



A focus group discussion with women, led by Oxfam staff in Dedaye township in the Delta region of Myanmar. (Oxfam)

MYANMAR CASE STUDY

Putting women at the centre of disaster risk reduction

Men and women in Myanmar have, in principle, equal rights and women play a role in all spheres of society. However, gender discrimination is still widespread. There are very limited opportunities for women's leadership at all levels. Gender-based violence, mostly against women, is widespread, particularly in conflict areas. In the aftermath of cyclone Nargis, Oxfam set up a programme in Dedaye Township, which aimed to restore primary production and income levels, establish social safety nets, and promote alternative skills-based livelihoods options. The programme took two main approaches: to identify and address vulnerability to risk and to foster the development of women's livelihoods. This both directly benefits women, who are among the most vulnerable members of the community, and improves the capacity of the whole community to withstand natural hazards.

INTRODUCTION

Cyclone Nargis struck southern Myanmar in May 2008, sweeping through the Ayeyarwady delta region and the country's largest city, Yangon, causing widespread destruction. Buildings, infrastructure and communications were severely damaged and flooding was widespread. The estimated number of people affected was as high as 2.4 million, with an official death toll of 77,738 and 55,917 missing.

The consequences of the cyclone were extremely severe for the families in the region who rely on farming, fishing and casual labour to generate an income. Oxfam conducted its first assessment in Dedaye Township, one of the areas of the Ayeyarwady region, in September 2008. From the assessment, we found that farmers and fishers lost up to 60% of tools, equipment and inputs needed for their livelihoods activities. In addition, indebtedness increased as interest rates went up after the cyclone, discouraging many borrowers.

Women and disasters

Men and women in Myanmar have, in principle, equal rights and women play a role in all spheres of society. However, gender discrimination is still widespread. For example, the higher attainment of women at university level in Myanmar is contradicted by the lower levels of adult literacy, with significant illiteracy among ethnic minority women. There are very limited opportunities for women's leadership at all levels. Gender-based violence, mostly against women, is widespread, particularly in conflict areas.

Oxfam believes that gender inequality in disasters essentially reflects gender relations in society. Owing to different life experiences, women and men differ in how they experience, respond to, and recover from disasters. Oxfam mainstreams gender into all its programmes to promote gender equality.

Oxfam recognizes that weather-related destruction of livelihoods often affects women more than men. Moreover, as could be seen in Dedaye Township, women's participation is essential to increase community resilience to disasters as well as to aid recovery when disasters do occur.

Therefore mainstreaming gender into disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies offers the opportunity to re-examine gender relations in society from different angles and enhance gender equality in socioeconomic development.

Promoting women's livelihoods as a DRR strategy

In the aftermath of cyclone Nargis, Oxfam set up a programme in Dedaye Township, which aimed to restore primary production and income levels, establish social safety nets, and promote alternative skills-based livelihoods options.

Oxfam's projects in Dedaye Township took two main approaches: to identify and address vulnerability to risk and to foster the development of women's livelihoods. This both directly benefits women, who are among the most vulnerable members of the community, and improves the capacity of the whole community to withstand natural hazards.

PVCA AND ACTION PLANS

Before any intervention, Oxfam works with villagers to carry out assessments and create action plans. First Oxfam staff asked villagers do a 'Participatory Capacity and Vulnerability Assessment' (PCVA). During the PCVA process, all community members talk about and agree what strengths they have, who are the most vulnerable people in their community, and what hazards they face (see box: 'The Gender Clock').

The PVCA process builds a profile of the village physically and socially. Typically, through conducting the PCVA, it reveals that villagers think that women, old people, disabled people, children, and poor people are the most vulnerable. Villagers also find that women do have contributions to make to the village as a whole and have capabilities that are different from those of men. These capacities add to the diversity and increase the total resources available in the village. In addition, the PVCA process can highlight the degree of risks when facing natural hazards. Through this improved understanding of the risks, of who is vulnerable, and of their capacities, the villagers can start to create an action plan.

The Gender Clock

In Myanmar society, men and even women themselves do not always see the value of the work that women do, such as taking care of the household, cooking, cleaning, washing, and engaging in small-scale trade. Oxfam has taken a unique approach to getting men and women to understand the value of what each sex does: men and women sit in separate groups and list what they do in a twenty-four hour period from waking up till going to sleep. Activities such as going out to the fields, cooking a meal, doing chores, sitting in a teashop, and even watching the latest instalment of a Korean television series may come up in the twenty-four hour descriptions. Once completed, men and women exchange their 'clocks' and put a monetary value on each of the listed activities. There is much laughter and joking, but usually there is also a moment of insight when both men and women realize that women's work actually has a high financial value. Even though women often do not earn money, it becomes clear that women contribute a lot with their services. Thereby, women themselves begin to see the monetary value of what they do. In sum, the gender clock fosters change in people's attitudes towards women and their value in the village.

A common element to the DRR action plans is the focus on infrastructure accessible to both women and men, e.g. building a stronger bridge or improving the structure of a village school so it can be used as a refuge in case of a natural disaster.

Oxfam reviews the action plans that the villagers develop to ensure that these plans help to reduce the vulnerabilities of women and other vulnerable people. For example, in a village where the action plan calls for repairing embankments Oxfam encourages the villagers to repair those of the most vulnerable people first. As part of the strategy to promote greater gender equality, Oxfam chooses women rather than men as representatives of their households. In this, women can become the main beneficiaries with control over money and decision-making.

LIVELIHOODS PROJECTS

Oxfam's livelihoods projects focus on encouraging women to take on new responsibilities, both in farming and in business.

In Myanmar farming activities are divided according to sex. Men are responsible for most of the duties, and women have a vital role through their tasks of weeding and transplanting seedlings into fields. Given this cultural reality, Oxfam has found that it may be self-defeating to insist on having a set percentage of women being involved in some livelihoods programmes. At the same time, Oxfam has been able to help some villagers create opportunities for women to earn money in non-traditional ways (see box: 'Machinery Rental Programme').

Machinery Rental Programme

In one community, Oxfam assisted women to set up a business to rent out agricultural machinery. The women were faced with a lot of resistance at first, but their business became accepted as soon as the villagers realized that the women do not have to know how to run agricultural equipment in order to rent it out.

Grain Banks

Grain banks are an effective way to improve the food security of a village, especially in the aftermath of a disaster when food resources are scarce, whilst also promoting greater equality between the sexes. Oxfam encourages villagers to form committees or farmer 'user groups' consisting of at least 40% women, thereby ascribing women a more vital role with regard to the development of the village. Through managing grain banks, women become critical to their running and also improve their management skills. In addition, there is a greater chance that the whole family will be less vulnerable to malnutrition when women are given control over food security.

Women's Income Generation Group

Oxfam has also set up a Women's Income Generation Group (WIGG) and encourages women to consider alternative ways of income generation. For example, raising piglets is been a popular livelihoods option in Myanmar. However, in practice the high costs connected to raising piglets mean that women cannot save much over the course of a

year. Working through the WIGG, women have been encouraged to discuss alternative options, such as collective action and group saving. They found it effective to set up a group and collectively provide feed for the piglets. Furthermore, generating income through other livelihoods options was considered. Raising ducks turned out to be more practical for the women and promised to be more profitable: the duck eggs could be sold and by pickling them their market value could be increased. The WIGG also provided information about other income generation models for women such as soap and candle making or growing mushrooms.

LESSONS LEARNED

Benefits

The DRR action plans are widely beneficial to villagers and authorities alike. Community members can show their plans to local authorities, who can provide the villagers with the permissions needed. With such successes, the villagers develop greater confidence to negotiate with local authorities. This is a significant change in an environment where villagers usually believe that local authorities will not respond to their needs.

Furthermore, Oxfam has found that the implementation of the DRR action plans succeeds best when the projects make use of local expertise and local labour. Sharing the local knowledge and expertise with relevant government ministries such as the Ministry of Agriculture can be an effective way to spread it to other regions and also helps to improve the skills of ministerial staff.

Oxfam's experience with grain banks and the agricultural machinery rental venture show that, while at times it is necessary to accept cultural realities, such sensitivity does not preclude implementing projects that place women in positions of central responsibility.

By encouraging women to take up leadership positions in the various committees formed, other women in the community may aspire to similar positions. As the proportion of women who make decisions increases, the role of women as decision-makers in society becomes more visible and acceptable.

Challenges

Oxfam has found that denial about the reality of the situation of women is common among male leaders. They believe that they represent and understand women and men equally, even though there is a strong tendency for women to be less involved in committees and organisations than men, especially in decision-making.

Cultural practices also present a challenge. For example, gambling is common among women in Myanmar, which opens up the possibility of financial assistance being misused.

Another challenge is the lack of a wider perspective among the villagers. Oxfam elicits ideas from women and other vulnerable populations about what to do to improve their livelihoods. Yet, some of these ideas may be of limited practical use or not in their long-term interests.

When looking at long-term changes in women's position in society, men may not always appear to resist programmes like the ones Oxfam carries out. However, there can be difficulties when trying to promote women to take positions where men have decision-making power. In addition, women who have found their way to such positions, e.g. on committees, are often related to powerful local men. Oxfam is therefore concerned with inadvertently spreading the influence of some men by promoting the participation of women.

A continuing challenge in working with WIGGs is the size of the group: in a large group each woman receives only a small share if the profits are divided equally. However, financial profit is not the only goal of these programmes. As women come to have greater earning power and control over money, the power relations in the communities are changing, and women gain more power over assets and decisions.

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