Taking Charge of the Recovery

**Myanmar, December 8, 2008**

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    <span class="field-credit">
      Jeremy Barnicle/Mercy Corps  </span>
  

Photo: Jeremy Barnicle/Mercy Corps

*Kan Bet, Myanmar -* In my four years at Mercy Corps, I have often heard colleagues talk about "community mobilization" as something central to our approach in the field, but to be completely honest, I never really understood it.

I knew it had something to do with getting communities together to talk and figure out how to do things, that it is supposed to promote transparency and inclusiveness, and that it was a better way to do emergency relief and long-term development.

And today, I got it. Here in Kan Bet, a bustling riverside village in Myanmar's Irrawaddy Delta, I saw community mobilization in all its chaotic, full-throated beauty.

A little bit of background: in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, communities like Kan Bet have lots of needs, some urgent and some slightly longer-term. In the old days of relief and development, an aid group would come into a community like this, do its own assessment, decide that the village needed a bridge or a water system or a school, build it, take some photos, and move on.

Thankfully, the humanitarian community has learned some important lessons in recent decades:

1. Relief and development programs only work when local communities support and own the outcomes of outside support.
2. Process matters as much as outcomes in our work. In other words, it's still important that struggling communities get the school or bridge or training programs they want, but it's also critical to that communities learn to collaborate, compromise, prioritize, and implement those projects together in a way that gives that community's various stakeholders a seat at the table.

And that's where community mobilization comes in.

**The power to decide**

Mercy Corps has the financial resources and expertise to help cyclone-affected villages like Kan Bet make some big steps toward recovery. But in order to determine where to invest and to help teach participatory decision-making, we need a public process.

In Kan Bet, that public process started today. More than 200 local residents, packed and perspiring in a Buddhist temple on the edge of town, got the opportunity to say their piece about how the village should move forward.

Road construction or small business grants? Build a new fishing pier or renovate the market?

As the group went through a list of possible investments, everyone had a chance to say yea or nay. Though there was no formal speech-making, the open forum definitely featured the cast of characters you'd find at any public meeting around the world: the young radical, the old crank, the righteous matriarch, the wise man.

And I was struck: For this time and this place, this is what democracy looks like.

It's far from perfect. They badly need a microphone. The list they're voting on is much too long, and the process far too slow, to finish the meeting today. The young Mercy Corps staff members running the meeting look wrung out already, and we're only about 15 minutes in.

**"The process is working"**

The ringleader of this circus was Wayan Tin Maung Win, an exceedingly earnest 26-year-old program officer for Mercy Corps, who under the circumstances did an excellent job of walking the group through the process of ranking their priorities.

"So what if I suffered?" asks Wayan after the meeting. "I am satisfied because people are engaged and the process is working."

Win Win Maw, a 36-year-old mother and shopkeeper, is thrilled to be part of the process.

"I've never seen anything like this before," she says. "We have no experience doing this so people are trying to figure out what to do: how to vote, how to get people to support them."

Win Win is pushing hard for grants to small businesses: her inventory was wiped out in the cyclone and she needs to replace it in order to really get the shop up and running again.

"I think about two-thirds of the people really understand what we are doing here," she says, "but I think it's an effective way to make a group decision."

It's important to note — given that the Myanmar junta is known in the West for suppressing democratic activists — that the local government knows these meetings are happening.

"They understand how we are running this process and I think they are fine with it — it's leading to some infrastructure projects that really help these villages," says Michael Gabriel, Mercy Corps' country representative in Myanmar.

The outcome of these meetings, in villages through the Irrawaddy Delta, is a community recovery plan that will allow aid groups and governments to make recovery investments that truly reflect the communities' priorities moving forward.