Life after the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis, which struck Myanmar on May 2, 2008, has been returning to its old usual pace. Schools have been repaired, rebuilt and reopened and teachers and students have returned to their classes. However, this time they are equipped with valuable information about disaster preparedness.

Myanmar is subject to wide ranging geological and climatic conditions which yield natural catastrophes. Thousands of people are affected by natural disasters every year. Storms and floods are the greatest threats and urban fires are the most common hazard listed on the nine primary types of potential disasters.

In order to help the country’s catastrophe contingency plans, the UNESCO Myanmar Education Recovery Programme (MERP), an initiative in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Myanmar, has produced an information awareness kit on disaster risk re-education and preparedness. This has been done through the use of a series of modules and learning materials.

“I didn’t know that fires are among the most common disasters in Myanmar until I learned about them in a workshop,” said Sabei, a teacher for 15 years. Teaching staff then act as a focal point for implementing disaster preparedness activities in their respective schools.

“I found the training effective for disaster risk reduction education,” said Lay Lay Khine. “I will get my school prepared for disasters and teach my students using posters, and make them practice mock drills.”

Than Than Ay, a secondary school teacher at a state school in Kunchangon, was also eager to attend the disaster risk reduction workshop to learn how disaster risks could be reduced.

She said: “I teach science and I have already used some of the exercises in the activity book for class exercises. I am going to make a disaster risk reduction plan for my school and implement it by applying knowledge and the experience gained from this training.”

Back in November 2008 after Cyclone Nargis, UNESCO signed a regional partnership agreement with the Asia regional office of Plan International, one of the largest NGOs supporting Education for All and emergency education, which provided USD$600,000 for MERP.

The ultimate goal is to raise awareness of the importance of disaster reduction as an integral component of sustainable development, with a central goal of reducing human, social, economic and environmental losses caused by catastrophes.

Cyclone Nargis claimed an estimated 140,000 lives in Myanmar, causing widespread devastation in the Ayeyarwady and Yangon divisions of the country. Around 3,700 schools were destroyed or damaged, leaving 360,000 children without safe places to learn, according to the Post-Nargis
Opposite left and middle: Over 2000 school principles and teachers have received training in disaster awareness and preparedness and, below, the resource material included in the information awareness kit.

Joint Assessment by the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), a body comprised of the Government of the Union of Myanmar, ASEAN and the UN.

“The wall of my school was blown apart, the roof disappeared, and the school building inclined to one side when Cyclone Nargis struck in May 2008,” said Lay Lay Khine, the principal of a basic education primary school in Hti Tan, Pyapon.

“Moreover, three of my girl students died,” the 32-year-old teacher added.

Nearly 2.4 million people are thought to have been severely affected by the cyclone, equivalent to more than one third of the population of 7.3 million, with up to 800,000 people displaced from their homes, according to TCG data.

The frequency of cyclones in Myanmar used to be an average one in every three years, but after the year 2000, cyclones have hit annually.

Derek Elias, chief of the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Unit at UNESCO Bangkok, said: “Disasters are striking the region with increasing impact. It’s an explicit challenge for the education sector to make the necessary adjustments to address the threats and to improve the resilience of the education system.”

“This implies not just schools, but also the content of learning and access to learning which can be disrupted badly by disaster.”

More than one third of global catastrophes occur in the Asia-Pacific region, with earthquakes and cyclones being the greatest hazards. Others include floods, landslides, fires and tsunamis.

“When disaster strikes, education is typically not a primary focus in initial rescue and relief operations. Ironically, however, education is often among the most affected sectors, particularly in terms of children being out-of-school and challenges to the security of children. It’s critical for the education sector to plan and prepare the students, teachers and system alike for disaster,” added Mr. Elias.

Disaster risk reduction is heavily based on building local capacities and strengthening mechanisms at the community level. For this reason, it is imperative to raise the level of public awareness and sensitivity towards disasters.

Information, education and communication material are some of the most effective tools, and there are a wide range of materials that can be used and disseminated for emergency preparedness.

In this regard, the main objective for this component is to develop processes, learning materials (information awareness kits) and training in order to better develop relief and emergency response plans for disaster risk reduction education, providing both communities and children with a role in the recovery and disaster risk reduction process.

MERP deployed a cascade model in its approach, in which a master trainer cadre was developed at the national level. This person is responsible for training workshops that create a pool of trained persons at the sub-national levels, and from there on to the township and school levels.

“I’ll give disaster risk reduction education to students in my school through class teachers, subject teachers, speeches and talks at school assemblies and practice,” said Kyin Myint, a principal of a basic education school in Pyapon township.

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