

Sustaining the disaster preparedness message: How local information resource centers on disaster risk reduction may offer an important contribution to long-term resilience in Myanmar

Case Study

KUNGYANGONE, Myanmar – On 12 May 2013 the Kungyangone Township's Information and Public Relations Department (IPRD) embarked on activities to prepare their coastal community for cyclonic storm "Mahasan" that would make landfall in 48 hours. The information that fishermen and coastal communities received from the department reportedly heightened public awareness of the danger of the storm's relentless path. Activities such as disseminating preparedness pamphlets, producing large vinyl prints of awareness material and providing other valuable relevant information led to more prepared communities, reducing disaster risk and lowering loss.

Disaster risk reduction activities during Mahasan are a result of efforts that ignited in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. In 2008, the category 3, Bay of Bengal storm named, "Nargis" levelled Myanmar, and left behind an estimated US\$4 billion in damage. Since then, Myanmar has boosted its disaster risk reduction planning from the national to township and community levels.

Through various risk reduction activities, large amounts of valuable local and national disaster risk reduction (DRR) information were produced in different townships. This information ranged from national action plans and policies, to township and village disaster management plans, to sector guidelines on DRR, to public awareness materials.

Guidelines and Plans



DRR Project Activities



Public Awareness Materials



The bigger picture: systematic disaster risk reduction in Myanmar

Work in Kungyangone is part of the bigger picture of disaster risk reduction happening throughout Myanmar. Recently, national efforts to reduce disaster risk have led to the development of policies and plans such as, the Myanmar Action Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction (MAPDRR) and the drafting of Myanmar's first Disaster Management Law. Additionally, the establishment of discussion platforms such as the National Natural Disaster Preparedness Central Committee and Working Committee, and the Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group have led to improved disaster risk reduction in terms of management, information sharing and development planning. The Relief and Resettlement Department takes a leading role in many activities.

Translating national policies into local level, long-term action for disaster risk reduction (DRR), is a national goal for Myanmar. This topic is recognized in the Government's MAPDRR; and contributes to a comprehensive, systematic approach to risk reduction in the country.

In-line with a systematic DRR approach, the demonstration Information Resource Center in Kungyangone was built upon existing information management mechanisms in Kungyangone. The idea was to build on existing systems, taking advantage of existing resources; not to build new systems from scratch. This methodology is not only low cost, but also preserves familiarity with the information management mechanism. In this way, the success of this approach can be easily replicated in other townships.

Kungyangone Township is one locality that has prioritized reducing disaster risk as it sits on the southwestern tip of Myanmar on the Andaman Sea. Due to its location, Kungyangone faces not only the risk of cyclone, but floods, forest fire, storm surge, tsunami, and earthquakes as well. Understanding communities' risk in nearby localities, township authorities and the public have worked tirelessly with the government and development partners to create safer and more resilient communities.

There is now a need to build information linkages between the township level disaster risk reduction efforts and community based interventions. Together with the Government of Myanmar, development partners wanted to bridge the divide between national, township and local levels by improving information sharing and establishing a central local location for the information to be accessed by Kungyangone township officials and residents.

“ We believe that local information-sharing platforms is an effective way to get the word out. We have a significant amount of information at hand now. In order to turn policy into practice, we need the information to be accessible in a central location, ”

explained U Aung Ngwe, Deputy Director, of the Information and Public Relations Department (IPRD), Nay Pyi Taw.

An easily accessible, information-sharing platform could significantly help sustain Myanmar's risk reduction efforts and link national and township level activities. Moreover, escalating information sharing activities could be an opportunity for other Asia-Pacific countries to learn from.

“A sustainable mechanism for disaster risk reduction information linkages and dialogue between the township level and village levels is necessary,” asserted U Chum Hre, Director, of the Relief and Resettlement Department (RRD), Nay Pyi Taw.

Kungyangone is taking a lead and paving the path for others to follow: By establishing the first Information Resource Center for Disaster Risk Reduction at the township level, officials and development partners have established a system to improve information sharing, while creating public awareness to the town's disaster management plans. Through Kungyangone's Information Resource Center, information sharing at the township level is sustained, and coordination between township departments and communities is enhanced –essential actions required to achieve disaster preparedness.

“A central location for public access to information on disaster risk reduction is key,” U Aung Ngwe said. “Traditional libraries are a common gathering point for the public in Myanmar. People are interested: It's our responsibility now to offer them access to this information,” he continued.

Foundations laid: working with existing structures

The activity began with a review of Information Resource Centers in Myanmar and other South and Southeast Asian countries, in order to understand some of the challenges and successes. It was found that there were very few information resource centers with a focus on disaster risk reduction publications exist. When IRCs have been

established in other countries, they are mostly attached to a particular project, as a standalone – not within existing structures. Therefore, when the project completes, the sustainability is uncertain.

In Myanmar however, there is a well-established nation-wide information management system, coordinated by the IPRD. The Department runs existing knowledge hubs and outreach approaches such as Town Libraries and the well-used “Mobile Library” – Myanmar's delivery book loan and information dissemination system that provides resources to hard-to-reach villages. Through a series of consultations, it was found that these existing systems and assets could be used to establish an Information Resource Center for DRR.

The IPRD handles the Center's information management, as a nodal agency. With several responsibilities to support disaster risk reduction, the IPRD works to raise public awareness of natural hazards through advocacy materials and cooperatives with local authorities for disaster preparedness as required. The Department actively seeks out knowledge produced on disaster risk reduction and ensures that the information becomes available at Kungyangone's Information Resource Center. Conversely, other township departments agree to share any related DRR material as it becomes available.

“Working with systems already in place is one of the main strengths of the establishment of Kungyangone's Information Resource Center,” U Hla Myo Aung, District Officer, of IPRD Yangon explained. “The Township Center is strengthening local systems as it is a government-owned mechanism and fully operated by the Information and Public Relations Department. This approach promotes sustainability and the possibility of duplication in other areas of the country,” he continued.

A goal of the Information Resource Center is to establish a system that can be replicated elsewhere, broadening knowledge of disaster risk reduction in other areas throughout the country. Therefore, policy and guidance notes were developed, in order to promote and guide townships to replicate the IRC model.



Kungyangone line ministry officials discuss development of the township's Information Resource Center

Making materials available for township departments and public use

The Center hosts a wide-range of disaster risk reduction-related materials - produced by government and non-government agencies alike. Materials range from guidelines and plans (MAPDRR, the Township Disaster Management Plan, Village Disaster Management Plans) to public awareness materials such as posters, booklets, manuals. Additionally, disaster risk reduction projects and activity plans are available to improve future project planning.

“Local NGOs, development partners, government agencies and others working in disaster risk reduction in Kungyangone are responsible for sharing their information with the Center,” Daw Nant Swe Nwe Oo, Staff Officer, of Kungyangone IPRD said.

It is hoped that by providing access to important township-specific documents, visibility to disaster risk reduction will increase. “Library browsers will be able to search and browse through the Township Disaster Management Plans, village risk assessments and action places, and location-specific public awareness,” elaborated Daw Nant Swe Nwe Oo.

The Information Resource Center in Kungyangone uses available furniture next to existing library bookcases; and a librarian is on duty during hours of operation to ensure that readers find the document that they are in search of. Additionally, the IPRD, recognized the importance of a systematic approach for information management. Cost-free and simple knowledge management tools such as inventory tables, a registration book for all users to sign-in, and a documentation system for



Selected benefits of a Township IRC for DRR:

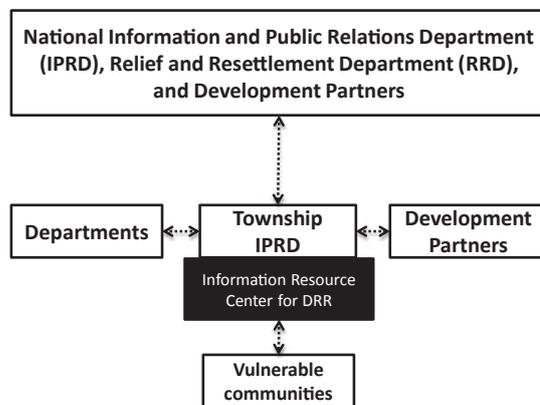
- **For the township-** Reduced disaster risks through improved long-term coordination and information-linkages at the township with villages. Township and village disaster management plans remain 'visible'.
- **For the national/regional government-** government-owned platform for DRR information resources, accessible to township authorities and the general public. More consistent approach to DRR implementation in the Townships.
- **For the development partners and donors-** important DRR information resources developed in the townships remain accessible after the project completes, shared more widely, and are not forgotten.

publication contributors are used by the library staff to keep the Center organized. Finally, a comment book is available for visitors to provide feedback, which is then reported to the IPRD to improve the Center as recommended.

Ensuring an effective knowledge sharing strategy

Although the IPRD leads advocacy, the Center also requires the support of the Township General Administration Department as well as other Township departments. Many related resources are often readily available; the challenge is to have an effective knowledge sharing strategy to ensure documents produced reach the Center in a timely manner.

Whilst most resources are available in the Township, the Government of Myanmar and development partners have developed a large collection of disaster risk reduction materials, and continue to develop new materials. Therefore, there is a need for an effective mechanism for the Information Resource Center to obtain these materials, which again builds on existing structures within Myanmar.



Reaching out to get readers in

Obtaining information and managing the knowledge is only half of Center's challenge. Once the shelves are filled with essential information on disaster risk reduction targeted for Kungyangone, the Information and Public Relations Department is reaching out to the community to ensure that the resources available are used.

How will the township Information and Public Relations Department encourage visitors? Sharing information through the mobile library and monthly awareness speeches are two ideas to promote the Center. John Aung, program coordinator of ACTED, further explains, "With creativity on part of the Information and Public Relations Department, more ideas can be implemented to advocate the Center and effectively share the resources available." ACTED and the Swanyee Development Foundation have been supporting Kungyangone's disaster risk reduction efforts in recent years. References to training topics conducted by ACTED and the Swanyee Development Foundation will be among the materials available at the Information Resource Center, alongside the current activities of the Township Disaster Management Committee and School Based DRR activities.

Heightened public awareness reduces risk of disaster

"Having access to documents related to disaster risk, such as village mitigation, evacuation and contingency plans, will definitely raise awareness. Access to information is an important aspect of disaster risk reduction information," Daw Khay Mar San, Program Officer for Swanyee Development Foundation, commented.

It is hoped that the township Information Resource Center will benefit the community in several ways. To begin, through its establishment, the Center will support long-term coordination and stronger linkages between the township and surrounding villages by disseminating information on disaster risk reduction. The Center also hopes to set an example for other townships in Myanmar to follow to improve disaster risk reduction implementation at the township level. Additionally, as the Center is government-owned, it is accessible and utilized by both township authorities at the general public. Finally, the Center aims to improve stockholding of information developed by development partners. This will prevent loss of information once projects are completed. ■