Local Capacity Development: Disaster Resilience in Myanmar

Presenter: Malka Older, Specialist, Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Preparedness, Save the Children, Washington, DC
Contact Person: Joanne Spicehandler, Advisor, Capacity Strengthening and Partnership, jspicehandler@savechildren.org, 202-640-6777
LCD Areas Addressed: (1) Programmatic Tools and Approaches, (2) New and Emerging Areas

The Capacity-building Initiative
Save the Children set up the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)-funded Disaster Response and Resilience Learning Project (DRRLP) in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis to address a clear need. The massive response activated a large number of civil society organizations and local NGOs with invaluable local knowledge and strong commitment to the response effort. However, they lacked capacities key to working productively with international actors. As the initial emergency response ended, the focus shifted to disaster risk reduction and improved resilience. The Disaster Preparedness Learning Project (DPLP) was developed to address these evolving needs. With Myanmar opening up rapidly, it is more critical than ever that local civil society has the capacity to make their voices heard and collaborate with international actors.

Key Objectives and Components
The DPLP's main objective is to build capacity of field-level national humanitarian staff and civil society groups to prepare for and respond to natural disasters. It accomplishes this through the development of a manual and training program offered to participants from local NGOs, CSOs, local governments, and village leaders. DPLP works closely with the Myanmar Consortium for DRR (MCDRR), but also strives to push the capacity building down to the local level through on-site trainings and the establishment of disaster committees in high-risk communities.

The DPLP is designed to empower national-level NGOs through a training that is not simply a one-off, but a structured series of workshops interspersed with time for absorption, further study, and for participants to share within their organizations. The workshops are designed to be interactive and as much as possible respect the experience and local knowledge of the participants, while helping them to put it into the frameworks of international humanitarian practice. After the initial series of trainings, the participants are given the opportunity to put their learning into practice by carrying out trainings in the field with very small, very local civil society actors, including local government and community leaders.

Challenges and Barriers to Implementation
In Myanmar, which has the second-largest landmass in Southeast Asia and where travel restrictions make work in some areas difficult, this is a major effort. DPLP's approach has been to make trainings as practical and locally-oriented as possible, and to design a staged process that used larger, more experienced local actors to reach smaller, less sophisticated civil society groups.

Even with this two-tiered process, finding the appropriate level of difficulty for the trainings was challenging as both groups contained variation. DPLP is experimenting with separate basic and advanced manuals and workshops, but it is still hard to identify content that offers something to all the participants without being too difficult for some of them.

As usual, it was challenging to find enough time for the training, especially as the participants were all taking time away from other responsibilities, often very demanding ones. The program has attempted to address this by spacing out the trainings – for example, with a two-day workshop and then a two-week break before the subsequent workshop – and by taking a self-study approach for participants to add to what they learned from the curriculum by continuing to study on their own. While this has been successful to some extent, the new program

is attempting to further improve it by giving participants more structure and support for the self-study, which has proved challenging in its own right.

Impact, Evaluation, and Documentation

Two external evaluations, in 2010 and 2011 after each of the project phases, have been carried out using focus-group discussions and structured interviews with key informants. Both evaluations found that the project was effective in developing local capacity, with the second evaluation noting, "The participants who attended the evaluation [Focus Group Discussions] FGDs expressed happiness and satisfaction with the program…Overall, they gained a global understanding of emergency context, as well as of the different phases and steps of Disaster Risk Reduction."

One particularly vivid demonstration of the project's impact was a case documented in the second evaluation. A local disaster management committee was faced with responding to a serious flood a few months after their establishment and training as part of DRRLP. The training was so effective that the committee had continued meeting and working together after the intervention was finished. Although they had no experience with flooding on that magnitude, they were able to respond effectively because of their experience with Save the Children.

Although the committee acknowledged they can still improve, they felt that the training they had received made a big difference in their ability to respond. Their description of the project impact reflects the objectives of local capacity development: "During the training the contingency plan seemed very difficult for us, but when the emergency happened we saw how useful it was for us to have it!" In an extremely remote village that could not depend on outside help, the community was able to take on something which they initially felt was too difficult for them and implement it in a high-stress situation.

Indicators for Success

Perhaps the strongest finding from both evaluations was the eagerness of the participants and of potential participants for this kind of capacity building. Given that, the main challenges have been finding a cost-effective methodology to reach as many participants as possible, as effectively as possible, and adapting to the diverse and evolving needs of the target groups.

The staged approach described above, which starts by working with more experienced organizations and then supports them in training weaker groups, has proven effective and also helps to address the wide variety in levels among local organizations. Bridging the gap between international training materials and local needs has also proved challenging. Each successive year of the project has refined the approach to respond to the needs identified during the evaluation of the previous year in order to make the manual and training program as practical and user-friendly for the target audience as possible. Perhaps the most important learning from this project is to maintain the focus on the target group, dedicate time and resources to listening to their needs, and prioritize their concerns over external, international conceptions of what the program should look like.

Scalability and Sustainability

The success of this project has led to several continuations and expansions of funding from OFDA, particularly as the situation in Myanmar becomes more open and the demands on local organizations more complex. The establishment of the MCDRR is one step towards making the initiative sustainable, but for now they still need both moderate amounts of funding and outside expertise. Save the Children is currently looking at how to apply lessons learned through the Emergency Capacity Building project (ECB, http://ecbproject.org/) to further develop capacity building and inter-agency coordination in Myanmar, particularly from the consortium in neighboring Bangladesh where Save the Children is the lead.