

Communication of information on the Thai-Burma border

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Communication of information has emerged as a particular concern for camp residents in Thailand since discussions about repatriation gained momentum in the past few years.

Roughly 110,000 camp residents – mostly ethnic Karen – live in nine camps on the Thai-Burma border, where humanitarian programmes now focus on preparedness for return. The general consensus among the humanitarian community is that conditions in Burma are not yet conducive to promote repatriation.¹ However, the lack of official information and the uncertainty caused by cuts to funding and consequent service reductions in the camps have made refugees anxious to obtain reliable information about their options for the future.

The Karen Refugee Committee formally highlighted the need for improved information sharing with refugees as a priority concern at the first workshop on repatriation in June 2012. UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) and the Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) – which coordinates the involvement of 19 NGOs providing services in the camps – have acknowledged that refugees lack access to formal channels through which relevant and credible information can be requested and accessed.²

In 2013 I conducted an ethnographic study that sought to understand how camp residents perceived the role and importance of communication in camp settings, particularly in light of the prospect of repatriation. Many camp residents I spoke to explained that a lack of access to trusted information about the situation in Burma and plans for repatriation heightened their concern and uncertainty. For instance, a woman with two children said, “I don’t know anything, any information, about where they will send us and what they will do.”

Camp residents also wanted to know about alternative options for those who did not wish to return to Burma. Would they

be permitted to stay in the camps or move to a third country? Or would the camps be forcibly closed and repatriation forced on those who are ineligible for resettlement because they arrived after the Thai government’s November 2005 moratorium on screening new arrivals? Moreover, camp residents wanted not simply to be the recipients of information but to give voice to their concerns and questions about the negotiation of conditions for return.

“We stay here for so long, but no one gives us a chance. We can’t meet with the UN or NGOs. We can’t say anything; we just close our mouths and stay quiet. ... No one comes down to speak with us, to give us a chance or to give us a human right to say what we need to say.” (elderly male resident in Mae La camp)

Dialogue about these and other matters is necessary if camp residents are to make informed decisions about whether, when and how they feel safe to return, which is surely a prerequisite for ‘voluntary’ repatriation. As preparations for repatriation progress, camp residents will need to know about matters such as relocation areas, livelihood opportunities, safeguards for human rights, clearance of land mines, location of troops, and whether education and training received in camp will be recognised in Burma.

“If you decide your fate on rumours, it is all wrong; that is the point I want you to understand,” a man in Nu Po told me. Likewise, a young man in Mae La explained: “The refugees need to know the right information. ... If they don’t, they will do the wrong thing for their future, so their life will never improve.”



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May 2016

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Main sources of information

Information flows in the camps follow a hierarchical structure of authority in a manner that simultaneously facilitates and restricts camp residents' access to information. 'Section' meetings (for different geographic sections of each camp), loudspeakers and noticeboards – all managed by the camp committees – are the primary conduits used by humanitarian organisations to disseminate information to the camp populations. In practice these mechanisms do not function consistently nor are they accessible to all sections of all camps. Camp residents felt the information-sharing mechanisms provided information predominantly relating to rules and procedures to be followed in camp but failed to address in detail the matters they deemed most important.

Humanitarian practitioners form the upper tier of the hierarchy of control over information disseminated in the camps, as they are the primary sources of information accessible to the camp committees, and their decisions about what information is provided or is not provided directly affect camp residents. Humanitarian practitioners described making decisions about what information to disseminate on an ad hoc basis in accordance with their own notions of the relevance of certain details to the camp populations. However,

there is a lack of structures to better ensure that these decisions respond to the actual information needs of camp residents, which will inevitably change over time.

Additional 'gatekeeping' of information occurs when the camp committees make decisions about what parts of the information provided by humanitarian organisations should be passed on to section leaders, who then pass that information on to camp residents. The camp administrations have been dominated by Christian Sgaw-speaking Karen, who make up only a third of the Karen population but who are generally the more educated and prosperous Karen. The representativeness of the camp committees is also undermined by the exclusion of unregistered camp residents from the right to vote or be nominated in the camp committee elections. This is particularly problematic in Mae La, Umpiem and Nu Po camps, where a substantial number of unregistered people are not part of the majority ethnic group. Non-Karen camp residents frequently expressed a belief that the Karen received preferential treatment in camp and that other ethnic groups were marginalised and voiceless. Accordingly, humanitarian organisations should communicate the most important issues directly to camp residents.³

Given that only one person per household is permitted to attend the section meetings, the attending member of a household also exercises significant control over the information that other household members access. A woman in her mid-20s explained that her grandfather had withheld from other family members information about the brief period of registration conducted by UNHCR prior to the commencement of the resettlement programme in 2005. Her grandfather harboured hopes that it would one day be safe enough to return to Karen State, and he wanted his relatives to return with him. By the time the rest of the family found out about the opportunity for registration, it was too late for them to have their cases considered.

A clear theme to emerge is that camp residents at the bottom of the hierarchy of camp communication are least likely to



Loudspeaker in Umpiem camp.

obtain timely and reliable information. Camp residents who cannot attend the section meetings, are illiterate, cannot speak Karen or live in an area where the loudspeaker is broken or inaudible – or where there is no loudspeaker – are forced to rely heavily on word-of-mouth accounts from camp residents who have better access to the information-sharing mechanisms. Camp residents from the most vulnerable households are less likely to attend section meetings because they are preoccupied with the daily struggle of trying to eke out a living. One young woman said she and her mother were unable to attend the meetings because they were busy struggling to make ends meet since her father died some years ago. “We go outside and work in a village so we do not attend the meetings,” she said.

The accessibility of printed materials – such as on the noticeboards – is limited given that illiteracy is common among camp residents. An additional problem is that each individual announcement is typically printed in only one language – Karen, Burmese or English (depending on the majority ethnic makeup of the camp).

Some camp residents tried to obtain information independently but they have very limited access to news media and communication technologies. In the absence of other sources of information, the sharing of rumours was a way for camp residents to collectively speculate about, give meaning to and thereby make sense of their experiences.

Since the fieldwork for this study was completed, CCSDPT has worked with the Karen Refugee Committee to develop a model for information sharing. Camp Information Teams made up of personnel recruited from the camp populations now operate in the seven ‘Karen camps’. The Karen Refugee Committee is responsible for training the teams in a variety of information dissemination activities, including community screenings, community forums, home visits, in-office DVD shows, and leaflet distribution. CCSDPT provides technical support and funding.

Conclusion

The challenges around information sharing on the Thai-Burma border are indicative of the humanitarian sector’s historical tendency to focus aid efforts on physical needs, while information and communication are treated as secondary concerns. If humanitarian organisations fail to provide access to timely and accurate information, this can have a significant impact on the mental well-being of refugees, as well as inhibit their ability to make informed decisions. Moreover, there is an established link between dialogue – that is, ensuring that beneficiaries of aid not only have access to information but also that humanitarian organisations listen to their voices – and improvements to the design and delivery of aid, relationship building, accountability, transparency and trust.⁴

Information provision needs to be carefully planned in order to reflect the diversity of camp residents, and so as not to perpetuate and exacerbate social inequalities, and therefore further marginalise and disempower. In the past decade, a range of humanitarian organisations have re-envisioned communication as both a fundamental need of crisis-affected communities and a service that can improve the quality and effectiveness of aid efforts across sectors.

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1. The Border Consortium (2015) Programme report: January-June 2015, p11

www.theborderconsortium.org/media/62531/2015-6-mth-rpt-Jan-Jun.pdf

2. See CCSDPT Information sharing terms of reference and updates www.ccsdpt.org/information-sharing/

3. See UNHCR (2006) Operational Protection in Camps and Settlements, p57-63 www.unhcr.org/448d6c122.html

4. Abud M, Quintanilla J and Ensor D (2011) Dadaab, Kenya. Humanitarian communication and information needs assessment among refugees in the camps: Findings, analysis and recommendations. Internews www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Dadaab2011-09-14.pdf