

## Disaster Preparedness Program Save the Children in Myanmar CASE STUDY - MAY 2009

### Introduction

In the hours and days following Cyclone Nargis - which hit Myanmar on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 with 200km per hour winds and tidal surges of up to 4 metres high – thousands of Myanmar staff and volunteers from local and international NGOs and civil society organizations sprang to action, urgently addressing the immediate, life-saving needs among the estimated 2.4 million people affected by the disaster.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the torrential rains, lack of communication technology, and limited or no prior experience working in an emergency, national staff and volunteers mounted a tremendous response effort, supporting people across the affected area, often in remote areas, accessible only by boat, motorbike or on foot. The strengths of these efforts were noted by the *Inter-Agency Real Time Evaluation (IA RTE) of the Response to Cyclone Nargis*:

“Although hardly any of the (primarily national) individuals, private businesses, student groups, and local agencies responding had previous disaster management experience, they spoke the local language, understood what constituted a culturally appropriate relief item and knew how to interact with local authorities and communities.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the IA RTE also pointed out that, “many lessons learnt from earlier humanitarian responses were re-learned after the cyclone, something that could potentially have been reduced if more experienced emergency responders had been involved from the outset.”<sup>3</sup> The lack of experience among national humanitarian staff was compounded

by the fact that, despite small and medium sized emergencies having impacted parts of the country on a regular basis prior to Cyclone Nargis, the perceived disaster risk in Myanmar was low. As a result of this low-risk perception and other constraints linked to the inability of humanitarian organizations to work in many affected areas prior to Cyclone Nargis, there had been limited emergency capacity building, preparedness planning or disaster risk reduction (DRR) work carried out.

Despite these challenges, there were many examples of organizations and communities undertaking rapid, effective response in difficult circumstances. Save the Children, working in Myanmar since 1995, saw that a significant opportunity existed to expand the knowledge and skill levels of national staff responding to the emergency and to embed humanitarian response, preparedness and DRR skills within organizations working in Myanmar.



*Disaster Preparedness Self-study Workbook*

### Project Overview

The *Disaster Response and Resilience Learning Project* is an inter-agency capacity building initiative for field-level humanitarian staff in the Cyclone Nargis response to improve response and recovery capacity and strengthen DRR practices.

<sup>1</sup> Tripartite Core Group (TCG), Post Nargis Joint Assessment, July 2008

<sup>2</sup> Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC), Inter-Agency Real Time Evaluation of the Response to Cyclone Nargis, December 2008

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The *Disaster Response and Resilience Learning Project* was developed by Save the Children to enhance humanitarian capacity following Cyclone Nargis. Developed as an inter-agency initiative, the project implementation phase from March to October 2009 is targeting 480 staff working with humanitarian organizations - ranging from small and community-based to large and international – to increase learning of concepts and principles related to humanitarian work, including DRR, disaster response, accountability and international standards. The project will be implemented in twelve cyclone-affected townships in Yangon and Ayeyarwady Divisions, selected for their spread across the cyclone-affected area and the proportion of both local and international organizations in operation. Funding for the project has been provided by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK.

## Human Resources

The *project team* is comprised of 1 international Project Manager, and 3 national staff in the roles of Learning & Development Manager, Learning Assessment Officer, and Project Assistant, with complementary skills and experience in project management, humanitarian work, HR and capacity building.

A *steering committee* was formed with 10 members representing Myanmar NGOs (MNGOs), International NGOs (INGOs) and local capacity building and networking organizations to provide feedback, advice, direction, recommendations and support which increased the ability of the project staff to develop appropriate approaches and activities. The monthly committee meetings also provided valuable opportunities for committee members to learn and share from each other's experience in the Cyclone Nargis response.

## Identifying Needs

A *learning needs assessment* was carried out by project staff in order to identify the learning needs and preferences of field-level humanitarian staff working on the Cyclone Nargis response. Eighty-three (83) respondents from MNGOs and INGOs in 2 cyclone-affected townships completed a survey, providing important information which directly informed the objectives and approach of the project.

From the survey it was evident that a great desire existed among the field-level humanitarian staff to increase their knowledge on a wide range of topics and to enhance their professional development. The challenge presented was therefore how to engage a large number of people from different organizations in a comprehensive learning process that would build upon their practical experience with minimal time away from their responsibilities on the response (thereby providing the opportunity for the interventions to be utilized in early response phases of future emergencies).

### *Highlights of learning needs assessment:*

Prior to Cyclone Nargis:

- 48% of respondents worked for a humanitarian organization
- 29% had experience working in an emergency
- 89% had never received training in emergency response, humanitarian principles, disaster preparedness

Of the 46 potential learning topics presented (related to humanitarian principles, disaster preparedness and response, managing projects, working with communities and managing people) all of the topics were selected by more than 50% of respondents

When asked about learning preferences, the majority of respondents selected (a) *with a facilitator providing training in a workshop* and (b) *with a group of people discussing a topic* rather than (c) *on your own with a coach or mentor* or (d) *on your own with reading materials (workbook)*. When asked to consider the same question in the context of a response situation when they have many priorities and a limited amount of time, preferences for options (c) and (d) increased by 15% and 11% respectively.

## Innovative Learning Approach

The project design utilized a relatively new approach, shifting the emphasis from the teacher-centred *training* approach commonly used in Myanmar to a participant-centred *learning* approach.

*Training* refers to an instructor-led, content-based intervention, leading to desired changes in behaviour, while *learning* is characterized by a self-directed, work-based process, leading to increased adaptive capacity.

The approach built upon prior research from such initiatives as the Emergency Capacity Building Project and the Learning Support & Capacity Building Programme (RedR Sri Lanka), which recognized that traditional training programs are often not sufficient to equip national staff for emergency work and that specific learning approaches and ongoing support are required to enhance the learning process.

The project's innovative learning approach emphasizes the following elements:

- *Field-level focus and location:* To meet the specific needs (knowledge and learning methods) which staff require during a response operation, ensuring immediate relevance and transferability to operational field work, and alleviating the time required to travel to HQ locations (e.g. Yangon)
- *On-the-job learning:* A self-directed, work-based learning process requiring commitment and self-discipline to link the resources and information provided to practical experience
- *Peer support:* To encourage staff to learn through their shared experiences and to utilize local networks for ongoing support
- *Personal reflection:* To maximize experiential learning through reflecting back on it, drawing conclusions and deriving principles for future application



*Participants during peer learning activity*

## Project Activities

The activities and resources, developed specifically to support the project's learning approach include: a self-study workbook, workshop, discussion group meeting, and exposure visit, which together comprise the *Disaster Preparedness Program*. All activities

are conducted in the local Burmese language and the workbook and facilitation guides are available in both Burmese and English.

*Disaster Preparedness Program: tailor-made learning activities for field-level humanitarian staff*

*Self-study workbook:* Provides basic information about humanitarian principles and standards, disaster preparedness and response, project management and working with people. The workbook utilizes simple language and provides clear explanations designed to be accessible to a wide audience of Myanmar staff working with community-based, national and international organizations. It also includes reflective questions to help participants to apply and link the topics within their work.

*Workshop:* Introduces many of the topics provided in the workbook through participatory methods and helps to build the participants' comfort and confidence with using the workbook in a self-study manner (which they are expected to do following the workshop). During the workshop participants are encouraged to reflect on the topics and how they relate to their work experience, and to share this with each other.

*Discussion group meeting:* Conducted 3 weeks after the workshop, to provide participants with an opportunity to discuss their learning, ask questions, describe how they applied their learning to their work context, and to collect feedback on the workbook.

*Exposure visit:* Provides an opportunity for the participants to visit another organization to observe and assess innovative activities, programming and alternate processes utilized by other organizations or programs working on the Cyclone Nargis response.

## Learning Facilitators

Three facilitators have been hired on a contractual basis to conduct each month's scheduled activities in 3 townships (concurrently). The facilitators bring significant levels of experience in teaching, training, and facilitation, and were provided with a Training-of-Trainers (ToT) workshop on participatory facilitation skills, conducted by the Centre for Community Empowerment from Vietnam. Their experience coupled with their knowledge of the local context, enabled them to contribute significant ideas and techniques to the



*Learning Facilitator*

development of the project activities as well as to carry them out confidently while effectively engaging a diverse group of participants. The facilitators were not required to have significant humanitarian experience as a prerequisite for their work with the *Disaster Preparedness Program*.

The facilitator's role is to provide guidance and direction to support the participants to meet the learning objectives of the activities. Their role is therefore not to *teach* but rather to *facilitate learning*. The participants are considered the "experts" in humanitarian work as they have significant skills and experience, and the facilitator will help them to share this with each other. This is another significant shift in the learning approach used in Myanmar as the instructor is usually considered to be the expert on the topic and workshop participants are not expected to contribute to or question the learning process.

### **Phase 1 in Kungyangon, Pyapon and Labutta**

Field visits were conducted by project staff to each of the three initial townships in order to identify the organizations working in the area and to utilize a personal, face-to-face approach to share information about the program and its benefits for staff. These visits were essential to ensuring a high level of participation in the program. They generated a significant level of engagement among staff and organizations and further enhanced the staff's knowledge of the local context, allowing them a better grasp of the varied operating styles and capacity needs of organizations in the cyclone-affected areas.

Staff representatives from Save the Children Area Offices and OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) Hub Offices in each township agreed to disseminate and collect application forms on behalf of the project. This was an effective way to overcome the lack of email and fax service. The application forms required applicants to indicate their motivation for participating in the program, and sign-off from their line manager. The programs in all 3 townships were over-subscribed – with a total of 202 applications

received for 120 spaces (40 per township). All applications were thoroughly reviewed using criteria designed to ensure diversity of sectors, positions, organizations and gender.

#### *Workshop attendance in 3 initial townships: Kungyangon, Pyapon, Labutta*

- 120 participants from:
  - 15 Myanmar NGOs
  - 11 International NGOs
  - 4 UN/Inter-governmental agencies



*Applying knowledge from the workbook*



*Participatory approach*



*Exposure visit to shelter project*

## Evaluation and Feedback

Pre- and post-knowledge assessments were utilized in the workshops as a self-assessment tool for the participants to assess their level of understanding on the workshop topics prior to the workshop and again after they completed the workshop. The results of this process were collected by staff in a confidential manner and used to assess the increased knowledge of the participants as an outcome of the workshop.

The results indicate that prior to the workshop most of the participants identified their level of knowledge on the workshop topics as *okay*, *not well* or *not at all*, however after participating in the two day workshop the number of responses in the *excellent* and *very well* categories increased considerably.

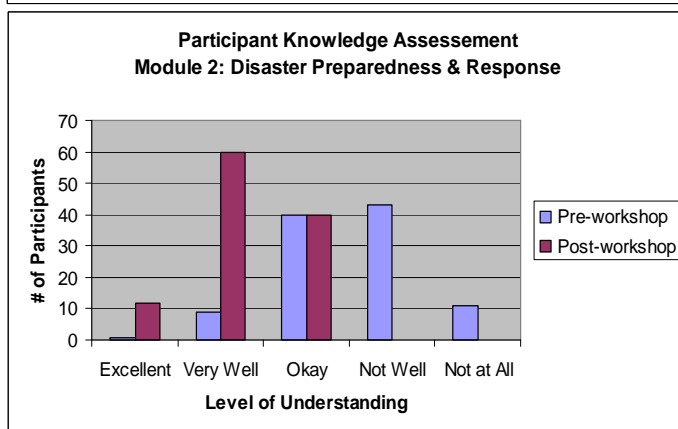
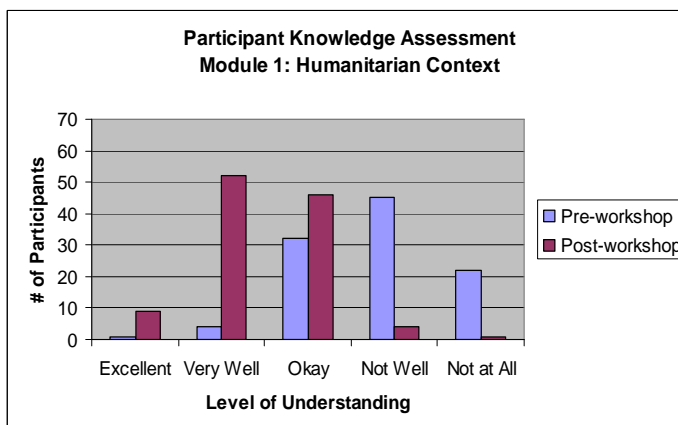
At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to complete a short evaluation form to evaluate and provide feedback on the workshop. When asked to identify the 3 most significant things they learned in the workshop, the majority of responses were related to: *humanitarian principles* (55 responses), *leadership* (47 responses), and *reducing risks and preparing for disasters* (45 responses). Participants were also asked to indicate what other topics they would like to learn about and the most frequently cited topics were: *project management* (14 responses), *disaster response and preparedness* (14 responses), *community-based and child-led DRR* (8 responses).

Feedback on the self-study workbook was very positive and participants appreciated receiving the free resource which provided information on many new topics. Some participants noted that they had difficulty understanding some of the topics on their own, without the support of the facilitator or peers. The discussion group meetings therefore provided an important opportunity for follow-up discussion on specific topics.

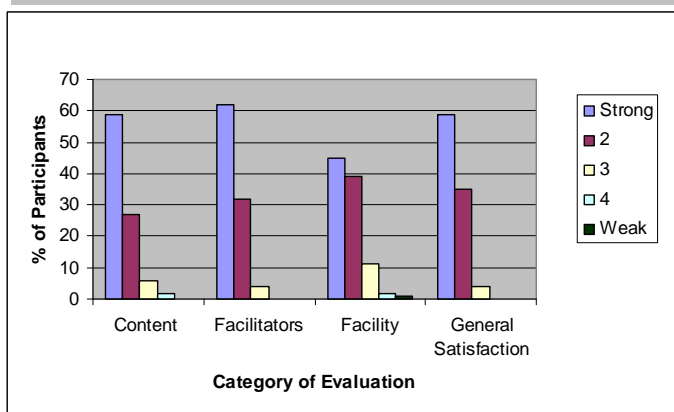
Interest in the exposure visits was very high among the participants, although many found it challenging to apply the information from the workbook and workshop to a practical context. Participants indicated that practical tools and templates would be very beneficial to helping them to apply their knowledge.

Project staff have incorporated many of the suggestions from participants into the program and will continue to evaluate the learning outcomes.

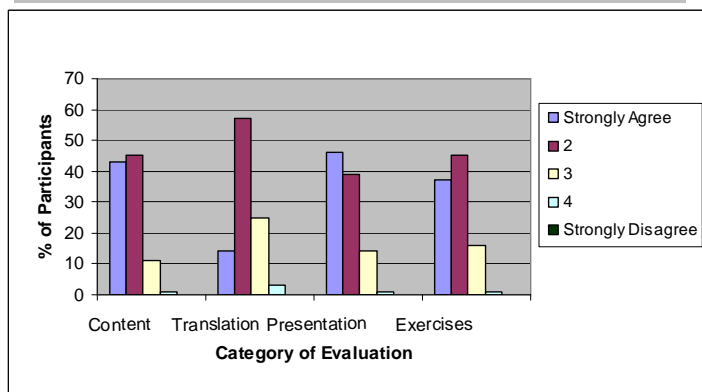
### Results of pre- and post-knowledge assessments (for modules 1&2) from participants in 3 initial workshops:



### Workshop evaluation results:



### Self-study Workbook evaluation results:



## Lessons Learned

### Combine innovative & traditional approaches:

The rationale for developing a self-study workbook was to enable staff to learn on their own without taking them away from their work for significant periods but there was initially concern that the self-study approach would not be effective in Myanmar without a motivation such as a quiz or test. A decision was therefore made to use a traditional learning format (short workshop) to introduce, support and build confidence in the innovative approach (self-study workbook).

Involve facilitators in activity design: Involving the facilitators in the development and review of the learning activities was very beneficial as they contributed local knowledge and experience and it also helped to enhance their commitment to the program.

Draw on local expertise: The steering committee was an important resource for project development. Despite challenges with convening all members for meetings, the value of their contribution was high due to their expertise in emergencies, NGO context, training, etc. It was also imperative in the Myanmar context to consult with local contacts in each township to identify how to obtain permission from local government authorities to conduct training activities.

Secure organizational buy-in: It was important to visit each township for face-to-face meetings with organizations before implementation began to establish relationships with managers and senior personnel who could encourage and support their staff to participate in the program.

Encourage participant commitment: Requiring participants to provide their motivation on the application form prompted them to consider the program objectives and their interest in participating. This consideration helped to ensure individual commitment to the program and attendance at all 4 activities. Requiring sign-off from line managers on the application form helped to ensure accountability and support.

Give time & flexibility to overcome challenges: Lack of communication technology (e.g. internet, fax) created challenges with regard to coordinating the program from Yangon (e.g. distributing and collecting application forms). Sufficient time had to be provided to send paper applications between offices and in some cases project staff needed to travel to the townships to collect them.

Use consistent and transparent selection processes: Having clear selection criteria for identifying program participants was important because the programs have been oversubscribed and the criteria provided guidelines by which to short-list participants. The criteria were also used to explain to organizations and staff why some applicants were not selected. Similarly, selection criteria were also used to identify and provide explanation for the townships where the program will be implemented.

Create opportunities for knowledge transfer: The strong interest participants expressed to transfer and share their knowledge and learning with colleagues and community members exceeded the expectations of project staff. Further consideration should be given to how the program can support this opportunity to expand its reach across the humanitarian sector and communities.

Value staff time and experience: Working within the dynamic context of an emergency means that staff are constantly faced with urgent deadlines, impromptu requests and changing priorities, and this must be recognized and accommodated in order to support their participation in learning activities (e.g. when developing schedules, meeting locations, etc.). All staff regardless of their prior training or experience should be encouraged to contribute their ideas, knowledge and skills to enhance the learning environment.

Promote learning for all staff in an emergency: Feedback from participants has indicated that there are some biases toward prioritizing humanitarian related training for program staff over support staff, however the foundational knowledge provided in this program is essential for all humanitarian and NGO staff – even those not directly engaged in front-line emergency work. It is also evident that training and capacity building opportunities have most often been provided for mid-/senior-level staff, thereby neglecting the learning needs of lower-level and front-line staff, particularly those based in the field. Convening a diverse group of staff from different roles, sectors and programs provided participants with valuable cross-learning opportunities.

## The Way Forward

The initial results of the *Disaster Preparedness Program* have been very positive and they have reinforced the need to continue to support the capacity building of humanitarian staff in Myanmar. As previously stated, the program is targeting 480 humanitarian staff working on the Cyclone Nargis response, however the learning needs of humanitarian staff in Myanmar remain far greater than what the current funded project (until October 2009) can address.

Project staff are currently exploring opportunities to increase the reach of the *Disaster Preparedness Program* through a variety of means, such as:

- Providing Training-of-Trainer (ToT) sessions and encouraging organizations to offer the program to their own staff
- Promoting the program among non-emergency staff, as well as organizations and programs in other parts of Myanmar (outside the cyclone-affected area)
- Establishing linkages with regional and international organizations and capacity building initiatives to adapt the materials and resources for other contexts and languages

Following the experience of Cyclone Nargis, civil society organizations in Myanmar have noted that “staff feel more motivated to work when they feel confident about their skills and knowledge in doing the job”<sup>4</sup> and training sessions have been an integral way in which to enable staff to build their “sense of confidence in themselves”. They have also highlighted a significant need for capacity building and see external organizations as being well placed to assist. Through continued inter-agency collaboration and stakeholder engagement it is hoped that the *Disaster Preparedness Program* will continue to support the continuous learning of staff and the development of the humanitarian sector in Myanmar.

### *Disaster Preparedness Program in Action*

Save the Children in Myanmar’s Human Resources Department is developing a new staff induction process that will utilize the self-study workbook and a customized version of the workshop, to employ a minimum competency in disaster preparedness for all country staff.



*Program participant receiving certificate*

### **For more information on the *Disaster Preparedness Program*, please contact:**

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<sup>4</sup> Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies (Cambodia),  
 Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil  
 Society’s Response to Cyclone Nargis, 2009