Participatory Development in Myanmar’s Dry Zone Region: The Village Book

By Janine Joyce*

Abstract

This field report focuses upon the participatory development process utilised by ActionAid Myanmar in Myanmar’s centrally located Dry Zone area. Communities in Myaing and Pakokku Townships were observed at various stages of engagement, as a range of participatory rural appraisal tools were utilised to develop the strategic planning document known as the Village Book. For the purpose of this field report the In Yeung community will be given as a specific example.

The underlying Fellow programme of specially trained youth change builders from the local communities was a key aspect in the effective planning, development of democratic processes, practical outcomes and strength of unity spirit within the villages; required for the forming of the Village Book.

The observational and focus group data comes from an eight-day field trip (June 2014) reviewing the practical outcomes and peoples’ experiences of the bottom-up planning and development process. As such this represents a constructivist theoretical perspective. I am mindful that this is at best a glimpse into a much larger phenomenon, impacted by global systems of production, consumption, pollution, agencies, politics and policies. However, the strength of this field report lies in the way that it gives the people’s description and experience of themselves as agents; working alongside community members or fellows especially trained in participatory development skills.

Keywords: Bottom up development, Myanmar, Participatory development, Water

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Overview

Myanmar’s centrally located dry zone has suffered from ongoing drought and sub-optimal monsoon for over ten years.1 Many communities lack electricity, drinking water and sufficient resources to manage the ongoing effects of climate change including; lack of water, loss of vegetation and rising temperatures. The dry zone area has been subject to severe climatic disasters; including Cyclone Nargis in 2008.2 The effects of climate change on these communities has been evident in the areas of; i) loss of village infrastructure; ii) reduced educational opportunity and literacy; iii) poor health; iv) struggling economy; and v) changing livelihood.

The people are faced with the task of surviving conditions that require additional knowledge and rapid changes in agriculture, livelihood and networking. For hundreds of years they have lived in their communities without need for outside assistance. Climate change has altered that. As a consequence the people are negotiating and engaging with the state, outside agencies and agents. They are holding the state accountable as they identify their needs and aim to reduce poverty. They are competing for external aid agency funding whilst facing the practical requirements of survival. This preliminary report looks at the participatory development program that has encouraged such skills and the practical effect.

Myanmar has been politically sensitive and external development agencies that have access to those suffering from climate change do not take this for granted. As a result Actionaid Myanmar implemented a model of bottom-up development that relies on the youth within the communities to become the change builders. Actionaid seldom provides money to the communities; preferring to focus upon soft skill development including; livelihood training, coaching, networking, and funding applications, collaboration with funding agencies and encouragement. The initial key project outcome was to produce and develop the strategic document, known as the Village book. ActionAid Myanmar trains youth (known as fellows)

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1. The Dry zone occupies 10% of Myanmar’s total land area. It has 57 townships and thirteen districts. Approximately a third of the national population (16 million people) live in this drought prone area (Kyi, 2012).
2. The Very Severe Cyclonic Storm Nargis was the worst recorded natural disaster in the recorded history of Myanmar. The cyclone sent a storm surge 40 kilometers up the densely populated Irrawaddy Delta causing catastrophic destruction and at least 138,000 fatalities. There were around 55,000 people missing and many other deaths were found in other towns and areas, although the Myanmar government’s official death toll may have been underreported. The feared ‘second wave’ of fatalities from disease and lack of relief efforts never materialized–Damage was estimated at over US$10 billion, which made it the most damaging cyclone ever recorded in this basin.
with the soft skills necessary to enable the community to come together and engage in SWOT
analysis. The tools and techniques are context specific, although collaborative and inclusive
of all members in the community. Traditional inequalities are addressed as women and youth
take an active role in planning and change within the villages. In many ways it as practical
embodiment of what social scientist Robert Chambers (1997) describes in his book as putting
the first last. Alongside this important shift in mind set was the giving of the necessary skills,
training and autonomy and power to the people themselves.

Participatory Development

What is participatory development? It is a human rights based approach to development,
whereby the community’s power relations are transformed and there is priority given to the
active agency of the people living in poverty. It recognises the importance of the people
becoming conscious of their rights. The goal of development is to assist the people to become
organised and able to collectively claim their rights (Kyumusugulwe, 2013). Or as In Yeung
villagers state about their Village Book and resulting dam and reservoir;

“It was made from everyone. We announce each other and we meet one place and we
decide each other and it came from the people’s decision. Two years, every month
talking and then the book was made...We already finished the last two years but we
could only publish information in 2012....The fellows only organise the people and
when they plan it is everyone...We went to the authorities and we said and they find
out our difficulty and then together we have planned and made our dam. We would
collect each other and face the problem together and go and ask like that” (In Yeung
Village, 16th June 2014).

What are soft skills? Soft skills are the abilities that managers bring to the processes of
engagement and include; trust building, maintaining morale, conflict resolution and
facilitating the discussions that traditionally formed a SWOT analysis. The Village book
analysis however goes further as it is predicated in any understanding of the dynamics of
power and control and the macro-issues involved in community poverty. All planning seeks to
have the ‘people’ as active agents to producing change and becoming capable in effective
advocacy with state agents.

ActionAid Myanmar has been developing a unique program of participatory development
processes. These processes rest upon the Youth Fellow programme and the production of the
strategic planning document; the Village book.

Youth Fellow Program
The Youth fellow programme gives training and coaching to youth from the community; so

3. SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. SWOT Analysis
is a tool that enables a subjective assessment of a given situation or subject in order to make
critical decisions that are related to planning and risk management. Whilst this is not the
language used by the communities in describing their change process; it is an easy way of
understanding the thinking behind the village book and facilitative processes. However, the
village book process is embedded in deep attitudes whereby the ‘first are put
last’ (Chambers, 1997).
that they become change builders with the soft skills, knowledge and confidence necessary to create the links between their community’s identified needs and local authorities and external actors. The necessary soft skill abilities include; communication, trust building, positivity, constancy, confidence and the capacity to facilitate within communities. The purpose of the Fellow program according to a report by Ferratti included;

to train young people as change makers in social development and participatory methodologies; to mobilise community members through the establishment of functioning Reflect circles in villages; to support the community to analyse the causes of their poverty and to identify strategies to overcome these; to support community action to undertake identified activities as determined by the communities themselves; to build the capacity of the community to undertake their initiatives and facilitate ongoing development processes; to strengthen the capacity of communities to actively engage with state and non-state actors to mobilise resources; and facilitate networks of fellows and community members too link people at various levels and strengthen civil society (2010: 4).

**Village Book Model**

The development of this document is formed as community members meet together and complete a range of participatory rural appraisal tools including; i) social map; ii) resource map; iii) seasonal calendar (seasonality diagram); iv) timeline; v) wellbeing analysis; vi) cobweb analysis; vii) venn diagrams and focus group discussions; viii) problem tree analysis; ix) matrix for rights mapping; x) dream map and; xi) the village development planning matrix. These materials are pictorial and therefore not dependent upon literacy skills. All members from the community including those most affected by poverty are able to come together to develop this material. In this we can see that the people are able to give complex information about their reality, without any exclusion due to the effects of poverty. This reflects the methodological revolution that Robert Chambers (1997) identified in his book, ‘Whose reality counts: putting the first last.’ In Myanmar the change builders are youth and in many communities have been joined by the women and landless who have formed advisory groups. In addition ActionAid Myanmar has begun training government and state officials in the principles underlying bottom-up planning and participatory development.  

The Village Book is a planning document that is the outcome of a number of ‘soft processes.’ By this we mean that it is developed from a participatory and facilitative range of approaches and techniques that allow all villagers to be involved in problem identification and strategic planning. There are no barriers in this process as all villagers are invited and encouraged to attend the meetings. Full participation is reliant on a trust building process and is aided by the community engagement by specially trained fellows. The fellows often come from the village and recently have been nominated by the villagers themselves for the training programme. Most fellows described challenges at the beginning as people were sceptical that such a

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4. Patrick Kyumusugulwa 2013 article on Participatory Development and Reconstruction offers excellent definition of terms and critique of the approach which remain outside the scope of this field report.
process would give practical results to the serious issues facing the community. Many fellows faced prejudice due to their age and gender (in the case of the female fellows).

Each village book is formed from a range of community meetings. From these community meetings a detailed analysis of the problems is developed. A detailed analysis of the assets of the village and map of the village is drawn. A pictorial representation of the village goals is produced in the Dream map. This map shows the exact location of where the needed extra buildings (for example: the school, dam, market) and infrastructure shall be.

The ActionAid Myanmar training material describes the Village Book model as having the following strengths; i) capturing the general situation of the village; ii) information is sourced from the community and processes are owned by the community; iii) the book is used to prepare the village development plan, engage relevant actors, such as local government to coordinate development activities, and hold them accountable; iv) supporting advocacy and planning; v) analysis of the village; including mapping of the status of rights; baseline of the situation; participatory indicators of change; village development and action plan; and detailed implementation plan; vi) at the end of the process the critical analysis and village development plan is shared and reviewed with villagers in a large meeting where it can be reflected upon and critiqued. Then the book goes to the village head for approval and signature. From there the process of implementation begins. Twenty three villages have had village books completed in the Myaing Township, Dry Zone Region. Within Pakokku Township all of the villages have completed village books (N= 297).

Findings

I will speak about one example of participatory development although we saw many examples in the Dry Zone region. The people from In Yeung village described how they began the process of addressing the lack of water in their village. They began with the Problem Tree (a form of participatory vulnerability analysis);

“We started at the root source which was; a lack of a sustainable way; the dam was weak and very small; we lacked technical support and past experience; deforestation; and no dam function. And this caused the following effects; deforestation; no more water for irrigation; less production of crops; community disappointed; and disaster. From this the following detailed effects included; no good quality of crops; global--warming; income is less; and health problems and aggression.”

I was impressed by the in depth analysis by the men and women as they shared the problems they had faced. Three years later the people have prioritised their needs; the school renovation (US $1000), water from irrigation (dam) (US $4000) and creating working opportunities are ongoing projects with significant investments of time and materials. The road and reservoir have been formed; and women and children are attending a training center and developing livelihood skills; and the farmers have already changed the types of crops being grown according to the new local conditions. The rural clinic (dispensary (US $4000), road renovation (US $3000) and tractors (2 tractors; US $5000) are ongoing projects. What was clear to me was that projects were manifesting empowerment and progress was
seen. I was impressed by the enthusiasm and hope that communities seemed able to maintain for a long period of time with the support of fellows. -- For example; it took three years to prepare the Village Book data and as an example included the exact numbers for the following types of categories; 1) number of livestock (chickens, cows, goats); 2) individual ownership of trees; 3) types of trees (tamarind, fruit trees, palm; toddy); 4) numbers of cell phones and televisions in the village; 5) the numbers of bicycles and motorbikes in village; 6) the amount of land owned by the village; 6) the numbers of people owning land in Inn Yeung village; 7) numbers working as farmers or in other occupations; 7) number of dams and other power sources such as solar; and 8) educational attainment figures. One report identifies progress in the area as including; 77 wells constructed in 33 villages; well cleaning in 50 villages; 45 ponds constructed in 26 villages; pond cleaning in 35 villages; and piped water arranged for a few communities (Lofving, 2011). All villages in the project group (50) now have drinking water all year round. There are many other villages not in the project group that lack these facilities.

In Yeung people are now focused upon getting electricity. The problem tree for electricity shows the detailed effects of not having electricity (no media, lack of access to international information for example).

As we continue with the community’s story of development we find coordination with the state;

“Once two years ago the foreman was invited by minister to a meeting and boldly presented about his village’s nearby small dam. He asked minister for support to enlarge it. At this forum were other officials from agriculture department and irrigation department. We said that the small reservoir made by hand was not sufficient so we needed support from you and the minister and the officials want to support this. The officials went to their office and then make the instruction that they want to check this place. I had no idea and he have no idea where it was and we all come together to see it. We continue this process of linkage with ActionAid and ActionAid sends fellows. So the fellows came and began meetings with the villagers and everyone develops the village book and we plan accordingly. The village set up advisory groups; the construction advisory group and the women and mothers group” (In Yeung Village, 16th June 2014).

The community describe how they prioritise needs and plan in an equitable way;

“Farmers that have land will get water but those without land will not. Definitely water for farmers but landless and poor families have no water. So we decide to be equal. Landless families group was formed and there are only women members on that group. The landless families group organized the mothers and women’s advisory group to get fair share of water and profit from them. So fish in the dam for the homeless. Goats for the landless and farmers to be charged for water use. For dam maintenance and support of 50% landless women, homeless families and 30% action plan and 29% dam maintenance. The mothers group sorted the rules and made sure of.”
We were curious about the ways in which the project practically happened;

“Of course from 2011 our effort has started from small dam built by hand 30 years ago. Since 2011 multiple similar work has started. Mother’s Advisory group will tell the story. For the dam construction we decide. Of course we all decided we all knew that we needed it. But this man had the chance to talk to the minister so it started like that. The story (village book) came first then they calculate the cost with the help of the town irrigation engineer. 200,000 dollars and government not supporting us just to say to us ‘to do’. So we request ActionAid that funding is needed. Heavy machinery is available in town. But to run, the machines need fuel. So asked ActionAid to give the money to run machines. We therefore don’t need $200,000 dollars. We only need $20,000 to run the machines. Shihad Uddin Ahamad, Country Director, ActionAid Myanmar, says, ‘$200,000 to $20,000 this is not so much.’ He says he will look for a donor. From his limited funding he give the $20,000 and then it is up to us to work and replace it when the dam is broken. We have no money but labour, stone carrying from the gorge so that gives $10,000. The project starts with $30,000. So we start the work. We combine this work and now the government has approved $200,000 more.”

It seems that the pervasive and serious nature of climate change has given the impetus for a productive working relationship between the people, the state and the aid agencies.

“Like when you ask about relationship with government. So when they make plan with government the next thing is electricity. So they show to authority who say it will cost 5000 lak and they do not the money for that. They have that difficulty because the government will not provide all. And also the second priority is the water they also have an idea to give water house by house but the problem is the water cannot go deeply. The water is not there underground. They do not know what the problem was. They were trying to find another place that will give water...And also UNICEF they would donate the pipe but you have to show you where the water resource is. You have to show but the problem is they cannot show where the water resource is. But they are trying to save their money to have their own because if you find the place you start to dig so you have to give the money. You have to pay to dig to find the water source.”

Here we see that the people are facing the changes in the underground water table. It is sobering when communities traditionally based in an area for such a long time say that the deep water is disappearing. Yet somehow through the Fellow and Village Book processes the people are uniting to meet their needs. Throughout this project the women took more active roles in the planning of village needs. We asked the men what this change was like for them;

“We like it. Before we were confused and we did not get things done. The women are not confused. The work gets finished.”

The women laughed and continued by describing their experience of participation;

“In the past we don’t speak but now we do dare to tell. If we want to tell we do tell.
We are really happy, we are proud of ourselves. We are women and we can speak our need. Before the ActionAid program we are less confident. In the first we were very shy with guest and now we see guest and tell openly. This is because of the meetings with ActionAid and in their meetings they talk a lot....and also she mention one Sawmya Thandar sister and because of her we manage as well because she is coordinator for Pan Village (also in ActionAid Myanmar program).. Like a role model...

It was interesting to me that beneath the traditional roles was a community that valued unity. When I asked what unity was the people laughed and said, ‘unity is an energy.’ They explained the underlying importance of their values towards each other;

“Like they try to help each other and if they see if someone don’t have dam, then please come and have some it’s okay....really have unity each other...Because their religion shows the way.. Buddha. To love each other to love each other as much as they can and if other village need something with crops then we come with our own ration and help them as well...Yeah it’s getting better but its only time. We have to wait the time but when everyone one voice it will happen like that.”

Interpreting Findings

I am reluctant to interpret or generalise these findings too much. This field report represents a beginning conversation with the Dry Zone people and a step towards understanding development when it is nested deeply within indigenous values and understandings about life and being human.

However, it seems from the stories shared that when power is returned to the whole collective family, including the women and youth then sustainable development is possible. It is a story of progress and requires cooperation between the people, the state and the aid agencies. In addition, I was heartened by the lack of wastage of resources when the villagers and their advisory groups were given complete control and accountability for resources and progress.

Conclusion

The story of In Yeung dam and the surrounding villages in Myaing and Pakokku townships is hopeful. Although much yet needs to be done to eradicate the health and educational effects of poverty. The needs in the areas affected by climate change are many and continue to require outside resources. But it seems from this story that there is a style of resourcing that enhances the unity, agency and voice of the people themselves, as they tap into their own indigenous knowledge and expertise of the lands that have nourished their people for millennia.
Bibliography


