Rising water & damaged livelihoods in Myanmar

We’ve never seen flood like this before

In the townships of Kawkareik and Kyar-Inn we spoke to several people about the extreme weather during the 2019 monsoon and its aftermath in their villages. All stressed the severity of this year’s flooding. In some of the areas in Kayin State, people are used to flooding, like 61-year old U Hla Kyaing from Kawt Pha Lunt village who said that “flood used to happen every two years in the past, and nowadays it happens every year, but I have never experienced this before”. Daw May Thu (30) who lives in Kant Thar Su village with her 6 family members, also mentioned how flooding happens every year now and explained how this year the rising Gyaing river “flooded the whole village and destroyed houses, cow sheds, pig houses, monasteries and farmlands”. U Mg Hla Myint from Nan Kawt Tay village mentioned the destruction of the village wells, which is a big problem because “pure water cannot be accessed”.

U Saw Htee Hlaing from Taung Sut village and Saw Pay Moo who lives in Whin Kana, however, both said they had never experienced flood before. They described the many losses in the area: destroyed paddy fields and crops, lost food storages, lost animals, closed schools and a broken suspension bridge. Besides the increased intensity and frequency in some areas, in other parts of South-eastern Myanmar flooding is a new phenomenon catching the population unawares by the disaster.

Coping with rising water

People were overwhelmed by the fast rising and powerful water. Daw May Thu said that as the water entered the house “we were not able to move our things to a safe place in time”. U Saw Htee Hlaing describes how even the cows and pigs tried to climb the stairs to find a safe space. He tied some water buckets to his body and climbed to the roof of the house. He said no one could hear his shouting, although even if they had “they did not dare to come and help”. Saw Pay Moo also recalls how people were too scared to help others during the heavy storm.

Responding to extreme flooding in Kayin State

Some areas of Kayin State, like many areas in Myanmar, are prone to flooding during monsoon season. However, in August of 2019, extreme weather caused unseen severe flooding in southern Myanmar. Torrential rains and extreme high water levels in major rivers caused flooding in the whole area, loss of lives, major destruction to people’s properties and livelihoods and damage to key infrastructure such as roads and bridges. A depression in the Bay of Bengal resulted in a continuation of excessive rainfall, exacerbating the situation and impeding support to affected communities.

In the wider South East area of Myanmar, close to 80,000 people were affected by floods and several thousands took refuge in evacuation centres. Shortly after the flooding, Karen Baptist Convention (KBC) managed to carry out a rapid needs assessment and place a team of volunteers in the area. Partnership with Christian Aid and funding from Start Network allowed KBC to scale up their limited initial response and meet the critical food and water and sanitation needs of 3000 households and include a hygiene awareness component in the activities.

In Kayin State, which was the worst affected area, we spoke to several people from two different townships – Kawkareik and Kyar-Inn – about their experience. This document presents their reflections.
and rain. But both pointed out how people shared food amongst each other after the flood.

U Hla Kyaing informed the village leader and after the flood villagers came and helped him move things to a safer place. Daw Pan Yin also asked her neighbours in Kawt Tar village to help and they moved her cows to a dry place by boat. She said that “the villagers help and support each other, and my children also took care of me”. U Maung Ngo, from Kawt Go village, described the transportation difficulties to bring people and things to safety, because there were only few boats. But, villagers helped each other by sharing food and boats.

**Coordinated response**

Local organisation Karen Baptist Convention (KBC) has a strong presence and wide reach in Kayin State. Through their humanitarian and development programme experience, they have built a sound understanding of local communities and their needs. Shortly after the flooding, KBC managed to carry out a rapid needs assessment, identify the needs in two townships and placed a team of trained volunteers in the area. With Start Network funding and technical support from Christian Aid they were able to scale up this response, reaching 29 villages and around 15,000 people in Kawkareik and Kyar-Inn townships. For an appropriate and accountable implementation, KBC coordinated the activities with its umbrella organisation Hpa-An Mawlamaing Association, the Departments of Social Welfare and Disaster Management and the General Administration Department. At the Yangon level, Christian Aid supported the coordination needs from the preparation of the alert note to the culmination and review of the project with other Start funded agencies. Between the 23rd of August and the 2nd of October the team distributed food and non-food items, distributed hygiene toolkits together with hygiene awareness and promotion activities. The distributed items included rice, oil, beans, salt, tooth paste and brush, soap, sanitary pads a bucket with lid and aqua tabs. Since there was shortage of safe drinking water due to flooding of wells, and to prevent disease outbreak, the activities also focused on water and sanitation. The hygiene promotion talks were supported by materials to inform and educate people on the need for hygiene and how to practice. U Hla Kyaing specifically expressed this thanks for the health related activities, since “we did not receive health awareness before”.

**Time to rebuild livelihoods**

The food items distributed were selected with the intention to provide people some leeway and time to rebuild their livelihoods. In both townships people foresee struggle to bring their lives back to normal again. Some are not able to work and have no income, like 61-year-old U Hla Kyaing or U Mg Hla Myint, who is 56 and disabled since he lost a leg. For many people in the area, their income is unreliable and their sources of income being destroyed by the flood aggravates the difficulty to rebuild. 30-year-old Daw May Thu is currently not working because she is pregnant, but she used to earn 5000 Myanmar Kyat (MMK) a day as a daily wager planting paddy. Not only were most of the paddy fields destroyed, also stocks of seeds were lost which makes replanting difficult. Daw Pan Yin, who’s family live from farming and cultivation describes how in Kawt Tar village “the stored straw to feed animals floated” in the high water and “the food storages besides the rice mill were flooded too”.

U Saw Htee Haing from Taung Sut village described how he lost half of his garden and his family is surviving on the rice donations. The family relies on the garden, since “as a daily wager I can only earn any income when rubber and betel nut are in season”. He stresses the need for paddy seeds to replant.

**Fostering partnership and the localisation agenda**

Christian Aid works through local partners and focuses on enabling local and national agencies to improve their leadership in humanitarian settings. Within this institutional strategy, Christian Aid has worked with Karen Baptist Convention (KBC), a prominent local organisation with a strong presence in Kayin State, for over eight years on initiatives linked to supporting health, disaster risk reduction and emergency response.

As the lead organisation in the ‘Accelerating Localisation through Partners (ALTP)’ programme, Christian Aid is committed to advance the localisation agenda from country to global level. Based on research on strategic and operational needs in Myanmar, Nepal Nigeria and South Sudan, the ALTP programme provided key recommendations for partnerships between national and international NGO’s. Pilots in the participating countries provided deeper insights on localisation in humanitarian work.

By building strong partnerships with local organisations and focusing on capacity building and organisational development, Christian Aid puts a key recommendation from the ALTP research into practice. In close accompaniment, Christian Aid supported KBC in activity design and implementation through Kayin-based staff who facilitated a project planning workshop to develop community response plans, finalise the IEC materials for hygiene promotion, procurement mechanisms and logistics. Besides this, Yangon-based staff provided training and support in areas such as M&E, accountability, complaint response mechanism, safeguarding and financial management.