

## Farming together to overcome fear and mistrust in Rakhine state, Myanmar



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MAUNGDAW, Myanmar, December 29 (UNHCR) – For 18 months they lived side by side but did not see or talk to each other. Following the 2012 inter-communal violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state, Muslim and Buddhist neighbours in this mixed village in northern Rakhine state were divided by fear and mistrust even though they were not directly affected by the unrest.

But they could not ignore the realities their forefathers had accepted. "The people of this village depend on each other," said

Khine Myat San,\* an ethnic Rakhine woman in the village. "Rakhine women used to sell vegetables in the Muslim hamlet, and Muslim men have been habitually hired as labour by Rakhine families."

In the country's second poorest state, paddy cultivation is one of the main sources of income and the two communities used to cooperate for agricultural and trading purposes. Luckily their leaders understood the importance of maintaining and restoring traditional links, and have progressively re-established a dialogue in some locations.

As a member of a mixed "agricultural committee," Khine Myat San speaks proudly of her efforts to promote a harmonious environment and enhance economic opportunities in her village. Her committee received farming machinery from UNHCR this year – part of an initiative to encourage reconciliation and coexistence in the wake of the violence that displaced more than 140,000 people.

UNHCR has spoken to numerous community leaders about livelihood activities that could lead to further interaction in their area. Early this year a meeting was called so that all community representatives could set out the basis for their cooperation. It was the first time that Muslim villagers were able to access the Rakhine hamlet in one-and-a-half years.

The committee members recall it as a moment of joy. "At the beginning we were all afraid that something might go wrong, but when we saw each other, we relaxed, and the meeting went well," said committee member Osman Johar.\*

Today the agricultural committee members gathered in the house of the village administrator to highlight the benefits of their interaction and appreciate UNHCR's help in this process. When asked how often they held meetings, they looked at each other and burst into loud laughter: "We see each other every day we don't need to make an appointment for that."

Six villages have benefitted from this UNHCR initiative to support agricultural activities and improve income. Since the beginning of the year, UNHCR has helped more than 800 farmers by providing 18 small tractors, six rice mills, six harvesters, 12 water pumps and 45 tons of fertilizer. As a sign of their commitment, the committee members contribute an equal amount of fertilizer.

Where the villagers previously relied on manpower and cattle to plough their lands, the



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Members of a mixed farming cooperative work together in the fields. The initiative helps overcome fear and mistrust and produces bigger harvests.

introduction of farming technology is expected to increase rice production while reminding people how they used to work together.

The project primarily targets communities that face irrigation problems and limited resources while trying to cultivate winter crops during the dry season. Equipment like water pumps decreases cultivation costs and improves irrigation.

Following this example of positive collaboration between the two communities, another 10 projects have been approved by the local authorities and the machinery will be delivered to the committee members in January.

While much more remains to be done to promote reconciliation between the communities, there are hopes that projects like this can start to sow the seeds for dialogue. As Khine Myat San observed, "We need to stay together. If we continue our lives separately, there will be risk of more misunderstandings, and violence might happen again."

*\* Names changed for protection reasons*