

Reducing economic vulnerability in Myanmar

The experience on equitable and inclusive approach to livelihood improvement



Background

The central dry zone in Myanmar is a particularly vulnerable region of the country prone to water scarcity and harsh weather conditions. The region is one of the most densely populated areas of Myanmar causing stress on an already limited supply of water needed for drinking, irrigation and domestic use.

Since 2011, HelpAge International has been implementing a three-year project in the dry zone in collaboration with Network Activities Group, YMCA, Golden Plain, and the Leprosy Mission International. The project is being funded by the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), a multi-donor fund established in Myanmar in 2009, and aims to reduce economic vulnerability through an equitable and

inclusive approach to livelihoods (REVEAL).

Working with 30 villages in Ayartaw Township, Sagaing Region, and Mahlaing Township in Mandalay Region, the REVEAL project has established community-driven Village Development Committees (VDCs) that improve food security and ensure social protection for the most vulnerable people.



It is estimated that more than 20,000 people including older people, people with disabilities, women headed houses, marginalised farmers, landless labourers and their families are directly benefiting from REVEAL.

An inclusive approach to village development

The REVEAL project has assisted communities to establish 30 strong Village Development Committees (VDCs) in rural Myanmar. These VDCs are an effective vehicle that empower communities for social and economic development and establish a community-level social protection mechanism in marginalised areas. VDCs have three distinctive characteristics. They are formed with a **democratic membership-based**

structure, they are **multifunctional** in design and implementation, and they aim to encourage **participation** and **promote inclusion** of the most socially excluded groups. These combined elements enable VDCs to build a mobilised, collaborative and engaged community, strengthening the livelihoods and enriching the quality of life of poor households and families in Myanmar.



Village Development Committee

VDCs provide assistance and empower the most disenfranchised social groups through the following formation and functions:

Inclusion	VDC members are elected by their communities. Women, older people and people with disabilities must comprise at least 30 per cent of the committee and its sub groups, to ensure social inclusion.
Sector input	Operating under the VDC umbrella are thematic groups representing various sectors of the community including agriculture, livestock, small business, older people, health and disaster risk reduction. Leaders of these sub groups merge to form the VDC, ensuring a balance and presence from all community niches.
Capacity building	VDCs are trained and mentored in leadership, planning, organisational management, conflict resolution, financial management and other essential skills to build capacity and to ensure sustainability and village cohesion. Through monthly meetings, members actively participate and contribute to community decision-making.
Ownership	Using participatory activities, community members identify vulnerabilities in the village and are able to take ownership in developing, implementing and evaluating their own Integrated Community Action Plans (ICAPs). The community then works collaboratively to resolve these self-assessed
Support	Key activities of the project are aimed to enhance the work of the VDC and improve village capacity. Some activities include training in agriculture, livestock and small business, DRR, the construction of village tube wells and the training of health and home care volunteers. As the village focal point, VDCs are able to reinforce cohesion, mobilise community members and provide support to the most vulnerable social groups including older people, women, children and people with disabilities.
Sustainability	VDCs create a sustainable community-led mechanism for social protection through a VDC fund, communal income generation and fundraising activities. With funds generated through this, VDCs are able to support the community through initiatives such as loans for livelihoods and small business, assistance with medical care costs, scholarships for children's schooling and other community activities.

Key activities

- **Livestock and small business training** has been given to community members to enhance their skills and knowledge and to increase their capacity to generate more income in rural areas.
- In 17 villages where water is particularly scarce, 20 **tube wells** have been constructed to enable a safe and accessible source for drinking water. The wells are also being used to supply water for home gardening and irrigation as well as for livestock.
- **Training and inputs** have been provided for vulnerable households to cultivate home gardens. These gardens provide a nutritious, cost-effective source of fruits, vegetables and seeds for the poorest households to use for cooking and potentially to trade.
- Drought-susceptible communities have been trained in new **farming and agriculture techniques** that combine both local knowledge and new technologies. Pilot demonstration plots have been developed to test new varieties of drought-resistant crops including cotton, sesame and pigeon pea.
- **Community seed banks** have been set up and management handed over to the VDC to ensure marginal farmers have access to good quality seeds at critical times.
- **Healthcare volunteers** have been trained to provide peer group education about non-communicable and communicable diseases, good nutrition practices, self care and hygiene. The volunteers regularly visit older people and people with disabilities to deliver primary health care and test for hypertension, diabetes and give basic treatment when required.
- **Home care volunteers** have been trained to provide psycho-social support and assist with day-to-day activities of vulnerable people. This helps to reduce the social isolation of homebound people living in the community.

Life story

Tube well construction in rural villages



Myint Yee (right) collecting water at the water pump.

“In the past, it was very difficult to collect safe drinking water. There were 1,025 people living in our village with only one well to access water from,” said Ma Myint Yee, 25, lives in Mahlaing Township.

The community members, mostly women and school children, sometimes spent up to several hours a day gathering drinking water from the well, which was usually overcrowded particularly in the summer months.

“The students were required to walk a long distance to retrieve water, which often meant missing class as they were assigned to collecting water on a rotating basis.

“By developing a needs-assessment and Integrated Community Action Plan, and with assistance from the REVEAL project, the community worked together to construct two

new tube wells in a location agreed on with input from the entire community.

“Now community members have safe and easy access to a reliable water source for drinking and household use.”

With guidance from the project, the Village Development Committee has since built seven water storage tanks located around the village for people to store and collect water from close to their homes.

Myint Yee said she no longer has to worry about the scarcity of water in summer. Not only does the community have better access to water but animals such as cows, which are essential to the farmers, are now able to access more drinking water too.

Life story

Village Development Committee small business loans



Daw Lone at her shop in Ayartaw Township where she received a small business loan.

Daw Lone, 83, suffers from leprosy. She lives with her son and daughter-in-law in Ayartaw Township. Together they earn money from various seasonal work at an average of 3,000 Kyats (3 USD) a day. Daw Lone said:

“I once opened a small shop in front of my house. Since my family was struggling to earn enough money for food, I could not raise the amount needed to invest in my shop.”

Through the Village Development Committee Daw Lone received a small grant. She put this money towards supporting her business.

“I used the money to buy rice bags, cooking oil, onion and other items that were not previously sold in my shop. Now that I have more things to sell, my shop has more customers. We now earn between 15,000 to 20,000 Kyats a day from the shop.

“The shop sells particularly well during special occasions such as religious events. In May 2012, we managed to buy a motorcycle. Having the motorcycle means more convenience and quicker transport to buy products from nearby towns.

“In the past, we had only one bicycle, which took long hours to buy goods from the other towns. Since the revenue from the shop has increased my business has almost doubled in value.”

Daw Lone has reimbursed 25 per cent of her grant back to the VDC fund which finances other poor people in the community to start their own business.

“I feel very happy now because I am able to afford more medicine and nutritious food as well as have an opportunity to support my family.”

HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.

HelpAge International established a country office in Myanmar in 2008. It has since been working closely with communities to develop more than 128 self help groups and Village Development Committees in the most marginalised areas of Myanmar. These community-based organisations are a fruitful mechanism and contribute to alleviating poverty, promoting inclusion and enhancing the capacity and livelihoods of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Myanmar.

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