

act:onaid

**Mobilising communities
in Kayin State to claim
their rights to income,
public services and
accountable governance**

FROM CONFLICT TO COOPERATION



COVER: VCBO member Daw Shwe Nyunt is calling for a community meeting in Taung Gone village, Hpa An Township. The traditional wooden gong resonates through the entire village and within minutes people start to assemble in the community hall / KBJ

This publication was produced by Kalika Bro-Jørgensen

Photos by Thet Oo Maung (TOM) and Kalika Bro-Jørgensen (KBJ)

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Scan this QR code with your smartphone to watch *The Dream We Are In*, an ActionAid documentary film about Kayin State

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I hope this booklet will make you curious to know more about our work in Kayin State. If that is the case, I invite you to visit our YouTube channel and enjoy our documentary film *The Dream We are In*

Director's foreword: From conflict to cooperation



ABOVE: Scan this QR code to watch *The Dream We Are In*, an ActionAid documentary film about Kayin State
LEFT: Naw Nan Than Nu received vocational training and financial support to start a small tailoring business at home. This has helped her gain financial independence from her parents, whom she earlier relied on for all living expenses. Today she has become a Fellow / KBJ

More than half a century of armed conflict has taken its toll on ethnic communities in Kayin State. While the situation has improved over the past years, people still suffer a severe lack of income opportunities as well as basic public services and infrastructure. Furthermore, the conflict has damaged the level of trust between citizens and government.

Over the past four years our programme in Kayin State has focussed on mobilising people to cooperate, create their own sources of income, claim their rights to education, health, water supply and, not least, accountable governance.

Through photos and case stories this booklet attempts to capture the activities, challenges and results of the programme. Among others you will be introduced to Saw Thet Zaw Oo, who runs a small motorbike repair shop, which allows him to send his younger siblings to school; Naw Paw Sese, who volunteered to open a preschool in her village, which lets her pioneer a child centred approach to teaching; and

Daw Shwe Nyunt, who helped safely deliver 20 babies in her village after she received training to become a traditional birth attendant.

You will also meet communities, who cooperated to construct wells and other new infrastructure; civil society front-runners, who helped mobilise and support people; and progressive government servants, who responded to the needs of the communities.

I hope this booklet will make you curious to know more about our work in Kayin State. If that is the case, I invite you to visit our YouTube channel and enjoy our documentary film *The Dream We are In* (bit.ly/1DedWKH).

Finally I wish to thank the European Union for funding this ambitious programme, and all our staff, partners, Fellows and friends for supporting our implementation.

Shihab Uddin Ahamad
Country Director
ActionAid Myanmar



■ Villages across the state paid a particularly high price; apart from widespread violence, disappearances and displacements, people had few income opportunities and received next to no public services under former military regimes

Introduction: The programme in Kayin State

LEFT: Naw Nan June May Win, the Health Volunteer of Thar Yar Gone Village, is reading a book for preschool children in the community hall / KBJ

RIGHT: Kayin State (red) is an ethnic state in eastern Myanmar on the border of Thailand

Kayin is an ethnic state located in eastern Myanmar on the border of Thailand. For more than half a century after independence the state was marred by armed conflicts between the army and various ethnic armed groups, primarily the Karen National Union, KNU. Villages across the state paid a particularly high price; apart from widespread violence, disappearances and displacements, people had few income opportunities and received next to no public services under former military regimes.

ActionAid Myanmar initiated the *Capacity Advancement of Non State Actors in Development* project in 31 villages in January 2011, to improve income opportunities and access to public services such as health, education and water supply as well as to provide capacity building for civil society organisations in Kayin State. In January 2012 the *Active Citizenship for Accountable Governance* project was





■ ActionAid Myanmar’s overall theory of change is based on the belief that the causes of poverty can be challenged and that change can and will happen

LEFT: Thet Zaw Oo from Paro Village dropped out during 8th grade to become a daily labourer — today he is the proud owner of a motorbike repair shop, which allows him to get his younger siblings through school / KBJ

RIGHT: Naw Mu Mu is caring for her sisters goats. She believes that they represent her sister’s only chance to return from Thailand and settle in Taung Gone Village / KBJ

added in order to further enable citizens to claim their rights and encourage accountable governance at all levels.

The entire programme was funded by the European Union and enacted in partnership with local organisation Knowledge and Dedication for Nation-building (KDN) and implementing partners Karen Anglican Development (KAD), Taunggalay Social Services (TGSS) and Kyar Inn Karen Baptist Association (KKBA).

ActionAid Myanmar’s overall theory of change is based on the belief

that the causes of poverty can be challenged and that change can and will happen; that a human rights based approach to sustainable, community-led development and strong youth and women leadership can be powerful drivers of change; and that all changes have to be led and facilitated by the people of Myanmar with support from the international community.

It is a priority to reinforce the change processes through engagement with civil society, which will work in solidarity with the people; the media, which will amplify people’s voice in influencing the state;





LEFT: Daw Than Aye from Paro Village has received training to become a traditional birth attendant. She has now delivered more than 20 babies and helped refer another pregnant woman to the hospital because of complications / KBJ

RIGHT: The birthing kit, which Daw Than Aye received after the training, contains the basic tools needed / KBJ

■ Fellows are at the heart of all ActionAid's activities in Myanmar. They are young, energetic volunteers elected by their own communities and equipped with the necessary confidence, skills and knowledge to facilitate participatory development in their villages

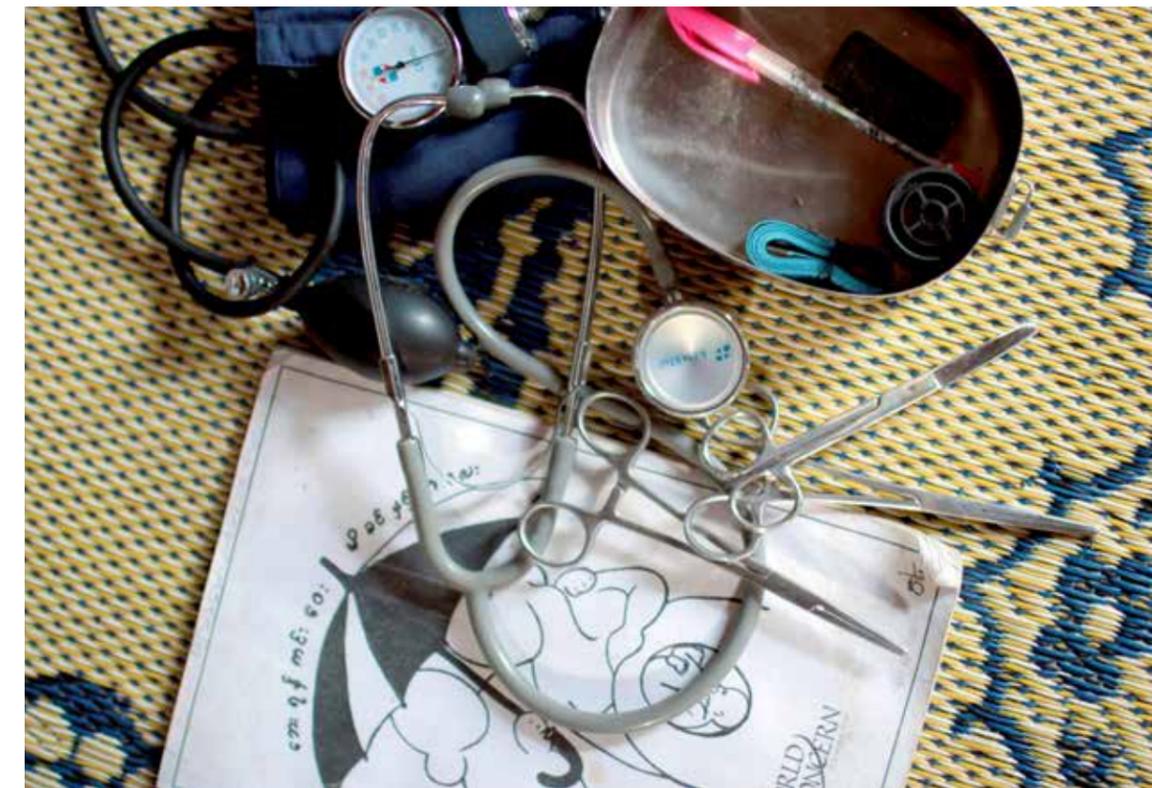
and the state, which will ensure justice and promote, protect and fulfil people's rights.

All ActionAid's programmes are guided by this theory of change and further employ a range of innovative, context specific methodologies.

Fellows are at the heart of all ActionAid's activities in Myanmar. They are young, energetic volunteers elected by their own communities and equipped with the necessary confidence, skills and knowledge to facilitate participatory development in their villages. Fellows

employ various participatory rural appraisal tools in order to mobilise people to collect vital demographic data, analyse their situation and prioritise context-specific action plans. All this information is compiled in comprehensive *Village Books*, which are used in development processes by the community, ActionAid as well as the government.

Fellows also encourage their communities to form *Village Community Based Organisations (VCBOs)* in order to ensure good governance is institutionalised at village level.





“ We did not receive public services under former military regimes, and have no tradition for gathering to solve our own problems either

Context: What do the villages in Kayin State want?

LEFT: U Chit Shwe (left), the president of Paro VCBO, is chatting with U Saw Ah Klai (right) in the shade of a tree. At 73 the latter is one of the oldest community members and an advisor to the VCBO / KBJ

Shortly after independence Paro Village, Hpa An Township, was burned down to the ground and everyone fled to the forest, remembered U Saw Ah Klai from Paro Village, Hpa An Township. At 73 he is one of the oldest community members and serves as an advisor to the VCBO.

“After five years people began to return and reconstruct their homes. Over the next many years we were attacked by rebels and forced to work as porters for the army. Every so often the men would hide in the jungle to avoid getting caught up in the conflict,” he said.

Most villages in Kayin State suffered a similar history of violence and human rights violations. An army base was located in Thar Yar Gone Village, Hlaing Bwe Township, but this only increased the level of conflict.

“Several battles were fought around here and three villagers died from land mines. We have had a primary school for decades but the children did not attend

during the conflict. We did not even dare to sit together and talk because we were afraid of being taken as porters,” said U Saw Than Soe, the Village Leader of Thar Yar Gone Village.

While many villages were established hundreds of years ago, Taung Gone Village, Hpa An Township, was established as a result of the conflict.

“Our old village was burned down to the ground, so people went here to build new homes. The army would force us to work as porters and confiscate our food if they needed rations — in turn the KNU would beat us up, accusing us of cooperating with the army. For many years we worried about the conflict; we often heard gun shots and bombs in the distant,” said U Zaw Li, the Vice President of Taung Gone VCBO, who lost a leg to a land mine during the conflict.

Explosions still reverberate through the village every so often. But these days,



LEFT: U Saw Than Soe, the Village Leader of Thar Yar Gone, is resting on a bench in front of the community hall / KBJ

RIGHT: Members of the VCBO in Taung Gone village, from left to right: Naw Khin Than Aye, Daw Shwe Nyunt, U Zaw Li, and Village Leader U Ku Ta La / KBJ



the cause is to be found in the limestone quarry at the edge of the village. While one conflict is winding down another looms large: the fight for Kayin State's rich natural resources.

Taung Gone Village is nestled between the limestone quarry and a sizeable rubber plantation but the villagers have no claim on either; all they can hope for is to earn meagre daily wages as casual labourers at these enterprises. The village is among the poorest of the township. Most houses are made of bamboo and thatched palm leaves. A few families have installed cheap solar panels, but there are no electricity supply as such; some own a tiny patch of land, but the majority have no property and few job opportunities. Many villagers are currently seeking a better fortune as migrant workers across the border in Thailand – a pull-factor that has a huge impact on village life in all of Kayin State.

This lack of income opportunities,

basic public services and accountable governance is a common problem in most villages. While appreciating the relatively peaceful situation nowadays U Saw Ah Klai pointed out, that there are still plenty of problems to solve.

“We did not receive public services under former military regimes, and have no tradition for gathering to solve our own problems either.”



When ActionAid engaged in Kayin State each of the 31 target villages were asked to elect a Fellow, who received extensive training on how to mobilise communities to identify, prioritise and engage in development projects. Each village then established a VCBO and developed a Village Book of demographic data, a situation analysis, development priorities and action plans.

The typical priorities were to improve job opportunities, education, health



“ Our living standards have improved a lot. We have found new knowledge and become better at cooperating within the village. Diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and diarrhoea is not a big issue any longer — we now know how to prevent outbreaks

LEFT: Members of the VCBO in Thar Yar Gone Village gather in the community hall. Earlier there was no such tradition for gathering and cooperating to solve village level problems together / KBJ

and access to water, transportation and electricity.

“Everyone agreed that a bridge should be our first priority. The road used to flood every rainy season making it difficult for children to attend school and for all of us to access markets and clinics in other towns. The Fellow showed us how to write a proposal and soon we got the necessary funding. This rainy season the flooding was no problem. Our new bridge is built of stone and reinforced with steel. It has improved our lives in so many ways,” said U Zaw Li from Taung Gone Village.

In Paro Village people prioritised and received funding to construct a well and also managed to get support from the Rural Development Department for road renovation. The top priorities in Thar Yar Gone Village were to build a wall around the school, improve access to water and construct a road.

In each village a number of people attended trainings to become traditional birth attendants, village health volunteers or community teachers with a child

centred approach. Each community would identify its most vulnerable members and nominate them to receive vocational training and financial support to create alternative income opportunities for themselves.



Over the past few years, living standards in Taung Gone Village has improved significantly, agreed the members of the VCBO.

“Our living standards have improved a lot. We have found new knowledge and become better at cooperating within the village. Diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and diarrhoea is not a big issue any longer — we now know how to prevent outbreaks,” said U Zaw Li.

The VCBO members meet every month to discuss village development issues.

“Because we formed a VCBO early on it was much easier for us to develop a village book with priorities and an action plan — which we can now show to the government to request further support,” said U Zaw Li.



Livelihood: **Creating alternative income opportunities**

LEFT & BELOW: Saw Thet Zaw Oo has established a motorbike repair shop in Paro Village after receiving vocational training and financial support. He now supports his parents and two younger siblings / KBJ

Saw Thet Zaw Oo from Paro Village dropped out of school four years ago, one month into 8th grade.

“I was sad to do so, but I could not keep up any longer,” he said.

His parents are both casual labourers and at 14 years of age he figured he could always earn an income that way — no education needed. Yet, his childhood dream was to become a motorbike mechanic.

“Casual labour is exhausting work, the income is low and you are looked down upon. Motorbikes have always been my hobby and since I dropped out of school I spent my spare time in the local repair shop just to watch and learn,” he said.

Saw Thet Zaw Oo did not have much spare time though. For three years he toiled at his uncle’s fields and also helped out with electric repair tasks.

“It was hard work and I was not experienced at all. I was slow and felt guilty about it. My uncle could be short tempered and would often scold me. I kept dreaming about opening my own motorbike repair shop. My parents always encouraged me so I kept believing that it could come true even if I had no money to get started,” he said.

Two years ago Saw Thet Zaw Oo got a chance at making his dream come true when he was invited to join a 45 day training on motorbike repair and maintenance, at the end of which every participant received financial support to buy the equipment needed to start a small business. Meanwhile, the only other motorbike mechanic in the village had moved to Thailand leaving no competition around. A friend even offered him to open a shop on her parents plot of land — for free. All he had to pay was for the bamboo walls and tin roof.

“ I kept dreaming about opening my own motorbike repair shop. My parents always encouraged me so I kept believing that it could come true even if I had no money to get started





“ She chose to begin breeding goats because it was easy; they breed twice a year and you do not need to feed them. She was very happy for the chance, which she had never been able to afford otherwise

LEFT & RIGHT:
Naw Mu Mu caring for her sister's goats. She hopes that her sister will one day be able to return to the village and make a living for herself / KBJ

“When I opened my shop I hung some tires in front, which was enough to spread the word. I have worked for almost two years and now I can buy whatever I want and also support my parents and my two younger siblings, who are still in school. Now people respect me and rely on me,” he said.

Saw Thet Zaw Oo cannot buy whatever he wants though: a motorbike would take him back at least 10 months of earnings. Yet, he is convinced that it is only a matter of time.

“I plan to rebuild the shop and buy extra materials and equipment. Then I can handle more complicated problems and sell spare parts and accessories as well. This will generate even more income. If I did not support my family I could probably buy a motorbike in a couple of years, but as it is I expect to be able to buy one in four or five years.”

*

Two years ago Naw Mu Mu was selected by the Taung Gone VCBO to receive training and support to create a new livelihood opportunity.

“We are both orphans, but my sister is unmarried and had no income or property. She lived with me and my husband and helped out around the





LEFT & BELOW: U Tin Win Soe has noticed a significant increase in the yield since he attended a training on improved agricultural practices / KBJ

home. She chose to begin breeding goats because it was easy; they breed twice a year and you do not need to feed them. She was very happy for the chance, which she had never been able to afford otherwise,” said Naw Mu Mu’s sister, Naw Soe Lay.

Now the two goats already multiplied to six but it will still take a while before the goat breeding becomes profitable enough to make a living. Recently, Naw Mu Mu took a job across the border in Thailand and left the goats in the care of her sister.

“It is OK. She taught me how to care for the goats. We have to help each others out,” said Naw Soe Lay.

Both sisters hope that Naw Mu Mu will one day be able to return to the village and make a living for herself breeding the goats.



U Tin Win Soe makes a living cultivating

vegetables on 0.6 acres of land in Taung Gone Village and was invited to attend a training on improved agricultural practices.

“We learned many useful things. Most importantly to protect our crops from insects and infestations. Earlier I managed to keep most insects away by hand. But lately the weather changes brought too many insects for me to handle,” he said.

U Tin Win Soe always provided for his family’s survival. Now he even makes a surplus.

“For every time I would previously produce 10 kilos, I now get 13,” he said.

Apart from the training, all U Tin Win Soe’s knowledge about agriculture have been passed down through generations.

“With time I will hand over the land to my sons. If I ever get the opportunity for more training I will let them go,” he said.

“ We learned many useful things. Most importantly to protect our crops from insects and infestations. Earlier I managed to keep most insects away by hand. But lately the weather changes brought too many insects for me to handle





LEFT: Naw Paw Sese is working at the preschool in Anan Pin Kone Village after receiving training on child centred approach to teaching / TOM

Education: Children should think, not just memorise

Naw Paw Sese was born and brought up in Anan Pin Kone Village, Hpa An Township. The youngest of seven siblings she still lives with her parents, who have a small rice paddy field. As a child she loved going to school — especially studying with her friends, who helped her with rote memorisation, an essential part of the Myanmar school system, but not one of Naw Paw Sese’s strengths.

“My favourite teacher was Daw Myo Ei Ei San, who taught 5th to 8th grade — she explained everything better than other teachers and made even boring subjects seem interesting. Every time I saw her in class, I wanted to be like her,” she said.

But Naw Paw Sese’s parents could not afford to send her through high school so she had to drop out after 8th grade. This scattered her dream of becoming a teacher. In stead she helped her parents

“ My favourite teacher was Daw Myo Ei Ei San, who taught 5th to 8th grade — she explained everything better than other teachers and made even boring subjects seem interesting. Every time I saw her in class, I wanted to be like her



LEFT: U Saw San Myint Tun, the Deputy Officer of the Hpa An Township Education Department, is a vocal proponent of a child centred approach to teaching / KBJ
RIGHT: A child from Anan Pin Kone village school is studying / TOM

“It takes more time to prepare, but the children will learn more that way. It is much more efficient because of the heightened level of understanding. It also improves the child-teacher relationship; the children will be less afraid

out in the fields and gradually lowered her expectations. Her new plan was to move to Bangkok and get a job that might allow her to save enough to open a small shop in the village one day.

“But my older siblings would not allow me to go,” she said.

A couple of years later she was offered a chance to attend a training on child centred approach to teaching and jumped at the opportunity.

“I learned how to teach in interesting ways using poems, songs, and various materials that would help children learn better. When I finished the training I felt very excited because I realised that maybe I could become a teacher after all,” she said.

Naw Paw Sese noticed that children, who were too young to attend school, were hanging around disturbing the education in the village school. One day she suggested to open a preschool for them.

“I offered my help and the community could easily see the benefit. I cannot become a government appointed teacher, but the parents give me a small stipend. When teachers are sick or on



leave I even get to teach 1st grade. I feel really happy and proud,” she said.

This year she teaches 35 children age three to five. There is no government curriculum for the preschool so Naw Paw Sese has a lot of freedom in planning her days.

“We sing songs, recite poems and study the alphabet. I make the children feel each character by drawing in the air with their arms before we write them on paper or the blackboard. Preschool helps the young ones enjoy school and be familiar with the concepts before they start 1st grade,” she said.

Over the years Naw Paw Sese has witnessed a general improvement of education levels in her village.

“My mother’s generation had very limited education because of the conflict; most are illiterate. But nowadays almost all children have the chance to go to school,” she said.

*

U Saw San Myint Tun has worked in the Hpa An Township Education Department since 1993. Today he is the Deputy Township Education Officer and he has been a vocal proponent of a child



LEFT: Children at the new school wall in Thar Yar Gone Village / KBJ

BELOW: School children crossing the new bridge in Taung Gone Village / KBJ

NEXT: Naw Paw Sese's students sleeping and playing during a break / TOM

centred approach to teaching ever since he attended an NGO training on the subject in 2009.

“A child centred approach is very important because it stimulates children to learn through thinking instead of rote memorisation. Teachers employing a child centred approach use real life examples and learning materials. It takes more time to prepare, but the children will learn more that way. It is much more efficient because of the heightened level of understanding. It also improves the child-teacher relationship; the children will be less afraid,” he said.

According to U Saw San Myint Tun the government is trying to introduce a child centred approach through trainings and learning materials, supported by NGOs.

“Unfortunately, many teachers stick to the traditional teacher centred approach. It depends on the individual teacher, but it is generally difficult to change our long tradition for rote memorisation. I welcome that NGOs provide trainings – both to government teachers and community teachers like Naw Paw Sese. The NGOs draw on international experiences and knowledge, which can improve our system,” he said.







Health: Right from the birth

Daw Shwe Nyunt is a member of the Taung Gone VCBO. In 2011 the Fellow persuaded her to attend a two months training, which would provide her with the necessary skills, knowledge and equipment to become a traditional birth attendant.

“I was interested because there were no midwife in the village, so it would be very helpful for everyone if I could take on that responsibility. I have since delivered 20 babies,” she said.

Daw Shwe Nyunt charges on donation basis and helps with check-ups during the pregnancy, the actual delivery as well as advise on hygiene and health after the child is born.

“For instance I make sure that the mothers breastfeed for at least half a year before introducing solid foods — earlier people would start feeding their infants rice much too early. I also explain how to keep good hygiene. To motivate mothers further, I emphasise that keeping your child clean will prevent disease, which will save you money in the end. I also give health talks on how to prevent tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases,” she said.

Naw Tar Pi Pi is one of Daw Shwe Nyunt’s clients. Ever since she gave birth for the first time, 18 years ago, she has done so in her own home. In January 2015 she expects her sixth child. Every month she gets a check-up with Daw

“ Apart from the monthly examination Daw Shwe Nyunt also provides me with folic acid and other important supplements. It is great to have a traditional birth attendant in the village because it saves us from travelling to other villages or towns for help



LEFT: Daw Shwe Nyunt from Taung Gone Village is examining Naw Tar Pi Pi. She concludes that the pregnancy is progressing well / KBJ

RIGHT: A baby is born / TOM

Shwe Nyunt and everything seems to be progressing well.

“Apart from the monthly examination Daw Shwe Nyunt also provides me with folic acid and other important supplements. It is great to have a traditional birth attendant in the village because it saves us from travelling to other villages or towns for help,” she said.

Another of Daw Shwe Nyunt’s clients, Naw Soe Lay, is married with two children aged one and four.

“I had to go to the hospital to deliver my first child, but second time around I could stay at home thanks to Daw Shwe

Nyunt. It is better that way and the level of care and safety is the same, I believe. Daw Shwe Nyunt knew my situation and was ready to refer me to hospital if needed. But luckily there were no complications,” said Naw Soe Lay.

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Naw Mu Mu always dreamed to become a teacher, but because she attended 10th grade on the Thai side of the border she was barred from further education in Myanmar, which is a prerequisite for becoming a government teacher.

When the Fellow encouraged her to attend a village health volunteer training she agreed in a heartbeat — she had nothing better to do.



As a volunteer I passed on my knowledge and helped people with health issues. I was very happy to create awareness and see the general standards of hygiene and health improve

LEFT & RIGHT: Naw Mu Mu is teaching village children to keep good hygiene habits in order to prevent outbreaks of diarrhoea and the diseases / KBJ

“I thought it was a chance to get new knowledge and do something good for my village,” she said.

During the month long training in 2011 Naw Mu Mu learned how to bring about awareness on hygiene and health, measure temperature and blood pressure, and provide first aid in case of accidents.

“As a volunteer I passed on my knowledge and helped people with health issues. I was very happy to

create awareness and see the general standards of hygiene and health improve,” she said.

Naw Mu Mu has a special focus on institutionalising good hygiene habits among the village children in order to prevent outbreaks of diarrhoea and other diseases.



Naw Nan Than Nu from Paro Village is 36 years, the oldest of six sibling, but since she is unmarried she still lives at





“ As a health volunteer I focussed on building awareness to prevent diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, dengue and diarrhoea. Last year we had six tuberculosis patients but now we have only one

LEFT & RIGHT: Nan June May Win from Thar Yar Gone Village was forced to drop out of school in 8th grade. She always dreamt of becoming a nurse, so she was happy to attend the Village Health Volunteer training. She hopes this can help her to one day make her dream come true / KBJ
NEXT: A traditional birth attendant is examining a newborn baby / TOM

home. Her parents are paddy farmers and after 10th standard she went on to help them on the farm.

In 2011 the Fellow asked her to attend a month long training to become village health volunteer. She was also elected as a member of the VCBO.

“As a health volunteer I focussed on building awareness to prevent diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, dengue and diarrhoea. Last year we had six

tuberculosis patients but now we have only one. We have not had major outbreaks of malaria or diarrhoea since 2012. I believe the main reason is the monthly health talks I give about prevention,” said Naw Nan Than Nu.

Four months ago the former fellow quit to become a teacher in the local primary school. As a health volunteer Nan Than Nu had followed the Fellow around and assisted with most of his work. Now she took over the position.







“ We had to go to the stream to collect water, sometimes even during the night. So I was very happy when our proposal to construct a well was approved

Water: Access improves health, education and livelihood

Construction or renovation of centrally located wells were among the top priorities in most villages. This was also one of the objectives of the programme since inadequate access to clean water would have a negative impact on health, education, income opportunities and just about every other aspect of life.

“In my opinion, access to water is most important; after all it benefits the whole community,” said U Saw Pyo Lay Sein, a widower who makes a living producing bricks in a small workshop in his home. He is also a member of the VCBO and the water committee of Thar Yar Gone Village.

Constructing a well was one of the top priorities of the Village Book and U Saw Pyo Lay Sein participated in the process from the very beginning.

The Fellow helped the community



members write the proposal, since no one had any experience with such matters.

“My role was more that of an advisor. I suggested which solutions would benefit the community the most. For instance I proposed that we should construct a cement tank and a separate well,” said U Saw Pyo Lay Sein.

Water used to be a very scarce resource in the That Yar Gone Village, he remembers:

“We had to go to the stream to collect water, sometimes even during the night. So I was very happy when our proposal to construct a well was approved,” he said.

Some households have installed pipes, others can collect water from the centrally located well.

LEFT: A boy is splashing in the water from the well / TOM

RIGHT: As a volunteer member of the Water Committee U Saw Pyo Lay Sein is responsible for maintenance and repair of the new well / KBJ



“ I found that we had constructed or renovated eight new wells since 2011. The number of households had also increased and improved health awareness had led to a dramatic decrease of disease and pregnancy complications

“We hope to connect each house directly with a pipe. At the moment only the richer people could afford it. Even though I am a member of the water committee I have to go collect water at the well,” said U Saw Pyo Lay Sein.

The water committee was formed as soon as the well was finished to ensure maintenance and repair and collect a small monthly fee from each household to cover recurring expenses.

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Naw Nan Than Nu became a Fellow in Paro Village four months ago when the former Fellow quit to become a teacher

in the local primary school. Her first task was to organise a water committee and a water user group to govern the rules and regulations needed to protect drinking water quality and the well, which had just been renovated.

Next she did data collection to update the village book before the end of the programme.

“I found that we had constructed or renovated eight new wells since 2011. The number of households had increased and improved health awareness had led to a dramatic decrease of disease,” she said.

LEFT & RIGHT: Community members using the new wells / TOM
NEXT: Nan Than Nu retrieving water from the new well — another seven wells have either been constructed or renovated in the village since 2011 / KBJ





“ We knew that we could not run the programme without local partners, so we set up collaboration with three local organisations; but actually, they did not have the capacity needed to implement the programme

Organisational development: Cooperation at all levels

Working with local partner organisations is of high priority for ActionAid; recognising their role in the struggle against poverty and injustice and their legitimacy in promoting and claiming the rights of the Myanmar people.

Moreover, in Kayin State partnerships were the only option, due to the political situation when the programme was initiated. ActionAid and KDN did not have the level of access to the target villages necessary to implement the programme.

“The government only recognised religious organisations at that time. Maybe because they respected Buddhist organisations, they also respected Christian ones. But they did not trust civil society organisations, so KDN could not be registered and we had to keep a

very low profile,” said KDN project officer U Kyaw Swar.

However, the local faith-based organisations, which could reach the remote communities, had very limited systems and structures in place. The political situation and long history of armed conflict had kept organisational development at a minimum.

“We knew that we could not run the programme without local partners, so we set up collaboration with three local organisations; but actually, they did not have the capacity needed to implement the programme,” said U Kyaw Swar.

It became an objective of the programme to capacity build and support these organisations in order to strengthen civil society as well as to ensure quality



ABOVE: KDN project officer U Kyaw Swar explained why capacity of local civil society organisations were such an important part of the programme / KBJ

implementation. ActionAid provided a range of trainings on organisational development to all partners. KDN provided further trainings to the implementing partners. And the support was in high demand.

“The top priorities were financial management, project management and leadership skills so that our partners could manage their organisations and implement our activities well. Our programme was very different from what they had done before. As religious organisations they were used to receive church donations that came with no need to show evidence or documentation for its spending. It is very different with grants from international agencies. When we asked our partners to help implement our programme they asked to get support on organisational

development. By working with us they had realised that they needed to build their capacity — not only for the sake of our programme but also to strengthen their work for their own organisations,” said U Kyaw Swar.

He has witnessed a lot of improvement over the past four years.

“I think, if you visit the partners today, you will see that they have well structured organisations and use money in a systematic way. I have worked with them before this programme and back then they could, for instance, never document their spendings — but today they ask in advance about what kind of documentation we need. When they work on projects unrelated to this in the future, I think they will benefit from these skills, systems and structures,



“As an implementing partner in this programme we had to follow certain guidelines and focus on the priorities of the community

ABOVE: Reverend Ku Thay from Kwan Tar Village, Hlaing Bwe Township, is the chair person of the Hpa An Anglican Diocese’s Development Department, which oversees the work of KAD, which was an implementing partner in six target villages / KBJ
NEXT: Villagers attending a training / TOM

which will make them stronger and more accountable for what they are doing,” said U Kyaw Swar.

As a KDN project officer he also received organisational development trainings from ActionAid.

“I improved my organisational skills and knowledge too. For instance I now understand the importance of having policies. In the past we worked with partners without establishing a policy for our cooperation, but now I realise that we should do that. There are a lot less problems in dealing with partners if you have a policy in place,” he said.



Reverend Saw Ku Thay from Kwan Tar Village, Hlaing Bwe Township, is the chair person of the Hpa An Anglican Diocese’s Development Department, which oversees the work of KAD, the implementing partners in six villages.

“Traditionally, KAD used to operate quite freely as long as it was in accordance with the priorities of the church. But as an implementing partner in this programme we had to follow certain guidelines and focus on the priorities of the community,” he said.

Saw Ku Thay were not familiar with these new requirements and approaches and appreciated to receive support on organisational development.

“The Diocese has six departments. Each of them used to mind their own business. But after the organisational development workshops we have started to cooperate, inform and support each others. The departments are now quite integrated and we plan our activities together so they complement each other,” he said.





Governance: Amplifying the voice of the people

A governance component was initiated one year into the programme in Kayin State. The main objective with this was to ensure sustainability of the entire programme by mobilising people to build stronger networks and engage with government from township to state and even union level in order to claim their rights to public services, livelihood opportunities and accountable governance.

The Fellows were already in place, but received further trainings on active citizenship and accountable governance, which they cascaded in their communities.

The communities were encouraged to compile the common needs of their Village Books at Village Tract level in order to present a stronger case for support to township authorities. And the existing VCBOs were inspired to come together to form Community Based Organisations (CBOs) at township level.

Meetings between villagers and representatives of the township and state governments were organised in collaboration with the Karen Unity and Peace Committee; the Chief Minister of Kayin State personally attended the state level meeting.

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Fellows and VCBO members of six target villages in Kyar Inn Seik Kyi Township established a CBO with community members from five other villages in the township. Similar CBOs have been established in other townships.

“One village cannot solve their problems alone, we need cooperation,” said CBO member Saw Me Bway Doh Htun.

The idea was introduced during leadership trainings and workshops for the VCBOs. Fellows and community members could see that they had many common issues in their Village Books – particularly land grabbing, health, education, lack of job opportunities. They also acknowledged that they would have a stronger voice if they presented their needs to the government as a larger group of villages.

“We also wanted to be a buffer between the government and the rural communities; and to share information about what the government is doing so the communities have a chance to know,” said Saw Me Bway Doh Htun.

“There are many religious groups and armed groups but we wanted to form an organisation dedicated to development,” added Saw Hsar Lay Paw.

The CBO is called Hku Po Ka Paw and the members are mostly young; half are women, half men; some buddhists, some christians and one an animist.

There is no cell phone reception or internet connection in the villages, so they meet in person four times a year.

“The roads are so bad in our township that we need to walk — often 15 miles each way. We literally climb mountains and cross rivers to meet,” said Saw Me Bway Doh Htun.



“There are many religious groups and armed groups but we wanted to form an organisation dedicated to development”

ABOVE & LEFT: Four members of the *Hku Po Ka Paw* CBO. From Left to right: Saw Hsar Lay Paw, Naw Ah Eh Dar Noe, Saw Me Bway Doh Htun and Saw Htoo Htoo Eh / KBJ



“ There are many words that cannot be translated to Kayin language. For instance, we do not have a word for ‘conflict’ — only for ‘fight’. So I had to use real life examples or experiences to explain the meaning of words and concepts

LEFT: Naw Pal Moo said that one of her most important roles as a Fellow was to create links between the villagers and the government / KBJ

“When we meet we share information, review our past activities and draw action plans for the future,” he said.

Each VCBO already organises many development activities so Hku Po Ka Paw focus more on common issues and awareness raising — especially on the peace process, women’s rights and youth affairs.

“Some people don’t even know, that there is an ongoing peace process. One woman said that if she had known, she would not have agreed to get married just now — she would rather have participated in the peace process. Those who know that there is a peace process, have little idea about what is actually going on, so we share information about that,” said Saw Me Bway Doh Htun.

The main youth issue is drugs and unemployment. The members believe that most youths have tried yaba (methamphetamine) and many become regular users.

“The price in our villages is half of that in Hpa An and Mawlemyine. But it is still relatively expensive, and the cost often leads to financial problems and violence within the family. We cannot solve the problem but we try to help as much as we can. I think that few people would use yaba if they had any job

opportunities; sometimes we can make people stop using just by involving them in development work,” said Naw Ah Eh Dar Noe.

The members also try to create awareness about women’s rights, but they have not had much success yet.

“Women usually have to do all the domestic work so they do not have time to discuss these things,” said Saw Me Bway Doh Htun.

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Naw Pal Moo from Kwan Tar Village, Hlaing Bwe Township, has been working as a Fellow in both Thar Yar Gone and Htee Poe Kee villages since 2011.

“Htee Poe Kee Village is a very closed society and the community was never in touch with outside organisations before. They have very limited access to education, most adults have had none at all. Now the villagers are more active, they have constructed a school and established a women’s organisation and a VCBO,” she said.

She said that one of her most important roles as a Fellow was to create links between the villagers and the government.

“I help them prepare and get organised



“ I also had a talk about equal pay for equal work with my boss, who owns a big groundnut plantation and employs many casual labourers. After a while he agreed to follow that principle

LEFT: Daw Nyunt Tin, from Thar Yar Gone village signed up for as many trainings as she could – and put the new knowledge to use in her community / KBJ

for meetings. It has been a very empowering process,” she said.

Naw Pal Moo also conducted trainings on active citizenship for accountable governance and women’s empowerment; often a quite complicated task to undertake.

“Most people had a hard time understanding the trainings because they were not familiar with the basic concepts. Also, there are many words that cannot be translated to Kayin language. For instance, we do not have a word for ‘conflict’ – only for ‘fight’. So I had to use real life examples or experiences to explain the meaning of words and concepts,” she said.

In the women’s empowerment training she had to explain the United Nations Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

“No one heard about that before. Even I only heard about it during the training of trainers. But I think the participants ended up understanding basic ideas of equal rights and that violence against women is wrong,” she said.

One of the participants of the women’s

empowerment training, Daw Nyunt Tin, from Thar Yar Gone village, put the knowledge to practical use.

“Women’s equality was really news to me. As soon as I got back I shared what I had learned with friends and neighbours. I also had a talk about equal pay for equal work with my boss, who owns a big groundnut plantation and employs many casual labourers. After a while he agreed to follow that principle. Before he would pay men 3,000 Kyat per day but women only 2,500. Now we all get 3,000,” she said.

Naw Pal Moo also invited people from different villages to join meetings with their village leaders and village tract administrators to compile the common needs of all the Village Books and mobilised people to attend township and state level meetings with government representatives.

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U Chit Thein has been the Village Leader of Htee Poe Kee Village, Kwan Tar Village Tract, Hlaing Bwe Township, the past four years.

“Within the last four years we have seen a lot of change: Before we did not have a



school but now we constructed a sub-primary school. During rainy season we could only reach the main road by boat, but now we constructed a bridge. We managed to do all this even though most of us are illiterate,” he said.

Recently U Chit Thein was called for a meeting with the Village Tract Leader, during which he was asked to provide all the information from Htee Poe Kee’s Village Book.

“Our needs are now compiled with those of other villages and submitted to the township authorities,” he said.

U Chit Thein has experienced that the levels of solidarity and unity have grown in the village as a result of the programme activities.

“Almost everyone participates when we do development activities in the village. It was not like that before. Especially the women’s empowerment training has helped the women become more active in village affairs. This is not reserved for male elders anymore,” he said.

Htee Poe Kee formed a VCBO in 2012. The members are elected and have monthly meetings.

“Earlier the older men would lead and the young men would implement — women never took part in decision making. But now it is more equal. Young and old, men and women are all members of the VCBO,” he said.

U Chit Thein attended the state level meeting with the Chief Minister in Hpa An. He used the opportunity to ask for extra funding for the school.

“We received 2 Lakh and a promise that more will be provided later. I was happy to attend — it is a really rare chance for people around here to meet the Chief

“ Earlier the older men would lead and the young men would implement — women never took part in decision making. But now it is more equal. Young and old, men and women are all members of the VCBO

ABOVE: Village Leader U Chit Thein said the levels of solidarity and unity have grown in the village as a result of the programme activities / KBJ



I compiled the priorities of the Village Books that we had with the most obvious needs of other villages. Four months ago we sent copies of this to the Rural Development Department and our local Member of Parliament

LEFT: U Thaung Shwe has been the Village Tract Leader of Kwan Tar since 2012./ KBJ

Minister. He has visited this area for other reasons, but we could never get near, much less talk to him. It felt good,” said U Chit Thein.



U Thaung Shwe has been the Leader of Kwan Tar Village Tract, Hlaing Bwe Township, since 2012. During the programme he attended a two day training on active citizenship for accountable governance.

“The training helped me improve as a leader. I realised that participation is better. If we decide alone, chances are that we are wrong; whereas the wisdom of others can improve the chance of making the right decision,” he said.

There are 10 villages in Kwan Tar Village Tract but only two of them are target villages of the programme.

“Last year I was asked to send volunteers from two of the other villages to Hpa An to attend a training. This was organised by the Chief Minister who was inspired by ActionAid’s Village Book concept. When they returned they started to develop their own Village Book,” he said.

U Thaung Shwe called for a Village Tract meeting to encourage other villages to make their own Village Books as well.

“I compiled the priorities of the Village Books that we had with the most obvious needs of other villages. Four months ago we sent copies of this to the Rural Development Department and our local Member of Parliament. Last week we received 20 Lakh from the local constituency fund to build a bridge,” he said.

Earlier U Thaung Shwe did not know much about what the township authorities were up to.

“But now we can approach the various departments quite easily and they will be helpful, respond to our requests and inform us about their activities. Everything is really changing with the current government and we see many visible improvements such as roads and other infrastructure,” he said.

This is not to say that there are no problems anymore, he pointed out.

“For instance, we still see land being taken from farmers, who cannot get any answers from anywhere,” he said.



Naw Ma Lweh has been the Village Tract Leader of Kwee Lay Village Tract, Shan Ywar Thi Sub-Township since 1993.

“The main reason I became a Village



“ When I met the Chief Minister of Kayin State I demanded that he give us a boarding house and a new ceiling for our school — and he accepted that. I am usually quite direct when I speak. I might be illiterate, but I dare to say anything to anyone

LEFT: Naw Ma Lweh has been the Village Tract Leader of Kwee Lay Village Tract, Shan Ywar Thi Sub-Township since 1993 – primarily because no one else dared take on the position, she said./ KBJ

Tract Leader back in 1993 was that no men dared to take on the position. It was safer for women, and no other women dared either,” she said.

One of her main challenges during the conflict was to keep the roads safe from land mines; something the army demanded of her.

“I had to ride a bullock cart with a heavy load up and down the road to prove that it was safe before the troops would pass. It happened that the bullock would get injured or the cart damaged. I also had to lead army convoys as a kind of human shield. I was afraid, of course, but I prayed,” she said.

Otherwise her duty would be to wait for orders from the army and the KNU.

“That part is more or less the same today, except that now the army pays when it needs porters.”

However, Naw Ma Lweh feels that much have improved over the past years.

“In the past children were not able to attend school and the teachers would

get captured. But nowadays teachers are allowed in the village and most children attend school,” she said.

Only one of the three villages in Kwee Lay Village Tract is a target village of the programme in Kayin State. Naw Ma Lweh’s village is not one of them, but she attended every meeting she was invited for over the past four years.

“The meetings inspired me to be more direct in asking the government for public services,” she said.

Naw Ma Lweh also attended the township and state level meetings with government representatives.

“When I met the Chief Minister of Kayin State I demanded that he give us a boarding house and a new ceiling for our school — and he accepted that. I am usually quite direct when I speak. I might be illiterate, but I dare to say anything to anyone,” she said.

Naw Ma Lweh never heard of any village receiving funds before.

“Not until we asked for it,” she said.



“ I would say that the meetings were successful, though not 100 per cent. The government needs to be even more transparent about their budgets and give firm promises and clear timelines

ABOVE: Mahn Aung pyi Soe, Chairperson of the Kayin Unity and Peace Committee / KBJ

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The programme organised Township and state level meetings between government representatives and villagers in collaboration with the Kayin Unity and Peace Committee, KUPC.

“In Kayin State we could not have engaged with government like this on our own. The only way to organise meeting between government and communities were to approach the KUPC and make them invite the government,” said KDN project officer U Kyaw Swar.

KUPC was established by members of civil society organisations, political parties and government representatives. The organisation had already organised seven consultations on unity and peace. Chairperson U Mahn Aung Pyi Soe believes that meetings between people and representatives of the government and armed groups are essential to establish peace and unity in Kayin State.

“The government used to be very suspicious of such meetings. But when representatives attend the meetings, they hear about the real situation of the Kayin people and their struggle to achieve unity; and come to understand that the people do not want to fight the government, they just want peace. There have been so many misunderstandings before, when actually, there are much common ground,” he said.

According to U Mahn Aung Pyi Soe most people used the opportunity to ask for public services such as health, education, transportation and electricity.

“People asked for their needs in an open

and direct way and the government representatives generally replied in a very gentle way; not like back in the day when they would be rather aggressive at times. For instance, one villager mentioned the problem with the drug trade — the government representatives did not show any aggression, but answered that they would try to solve it through the law,” he said.

U Mahn Aung Pyi Soe said that most people seemed quite satisfied after the meetings, especially those who went home with promises of budget support.

“I would say that the meetings were successful, though not 100 per cent. The government needs to be even more transparent about their budgets and give firm promises and clear timelines.”

The KUPC plans to continue to organise similar events.

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U Zay Wunna Hlaing has been the Township Administrator of the Hlaing Bwe General Administration Department (GAD), since April 2014, but has extensive experience from previous postings across the country.

“A lot of change is happening these years. The union government allocated 20,000 Lakh to the state budget for rural development and poverty alleviation this year, last year it was only half of that. We also have constituency funds worth 1,000 Lakh in Hlaing Bwe Township alone,” he said.

The state government calls the township administrators and newly formed development committees for a meeting when they receive funds.



“That is our chance to present local needs. We encourage village leaders and village tract administrators to submit their needs to the development committee. We then fund village level projects directly, because that is much faster and more efficient than if we go through a tender process and recruit a company to do it,” he said.

U Zay Wunna Hlaing has meetings twice a month with the development committee and also organise field trips to assess the local situation.

“We have even distributed our phone numbers to the villages so they can call and ask for help or make an appointment if they have a problem,” he said.

Inspired by ActionAid the Hlaing Bwe Township has developed two village books in cooperation with the state government.

“The Village Book is a really helpful and effective way to record the history, the

current situation, and the needs in any village. But the analysis part is hard work — we had to push people to finish it, even though they were graduates. Other villages might not have people who can do that, but in that case we could help them. In any case we do not only support villages that has developed Village Books,” he said.

U Zay Wunna Hlaing attended the Township meetings organised through the programme in collaboration with the KUPC.

“It was beneficial to us and to the villagers with this open forum for discussion. And it was helpful with the third party facilitation by civil society organisations. We had the chance to explain a lot of things at once to many people and I would say that the direct engagement improved the relationship and level of trust as well. People now know what work we do, and dare speak up and tell us if we do something wrong,” he said.

“ The Village Book is a really helpful and effective way to record the history, the current situation, and the needs in any village. But the analysis part is hard work — we had to push people to finish it, even though they were graduates

RIGHT: U Zay Wunna Hlaing has been the Township Administrator of the Hlaing Bwe GAD, since April 2014. Earlier he was posted in Shan State, Rakhine State, Chin State and Nay Pyi Taw / KBJ
ABOVE & NEXT: Community members attending a training / TOM





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.

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