money is exciting and communities will, of course, be keen to see how this can be used for their benefit, even if it is not a priority goal. Unfortunately it can mean that community structures are undermined if the project doesn’t work through existing structures.

Fifth, there is a risk of conceptual misunderstandings or frustration concerning the self-reliance approach. The fellows interviewed did understand the need for self-reliance and community action to guarantee the sustainability of projects and the need for government responsibility for community development. However, they also see that there are NGOs and INGOs that have money and could be supporting community initiatives when govern-

ment is not. One fellow’s analysis was as follows, “the government doesn’t inform the people of their rights, the NGO would like to do a lot without discussing with the community and the people themselves are not learning their roles and responsibilities. This creates challenges on all fronts. If the citizens knew their rights and duties then the NGOs could step back, but they don’t. What ends up happening is that NGOs come in and then the government steps back”.

This may create future issues for ActionAid in terms of the degree to which they facilitate other donors to provide funds. In addition, there is frustration since communities develop their own plans and strategies with fellows, and energy is created around this. However, this energy fades if they cannot raise their own funds or access resources. Fellows had frustrated stories of the shortcomings of the self-reliance approach. For example, in one placement village the community collectively decided to build a bridge. There was a landslide during the construction process and one person unfortunately died. The fellow there felt that the accident would have been less likely if they had been able to afford a pump to get rid of surplus water.

What is ActionAid Myanmar's role in contributing to change?

ActionAid Myanmar's role and contribution in supporting individuals, communities and beyond is multiple. In the first instance, ActionAid's own structure has supported the concept of youth motivation and development. ActionAid has encouraged young people to apply for jobs and the office has a youthful staff. The atmosphere feels very engaging. Staff eat together, talk easily and there is an atmosphere of cooperation. Every staff member has a connection with the fellowship programme, or knows fellows individually. This has four overall impacts:

- First, the fellows, when entering the office, are likely to be comfortable in the environment and this leads to better relationship building, which is beneficial for ongoing partnership.
- Second, staff may act as role models for fellows, who may be keen to work in NGOs in the future and may be motivated by development activities.
- Third, fellows act as continued inspiration for ActionAid staff members, reminding them what 'development' means.
- Finally, the continued connections are likely to be the best communications strategy as staff talk enthusiastically about the programme.

In the second instance, ActionAid provides funding to the project team. However, one hears again and again that ActionAid is 'not only funding'. ActionAid also provides invaluable training for fellows, as well as training and planning for the partner project team.

ActionAid provides a different knowledge base and the capacity to bring in external knowledge, perspectives and people from other country programmes to complement existing partner knowledge. For example, in a focus group discussion, a number of fellows brought up the issues of land grabs and forest ownership and asked questions about how other countries were dealing with the issue, whether at a local, national or international level. In this case, ActionAid could bring experience and learning from other countries. ActionAid brings tools to support further understanding around concepts of accountability and transparency. As a result of having projects in other areas of the country, ActionAid is able to provide learning across the programme, such as a newsletter, and additionally seeks opportunities for networking. For example, ActionAid is linking fellows through British Council training to an urban youth network. This means that the fellows' work can move beyond community empowerment to mobilisation of different groups within the country to create a greater movement for change and to build up a cadre of active and knowledgeable young people. However, partners and fellows noted that the relationship with ActionAid created barriers as well as opportunities. Language can be a barrier to understanding and can create a sense of injustice in power relations. If some people speak English, others can feel marginalised.

Some people also felt that ActionAid expatriate staff visiting the division could pose a security threat (ActionAid relies on the partner to suggest whether travel is appropriate). The relationship

between ActionAid and its partners is sometimes a challenge. ActionAid is not perceived solely as a donor and has its own values and interests. Managing this dynamic is complex. ActionAid wants to encourage its own agenda – for example around women’s rights – but it is keen not to undermine community voices and perspectives nor does it want to undermine relationships between itself and its partner by pursuing its own aims. Some partnerships were based on personal relationships, which was a huge asset. However, starting with personal relationships can lead to a lack of clear mechanisms for communication and regular meetings.

Finally, ActionAid will also have to think about the extent to which it continues to support fellows once projects are finished (currently ActionAid and partners are seeking to find extra funding for fellows to move into other projects. For example, many Delta fellows will move to work in the LIFT project). There are multiple options such as creating an alumni membership or supporting existing groups of fellows to gain funding for their own small businesses, or for vocational training.



Waiting in Labutta, Ayeyarwaddy division

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What lessons can be learnt for ActionAid?

The way in which ActionAid Myanmar works through the fellowship programme raises questions for ActionAid as a whole.

First, comparing villages that do and do not have a fellow shows that the model of having a supported individual spending concentrated time in communities leads to improved change and development outcomes, contributing to the enjoyment of people's rights. Communities questioned were unequivocal that it was better to have a fellow living in the village for a long period of time to facilitate change than to have an NGO project officer come into the village to set up a project as a 'one off'. This suggests the fellowship community based model would be useful in other country programmes. This model is based on *Reflect* as a methodology: both *Reflect* and the fellowship programme require a trained community member to facilitate community groups. However, what the fellowship methodology adds is that the fellows are linked at different levels both regionally in clusters and nationally through training and network meetings. This means that there is an added dimension of change. Not only do the community go through a change process, so does the fellow. ActionAid Myanmar believes that young people can be social change agents. ActionAid would find it beneficial to have a youth strategy to support its work in Activista, with fellows and with global activists and with youth movements.

Second, the approach both responds to and provokes questions around ActionAid's rights-based approach. Some people, and interestingly

often not those who have visited Myanmar, question whether it is possible to operationalise a rights-based approach in a repressive context. ActionAid Myanmar is convinced that working on rights is possible, but acknowledges that the approach will be different. In order to analyse these questions, it is useful to look at ActionAid's programming framework, which outlines how local, national and international programmes can link together under a rights-based framework. ActionAid Myanmar achieves the core minimum standards on human rights-based (HRBA) programming as outlined below, where programmes are expected to have activities (or at least strategies for how activities could be carried out in the future) under each of the following headings:

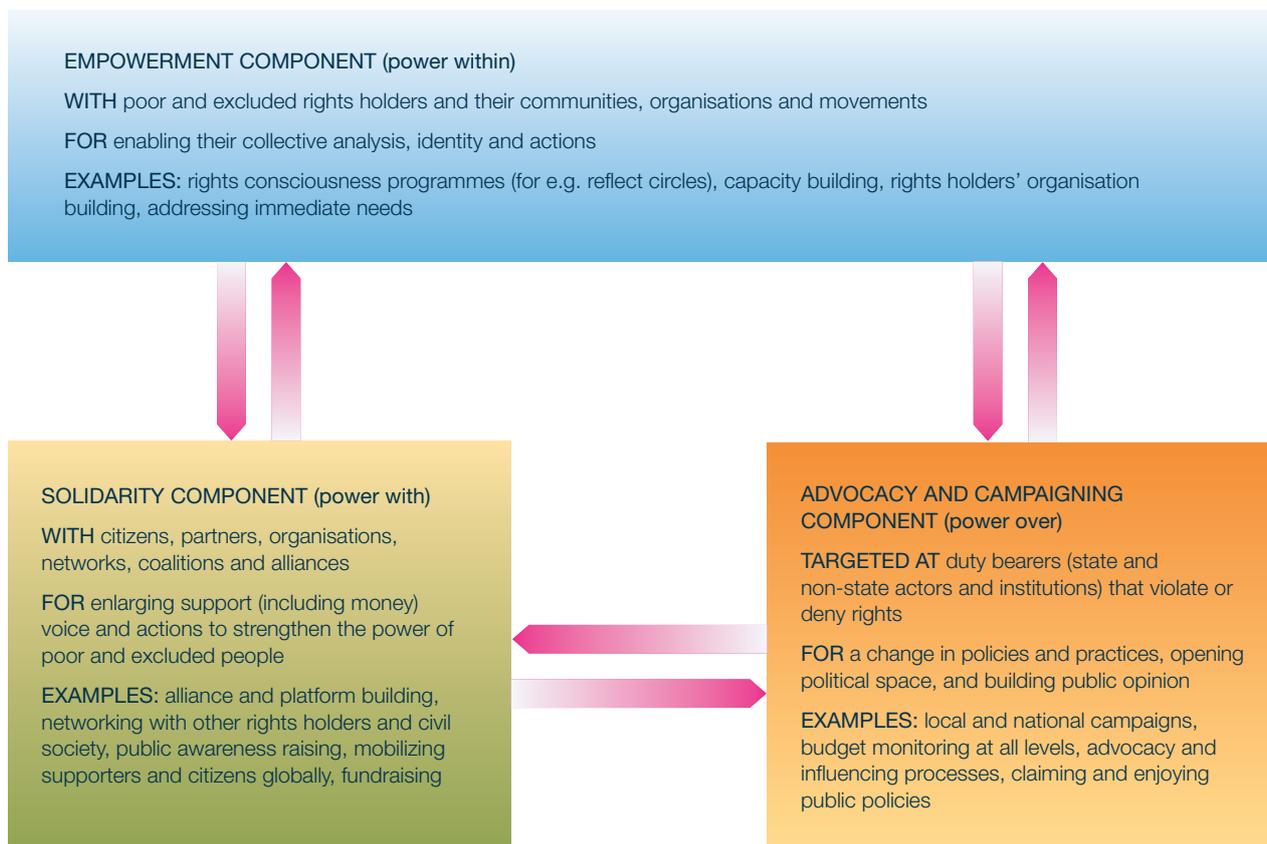
- 1) Building poor people's consciousness as rights holders (rights & power analysis)
- 2) Agency of the poor and excluded
- 3) Women's rights
- 4) Poor and excluded people's critical engagement with duty bearers
- 5) Changing the rules (tackling long-term impoverishment).

The activities in Myanmar may be different to in other countries. For example, in terms of responding to point number five (changing the rules), ActionAid is organising communities to analyse and act on their prioritised issues such as food, livelihoods, education and health through the fellowship programme. Fellows also facilitate community activities that will strengthen social capital and cohesion such as community groups and events. ActionAid

Myanmar believes that this practice at a local level will empower communities, and will allow them to negotiate more effectively with state and non-state actors now and in the future. In order to change the rules and tackle long-term poverty, ActionAid Myanmar is building up a positive relationship with key ministries and

departments and with authorities at the field level, since outright opposition is counter productive and has only contributed to stalemate and conflict. This process will take time, and it is strategic that at the same time, the fellows are supporting community change at a local level as part of a holistic rights-based approach.

ActionAid International human rights-based programmes Key components



In addition, the programming pillars of empowerment (which creates ‘power within’), advocacy and campaigning (which creates ‘power to’) and solidarity (which creates ‘power with’) are largely addressed. The fellowship programme empowers the fellows themselves and communities through *Reflect* and its analysis of poverty and inequality using participatory rural appraisal tools. The programmes facilitate solidarity since communities and individuals come together to work for a common cause. As mentioned before, the very act of coming together is political in Myanmar, as association is illegal. Advocacy is demonstrated since fellows and community members negotiate with and influence other stakeholders, including local authorities and government departments. However, campaigning to push local and national government to support citizens’ rights claims is not an option in the current political context. High-profile campaigns are not considered a viable or constructive approach to effective change at this stage. The lobbying taking place is less visible, more behind the scenes. It involves a careful analysis of the different potential players and steady building of relationships to prize open the doors to dialogue. That the absence of high-profile campaigns is considered an issue underlines the attitude that, in ActionAid as a whole, a rights-based approach is understood principally as challenging government through visual protest. Building capacity for change and building relationships between citizens and those who can implement change is equally valid, though not as visually dramatic.

The fact that ActionAid Myanmar does not engage in visual campaigning with the government does not mean there is no acknowledgement of government as a duty bearer. Ramesh Singh, ActionAid’s outgoing Chief Executive, said, “Our rights-based approach emphasises the primacy of agency

and actions of people... rights holders’ own action is absolutely essential for claiming, using and enjoying rights. Other people can help but they cannot claim, use and enjoy the rights of other people.”

In working to build community capacity through the fellowship programme, ActionAid Myanmar is ensuring that, when there are opportunities for more open dialogue, there will be people ready to participate. In addition, ActionAid Myanmar is ensuring that participants will come from the grassroots level rather than being representatives of grassroots voices. In rushing for involvement in campaigning, ActionAid is in danger of taking a representative role, which may undermine ActionAid’s long-term commitment to empower people to achieve their rights in their own way. Engaging with policy campaigning before the community has grasped the implications is a threat. ActionAid Myanmar’s current practice of respecting and appreciating grassroots knowledge and programme work means that, if and when campaigning to influence policy is possible, it will be locally driven. This is something that needs to be continually acknowledged in ActionAid.

ActionAid Myanmar’s innovative employment strategy has lessons for the organisation. ActionAid Myanmar has a very young staff. In some ways this is challenging since tasks that are normally undertaken by middle managers may be loaded on senior staff. However, it is also a huge benefit. Many current staff members have been volunteers, and employment is the result of having demonstrated passion and dedication to principles and having shown positive leadership potential and skills. As the job is new, no one is in their comfort zone and it is a steep learning curve. There is a deliberate strategy to select people with potential and drive. The philosophy is that, while anyone can

learn how to write a report, one cannot learn empathy, commitment and passion so easily, nor the principles that ActionAid espouses. Traditional recruitment policies that emphasise written tests may not be appropriate for all positions, and may not bring in staff who share ActionAid's values. This needs to be considered when recruiting. Having young staff has particular advantages for the fellowship approach, since it means that fellows and staff are as similar in interest as possible, and this facilitates better working relationships. As the programme grows, there may be a need for technical staff, but it will be key not to lose the vibrancy, sense of team spirit and passion.

ActionAid Myanmar has an innovative approach to report writing. One staff member pointed out how field staff are incredibly busy travelling to each community, and that writing reports for donors at the end of this process will neither be a useful or a thought-provoking experience. Some use external people to document the processes, to release the burden from the project staff member. This is interesting since it raises questions regarding the role of the shared learning function, the role of reflection and the use of documenting experiences. If it is merely to be an extractive process, then in a sense it is unimportant who documents it. However, if documentation can be a learning or knowledge accumulation experience in itself then there will need to be support throughout the organisation to coordinate how this is managed and effectively shared. ActionAid's annual participatory review and reflection process (PRRP) may be key to moving forward on this process.

Summary

ActionAid Myanmar is working with a principled, rights-based process along with its project partners and CBOs in the regions where it operates. Under its fellowship programme, young people are trained to carry out sustained community work in Myanmar. Power dynamics in communities are changing as a result of the fellowship programme, and the seeds of a nationwide youth movement are being sown. It is refreshing to see ActionAid involved in community-based processes, and centring work on communities. It is hoped that when the time comes for further lobbying and policy work, empowered communities will be in a perfect position to act.

ActionAid can learn much from the fellowship programme in Myanmar. The organisation would benefit from using the fellowship model in other country programmes, and exploring the synergy with ActionAid's other youth and training programmes, particularly those run by ActionAid Denmark.¹⁸ There are also advantages to be drawn from using a more flexible and innovative employment strategy.

¹⁸ ActionAid Denmark, formerly MS Denmark runs a 'people for change' programme which involves posting and exchange of developing workers between countries. More information can be found here: <http://www.actionaid.dk/sw118223.asp>

ActionAid is an international anti-poverty agency working in over 40 countries, taking sides with poor people to end poverty and injustice together.

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