

Reflections on Delta Committee Research

Key Challenges for International and Local NGOs

In 2009, the Local Resource Centre and Dan Church Aid produced research reports exploring the work of committees who were formed in Nargis affected areas to support local level relief and recovery activities. These are reflections from Paung Ku based on the research and our own experience.

Central level processes will often reflect village level processes

Most committees surveyed (in LRC research) reported that they were more worried about accountability to the funding agency than the community. In many cases, communities themselves were not informed of the project (information was kept within the committee itself). This may partly be because of Myanmar cultural tendencies. However, it may primarily be related to the fact that committees felt that they were implementing the *agency's* project (not their *own* or their *community's* project). The impetus and responsibility for increasing downward accountability and information sharing with communities needs to begin with agencies themselves being transparent and involving committees and communities in designing programs.

The LRC research reported that some committees felt they had very little power in deciding what they wanted to do. This feeling is likely replicated throughout the system. For example, it is likely that the field staff working with those committees felt that they had very little power to decide about their own agencies program in that region. It is also likely that the relief agencies' field level manager felt that they had little power to influence the overall program. Building community level participation cannot be done in isolation, it needs to be done in parallel with reform of relief agencies themselves at other levels.

Rapid implementation can also be participatory

Participation is often characterized to be in tension with speed of intervention. It is assumed that if we want to act quickly in emergencies we need to reduce involvement of beneficiaries. This is not the case. Communities and community based groups are actually able to identify needs and formulate plans extremely quickly in emergency settings. (Paung Ku received hundreds of proposals from community based groups in the first few weeks of the response).

Real participation is often in tension with Central Planning

Participatory, community led emergency responses will be diverse by nature. Each community or group will identify their key needs which will differ from village to village. (Paung Ku received hundreds of proposals in the first few weeks, each of these had a slightly different emphasis based on the perceived needs of local groups and communities). Participation is therefore often in tension with Planning. If larger agencies are to change toward being participatory and downwardly accountable it will dramatically change the way they do emergency planning (and donor proposals!). It is impossible to centrally plan details and activities for an emergency response that is truly participatory (it will be far too diverse).

How much do we dictate the way groups are formed?

In working with committees, we understandably want them to be representative of their communities and particularly of vulnerable groups. Therefore, we want more women, more people living with disability, more children, more elderly, more people living with HIV to be part of groups. However, the more we dictate the shape of groups, the more they become external

groups rather than community groups. Should we simply let communities form their own groups and address power issues in other ways?

How do power structures change?

Most committees emerge from a pre existing social network or structure (eg *thaye naye ahpwe*). Changing power and decision making structures in these groups and communities is more complicated than adding the presence of people from a vulnerable groups (the LRC research clearly shows this about gender).

What can happen is that

- The involvement is token and the person does not understand why they are there, which ultimately does little to change decision making.
- Or the committee places are given to someone who fits the criteria but may also be a power holder (the example of wealthy women being chosen to be on the committee),
- If there are multiple committees in a village, the power holders are on all of them and there are different other members

Actual power structure change and participation will come through increased understanding and slow changes amongst both men and women, young and old. Further, in some cases it has been noted that it is advantageous (for relationships with authorities etc) for groups to have some power holders as members. Are there more effective ways to look at issues of power within the emergency setting than simply dictating group members?

Why do we expect committees to last?

Many agencies state that they formed village based committees to increase sustainability. Even in the development setting most externally formed committees do not last beyond the end of the project cycle. Why do we expect that they will be sustainable in emergency settings? The reality is that almost all of them will cease at the end of the program (LRC research showed that few of them had a plan beyond the project). When we think about building a vision for the future shouldn't we start by focusing on the village's own social structures rather than externally formed, project based ones? Externally formed relief and recovery committees may not be the right vehicle for thinking about future development in the village.

We need to let go of the idea that we can tick every box

We often assume that our agency may be able to meet all recommendations about implementation from coordination and planning to participation and accountability. In reality, as things are often in tension (as we have seen above), **every intervention makes compromises**. What agencies need to do is be clear about which areas they are focusing on and which ones they are not focusing on.

Overall, it seems that the needs for reform and capacity building lie more with international agencies themselves than with committees. Committees formed in villages will largely reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the agencies that form them. While the research and studies focused on committees it seems that it ended up saying more about the external agencies themselves.

Paung Ku is a consortium initiative started in Myanmar in 2007 and designed to strengthen civil society through capacity building, changing practice, facilitating networks and enhancing advocacy. The initiative has funded over five hundred civil society groups during the last two years, the majority of which are in Nargis affected areas.

Paung Ku welcomes any advice, comments or questions on these issues. These can be directed to Paung Ku Advisor Tamas Wells twells@savechildren.org.mm