

# Community-based camp management

Sally Thompson

**In 1984, 10,000 refugees crossed from Burma into Thailand seeking temporary refuge. No one imagined then that refugees would still be arriving almost 25 years later.**

Villagers fled as whole communities, negotiated land with local Thai authorities and established themselves in camps around their traditional village leaders. The Thai government invited NGOs already providing assistance to Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese refugees to respond to this new caseload – on condition that assistance was minimal and low key, nothing which would encourage more refugees into the country or which would raise the profile of the people fleeing from Burma.

NGOs coordinated through the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT)<sup>1</sup> to provide basic relief assistance and services through refugee committees initially appointed by the ethnic political groups. The refugees used systems that they had brought with them. They set up camp committees and health and education departments. They built warehouses, maintained monitoring systems and built upon their community networks for justice and social welfare. Teachers from within the communities taught in their own languages. Health agencies provided training to community health workers to treat common diseases in the border areas.

For ten years this model was seen as ideal: refugees taking care of their day-to-day lives, Thai authorities providing local security, and international NGOs providing minimum assistance. The refugees remained close to the border and their intent was to return as soon as the situation allowed. The ethnic nationalities still controlled territory adjacent to the border, which acted as a buffer zone between refugees across the border and advancing Burmese army troops. The refugee programme was extremely lean,

cost effective and with minimal international staff, in stark contrast to the high-profile assistance programmes coordinated by the UN on the Indochinese border. If change had come in Burma, refugees would have been able to return relatively unaffected by their stay in Thailand.

UNHCR was largely absent throughout this period. There was no official screening process. Refugees crossed the border, entered the nearest camp, reported to the refugee camp committee and were generally added to the camp register. NGOs accepted these figures and provided support for services accordingly.

The Burmese army gradually gained nominal control over the homelands of the ethnic nationalities in the border areas; no longer was the border a safe haven. Between 1995 and 1998, 12 camps were attacked and burnt, resulting in a shift in Thai policy. Containment became the order of the day and whereas camps had been spread far and wide along the border, now they were consolidated and fenced in. From a situation of relative self reliance, the refugees were on the road to dependency on external assistance.

Village communities turned into urban centres as camps expanded from a maximum of 6,000 people then to an average of 17,000 today. Mae La, the largest camp, holds 45,000. Anyone caught outside the camps was considered an illegal migrant. With access to asylum no longer assured, the need for UNHCR became essential.

After the Thai army forcibly pushed back a group of new arrivals, UNHCR negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding and was given a mandate for protection and monitoring, while coordination of

services remained under CCSDPT. In coordination with the Thai authorities, UNHCR organised the first registration for 15 years. This was a turning point for the refugee camp committees who had been reporting the population figures on a monthly basis. Although some NGOs and donors had been sceptical of the committees' reporting standards, the registration came within 5% of their reported population figures, thereby raising the credibility of the camp committees.

## The model under review

The policy for 10 years was non-interference in order to maintain traditional culture, minimise the effect of displacement and leave people ready for return. In reality it was leaving people behind as the world around them continued to move forward. It failed to recognise that their situation had fundamentally changed and that different skills were needed to meet the responsibilities placed upon them. Instead it 'preserved' a culture and tradition which clashed with the more progressive thinkers in the camps who wanted to move ahead.

Community-based organisations (CBOs) were given training to enable them to effectively implement services supported by NGOs but the skills required to deal with the wider needs of a community were largely ignored. Camp committees, section leaders, women's and youth organisations were all expected to be mediators, negotiators, counsellors, managers, administrators and accountants, translators and trainers, as well as being the interface with the NGOs, the donor community and the Thai authorities. The required skills base was huge.

Increased demands from the international community for accountability, transparency and the fulfilment of minimum standards for humanitarian responses challenged the NGOs to review the model. While new



Mae La  
Oon refugee  
camp,  
Thailand

arrivals continued to enter the camps, the focus was on monitoring and standardising systems. The camps' supply management, while in many respects perfectly adequate, no longer met procedures required by donors for tendering, quality control and monitoring. Thus began a long process of re-design, training and implementing new systems to fit with the global humanitarian community's expectations. The systems had functioned on trust and informal agreements. Rejection of these systems implied a breakdown in trust which then had to be re-established.

### Camp Management Project

In 2004, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) agreed with the Karen and Karenni Refugee Committees to set up a Camp Management Project that would acknowledge the true cost of demands placed upon the camp committees. Support was needed for a number of areas, such as a core budget to cover administrative and management costs (for example, office supplies, communications and transport) and stipends for staff. Not only were staff not being sufficiently rewarded for their work but the lack of funding left them feeling undervalued. For years the camps were run by 'volunteers'. It was the medical agencies who first began paying stipends in an attempt to retain trained staff. Staffing and stipend levels have now been determined camp by camp and responsibilities

formalised. In addition to the formal needs of the camp, support was also needed for activities such as liaison with local Thai authorities and host communities, security, and cultural and religious occasions.

The Camp Management Project supports relationships with local communities whose land provides them with sanctuary. It helps to maintain relationships with local authorities and it provides support for CBO activities which in turn help to strengthen the voices of others in the community. Currently, women hold 28% of camp committee positions and participation of women in food distributions has been increased to 35%.

Both formal networks and partnerships have evolved, with NGO coordination through CCSDPT well established from the beginning. UNHCR's late entry 14 years into the refugee crisis heightened the need for partnerships. With no implementing partners initially, their dialogue was largely with the local Thai authorities, alienating the very people they had come to protect. The merits of partnership were soon clear and UNHCR and the NGOs established protection working groups from field level to national level, including camp-based organisations committed to sharing responsibility for protection. The focus was on practical protection in the field but has since widened to address policy

issues such as birth registration, administration of justice and ensuring the civilian character of the camps. The inter-dependency between NGOs, CBOs, UNHCR and the Thai authorities is evident through a host of coordination meetings at camp, provincial and national levels, ranging from coordination of services through child protection, resettlement, donor interests and general information updates.

Long-term confinement without gainful employment has given rise to increasing social problems from rising domestic violence to substance abuse to youth gangs, which in turn require more skills in handling. The camps have been accused of being lawless. The refugees' response was "we have our laws but they can be very harsh". The camp justice systems are in the process of aligning customary law with national and international law, in cooperation with the Thai Ministry of Justice.

All of these initiatives require human resources in the camps where the percentage of skilled and educated people is relatively small (only 2% of the camp population have any further education). If there are to be genuine community-based programmes, then efforts have to be made to ensure that NGOs provide capacity-building support not only for the skills required to deliver humanitarian assistance but also for the skills to promote



*Karenmi  
Refugee  
Committee  
meeting,  
Site 1, Mae  
Hong Son  
Province,  
Thailand*

Sutheer Kritsanavarin for TBBC

greater community representation and to address issues arising on a daily basis, from family disputes to negotiations with local authorities.

The need for adequate capacity-building programmes has been accelerated by the opening up of opportunities for third country resettlement. The impact on community-run systems is proving to be a significant challenge. The very people responsible for implementing the programmes – the educated, the skilled and the community leaders with years of experience – are the first to go. By the end of 2008 approximately 70% of NGO and CBO staff will have had to

be replaced. Technical resources are also necessary. NGOs all use computers, email, trucks and phones. More emphasis should be placed on ensuring that camp management staff can meet the responsibilities expected of them. Finally, if refugees had more freedom of movement and refugee organisations had some status then this would open up opportunities for them to engage in the wider discourse of the humanitarian and donor community.

Community-based camp management has focused on keeping refugees in control of their own situation and as autonomous as possible. It has moved from complete 'hands off'

to compliance with international standards and procedures. Systems continue to evolve. The NGO community needs to build on the incredible coping skills that refugees possess. With appropriate support the communities will continue to address the daily realities of camp life where the possibility of return is unlikely in the near future and where new arrivals continue to crowd into the already overcrowded camps.

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1. [www.ccsdpt.org/](http://www.ccsdpt.org/)