

# ... in case of emergency

How communities in Myanmar  
prepare for and respond  
sustainably to natural  
disasters



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Humanitarian Aid  
and Civil Protection

**Front cover:** Early warning village task forces have been established who work to ensure their communities receive timely information regarding extreme weather.

**Page 4-5:** ActionAid has distributed radios in the most vulnerable villages to ensure access to weather forecasts.

**Page 6-7:** Villagers are now prepared to safely store their most important livelihood equipment – such as fishing nets and fertilisers – as soon as the early warning task force notifies them.

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respond sustainably to natural disasters







# Foreword

Myanmar is extremely vulnerable to a variety of natural disasters and its people have a long history of coping with the devastating impacts of floods, tidal surges, cyclones, earthquakes and drought. Often they receive little, if any, help from outside their community.

In 2008 Cyclone Nargis claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and caused massive damage in the densely populated Ayeyarwaddy Delta. Cyclone Nargis turned out to be the worst natural disaster in Myanmar's recorded history, exacerbated by the fact that the population received no warning or immediate aid.

One positive outcome of Cyclone Nargis, however, was that the Myanmar government as well as the international community recognised the urgent need for mutual collaboration on disaster risk reduction activities.

The DIPECHO programme was initiated shortly after Cyclone Nargis

by the European Commission's Department for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (DG-ECHO). Having been engaged with community based disaster risk reduction in Myanmar since 2007, ActionAid now leads the Consortium funded by the current DIPECHO Action Plan in 2012 – 2013.

With this booklet we wish to showcase how ActionAid is supporting Myanmar communities in the building of sustainable methods to both prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

We wish to thank DG-ECHO who generously funds the project as well as our fellow Consortium partners, HelpAge International, Oxfam GB, Plan International, Malteser International and UN Habitat.

*Shihab Uddin Ahamad*  
Country Director  
ActionAid Myanmar





# Introduction

Myanmar ranks as the most at-risk country in Asia-Pacific in terms of natural hazards, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Medium to large-scale floods, cyclones, earthquakes, landslides or tsunamis occur every couple of years causing death and destruction as well as setting back development interventions.

Through ActionAid's work as part of the Myanmar Consortium for Community Resilience, our target areas in the Delta have increased their knowledge, capacities and tools to prepare for and respond to extreme weather and changes in their climate including developing their own village action plans.

Together with two local partners, Action for Social Aid and Knowledge and Dedication for Nation Building, ActionAid has been working in Pyapon, Labutta and Kyunsu townships, reaching almost 43,000 people in 42 villages.

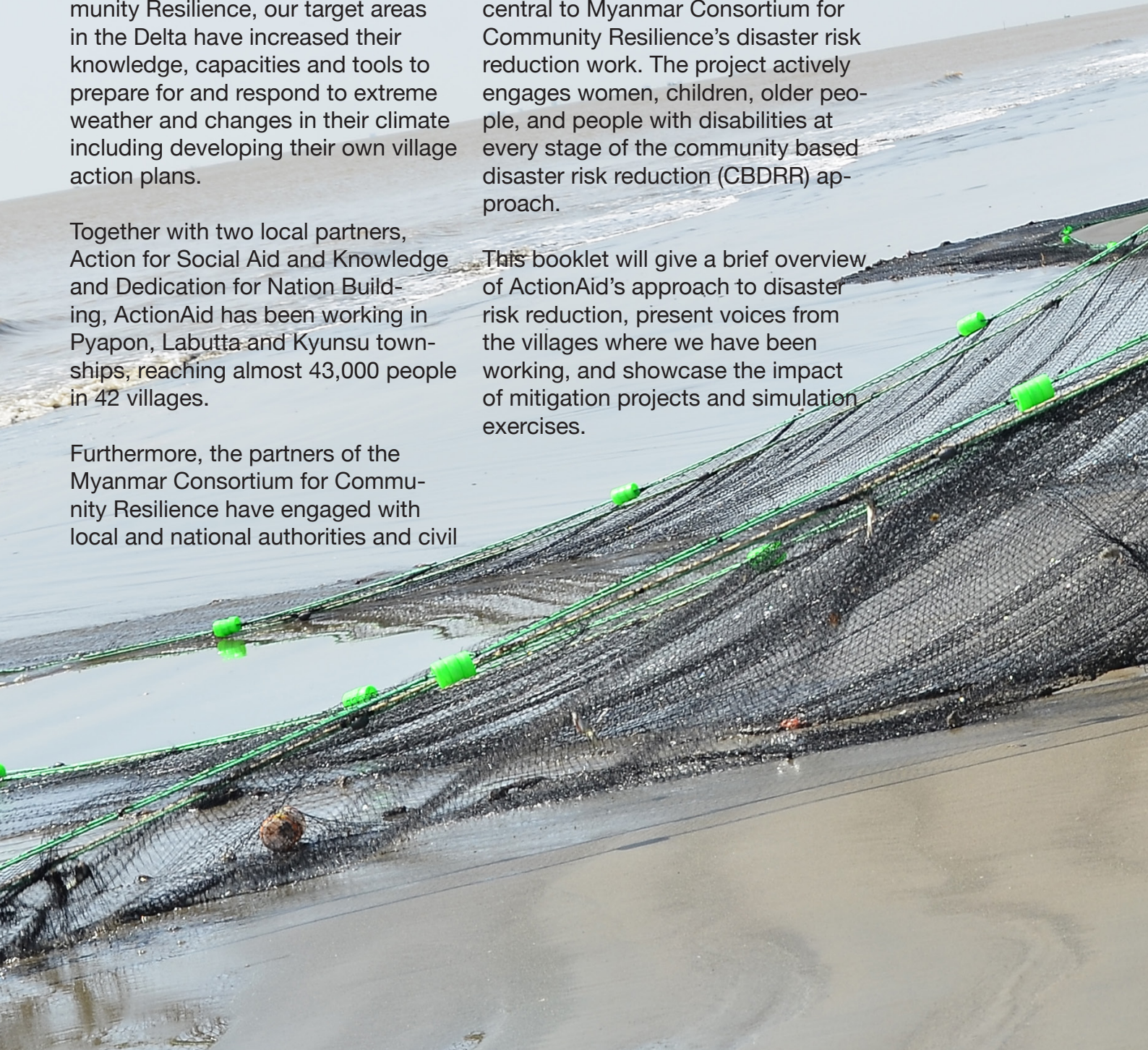
Furthermore, the partners of the Myanmar Consortium for Community Resilience have engaged with local and national authorities and civil

society organisations to support the implementation of improved policies and plans within a better functioning institutional framework.

At the national level the Consortium has been cooperating closely with the Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group to enhance coordination and to provide support to key government agencies.

The principle of inclusiveness is central to Myanmar Consortium for Community Resilience's disaster risk reduction work. The project actively engages women, children, older people, and people with disabilities at every stage of the community based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) approach.

This booklet will give a brief overview of ActionAid's approach to disaster risk reduction, present voices from the villages where we have been working, and showcase the impact of mitigation projects and simulation exercises.



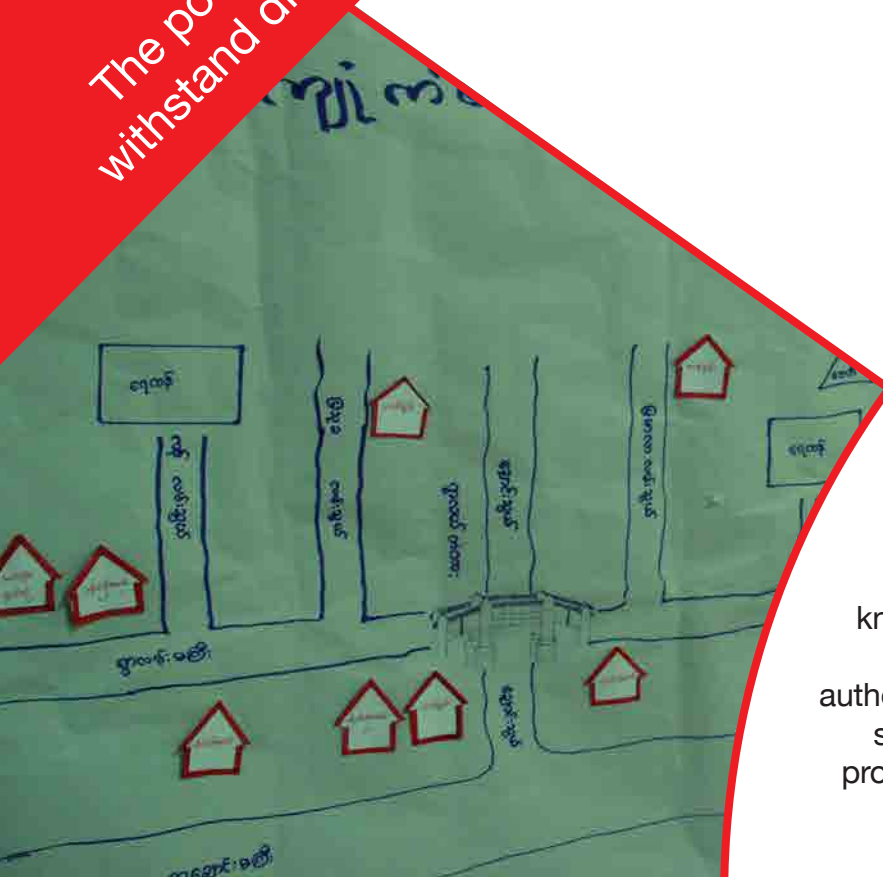






# Approach

The power to  
withstand disaster



Fellows (community mobilisers) are at the heart of ActionAid's approach. They are young people with leadership potential, elected by their own community members and living in the village where they work. Here they facilitate a process where everyone gets together to examine their vulnerabilities and find opportunities for action. Through this process people acquire new skills and knowledge and find new ways to work together as a community and to collaborate with local authorities. The process also results in community specific action plans for small-scale mitigation projects that will improve disaster preparedness.



Village Disaster Management Committees and Task Forces (focusing on early warning, first aid, and search and rescue) are established in each village to ensure that individuals are not confronting emergencies alone and that disaster risk reduction is organised in a sustainable and inclusive way. Members of the committees identify the most vulnerable people in the community to make sure that they are protected in case of emergency. The committees are also forums for community members to organise disaster risk reduction activities such as small-scale mitigation projects, simulation exercises and liaisons with local authorities.

The power of  
working together







The power of  
just governance

Knowing that collaboration between citizens and government is essential to improved disaster management, ActionAid supports community members on engaging with local authorities as well as the national government's capacity for bottom-up planning, which will improve overall accountability. Further, ActionAid is one of the leading organisations in the Myanmar Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group, which enhances cooperation and coordination and extends support to key government departments in their efforts to improve systems and policies and fulfil their international commitments.

The communities ActionAid works with have experienced disasters previously and each individual have their own knowledge and coping strategies. By bringing people together to reflect on disasters ActionAid facilitates the sharing of this knowledge in an organised way, ensuring that future plans will be based on this. ActionAid further provides a range of trainings for Fellows, members of Village Disaster Management Committees and Task Forces as well as other community members. Realising the importance of learning by doing ActionAid also supports the communities to organise simulation exercises to practice newly learned skills and knowledge.



The power of  
knowledge



# »Now we can save everyone«

In May 2013 a cyclone warning activated the disaster preparedness procedures in Po Laung village. Now was the time to test whether the DIPECHO project had indeed enabled the community to better prepare for and respond sustainably to natural disasters.







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Po Laung village is extremely vulnerable to extreme weather. Located only a few miles from open sea on the southernmost tip of Myanmar's Ayeyarwaddy Delta, the village is prone to flooding, tidal waves and, not least of all, cyclones. In May 2008 Cyclone Nargis claimed the lives of an estimated 200 people in the village and swept away nearly every house, livestock animal, and piece of vital livelihood equipment.

When Po Laung village received warning of an approaching cyclone in May 2013 everyone knew exactly how serious the consequences could be.

»With Nargis in mind we worried a lot and prepared for the worst. Fortunately, this time we had improved our procedures a lot,« says Village Leader Myo Lwin, 36.

The DIPECHO project has supported disaster risk reduction activities in Po Laung for the past three years.

A Village Disaster Management Committee (VDMC) has been established as well as three task forces concentrating on early warning, first aid and search and rescue respectively. The elected members have received extensive training, organised simulation exercises and initiated mitigation projects in order to improve safety and resilience in the village.

### A very real threat

»Last year we had a simulation exercise. Everyone did take it seriously but no one really worried because they knew it was just a drill. But this year the threat was very real and people were truly afraid,« says ActionAid Fellow Win Pa Pa Kyaw, 28.

The warning was received via radio as well as directly from township authorities three days before Cyclone Mahasen could potentially make landfall in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta.



**Previous page:** Myint Oo, member of the early warning task force, is proud to know that everyone could have been saved if Cyclone Mahasen had made landfall in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta.

**Left:** ActionAid Fellow Win Pa Pa Kyaw has facilitated the process that led the village to construct two new concrete bridges.

**Right:** Yin Nyunt was relieved to hear that Cyclone Mahasen had changed its course.



Village Leader Myo Lwin, who is also the head of the Village Disaster Management Committee, immediately organised a meeting to clarify the responsibilities of each group. He then requested local shop owners to deposit rice and other food items in the cyclone shelter to ensure sufficient provisions in case of an emergency.

»Fortunately, the shop owners were happy to do so, realising that their stocks would be safer in the cyclone shelter. We got 20 bags of rice, which in itself is enough to feed half of the village for five days. On top of this, most people were ready to bring their private rations to the shelter,« says Myo Lwin.

Meanwhile, the early warning task force performed a house-to-house canvass to tell local people to be ready for a potential evacuation.

»About 300 people decided to evacuate to the shelter right away. Some because they are poor and their houses are weak, others simply because they were too afraid not to,« says Myint Oo, 50, a member of the early warning task force.

Myint Oo joined the task force in August 2012. After receiving three trainings on early warning and disaster risk reduction he now spends about one day per week on related volunteer work.

»The most interesting thing I learned at the training was how to identify the most vulnerable people in the village. We now keep lists of where they live so we can ensure that someone will be assigned to help them in case of emergency,« says Myint Oo.

One of the villagers who chose to evacuate immediately was Yin Nyunt, 76, who lives with her husband in a small thatched house on the outskirts of the Po Laung.

»Remembering Nargis made me too afraid to stay at home. Back then I had to run through wind and flooding to find shelter, but this time I could walk there easily because we were informed well ahead of time. I took my clothes, a mosquito net, and my household registration form...later my children brought me food. I then spent three days in the shelter staring into space, worrying about my home and the days ahead,« says Yin Nyunt.

## Improved infrastructure

Had the local populace been warned and evacuated prior to the arrival of Cyclone Nargis, many lives could have been saved in Po Laung as well as the rest of the Ayeyarwaddy Delta.

»Almost 200 people were working in the fields that day. They all died. Four people took shelter in the local





school. They died when the building collapsed over them. After the cyclone only five houses and one monastery were left standing, everything else was destroyed. Over night we lost all means of livelihood, important documents, and our food and clean water. We only had coconuts to eat and drink,« says Myint Myint Cho, 52, member of the local first aid task force.

Po Laung is a relatively large village of 3,300 people constituting 720 households, most of which make their living from small-scale farming and fishing. The village has yet to fully recover from the devastating effects of Cyclone Nargis.

»Before Nargis the village was much better off. We had more houses and more people living here because business was strong. Our wholesale fish market was destroyed during the cyclone, so today hundreds of people have left for other areas to find work,«

says ActionAid Fellow Win Pa Pa Kyaw.

The lessons from Cyclone Nargis motivated the community to actively engage in the activities of the DIPECHO project.

»We now monitor the weather forecasts and stay in the village if we receive warning of a cyclone. Everyone has been informed about how to package important items such as documents, food and medicines. Our early warning procedures ensure a timely evacuation with designated people taking special care of children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Volunteers are ready to stand alongside the route to the cyclone shelter to show the way in case of flooding or strong winds. We are prepared to secure enough food and water for the shelters. Also, we are working to improve our infrastructure in general, especially by constructing stronger bridges,« says Village Leader Myo Lwin.



**Left:** The children of Po Laung need to cross the bridge every day to reach school, which motivated Maw Maw, a tailor and mother of four, to volunteer her labour during construction.

**Right:** Village Leader Myo Lwin is also the head of the local Village Disaster Management Committee.



ActionAid Fellow Win Pa Pa Kyaw has facilitated a participatory process in the village using a range of, primarily visual, tools that allow people to analyse their situation, identify vulnerabilities, and prioritise solutions.

»Drawing the problem tree made it clear for us that our first priority should be to build two new bridges from the village to the cyclone shelter. The wooden bridges we had were not very strong and might collapse during an evacuation,« says Win Pa Pa Kyaw.

The total cost of the two bridges would be around 4,700 USD, of which the DIPECHO project funded about 2,300 USD while the remaining amount was collected in the village. Many local people, such as Maw Maw, a tailor and mother of four, age 45, also volunteered their labour.

»The bridge is near my house and my children cross it everyday on their way to school, so I wanted to help improve it,« says Maw Maw.

She volunteered on the day when the bridge's concrete pillars were cast. This was some of the most challenging work because it had to be completed within one day.

»There were 50 people participating.

The men were mixing the concrete and the women carried it in buckets and poured it into the mold. Compared to tailoring it was very hard work, but it was also fun; it is not very often that we all work together like that,« says Maw Maw.

## Perfect procedures

In May 2013 the efficiency of most DIPECHO project activities in Po Laung village came to the test – and passed. After three days on high alert, the villagers were relieved to hear that Cyclone Mahasen had changed its course and turned away from the Ayeyarwaddy Delta.

During an evaluation meeting, the Village Disaster Management Committee concluded that the procedures are essentially perfect. The one thing the members are considering for improvement is the system for collecting provisions; they agree it would be better to have a separate budget for this instead of relying on the goodwill of individual shopkeepers.

»I am so happy and proud about how we handled the Mahasen warning. Now we can save everyone because we are so organised and well prepared. Everyone knew exactly how to react,« says Myint Oo.



# Mitigation

No village is the same and consequently most villages have very different needs when it comes to better coping with extreme weather. ActionAid's approach enables each community we work with to identify, prioritise and construct targeted small-scale mitigation projects















## A storage building for vital equipment

The villagers of Ta Mar Pin have decided to construct a storage building to keep their most important equipment – such as fishing nets and fertiliser – safe in case of emergency. This will give the villagers a chance of returning to their livelihoods soon after any emergency.

The DIPECHO project funded the construction with 1,500 USD while the community members contributed another 2,000 USD.

**Left:** About 15 people from Ta Mar Pin village volunteered their labour every day for two weeks to construct the storage building.

**Above:** Both men and women have participated in the construction work; The building will be made of wood with a zinc roof; A young girl takes a closer look at the village map, which shows where the storage building will be located; Paddy farming is one of the main livelihoods in Ta Mar Pin village.









## A road to the cyclone shelter

A concrete road through the village was the first priority for the people of Kyone Kan. Not only will it help everyone find their way to the cyclone shelter despite wind and water levels; it will also solve a range of social issues by improving access to the local school, market, and several other important institutions.

The DIPECHO project funded the road with 3,000 USD, the remaining 1,700 USD was raised in the community.

**Left:** Each household had to pay a minimum of 5 USD towards the road construction costs. Some volunteered larger donations; one businessman contributed 400 USD.

**Above:** The households were divided into groups of 30, each responsible for constructing 500 feet of road; Men and women alike worked diligently on the project for several weeks; Producing dried shrimps is an important source of income in Kyone Kan village.









## A fence to protect the school

The people of Pha Yar Lay Su village have decided to construct a fence around the village school, which also serves as a shelter and storage building. This will keep people, provisions and equipment safe from animals and thieves in the event of a natural disaster.

The DIPECO project funded the fence with 1,000 USD while almost the same amount was raised in the community.

**Left:** Women from Pha Yar Lay Su village tying metal wire to the concrete pillars of the fence.

**Above:** Women and men, young and old; Everyone shared the workload equally under the hot sun – mixing concrete, casting, digging, carrying, and tying the metal wires to construct the new fence around the local school compound.









## A bridge to the cyclone shelter

The villagers of Kone Tan decided to build a new bridge to improve access to the cyclone shelter. The bridge will also connect the two parts of the village on either side of the river. The old, structurally unsound bamboo bridge was unsafe to cross and needed much maintenance.

About 4,500 USD were funded by the DIPECO project while the community added another 1,000 USD to cover the total cost.

**Left:** Four young volunteers and members of the Village Disaster Management Committee standing on the newly constructed bridge after a hard day's work.

**Above:** Each household contributed between 5 and 50 USD and everyone was encouraged to volunteer their work during the bridge construction; The new bridge will also improve the passage across the river for bicycles, motorbikes and pushcarts.



»Support from  
older women gave  
me strength«





Kay Thi Khaing has faced many challenges working as an ActionAid Fellow in Aung Hlaing village. At one point she almost gave up, but soon she found strength to continue through the support from a group of older women.







Kay Thi Khaing was only 17 when she became an ActionAid Fellow in Aung Hlaing village in 2010. Despite being elected for the position at a village meeting she felt insecure about her own abilities, having no experience with community mobilisation or disaster risk reduction.

Her confidence soon suffered a severe blow: when she called a village meeting to initiate the DIPECHO project no one showed up.

»They didn't respect me because I was so young,« says Kay Thi Khaing.

She talked to the Village Leader who helped organise a new meeting with full attendance.

»But I was still very disappointed with myself for not being able to convince people to attend even one, single meeting. After a couple of months I was ready to quit,« says Kay Thi Khaing.

She shared her feelings with an experienced older woman in the village and asked her to help find a more suitable person to take over the position as ActionAid Fellow.

»But she told me to not give up so easily, that I was the right person for the position thanks to all the training I had already received from ActionAid,« says Kay Thi Khaing.

From then on a group of older women promised Kay Thi Khaing to support her disaster risk reduction endeavours.

## A bridge and a clinic

The women of Aung Hlaing are generally very active in community affairs.

When the DIPECHO project was initiated a Village Disaster Management Committee as well as three task forces on early warning, first aid, and search and rescue were



**Previous page:** Villagers from Mingalar Thaung Tan, volunteered their labour and limited financial means to construct a new concrete bridge.

**Left:** Working as an ActionAid Fellow was once challenging for Kay Thi Khaing, but today she feels confident and at ease with her position.

**Right:** Win Mar from the Village Disaster Management Committee has supported Kay Thi Khaing throughout her work.



established. The village elected no less than 36 women and only 12 men for the positions.

»It is partly because the men are often away fishing at sea. But actually, I think women are better at this kind of work than men. We spend a lot of time talking to each other anyways, and that gives us many opportunities to explain the project and mobilise people to participate,« says Win Mar, 42, member of the Village Disaster Management Committee.

Aung Hlaing is a relatively well-off village of 2,083 people constituting 528 households, of which most are making a living from fishing and trading seafood products.

However, located in Labutta Township on the seashore of Myanmar's Ayeyarwaddy Delta, the village is extremely vulnerable to extreme weather, primarily cyclones and tsunamis.

With the support of the older women Kay Thi Khaing began facilitating a participatory process in the village, using a range of, primarily, visual tools, which allowed people to analyse their situation, identify vulnerabilities and prioritise solutions. The community members soon agreed to construct a new concrete bridge to a larger, neighbouring village where the nearest cyclone shelter is located. The old bridge was difficult and dangerous to cross as it had been severely damaged by the 2004 Tsunami. The new bridge would have other benefits as well since the nearest fish market, clinic, and school are also located on the other side of the river.

The DIPECHO project funded the bridge construction with 1,000 USD while the community raised the remaining 5,000 USD needed to cover the total cost.

When the bridge was finished in 2011





Kay Thi Khaing began working on a new action plan. This time the village prioritised the building of a small clinic on their own side of the river.

»If we built our own clinic the government would sponsor a nurse. In case of emergency, she could provide medical assistance to the injured and thereby possibly reduce the number of casualties. Also, it would improve our access to health services and medicines in general,« says Kay Thi Khaing.

At this point in time, Kay Thi Khaing's confidence level has improved considerably thanks to the support of other community members and the training she received from ActionAid.

»The support of the older women gave me strength. Now I feel much more confident and at ease with my work and people respect me for what I have accomplished. It also motivates me to work with the Village

Disaster Management Committee because it is such a strong and united group – they keep me going,« says Kay Thi Khaing.

## A show of solidarity

Later, ActionAid presented the total DIPECHO budget for small-scale mitigation projects that year during a workshop for representatives of all villages in the area. The participants were asked to divide the funds among themselves and soon came to an agreement wherein villages that had not previously received funds were favoured.

However, during a group discussion Kay Thi Khaing realised that the funds allocated to Mingalar Thauung Tan, a much poorer neighbouring village, would never be enough for them to construct the bridge they had in mind.

Moved by a strong feeling of solidarity, she took a bold step after conferring



**Left:** ActionAid Fellow Thant Zaw Hteik used his skills from working as a carpenter to design the bridge in his village.

**Right:** Work in progress on the clinic in Aung Hlaing village.

**Next page:** Small-scale fishing is one of the main sources of income in both Aung Hlaing and Mingalar Thaung Tan villages.



with the Village Leader and other representatives from Aung Hlaing village.

»I decided to pass on our part of the funding to Mingalar Thaung Tan. They did not request that we do so, but it was evident that their need was far greater than ours. In Aung Hlaing we could possibly raise the total funds for the clinic, but the people of Mingalar Thaung Tan would never be able to collect the additional amount needed on their own,« says Kay Thi Khaing.

Mingalar Thaung Tan is a remote village. Most people are small-scale fishermen. They have no cyclone shelter, clinic, school, or market and need to walk for more than a half hour just to reach Aung Hlaing.

ActionAid Fellow in Mingalar Thaung Tan, Thant Zaw Hteik, 29, was grateful for Kay Thi Khaing's decision.

»We were very pleased to receive an extra 700 USD from Aung Hlaing

village. It was a very encouraging gesture – and without it we would have had to construct our bridge entirely of wood instead of using concrete pillars as planned. That would have left us with a bridge lasting maybe 10 years instead of 25,« says Thant Zaw Hteik.

Before Thant Zaw Hteik became an ActionAid Fellow he worked as a carpenter and mason. He used those skills to design and lead the construction of the new bridge himself.

»I am happy to work on disaster risk reduction. As a Buddhist I believe that you earn merit by helping other people. I am not rich, so I can't help people with money, but I can do it through my work,« says Thant Zaw Hteik.

As expected, Aung Hlaing did indeed manage to collect the necessary funds to build the clinic, which further cemented Kay Thi Khaing's confidence and position in the village.













# Simulation

ActionAid supports local Village Disaster Management Committees (VDMC) to organise simulation exercises. This gives the VDMC and Task Force members as well as the community as a whole a chance to practice their newly acquired skills and knowledge.





**Left:** A young girl is resting against the provisions in the cyclone shelter.

**Above:** A woman is packaging vital documents; volunteers are ready to help people access the cyclone shelter during the evacuation; a police officer is about to hand out leaflets on emergency preparedness procedures; the search and rescue task force is carrying a wounded person to safety.

**Next page:** Vice President Dr Sai Mauk Kham discussing disaster risk reduction and climate change with ActionAid Head of Programme Tauhid Ibne Farid.

The simulation exercises follow the same structure in most villages. As soon as the Village Head receives a cyclone warning from the Township authorities he organises a meeting with members of the Village Disaster Management Committee and Task Forces.

The early warning task force is activated and starts disseminating information in the village by canvassing from house to house.

When the cyclone gets closer people are instructed to secure important documents, vital livelihood equipment, food, and medicines before the evacuation is announced

and all villagers make their way to the appointed cyclone shelter. Here they are registered and reminded to take special care of children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

In the aftermath of the cyclone the search and rescue task force sets out to find missing people while the first aid task force tend to the wounded and dead. Food rations are distributed to those in need.

After the exercise the Village Disaster Management Committee organises an evaluation meeting to discuss whether any procedures need to be improved in the future.





A member of

Search and Rescue Taskforce attended Taskforce training  
(Lapunta)  
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Children collect food items and wait for their friends to return home during Hpa-an Flood response  
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Food consumption is important for the health and well-being of the community  
အသက်မွေးမှု အရေးကြီးပြီး အကျိုးရှိသည်



Climate Change impacts on the health and well-being of the community  
အသက်မွေးမှု အရေးကြီးပြီး အကျိုးရှိသည်



# Policy initiatives

The DIPECHO project complements the community based disaster risk reduction interventions by supporting government institutions at the township, district, state / region, and national level.

ActionAid is one of the leading organisations in the Myanmar Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group (DRR WG), a 50-member strong platform that ensures inter-agency coordination on disaster risk reduction. Activities of the Working Group include support to government agencies in the development of rules and regulations to accompany the new Disaster Management Law, mainstreaming disaster risk reduction, and supporting the government to set up Disaster Management Course Centres and an accompanying disaster risk reduction curriculum.

Furthermore, a toolkit has been developed, which includes all elements of Inclusive Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction (ICBDRR). This is used to capacity build local NGOs.













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