

## ASEAN Volunteers Making a Difference in the Ayeyawardy Delta

When Dwight Jason Ronan, 21, a new graduate from the Philippines was about to accept a job offer with a telecommunications company in Manila in December 2008, a phone call from Myanmar changed his mind. The phone call was an offer to be an ASEAN volunteer for the *Rebuilding Small Farm Livelihoods* in Thaleikgyi village, Pyapone Township in Myanmar. With a degree in development communication and an interest in community work, Dwight decided to become an ASEAN volunteer without a second thought. "I would like to use my knowledge to help Cyclone Nargis affected people in the Delta," he said. Dwight is not alone. His fellow volunteers, coming from different parts of Southeast Asia, share the same wish, that is, to contribute their knowledge and experience to help the cyclone-affected people in the Delta build back their lives.

ASEAN initiated the Community-Based Early Recovery programme in Seik Gyi village, Kungyangon Township, Yangon Division in July 2008, which was endorsed by the Tripartite Core Group, and the programme has expanded ever since.

Currently, ASEAN is administering two community-based recovery projects: *Rebuilding Small Farm Livelihoods* in Thaleikgyi village, Pyapone Township and *Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Programme* in Bogale Township. Both projects are carried out by ASEAN implementing partners with the support of ASEAN volunteers from Myanmar and other ASEAN countries.

In Pyapone, Dwight, together with Ruby Pineda from the Philippines, Un Bunnerg from Cambodia, Kyi Phyu Win Thant, Khin Thazin Myint and Tar Blut Bwe Moo from Myanmar, are supporting the *Rebuilding Small Farm Livelihoods* project, which aims to improve household food security and reduce dependency on food aid; provide rural households with significant income gains; create season-long wage employment for landless households; and improve agricultural production in Thaleikgyi village tract.

Despite language barriers, the bond between ASEAN volunteers and local people has grown stronger as the project progresses. "Although the living condition is very basic as compared to home, I feel there is a need for the volunteers to live close to the villagers to let them know that ASEAN cares about them and that they are not alone while facing the hardship. This also reflects our commitment to bringing ASEAN to the people and bringing people to ASEAN," Dwight said.



The project in Thalkeikgyi village aims to assist 300 farm households with rice crops and vegetable/cash crops by providing hand power tillers, fertilisers, irrigation pumps, vegetable seeds, and providing wage employment for landless households and wage employment through village infrastructure project.

*Rebuilding Small Farm Livelihoods* project in Thaleikgyi village: Distributing fertilizers to villagers

However, for Dwight and his team, the achievements of the project exceeded the stated objectives. Regular consultations between the team and local people have empowered the villagers.

“At the beginning of the project, local people rarely expressed their wish and tended to wait for us to make decisions. Our bottom-up approach, trying to engage villagers in the discussion and giving them the opportunity to have their voices heard, has gradually empowered them. I think this is one of the significant successes of the project,” Ruby said.

Un, who left his teaching job at Hun Sen Oukong High School in Randal Province, Cambodia to join the project, does not regret making the decision. He said, “I feel proud to be a part of the ASEAN volunteerism spirit. Each person can make a difference and I would like to join hands with youth in other Southeast Asian countries to make positive changes to our own region.”

Un added that the project is a rewarding experience, helping him to learn how to work closely with the community and making an impact on the lives of the local people.

In Bogale, Hasimah Ismail from Malaysia, Boeun Chan Born from Cambodia, Krongkeaw Sritaborvornpaiboon from Thailand, Aung Myo Kyaw, Chit Min Htun and Kyaw Zin Oo from Myanmar, are supporting the *Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Programme* to raise community awareness through meetings and workshops with stakeholders in the targeted villages; gather data and develop initial DRM action plan to build the community’s capacity; and plant mangrove with community participation. Despite all the difficulties of living far away from home, the team is hoping to stay longer in order to contribute more to the Delta. “Although people are benefiting from our project, there is still a lot to be done and I hope there will be more similar projects in other parts of the Delta,” said Boeun, a former researcher of the International Labor Organization in Phnom Penh.

Hasimah was nervous before her arrival in Myanmar since she had never travelled alone abroad. However, her anxiety vanished as soon as she joined the team in Bogale because of the warmth she received from the team and the villagers. “I am happy being with my team in the village where I can learn from and share my stories with the team and the villagers. I think this is the plus of being an ASEAN volunteer. And without the support of Myanmar volunteers, it would have been impossible for us to carry out the project.”

Tar Blut Bwe Moo, 25, from Yangon feels thankful for the help extended by his team mates. “I am grateful for all the help of ASEAN volunteers who sacrifice being with their family to come to help my country. If there is a similar disaster in another country in the region, I will definitely come to deliver help. That will be the least I can do to pay back what other volunteers are doing for Myanmar.”

In Seik Gyi village where the first ASEAN volunteer project ended in December 2008, Mr Shwe, 63 and his wife, Ms Shwe Nwet, who received 1,000 betel saplings from ASEAN after the cyclone wiped out their rice field and betel garden, are making 50,000 Kyats a month (about US\$50) from selling betel leaves. “We are very happy because we now can make an income and become self-reliant. I am thankful for the help from ASEAN and ASEAN volunteers. It would have been difficult for us to survive without their support,” said Mr Shwe.

With their strong volunteerism spirit, ASEAN volunteers are ready to extend their help to needy people across and beyond the region.

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### About the ASEAN Volunteers:

**Dwight Jason Ronan**, 21, comes from the Philippines. He turned down a full time job offer in order to become an ASEAN volunteer in Pyapone Township, Myanmar. When Dwight happened to come across a picture of a dead body during the Cyclone, he was grieved and angered. "I felt angered because I think the people deserve more and I feel privileged because I am now part of the team to help rebuild people's lives." Talking about his experience in Pyapone, Dwight said "Every day is a memorable moment. The volunteer programme helps me learn a lot, helps me to become a better person and fulfilled as a person."



*Dwight (right) during a Needs Assessment trip in January 2009*



*Ruby (left) during a field visit to Thaleikalay village in December 2008*

**Ruby Penada**, 23, quitted her full-time job at a local NGO in Manila, the Philippines, to join the ASEAN Volunteer project in Pyapone Township, Myanmar. For Ruby, to deliver assistance is not an easy job. She said, "Changes do not come easily, you have to work on it, and in order for assistance to be effective, it has to be done with the villagers' participation." It was challenging for Ruby in the first month since she had never lived far away from her family, but she said, "I will be sad to leave since the ties with the villagers have grown stronger." She encourages people to join the ASEAN Volunteer programme saying, "It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity as it opens you up to new experiences that will open you to many other aspects of life."

**Un Bunneng**, 25, comes from Cambodia. He was an English teacher at Hun Sen Oukong High School in Randal Province, 25 kilometres from Phnom Penh before joining the *Rebuilding Small Farm Livelihoods* in Thaleikgyi village, Pyapone Township. The project has been a rewarding experience for Un. He said, "Apart from learning how to run a community-based project, living close to the villagers and sharing the culture with them is a great learning experience."



*Un (left) during a meeting with villagers in January 2009*

**Hasimah Ismail**, 25, graduated from the International Islamic University of Malaysia and has been a volunteer for Rakan Muda Volunteer Programme since 2000. Hasimah is interested in community development and she is proud of what she has been doing for the people of Bogale township since January 2009. She said, "I was upset when I first saw the level of destruction caused by Cyclone Nargis. The living conditions of local people are so poor as compared to Malaysia, which urged me to help as much as I could."



**Boeun Chan Born**, 35, is from Cambodia. With extensive experience in Disaster Risk Management, Boeun joined the *Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Programme* in Bogale Township since January 2009. Although Boeun misses his wife and his two children, he hopes to stay in Myanmar longer so that he can contribute more to the people in the Ayeyawardy Delta.

**Tar Blut Bwe Moo**, 25 felt lucky enough that only the roof of her house was blown away during the Cyclone and she decided to find a way to help those less fortunate. Tar was happy to learn that volunteers from other Southeast Asian countries also came to help the villagers of Pyapone Township. "It has been a great experience working with friends from other countries and I do appreciate their time and effort trying to help the people of Myanmar," Tar said.



*Tar Blut Bwe during a monitoring survey trip in December 2008*

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There are currently 12 volunteers in the ASEAN Volunteer programme. To find out more about the programme, please email: [mai.aseanhtf@gmail.com](mailto:mai.aseanhtf@gmail.com), [niken.aseanhtf@gmail.com](mailto:niken.aseanhtf@gmail.com) or [kennygyaw.aseanhtf@gmail.com](mailto:kennygyaw.aseanhtf@gmail.com).

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