

MYANMAR RED CROSS EXPANDS ITS REACH AND IMPACT THROUGH INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Myanmar Red Cross is strengthening community engagement and accountability (CEA) capacity while saving time, money and effort by teaming up with other agencies to share CEA learning and launch joint initiatives

Introduction

Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) is an active member of the country's national Accountability to Affected People and Community Engagement Working Group (AAP/CE WG). Through this group the National Society has been able to learn from others on how best to scale up their community feedback mechanism to be country-wide and collaborate on joint initiatives such as a community voices platform. Coupled with access to materials, training, and even funding, MRCS' membership of the AAP/CE WG has helped them expand their reach and impact, while also saving time and resources.



Myanmar Red Cross Society program to provide food vouchers for displaced people in Sittwe Township from various townships in Rakhine State. ©Myanmar Red Cross 2024

Community engagement interagency coordination in Myanmar

MRCS' CEA Coordinator Moe Sandar and IFRC's PMER/CEA Focal, Zar Chie Tun, both regularly attend the AAP/CE WG monthly meetings, which take place in person and online. The group is jointly co-chaired by an international and national organisation. Co-chairs rotate every year, with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) providing secretariat support. MRCS joined the AAP/CE WG in April 2023, following an introduction to UNOCHA's AAP Specialist in Myanmar by the IFRC's Regional Community Engagement and Accountability (CEA) Coordinator.

Since becoming a member of the AAP/CE WG, MRCS has collaborated with partners on a number of different initiatives, particularly in relation to community feedback mechanisms. For example, the AAP/CE WG is establishing a community voices platform which will collect feedback trends from each organisation and consolidate this on one shared dashboard. Moe and Zar Chie are reviewing the tools, guidelines, and processes of this platform to ensure they align with MRCS procedures for data migration. The National Society has also learnt valuable lessons from other organisations on how to scale a community feedback mechanism to be nationwide – including what has worked well, the challenges, and solutions to overcome these. However, MRCS has also been supporting other organisations to strengthen their feedback approaches. For example, a UNOPS-supported

community-based malaria prevention project included MRCS' community feedback mechanism phone number on their fraud and safeguarding awareness posters. While a UNHCR and MRCS project supporting returnees, internally displaced persons, and host communities used the MRCS community feedback form, logbook and telephone numbers during distributions. Finally, membership of the working group is also helping agencies to share feedback referrals with each other. For example, MRCS was able to receive feedback about their aid distributions which had been shared by community members to the Save the Children International's feedback mechanism.

MRCS has also benefited from a range of different CEA trainings since joining the group. For example, Moe and Zar Chie attended a three-day interagency training on AAP for all working group members, delivered by Plan International and IOM in November 2024. The working group also supported an MRCS CEA in-person training for 30 Red Cross volunteers from 11 branches by delivering a three-hour online session on the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Briefing and Collective AAP Mechanisms.

Like many National Societies MRCS was also an active member of the country's Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (RCCE WG) established in 2020 to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Facilitated by the Ministry of Health, with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the RCCE WG provided training and risk communication materials to all members to help support their COVID-19 response activities. Although dormant since 2021, there are now plans to reactivate the RCCE WG and MRCS is taking an active role again. Recently, the RCCE Working Group requested MRCS to lead a session on "how to engage with the community in emergencies" during an RCCE training for members. MRCS' CEA Coordinator participated in this training, both as a co-facilitator for the one-hour session and as a participant in August 2024.

Lessons learned

Benefits of interagency coordination

Both Moe and Zar Chie believe there have been many benefits for MRCS from being part of interagency coordination forums for community engagement and accountability. Moe explains:

- **Sharing learning:** "We are learning from partners how to scale MRCS's community feedback mechanism nationwide. At the moment our system is only used for operations, but many of the working group members have national systems and they are sharing their experiences with us on how they did this – including what resources are needed. For example, in some regions of the country there is no electricity, internet, or phone network, so we're learning from others how to manage feedback in this situation. They are sharing solutions to challenges, allowing us to learn how they did it, and what worked and didn't, so we can apply this to improve our own system."

- **Increased impact:** “The community voices platform will help us understand the key issues and concerns of communities across Myanmar and make this information available to senior leaders and decision-makers. But this isn’t something MRCS could have done on our own. Being part of the AAP/CE WG allows MRCS to do more and have a bigger impact. This includes being able to share feedback collected across agencies, including easy referral of any feedback about specific agencies.”
- **Access to tools and materials:** “Within the working group we share documents and resources with each other. For example, we’ve received guidance on child-friendly feedback mechanisms, and dos and don’ts for field staff. These are resources we’ve shared widely with relevant departments within MRCS.”
- **Strengthens our staff and volunteer capacity:** “We have access to a lot of good capacity strengthening opportunities. For example, AAP online and in-person trainings for our staff and volunteers.”
- **Access to funding:** “The working group also provides small grants to members to strengthen AAP and CEA initiatives. We haven’t applied for this yet, but it’s good to know its available if we need it.”

Lessons learned about interagency coordination

While MRCS has not experienced any major challenges with interagency coordination, they have learnt some valuable lessons which could benefit other National Societies looking to scale up their engagement in coordination. Moe explains:

- **Local language:** “The AAP/CE WG meetings used to be conducted in English, so it was difficult for national and local organisation to discuss issues in depth. Now it’s conducted in Burmese, with English translation, and this had made a huge difference. Now civil society organisations and local and national NGOs are very talkative.”
- **Importance of internal accountability:** “Good internal accountability supports external accountability. If we’re strong inside, we can be strong outside, so we need to get our own house in order. Leadership interest is very important to this. They can allocate funding for a CEA focal point, which is needed if the National Society wants to be active in CEA interagency coordination. Partners can also help. If they put CEA in their projects, then this helps the National Society to prioritize it. You also need good internal coordination and communication on CEA between operations, programmes, branches, leadership and partners to be able to coordinate effectively with external partners.”
- **Sufficient staff time:** “A dedicated CEA focal point is needed to be able to participate effectively in interagency coordination forums. If the person has two roles – for example CEA and PMER – and then you add interagency coordination on top, they are stretched too thin.”

We would like to put MRCS forward to co-chair the AAP/CE working group but we just don't have the staff capacity at the moment."

- **Clear boundaries:** "It also helps to be clear about what you can and can't do, as the working group may ask a lot from the National Society. For example, in Myanmar we need to be careful about data security and what level of community feedback data we can share, so we negotiate with the group what we can and can't do."
- **Be active:** "Even though we are stretched we do attend most meetings, and when we can't, we always read the minutes and provide input to new developments like the community voice platform. Good coordination improves all our effectiveness so it's worth the effort."
- **National Society leads:** Zar Chie adds, "Although both myself and Moe are members of the AAP/CE WG, we always give our inputs as one. MRCS takes the lead and IFRC supports."

MRCS future plans for interagency coordination

Moe and Zar Chie plan to continue their active involvement in the AAP/CE WG. Specific activities include contributing to the community voice platform and developing standard referral pathways for community feedback, including working more closely with the PSEA Network to strengthen how sensitive feedback is reported and referred. Moe explains, "Our community feedback mechanism gets a lot of requests for assistance, and we can't meet them all, so we need to be able to refer people to other organisations who can assist them. We also need a clear and shared reporting and referral process for managing sensitive feedback, otherwise if we get sensitive feedback about other agencies we don't know where to refer it. These are things MRCS cannot do on its own, it needs to be an interagency approach." For Moe, the benefits of interagency coordination are clear and help MRCS to be more effective, efficient and strengthen its capacity, reach and impact. MRCS hopes to take on the co-chair of the AAP/CE working group in the coming years.

Contact information

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