

From Insecure - Badly Affected to a Strong and More Prepared Community: KHEM, a fisherfolk village in the midst of 2004 Tsunami

By Bunchar Pongpanich, MD.
Chairperson of Save Andaman Network (SAN), THAILAND
(2004-2006)

In 2004, the Nam Khem Community, on the Andaman coast of Southern Thailand, was devastated by the tsunami. Thousands lost their lives, only 200 of the 1,566 houses were left and 350 from 420 fishing boats were destroyed. Before the tsunami hit, the Nam Khem community was made up of 3,000 households and a population of 7,000 from all around the country and Myanmar. Most of the people worked separately in fisheries and as fisher folk.

In 2007, on the third anniversary of the tsunami, we did a case study to identify the lessons learned for the future of disaster preparedness in Thailand. Slowly learning and trying to reorganize themselves, Nam Khem helped themselves by organizing temporary shelters, mobilizing community groups, promoting a saving scheme, setting up a community bank, promoting occupational development, reconstructing new houses and developing their community's disaster risk management plan.

The Nam Khem Community has 10 important lessons to share about community responses to disasters:

1. **The determination and commitment of the people** was an important precondition. The strong determination of the community members to help each other ensured that all members stayed together in the same temporary shelter where they could look after each other and share their resources. They determined to start a new life together and insisted on remaining on the former land rather than being relocated elsewhere. They believed they could minimize the risk of this hazardous area by developing their own community based disaster management plan and other supporting development activities. They exhibited a collective determination to work together hand in hand. Tangible reflections of this collective effort are seen in their capacity to run a community coordination center, manage almost all the affairs for relief and recovering housing projects for the homeless and initiate a community disaster management plan.
2. **Alliances were built to provide continuous guidance and support.** Strong alliances are considered a necessary factor for all the sectors, including the affected communities, disaster victims as well as governmental, private and voluntary relief organizations. The importance of strong alliances was also evident in how, through several networks, many people shared experience and advice and volunteered to help and continue building the capacity of the community's human resources and activities, individuals and groups as INN-Individual Node Network model.

3. **Continuous expansion and establishment of community groups**, ranging from the local closely linked coffee shop group to various occupational groups. These provided a common space to relieve stress, a positive way to spend time, a way to prepare for any future disaster and a way to plan effective services and assistance to other disaster-affected victims. This group mobilization is so important as it is a prerequisite to any kind of activity. It helps to promote brainstorming of many interesting ideas and researching and planning things together, rather than separately. This is one of the conditions that helped revive and strengthen the community rapidly and systematically and so successfully that it led to the creation of the community's coordination center. Here, the villagers had a chance to invent, develop, coordinate, and to establish all types of community activity groups, a community development plan and a homeless group. These would not have been established without these community groups.
4. **Their eagerness for learning** was reflected in how whenever they found that they did not understand or were unclear about a matter – they would form a study group and search for a mentor who had more experience and knowledge to come and provide advice. Not only did they try to build up their understanding and knowledge, they took the initiative to organize study tours where similar activities had been carried out by others so that they could learn from real experience. All the activities that had been undertaken after the tsunami were new and founded as a result of this learning process. It has become a 'community school'. The learning of the people of the Nam Khem village reflects the importance of learning and enthusiasm that brought about their post tsunami revival.
5. **Getting hands-on experience and applying knowledge to action in all involved aspects**. This is the heart of post disaster rehabilitation process along with the above four lessons learned. Where there is will and determination together with support from allies and unity among community members, there is always a way. In Nam Khem, the community learned and shared knowledge and experience as well as gained genuine experience by taking action. The setting up of their own temporary camp, managing and providing all services to their people which then expanded to various post disaster rehabilitation activities led to the deep learning that is at the core of what is call 'The Real Thing'.
6. **The mobilization of funds, finances and a saving scheme became a successful community welfare system**. Aside from acting as an effective tool for community mobilization, the saving scheme and Nam Khem Village's community fund increasingly expanded to become more like a Village Bank for the villagers. The groups that have been formed through this mechanism range from the community's Coffee Council, Fish Cage Culture Group, Community Boatyard, Wood Craft Group through the Homeless Group, etc. All of these have undergone the hands on experience of sharing their financial incomes. In this way, the mechanism acts as financial stock for the community who knows and understands their own needs and who are also directly and fully involved in the management of their finances and fund raising, the allocation of funds and the establishment of a local welfare system that corresponds to the local circumstances. It is a community's life support-system that helps sustain small local development initiatives similar to a local development bank and the community's welfare programme that is dynamic and flexible.
7. **The consistent and active coordination and communication with all relevant sectors without delay** is another special characteristic of Nam Khem working group. They work hard

to collect and systemize the data of all organizations that came to help. The data includes details of the organization, who they are, what they do, and allows them to work actively with them whether they are private, governmental, public, voluntary or international. All of this data has been developed into a database. The visit by the King of Denmark to support the home reconstruction project for the Homeless Group was one of the tangible results of their special skill of organizing and communicating the data.

8. **The community has been visionary in developing future sustainable community plans.**
There are still many other affected communities that are in turmoil and fighting each other over external help that they desire for personal benefit. The Nam Khem Village is beginning to have a vision of their future much beyond the post disaster rehabilitation phase. They are now focusing on developing their community with balance and sustainably which takes into account the physical environment, culture, social and economic issues. Currently, the youth in the community are gaining support and are being encouraged to take part in community activities so that they can in future become community leaders and take responsibility for their community.
9. **Community disaster management plan** by which drills and constant practice are being conducted so as to reflect commitment and awareness. It starts out with the commitment to stay safely on their homeland and involve the government's official disaster warning system, where they received an opportunity to participate in training to boost the concept and practice of community disaster risk management. This resulted in subsequent capacity building skills such as training, surveying, evaluating, designing and assigning the roles and responsibility of staff and volunteers. They have also been disciplined in scheduling and carrying out drills, drawing up long term risk management plans, creating local warning and evacuation systems, mobilizing resources as well as constructing an evacuation center and etc.
10. **Compassion towards other victims, not being narrow-mindedly focused only on themselves** is another imperative characteristic which has grown wider and stronger. From realizations that a coordinated body must be established, that food and all supports should be distributed and managed for friends and others. Nam Khem went on helping other villages as the organizing body of not only all tsunami affected villages but also every incoming disaster and other schemes in community participatory development.

How did we apply the lessons learned?

As a voluntary body, SAN (Save Andaman Network) joined several organizations to facilitate and support their own self organisation and learning process in capacity building. They listened and observed, advised and bridged more friends for more participation with the disaster victims.