

Field Visits

November 17-19, 2011

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By: Shoaib Sultan Khan

Townships visited:

- Pakukka
- Kalaw

Village visited:

- Khin Mon Khan
- Myin Sai Kone
- Myin Taite

Township staff meetings:

- Pakukka
- Kalaw

The travel from Yangon to Pakkuka brought back memories of my service in Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan, when our car was loaded on a ferry to cross the river to reach Pakukka. The township had good road network but side roads and approach road to village Khin Mon Khan were dirt roads with rough and broken surface.

Khin Mon Khan is part of the Natkyim Village Tract and comprises 328 households. 2011 wealth ranking of households is shown below:

Poverty category	No. of households	SRG members' ranking
Poorest	9	
Very poor	177	18
Poor	121	27
Middle	14	1
Rich	7	
Total	328	46

In 2006, there was only one poorest category household member of SRG, she has now graduated to a higher category.

We were led, on arrival, to the monastery to meet the villagers where over 100 villagers greeted us, mostly women with a sprinkling of men. They introduced themselves as Village Committees Chairmen such as infrastructure, road maintenance, health, livelihoods, SRG leading groups, SRG members and some village leaders including Village Administrator and Village Elders. Besides Pakukka township, there were also some SRG members from adjoining township and other villages who had come to listen to us. An Assistant Director with another colleague from the Township Administration of the Government of Myanmar had also accompanied us to the village.

When we asked how come only 46 of 307 poorest, very poor and poor households have become members of SRGs when all of you are in unanimous praise of SRG approach and how has it changed your lives both economically and socially. You have substantial savings of your own and with ICDP support you have succeeded in building up Kyats 28 million as Common Fund since 2006, and have undertaken activities in the field of livelihoods encompassing agriculture, livestock, helping poorest of the poor (PoP) and environment and in the social sector by supporting education of poor and orphan children, village literacy, school renovation, provision of mosquito nets for improved health, provision of fly proof latrines, drinking water supply system, shallow tube well run by hand pumps, trainings of various kinds, building up of social capital of the community, village and market related infrastructure. In addition, significant work has been done on awareness raising and training in the field of HIV/AIDS.

The initial response from the SRG members and the project staff was the these households are labourers and mostly entire families are busy in labour for earning a living and they do not have the time and no interest in joining SRG. On further probe as how did they find the time and how and how did they organise despite the difficulties and problems they just narrated. And, how is the project going to show any impact on poverty reduction if only 15% of the

poor categories benefit from the project. You have all yourself in one voice told us that without forming SRGs the economic status of your families would not have improved.

At this juncture, some of the members informed that the other households are also willing to form SRGs. In fact, one of them said that she has formed one SRG in another village. When we asked her how did she do it, she said that she had told them about the benefits of SRG and refused to listen to their list of problems. She told them in very clear terms that she can do nothing to solve their problems but that she can assure them by giving her own example that if they organise in SRGs they would have found a way to tackle the problems they are facing and overcome them just as she and some of her co-villagers had done in Khin Mon Khan.

When we asked the SRG members why have they not delivered the same message to the non-organised households of the poor in their own village and is it possible for them to do so. We informed them that UNDP is required to show impact, if only 15% of the poor households are mobilised then how can UNDP convince donors that the project is having impact. Additionally for the sustainability of the project it is imperative that maximum number of the bottom three groups of households in the wealth ranking status should be organised in SRGs to benefit them from the project and to help them to help themselves.

Of the 44 members of 46 households of SRGs present in the meeting, with one voice agreed that if approached the remaining households will also organise. When we asked them if they would take the responsibility of organising the whole village because they were now the social capital of the community whose capacity has been enhanced by the ICDP project in every possible way. In fact, the current SRGs are managed and sustained by the SRG activists for the last five years. In the social mobilisation parlance these activists are the 'diamonds' of the community. Without them ICDP would have not been able to even implement the programme and sustaining the SRGs would have been out of the question. We asked about how many of you think you are diamonds and will accept the challenge of organising another 15 or so SRGs in the village There was an overwhelming response in the affirmative and in terms of time frame, they asked for three months time to do it.

One of the men present asked why men are not being organised. We said that if men are willing to fulfil the terms of partnership and adhere to the obligations of organisation, hold regular meetings and mobilise savings and participate in capacity building programmes, ICDP would consider the proposal. The women offered to organise them. The other men present responded the formation of one men SRG to ascertain how it works out.

The Assistant Director Planning of the Township Administration endorsed the strategy of SRG formation and informed that Government is also formulating a strategy of poverty reduction including micro finance and agricultural production and livestock development. There was an opportunity to link up government interventions with SRGs.

At the staff meeting at the ICDP office in Pakukka, we were informed of the setup which included Township Project Manager and Technical Specialists in Social Sector, Infrastructure, Capacity Development, Senior Community Development Facilitator, Community Development Facilitators, Administration Assistant, Finance Assistant and support staff like driver and security guards.

According to the board on the office wall the Outcome No. 1 was Village institutions able to prepare and implement effective development.

Pakukka township comprised 55 village tracts, 258 villages with 67,122 households. Of these since 2005, ICDP has initiated SRG formation in 65 villages spread out in 16 Village Tracts covering 7,815 households which is approximately 10% of the total households. However, the 109 SRGs formed so far have a membership of 1,667 which is less than 5% of the total households in the township and about 20% of the villages ICDP is present.

Obviously the total impact in terms of sustainability and economic well being of the ICDP would only be felt directly by less than 5% of the township.

On the positive side the SRGs have build up Kyats 620 million Common Fund with a one time cash grant from UNDP of Kyats 331 million over a period of 5 years. Another non-

quantifiable but most critical output has been a large cadre of village activists called Community Volunteers (CoVs) through capacity building programme which is social capital of the community.

It is Social Capital which can be capitalised in taking ICDP to scale in terms of SRG coverage of the villages and in fostering village institutions, the first Outcome of ICDP.

As the Township officials were also present we discussed with them about identification of a viable unit for demonstration of the social mobilisation approach to influence policy makers, administrators and donors. They felt that a district with five townships and a million population, would effectively relate to replication countrywide comprising 64 districts, 324 townships, 13,742 village tracts and 65,248 villages with roughly a population of 60 million.

They informed that the Government is already thinking of a poverty reduction programme at five levels, namely State/Regional, District, Township, Village Tract and Village.

The travel from Pakukku to Kalaw township involved a night halt at Thiri Pyitsaya in Nyaung Township and flight to He Ho airport leading to a two hour journey to Kalaw, a pleasant, neat and clean town typical of hill stations in this part of the world, used in colonial times as summer headquarters of the government. Kalaw was now the training ground for Myanmar army with the location of the Military Academy.

On arrival at village Min Sai Kone, we were accorded a warm welcome and taken to the monastery in a procession with music and dancing, where about 100 men and women had assembled which included Village Tract Administrator, Village Administrator, Village Elders, village leaders of different groups such as water, livelihoods, health, Community Volunteers (CoVs), and members of four SRGs comprising 42 member, out of 69 poorest, very poor and poor households. There were 23 households in the top two categories (middle and rich). None of them were members of SRG.

In 2005 when ICDP was initiated in this village there were 4 poorest households and 7 middle and 1 rich. In 2011, there was no household in the poorest category and the number of middle household category had increased to 16 from 7 and of the rich to 7 from 1.

On our on-going inquiry as to how the poorest households have graduated to higher category, Mamyayen, who was one the beneficiaries from the poorest category told us that in 2005 when ICDP came to her village, she was a widow with 7 children and they barely eked out a living often going without regular daily meals, as her only means of subsistence was casual labour, which gave her no more that Kyat 1,000 per working day. She had a small plot of land but no means to cultivate it. After becoming member of SRG, she borrowed Kyats 5,000 for agricultural inputs and from the income of the land she not only repaid the loan but when she needed Kyats 15,000 for medical treatment, even that amount she was able to borrow from SRG and repay it. Gradually her economic condition improved and enabled her to even borrow Kyats 90,000 for vegetable cultivation and improve her conditions with increased incomes.

She has married off three of children who live independently. All her children go to school. She can eat as much as she wants, especially when she is angry. She has improved her housing. The roof is now of corrugated iron sheets and the mud floor is now wooden floor. She now has five sets of clothes whereas earlier it was one.

Machachisan, who graduated from very poor to middle category, when she became a member of SRG she had two children and her husband was a carpenter. She borrowed Kyats 5,000 for horticulture and with the income started pig raising and expanding agricultural activities and also got her self trained as midwife and gradually became capable of borrowing Kyats 700,000, which she repays in monthly instalments of Kyats 50,000. She has a rice grinding machine and rice husking machine and her husband has opened a grocery shop. She has changed her roof with corrugated iron sheets and has a teak floor.

Another farmer woman told us her story of how she had borrowed Kyats 87,000 for pig rearing and how subsequently her daughter got training in tailoring and she borrowed Kyats

600,000 for purchasing sewing machine and other materials, and with extra income being earned she is able to repay the loan.

Another case was of a woman who was a small time trader, she borrowed Kyats 87,000 for pig rearing and gradually taking loans of Kyats 600,000 from SRG started flower and fruit trading. She pays local rates for the product she purchases and sells in urban markets at 33% higher price to cover cost and her profit.

Another case study was of a woman borrowing Kyats 87,000 for pig rearing and earn an income. She was also able to borrow Kyats 70,000 for medical treatment which she repaid in full and currently has borrowed Kyats 800,000 for flowers and horticulture. She pays interest monthly and will pay the capital amount in lump sum when loan is due. She has educated her children.

On a query from non-members of SRG as to what advantages they see in ICDP activities in the village, the Village Administrator said that prior to ICDP, hardly any development activities had taken place in the village. We had a muddy approach road, no water supply and had to go long distances to fetch water, sometimes six trips per day, and poor sanitation. UNDP ICDP has helped in constructing an approach road, has installed water supply system, each water tap providing clean water to 15 households and every household has fly proof latrine.

The Village Tract Administrator said that he was happy at ICDP providing help to the poor through SRGs. The Buddhist religion also exhorts all the well off households to help the poor. He promised his full support to SRGs. He said that he was looking forward to involving organised communities in promoting environment and would like a large tract of land in his area to be handed over to SRGs/CBOs to plant woodlots for their own benefit and to improve the environment. He would like more employment avenues to be created in the Tract villages.

One of the SRGs with 11 members informed that in the last 4 years they have revolved Kyats 26 million of Common Fund many times, enabling every member to access capital from the

fund at interest rate of 2% per month with minimum of Kyats 50,000 and maximum of Kyats 600,000. They have proper book keeping which is audited annually and currently their Common Fund stands at Kyats 36.7 million of which Kyats 400,000 is in cash for emergency loans and Kyats 36.3 million is in circulation.

We also met a group of four members from a SRG which has been linked with the Micro Finance Project (MFP). They have accessed Kyats 250,000 to Kyats 600,000 at 3% interest rate per month and is repaid in monthly instalments as capital plus interest. The loans have been taken for agricultural inputs, furniture making, trading, grocery shop, flower plantation, etc. They accessed MF loans because of paucity of funds with their SRGs.

After the SRG meeting, which was full of life, democratic of the whole village including the rich and the poor, we met with MF group from village Myin Taik. They were highly disciplined sitting in lines of 5 members each, highly regimented. One could clearly see the difference between democracy and autocracy. One was full of soul and spirit and the other soulless but highly efficient. Of the 92 households in the village, MF has been accessed by 51 of which 44 are currently active borrowers. The members are organised in groups of 5 and all groups in the village are linked to a Centre with a Centre Secretary and Centre Assistant Secretary. In this village, majority of group members were women.

MF offers 8 loan products and started its activities in 2005. It has been accessed by 60% of the poorest, 58% of the poor and 57% of the middle categories. To our mind 40% of the poorest and 42% of the poor are probably SRG clients. It is quite evident as pointed out in 2011 IAM that MF would not be able to be accessed by all the poorest and the poor and SRG is important in building up the capacity of such households to be able to access MF in due course of time. Besides ICDP, also helps in fostering village cohesion and building bonds between all categories of the households as witnessed in Myin Sai Kone.

On a question by Ophelia, if MF groups had heard of UNDP there was silence and on probing they responded they have only heard of PACT.

The decision to link up MF with ICDP is in the interest of both the programmes. ICDP makes social mobilisation as the centrepiece for its activities, fostering a framework of grassroots institutions of the people initially at the SRG level and after substantial saturation at the grassroots level federated SRGs (along with other Livelihood Groups – LHGs) at village level into Village CBO, and from then to the Village Tract Organisation. This would facilitate plugging in at different levels of the institutions of the people, programme interventions by UNCT, Government departments, NGOs and commercial sector. MF would be one of the critical players here and would meet the increased needs of the SRGs/LHGs, especially the poorest and the poor.

At the ICDP Kalaw township office we met the staff comprising 16 members. MF has 60 staff in the same township. Khaleel recounted the genesis of the theory of development propounded by Dr Akhter Hameed Khan, which had its origins in the 19th Century Europe and implemented in Japan Taiwan, Comilla in Bangladesh and South Korea's Samaul Undong movement. The three principles of the theory comprised organisation, capital and skills (OCS). What was lacking in ICDP was scale. Of the potential 21,030 rural households of the Kalaw township, ICDP has directly touched the livelihood of only 2,127. Indirectly through social sector interventions it might be a larger coverage but from poverty reduction angle, at the household, it is not possible to reduce without first organising all the poorest and poor households into SRGs.

Fortunately, over the years ICDP has fostered a pool of social capital in the shape of activists of SRGs and as Ophelia put it, scale can be reached by capitalising on SRG support.

We urged the staff to have clarity of vision. The First Outcome of ICDP has been stated as Fostering Village Institutions able to prepare and implement more effective development, which translated into an action plan for Kalaw township means coverage of 25 Village Tracts, 285 villages through formation of SRGs comprising 90% of 21,030 households. If the staff challenges the already organised 2,217 SRG members, whose capacity has been built up and enhanced over last few years to form one SRG each, the entire households of the township

can be brought in to the organised fold of SRGs. Leaving this thought to mull over we left for the Hill Top Hotel via the Nepali Restaurant.

Next morning on the way to the He Ho airport, we stopped at a horticultural farm spread over 6 acres, privately owned and managed. It has full potential to act as a Farmers Training Centre of the adjoining villages or even of the entire township.