Volunteer action in remote communities in Myanmar

Two-thirds of the Myanmar population lives in remote areas with poor access to health care. Health information is scarce, leaving many women without basic knowledge of the reproductive system or birth. To overcome barriers, Myanmar Red Cross Society has introduced the concept of Mother’s Clubs and recruited local health volunteers.

Barriers to health care
Long distances, poor road conditions and understaffed and ill-equipped rural health centers deter many from seeking medical care. Further there is a cultural tradition of not accessing health services or simply being unaware of their existence. This situation is exasperated by language barriers, as Myanmar has over 130 distinct ethnic groups and more than 100 languages.

An accumulation of these barriers exist in the mountainous Chin State, in the country’s west. The state is sparsely populated, has few transport links and remains one of the least developed areas while having the highest poverty rate (73%) of the country.

LOCAL CONTEXT
- Myanmar has one of the highest maternal- and child mortality rates in Asia - 200 per 100,000 and 50.5 per 1,000 respectively.
- Over 70% of deliveries are home births and of those, 43% are not attended by a skilled health worker.
Red Cross action
As part of a Community Based health Development Program, Myanmar Red Cross Society targets over 400 hard to reach communities that had limited access to essential health services, with a primary focus on women of reproductive age and children under-five.

In Chin state, Myanmar Red Cross Society, in partnership with the township health department, has recruited village health volunteers and trained 270 auxiliary midwives, all of whom are ethnic Chin, resulting in maternal health services being present in most villages.

They also support the volunteers by bridging gaps in the health system (between the township level and the rural- and sub–rural health centers) and provide training, support and basic kits of equipment and medicines to the volunteer health workers.

Women have embraced the concept of Mother’s Clubs, introduced as a platform for health education on the continuum of care, from conception to early child care. Women are keen to discuss topics, such as antenatal and postnatal care, sexual and reproductive health and care of young children with the midwives and volunteers.

Following a session on menstrual hygiene, Daw Ngun Hee from Kace village in Matupi Township and mother of 3 children, says: “This information is important for my health. I did not learn this before at school. It was great to talk so openly about it”.

The health sessions are often followed by a cooking demonstration to increase knowledge of nutrition, hygiene and safe food handling practices.

Achievements
Previously, only 0.02% of mothers used the emergency referral system for delivery or pregnancy care, but after introducing Mother’s Clubs, the number has increased significantly to 15% in some project areas. The number of women choosing to deliver with a skilled attendant also continues to increase from 30% before the sessions to 85%.

The program has established a feedback and response system. As people embrace this new concept, it helps them feel that the health services are there for them and it ensures that the maternal care is provided in a safe and respectful way, thereby increasing its utilisation.

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KEY ACTIONS FOR SUCCESS
• Recruiting local volunteers to overcome language, cultural and transportation barriers
• Establishing a community feedback and response mechanism
• Utilising Red Cross relationships to bridge the gap between the health department and community groups.

Local action, global gains
Breaking barriers, improving women’s health