

The Pioneering ASEAN Volunteer Humanitarian Project

Yangon, Myanmar, 20 November 2009

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Cyclone Nargis that struck Myanmar in early May 2008, a Community Based Early Recovery (CBER) pilot project (for the duration of August-November 2008) was implemented by ASEAN Volunteers in Seik Gyi village, Kungyangon Township. Supported by The Tripartite Core Group (TCG), the project aims to achieve the following primary objectives:

1. To restore the livelihood of the Seik Gyi community through the “Build Back Better” methodology and process. The livelihood activities include betel leaf distribution and boat building and distribution.
2. To repair community infrastructures, which involved the renovation and reconstruction within the monastery compound and the renovation of tube wells.
3. To share knowledge and experiences as a possible benchmark for future interventions of ASEAN and other humanitarian agencies.

The project capitalised on active community participation and the methodology of building back better. It represents a significant achievement for ASEAN as it was fully initiated and implemented by six ASEAN Volunteers from Thailand and Myanmar. The Volunteers worked closely with the local authorities and communities in identifying and addressing their most pressing needs. To ensure medium-term sustainability, the Volunteers built upon existing community committees and township coordination mechanisms. Overall, the project revived basic livelihoods to stimulate the local economy. Through the project activities, it promoted cultural and knowledge exchange among the ASEAN Volunteers and the villagers in the spirit of bringing ASEAN closer to the people.

BACKGROUND

Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on 2 and 3 May 2008, moving across the Ayeyarwady and Yangon Divisions in the south of the country. The cyclone produced winds of up to 200 miles per hour, devastating a 23,500 square metre region and affecting 2.4 million people. Cyclone Nargis is the worst natural disaster to hit Myanmar in recorded history and had enormous social and physical implications for the cyclone-affected areas. The cyclone left an estimated 140,000 casualties or missing, destroyed community infrastructure and subsequently hindered livelihood opportunities. Seven weeks after the cyclone, a group of ASEAN Volunteers conducted a needs assessment in Seik Gyi village. The cyclone dramatically affected the community’s ability to continue their livelihood activities and took away the means – both financial and physical capacities – to sustain their daily lives.

To support the implementation of the Seik Gyi CBER project, the ASEAN Cooperation Fund for Disaster Assistance contributed USD 140,118 (*please see the summary of financial report [here](#)*). In addition to the livelihoods and infrastructure element of the project, the CBER project was also tasked with identifying other villages for further CBER activities in Myanmar.

OUTCOMES

Applying a community-based approach was one of the success factors of this project. It actively engaged the villagers in the life cycle of the projects from needs assessments to analysis, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the projects. The ASEAN Volunteers worked through the pre-existing Village Nargis Committee, an effective participatory forum comprised of representatives from different groups of stakeholders, including the village chief, one fisherman, two monks, four farmers, five housewives, and five general workers. The Committee was responsible for supervising and coordinating the villagers during project implementation.

Restoring Household Betel Farms

The principal source of income for Seik Gyi Villagers was cultivation of betel leaf plants, which constituted 49 per cent of livelihood activities. Rebuilding this vital livelihood option was identified by the villagers as one of the project’s priorities. Together with the Village Nargis Committee, the ASEAN Volunteers identified 200 families who were betel farmers or interested in cultivating betel to receive grants to restore their primary

livelihoods. Of these, 41 households could not participate in the project because they did not have sufficient land or their land was unsuitable. The remaining 159 households undertook betel cultivation (1,000 saplings per household). The ASEAN Volunteers served as a bridge to promote capacity building and knowledge transfer among the villagers and local authorities at different levels.

Rebuilding Fishing Livelihoods

The needs assessment established that 40 of the 50 boats existing in Seik Gyi prior to Cyclone Nargis were lost during the storm. The Village Nargis Committee provided the names of the fishermen who had lost their boats and nets. The ASEAN Volunteers facilitated the construction of 34 new boats along with providing drift nets to replenish their loss of physical fishing assets. The project was extended to support an additional 29 fishing boats and 31 drift nets to the fishermen of Myat Lay Yon Village. The project assisted not only the fishermen, but also the landless villagers who served as carpenters to construct new boats through a cash-for-work scheme. Furthermore, local construction materials (e.g. wood) were utilised to stimulate the local economy.

Renovating the Monastery in Order to Promote Community Camaraderie and Enhance Disaster Risk Reduction

The population of Seik Gyi is predominantly Buddhist. The monastery serves as the focal point of village activities. The ASEAN Volunteers worked with the community to repair the main hall of the monastery and restore the stupa. The process brought about a sense of community ownership. Guided by the principles of “building back better”, the monastery was completely renovated to make it more resilient to future disasters and it currently serves as a multi-purpose village cyclone shelter.

Enhancing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Although Seik Gyi did not experience a shortage of water following the cyclone, 33 of the 39 wells, which were the main sources of water for drinking and washing, were either damaged or contaminated with seawater following the storm. The wells were also deemed unsafe for children and livestock because they had insufficient ground elevation. To prevent possible water shortages, the ASEAN Volunteers in partnership with the villagers, rebuilt and cleaned the wells by pumping seawater out and reconstructing the wells to make the water safe for drinking.

The existing public toilets in Seik Gyi were limited and in poor condition. Upon consultations with the community, the monks and villagers requested that the new public toilets and water tanks be situated in the grounds of the Seik Gyi monastery and the school in Kyun Chaung to promote better hygiene and sanitation.

LESSONS LEARNT

Community involvement is essential to conduct proper needs assessment. The ASEAN Volunteers were instrumental in providing opportunities to villagers to express their immediate needs for accurate early recovery assessment. The ASEAN Volunteers gathered household information from the Village Nargis Committee and established clustered occupational group meetings to assess and analyse the actual needs of the villagers.

The villagers as the project implementers promoted ownership. The regular community meetings facilitated by the ASEAN Volunteers served as a good venue for discussing their existing capacities and the agreed roles in project implementation. It ensured continuous progress updates and immediate problem solving. During the consultation group meetings, the villagers served as decision-makers with support from the Volunteers to design the implementation stages for each activity.

Empowering the community on feedback mechanisms and project monitoring fostered a sense of solidarity. To ensure a credible evaluation process, the ASEAN Volunteers facilitated a brief training to the villagers in community-based project evaluation through the use of interviews and the Likert Scale, which measures satisfaction on a scale of 1-5. In addition, the continuous presence of ASEAN Volunteers in the community also provides opportunity for continuous feedback and monitoring for immediate problem solving as required.

LOOKING FORWARD

Replication

The concept and methodologies used in the Seik Gyi project provided invaluable lessons that fed into two other projects: Rebuilding Small Farm Livelihoods during the Dry Season in Tha Leik Gyi Village Tract (covering six villages), Pyapon and Hayman Village Tract (covering five villages) Community-based Disaster Risk Management in Bogale.

Promoting ASEAN Regional Volunteerism

The Seik Gyi project demonstrated how young people from ASEAN Member States can support each other at the community and regional levels. The project also manifests the importance and potential of knowledge exchange in promoting a culture of volunteerism within ASEAN Member States. It is important to maintain the momentum and build upon the success of the ASEAN Volunteers programme in Myanmar to further enrich cross-cultural exchange and understanding in the region.

Continued Role of the Village Nargis Committee

The rejuvenation of livelihoods in Seik Gyi could not be achieved overnight and required constant monitoring and support is crucial to ensure that all livelihoods related activities are addressed as planned. The role of the Village Nargis Committee was invaluable in this regard and continues to play a key role in providing support. In the future, it could benefit from greater linkages with other field humanitarian agencies to collaborate in community-led activities that were not covered in the initial project. The capacity building initiatives, workshops and the creation of a disaster resistant shelter represent important steps towards improving the lives of people in Seik Gyi.

Challenges Still Remain

The Seik Gyi project was proven successful in restarting early community livelihoods recovery in the targeted areas. Nonetheless, chronic concerns such as poverty and disaster risks remain in the village. These challenges necessitate the urgent need for continued commitment and support to build a safer and more productive community.

Sources: ASEAN Volunteers Progress Reports 2008 & Project Final Report, February 2009.
