



**Listening to Voices from  
Inside: Myanmar Civil  
Society's Response to  
Cyclone Nargis**



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“Many people complain that there is no civil society in Myanmar. When Nargis happened, however, we could prove that there has been, and there still is, a civil society here. We have been saying exactly that for the last ten years. There is a space for civil society to occupy but we could not prove it. What we had been saying before Nargis about the space for civil society and the social capital has been proven.”

“Whilst there are a lot of Government restrictions, we find that we are able to work freely and we have room to work. Even in the most difficult situations, we still find a space to work.”

“People should understand that there are constraints but, at the same time, there are spaces to work as well. The purpose is to lessen the constraints and increase the space to work.”

“The empowerment of civil society is a big change since Nargis. The political landscape is changing. The cyclone has really helped connect civil society and community-base organisations.”

*‘Comments from interviewees, Yangon, November 2008’*

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# Preface

The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies has chosen to make public this documentation for two main reasons: to highlight the perspectives of civil society leaders who live and work in Myanmar; and to contribute to increasing debate on how to address Myanmar's political and conflict challenges.

All too often the opinions, ideas, experiences and insights of civil society leaders are absent in external discussions on the way forward for Myanmar. We hope this is the beginning of a series of such publications which raise the voices of people from inside Myanmar, around a range of critical and pertinent issues.

This publication uses the experience of responding to the Cyclone Nargis tragedy as a way to stocktake the current state of civil society in Myanmar, and to understand how it has changed as a result of this significant event just over a year ago.

As a result of 15 local organisations and 32 individuals interviews conducted with these key civil society people we make the following conclusions:

- A dynamic, varied, active, mobilised and intelligent civil society exists in Myanmar.
- While a terrible loss of life and property, Cyclone Nargis did provide the opportunity for significant development in Myanmar civil society. Developments include the way civil society is organised and interacts (networks, new linkages, and trust-building, particularly with external actors as well as internal) and the work it does. Different strategies were used which included: integrating peace-building into development work; from urban centres out; and across pre-existing divisions that were sector/group specific. The civic space is bigger, more complex and more integrated since the cyclone.

- These civil society actors hope to carry forward this work and the lessons learned. However, there are concerns that this increased space may be closed down. There are also concerns about the expectations and actions of international NGOs and donors. External actors need to be informed, responsive, trusting and careful in how they support local civil society.
- Recognition of the space available to civil society in Myanmar goes against external perceptions of what is possible. These perceptions are the result of skewed reportage and the dominance of the voice of advocates for political change in Myanmar who are located outside the country.
- There is a need to shift this perception of inaction or passivity, so that local actors can be better supported in their roles and activities in Myanmar; this shift must be made in the international media, in policy and donor circles, and in the international development practitioner community.

Whilst questions should be asked about 'who the legitimate voices to speak for Myanmar are, at the very least, those inside need to be heard as loudly and clearly as those who live and speak outside the country.



# Acknowledgments

While it is still not safe enough to identify the activists, social and development workers interviewed for this publication, we would like to thank them for their willingness to speak openly and frankly about their experience of Cyclone Nargis. Through the interviews we saw how deeply they themselves had been touched by the impact of the Cyclone and how much they had grown personally and professionally as they struggled to address the aftermath.

Thanks also to the academics and social activists who work on Myanmar issues from 'outside' of Myanmar who have shared their observations so candidly. Like those who compiled this report they mostly choose not to be identified as they wish to continue their long term accompaniment of people inside the country.

This book is dedicated to Dr Saw Hsa Lar Mu who recently passed away while working as a medical doctor in the Delta. Just 33 years of age, he was committing every waking moment to the survivors of Cyclone Nargis. This book is really a tribute to people like him who have selflessly given their time, energy, skills, resources and even their lives to support those suffering, despite ethnic, religious and political differences. They are an inspiration to us all and a reminder that the struggle is far from over.

# Executive Summary

Cyclone Nargis is believed to be the worst recorded natural disaster in Myanmar's history. It swept through the South Eastern region of Myanmar in early May 2008. It caused widespread destruction and devastation. This book contains a collection of narratives obtained through interviews with key actors involved in the cyclone relief effort. We primarily interviewed members of local organisations but have also included a number of alternate perspectives from external actors who work closely with the Myanmar context. The following summary reflects the main points gained from this project:

- On the one hand, Cyclone Nargis brought so much destruction. At the same time, it brought people together and provided the opportunity for people in civil society to take action and mount a response to the disaster. This is of particular significance in the Myanmar context where civil society is struggling with the impact of decades of civil war and division amongst identity groups such as clan, ethnicity, religion, or geographic/regional affiliation, or a mixture of these.
- As these narratives outline, the response to Cyclone Nargis was massive, immediate and greatly increased people's capacities in building relationships, working with communities outside traditional target areas, integrating existing programs and working with the authorities. Those providing the response comprised NGOs, business entities, religious institutions, government authorities, and community organisations both highly organised and loosely organised.
- Cyclone Nargis provided a number of opportunities for collaboration amongst actors who had previously been looking to work together for some time. It created the conditions for alliances to be forged and many organisations set out strategically to build their networks and integrate existing programs such as environmental awareness, participatory community organising, peacebuilding, etc.

- Without the effort of local organisations, Cyclone Nargis would have had a much greater destructive impact. A great deal of international assistance was prevented from reaching affected populations due to Government restrictions on entering Myanmar. This situation provided the opportunity for local and international organisations, including the UN, to build their connections and develop strong relationships for their field operations during the relief effort.
- Capacity building work carried out by NGOs prior to Cyclone Nargis was able to be capitalised upon in the wake of the disaster. Networks already existed so organisations were able to quickly mobilise community organisers, trauma healers and, in some instances, disaster response teams. Despite this however, capacity building was highlighted by the organisations we interviewed as a significant need of organisations in Myanmar and an area where external organisations can greatly assist.
- Through Cyclone Nargis, young people were able to gain volunteer experience and employment as a result of the expansion in NGO activities in responding to the disaster. The focus on building the younger generation is particularly important in the Myanmar context as decades of civil war has led to a decline in education standards and employment opportunities for young people. Building a sense of community by engaging young people in community work and exposing them to different contexts can inspire and encourage young people to become socially active.
- External organisations in Myanmar need to understand the local context and the conflict dynamics. This understanding is critical if the assistance provided by external organisations is going to have any resonance. Moreover, without understanding the context and conflict dynamics, local organisations will be unnecessarily burdened by the expectations of outside entities and can potentially be put at risk.
- Isolationist policies adopted by the international community towards Myanmar need to be reconsidered. These policies further polarise issues resulting in the Government becoming more

entrenched in their position. The majority of civil society groups we interviewed for this project were balancing working with the Government with their commitment to communities.

- In carrying out emergency response work for Cyclone Nargis, organisations became aware of the interdisciplinary nature of relief work and the need to work holistically in responding to the context. This necessitated being flexible and creative.
- An acceptance that organisations can develop a working relationship with Government and benefit from it, was a key learning expressed by many of the organisations we interviewed. This learning reinforces the importance of networking and building relationships.
- A number of organisations interviewed expressed that external organisation should trust the local people to do the work and also support and strengthen local mechanisms in program cycle management. This includes building skills in reporting, monitoring and evaluation. A strong recommendation emerged that participation in developing frameworks and co-operation between external and local organisations and community people, is required.

# List of Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of South-East Asian Nations
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
ERC	Emergency Relief Committee
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
MMN	Myanmar NGO Network
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PONJA	Post-Nargis Joint Assessment
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
TCG	Tripartite Core Group
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
VTA	Village Tract Assessment
WPTWG	Women’s Protection Technical Working Group



# Introduction

Myanmar, a country enduring a complex and protracted conflict, was hit by its worst recorded disaster in May 2008. An estimated 130,000 people were killed and scores more were injured when Cyclone Nargis swept through the country's South Eastern region. Its impact was immense and led to massive displacement and the decimation of agriculture and infrastructure across the region. In responding to the devastation, Cyclone Nargis had a significant impact on civil society in Myanmar.

This book engages with the impact of Cyclone Nargis on civil society. It documents the involvement of local organisations and civil society leaders in the aftermath of the disaster. It identifies how civil society has changed since Cyclone Nargis and outlines how donors and other external organisations can further strengthen and support this growth. The book also includes a number of alternative perspectives from external actors who work in the Myanmar context.

The narratives contained herein, produced through interviews with a diverse array of key actors involved in the relief effort, draw out the varied impact of Cyclone Nargis. Against the backdrop of a horrific and destructive cyclone, this book contains stories of different organisations and communities working together across diverse ethnic and religious lines; the strengthening of civil society as a result of Cyclone Nargis; increased capacity building; greater space for civil society actors and the building of new relationships locally, nationally and internationally.

## **Listening to Voices from Inside Myanmar**

Our focus on local organisations within Myanmar is deliberate for two inter-related reasons. Firstly, it is difficult to get accurate information about what is happening on the ground in Myanmar. In contrast, groups operating externally are able to effectively utilise various

mediums to be heard on issues. Hearing voices from the inside is paramount. It paves the way for a contextual understanding that can inform strategies and strengthen alliances.

Secondly, and perhaps related to the lack of acknowledgment received by voices from the inside, external actors tend to view civil society in Myanmar as either non-existent, or at the very least inactive. This book addresses these perceptions by documenting how civil society carves out its space in the restrictive Myanmar environment. It documents how this has changed as a result of Cyclone Nargis and how civil society leaders point to increased space in which to work. It highlights how external actors can better understand and respond to the challenges faced by local organisations. The frustration of local organisations when external actors fail to develop this understanding, and the damage that can result, are also detailed.

Skewed media reportage compounds communication challenges. International media readily broadcast the impact of the cyclone on the affected population and the huge numbers of people killed. Similarly, a great deal of media attention was directed at the Myanmar Government's position in relation to accepting, or refusing to accept, international humanitarian assistance. This media focus forms part of a trend which sees news stories about Myanmar narrowly focus on: the brutality of the military regime, deep divisions between Myanmar people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds; emphasising its isolation within the international community. It is important, however, that along with the stories of horror and destruction, there is room given to acknowledge and explore the positive and negative parts of this tragedy. In critically engaging with the impact of Cyclone Nargis, we need to go beyond simplistic pronouncements. We must unpack inherent complexities to understand the Myanmar context and to trace its changes and shifts.

### **How this Book is Structured**

This introduction will outline: how this publication originated, its three objectives and expands on why it makes an important contribution to debates on Myanmar. The book is then divided into three Parts. Part



A begins with a background on Myanmar's complex political history against which the cyclone took place. It introduces facts and figures on Cyclone Nargis and details other aspects of its impact on Myanmar. Three further analysis sections follow: Lessons Learned; Changes in Civil Society Organising since Cyclone Nargis; and Recommendations for External Actors. These analysis sections collect and build upon the key points raised in the interviews. Part B and Part C set out in full the narratives obtained from each interview. Part B contains narratives obtained from 15 local organisations and 32 individuals who live and work in Myanmar. Part C contains the narratives of five external actors interviewed for this project, all of whom have extensive experience working in the Myanmar context.

### **How this Project Came About**

This project came about to test the widely held assumption that there is no civil society organising in Myanmar. This attitude is exhibited by various actors within and outside Myanmar. It was the opinion expressed by a government official at a meeting of European donors in the months preceding Cyclone Nargis. The official commented that there was no civil society response after Cyclone Nargis. This opinion starkly contradicted what we had been hearing from those living and working in Myanmar. Through our networks, we heard stories about the overwhelming and immediate response provided by civil society in the wake of the cyclone. The significant disparity alerted us to the need to undertake a documentation project to investigate the gap between internal and external understanding of the situation.

The project developed in more concrete terms after a group of practitioners from Myanmar visited Cambodia. Upon touring the Documentation Centre of Cambodia - an independent Cambodian research institute dedicated to promoting memory and justice in Cambodia - the group were impressed by efforts to systematically document events and collect evidence. The participants expressed concern that no such institution existed in Myanmar. Additionally, they said people in Myanmar have little access to resources about

their history and therefore few opportunities to understand and learn about their country's past and that this knowledge was critical for prevention of conflict and for the country's future development.

Also during the Myanmar practitioners' visit, a Forum was held to provide an opportunity for the Cambodian community to learn about the experiences and challenges of working for peace and development in Myanmar. Practitioners who had participated in the civil society response to Cyclone Nargis spoke about their involvement. They told harrowing stories of tragedy and loss, and relayed positive stories about breaking down divisions and working alongside different religious and ethnic communities, in spite of the restrictive environment. They also spoke of creative and effective ways to gain access to affected areas to respond to people's needs. As outlined above, this perspective was contrary to the bulk of media treatment of Cyclone Nargis at the time.

### **Research Objectives**

In response to the above factors, and to address the disparity in perceptions, the project was formulated with the following research objectives:

1. To conduct interviews as a way of collecting evidence of initiatives pursued by Myanmar civil society during the Cyclone Nargis relief effort;
2. To document how initiatives undertaken by civil society in responding to Cyclone Nargis indicate the strengthening, and expansion of, civil society in the wake of the disaster; and
3. To identify key ways in which the expanding role of civil society can be further supported and strengthened into the future.

### ***Objective One: Showcasing the Work of Civil Society in Responding to Cyclone Nargis***

The primary aim of this publication is to document the work of civil society in responding to Cyclone Nargis. Through the collection of narratives obtained from various civil society actors, it offers up a full

picture, though by no means a complete picture, of the diverse ways in which groups came together and organised to respond to the devastation brought about by Cyclone Nargis. It documents the different roles adopted by organisations, from reactive to strategic and something in-between. As the interviews took place some six months after the cyclone, it also traces the changing role of organisations along the relief, rehabilitation and development spectrum.

***Objective Two: Documenting the Impact of Cyclone Nargis on Civil Society in Myanmar***

In collecting these narratives, the also offers an analysis of the impact of the cyclone on the way civil society now operates. This information appears in summary form in Part A below. The interviews capture the changes in civil society from before the Cyclone to the current context. They also trace the changing nature of the way local organisations approach their relationships with government, affected populations, other local organisations, the international community and their own staff. We can see how organisations now operate in a more holistic way, adopting an integrated approach to issues and how networks have been given greater importance. It is also evident that the cyclone has had a significant impact on the way people approach disaster preparedness and relief work. This documentation has drawn out and identified new opportunities and threats, strengths and weaknesses.

This publication collects the key lessons learned by individuals and organisations. These lessons range in subject matter from practical to strategic issues. This has helped reflect on areas of growth and on how to consolidate learning. It enables other organisations to draw upon the lessons of local organisations responding to Cyclone Nargis for their own planning and learning. It identifies how different organisations made deliberate decisions in their work and how others were more reactive. Both approaches offer valuable insights. It enables gaps to be identified and is important for future strategic planning.

### ***Objective Three: How External Organisations can Further Strengthen Civil Society in Myanmar***

Additionally, interviewees shared with us their views on how external organisations can support the further strengthening of civil society in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. These form the primary basis of our Recommendations chapter. This third objective aims to influence the strategies adopted by organisations wishing to support the work of civil society actors in Myanmar.

#### **A Note on Definitions – ‘Civil Society’**

In undertaking this project, we have adopted a broad definition of ‘civil society’. We have adopted a definition in which ‘civil society’ is any individual, organisation, actor or agent, that is not military or government. We have found more narrow definitions of civil society do not align with the Myanmar context. ‘Civil society’ therefore includes the work of religious organisations, business and non-government organisations. Applying this broad approach to ‘civil society’ ensures we are not limited in our analysis or in our search to showcase the work of key actors.

#### **A Note on Methodology and Sampling – How These Narratives Were Obtained:**

The documentation gathered for this project was sourced through primary and secondary data. The primary data consisted of interviews conducted in Myanmar with a large number and diverse range of local organisations. Despite the challenging security environment, in total we interviewed 32 people from 15 different local organisations that had assisted in the relief effort. The organisations varied in size and in scope. Some had existed for decades, whilst others were only a few months old. They worked in disparate geographic areas. The target populations of these local organisations ranged from specific religious and ethno-cultural communities to more general populations. Some were narrow in their sectoral coverage, others worked on a more holistic basis. Some had experienced rapid and significant expansion as a result of Cyclone

Nargis, whereas others expanded to meet demand and then reduced to their former pre-Nargis size. A range of civil society perspectives have been obtained using this methodology.

Perspectives from local organisations were supplemented by interviews with a further five external actors. Again, these actors operated in a variety of different countries but all had extensive experience with the Myanmar context. Some were focused on education, advocacy and training, others on religious work.

For all the interviews we conducted we followed a very informal qualitative format. We developed a schedule of questions to ensure we covered the three purposes of our project, as outlined above.

Secondary data was used to build a background on Myanmar and provide an overview to the protracted conflict. International literature was also accessed to detail the Cyclone and its impact in terms of fatalities, infrastructure and economic aspects. This data has served to contextualise the study and strengthen the qualitative data obtained.

In collecting these narratives, we have tried to critically reflect and consider how we as interviewers influence this process. Individuals were invited to comment on drafts throughout the process and their final narrative was sent to each individual prior to publication.

Recording the role of the local population in the relief effort ensures these positive stories do not disappear and are not forgotten. Moreover, these stories can be used to promote further co-operation and collaboration in other parts of Myanmar and divided communities globally. It is hoped that this book will have a multitude of uses: practically, academically and historically.

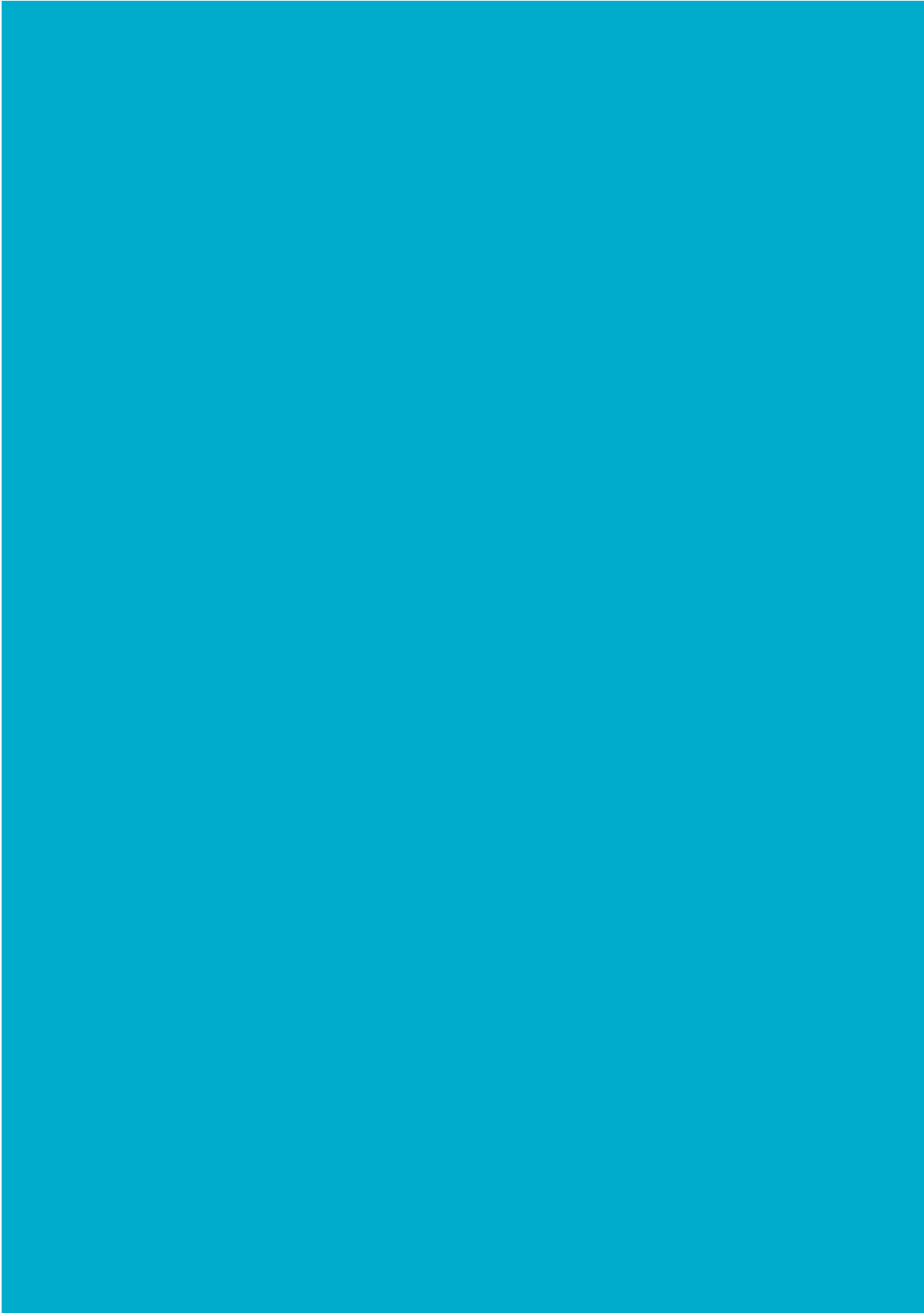
Part A which follows this section will introduce the political background and conflict in Myanmar, before providing an overview of Cyclone Nargis. This is followed by the analysis sections which collect the lessons learned, the changes in civil society before and after Cyclone Nargis and the Recommendations to external actors. The narratives obtained through the interviews follow in Parts B and C.



# Part A

## Analysing the Impact of Cyclone Nargis on Civil Society in Myanmar







**Myanmar Context: Cyclone Nargis  
and the Response of Local,  
National, Regional and  
International Actors**

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The impact of Cyclone Nargis was not just the sum of a natural disaster of huge proportions. It occurred against the backdrop of a country involved in a protracted conflict of many decades duration. To view the relief effort in context, this section begins with a background on Myanmar and the existing conflict dynamics. It then proceeds with a description of the Cyclone itself and its impact. Although this book focuses on the role played by local actors, this section will also briefly detail the role of international, regional and national actors in responding to the devastation brought about by Cyclone Nargis.

### **Background on Myanmar's Political Context:**

Traditionally Myanmar has been characterised by numerous conflicts: the national ethnic group (the Burmese, making up barely 68 % of the population)<sup>1</sup> and the ethnic minority groups (more than 32 % of the population);<sup>2</sup> adherents of various religious groups; and, in recent years, between the government and the various population groups.

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country. The Burmese, who live in fertile central Myanmar, represent the dominant ethnic group and their language and Buddhist religion have deeply marked the culture and social life of the country. The peoples of the ethnic minorities are mainly Christian, but there are also Moslems, Taoists, Buddhists and Animists. The overwhelming majority of the ethnic minorities live in the mountainous border regions that surround central Myanmar.

The entire economy of the country is in ruins after four decades of civil war and massive infringements of human rights by the military dictatorship. Today, after more than 40 years of military rule, the multi-ethnic and multi-religious country of Myanmar is one of the least developed countries in the world and it has occupied this status since 1987. It ranks as 132 out of 177 on the UNDP's Human Development Index.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [http://encarta.msn.com/fact\\_631504823/myanmar\\_facts\\_and\\_figures.html](http://encarta.msn.com/fact_631504823/myanmar_facts_and_figures.html)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> UNDP (2007) *Human Development Index Report* at [http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_MMR.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MMR.html) (Accessed 5 December 2008).

At the beginning of the 1990's a kind of 'war-weariness' took hold amongst all the conflicting parties involved and led to peace agreements from 1991 onwards between ethnic rebel groups and the military regime. However, the development of a non-violent dialogue between these parties to the conflict was blocked by the collective fear of the power of the state. This fear was keenly felt by the general population as a result of decades of massive, and still continuing, military terror. It was compounded by the mistrust between various ethnic and religious groups that had grown up over the years.

The three main forces in these conflicts are:

1. The military regime, which has ruthlessly followed its own interests since seizing power in 1962;
2. The non-violent resistance by the banned National League for Democracy (NLD) as represented by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi; and
3. The organisations of the numerous ethnic minority groups, some of which have been fighting for autonomy since Burma became independent in 1948.

In addition to the political regime, which oppresses the ethnic minorities but also the main Burmese ethnic group, a series of conflict lines within Myanmar's shattered society, make a process of peace and reconciliation considerably more difficult. Conflict lines run between: the main ethnic group of the Buddhist Burmese and the ethnic minorities who are Christian or of other faiths; between the various ethnic minorities; and within individual ethnic groups themselves whom frequently denounce one another.

All peoples of Myanmar have suffered for decades from the repressive actions of the government including forced resettlement deportation, forced labour, torture, arbitrary executions or arrests, and the confiscation of harvests that is permitted by Government tax laws. However, the main victims are the members of the ethnic minority peoples, particularly if they are in the areas where the armed resistance leads to fighting or in the zones that are important for economic development, especially those that harbour natural resources.

These conflict dynamics provide a background as to why the civil society response to Nargis was so significant. They underscore how civil society groups working together and across previously divided religious and ethnic lines, is momentous in this context and should be documented and celebrated.

## Cyclone Nargis

Cyclone Nargis, a Category 4 Cyclone, is believed to be the worst recorded natural disaster in Myanmar's history. On 2 May 2008, it struck the Irrawaddy delta region, 250km South West of Yangon, and worked its way inland reaching Yangon late that night.<sup>4</sup> Winds of up to 200km/hour and tidal surges of up to four metres high caused widespread devastation.<sup>5</sup> Exact numbers of people affected or killed are difficult to obtain but estimates suggest 84,537 people were killed, with another 53,836 missing, presumed dead.<sup>6</sup>

An almost 2.4 million people are believed to be severely affected by the cyclone out of the 7.35 million people living in the affected area. The UN's OCHA Office suggests five areas were affected by the cyclone including the: Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Division; Yangon Division; Bago Division; Kayin (Karen) State; Kayah State; and Mon State.<sup>7</sup> As many as 800,000 people were displaced by the Cyclone.<sup>8</sup> Some 450,000 homes were destroyed and 350,000 were damaged. Three quarters of all health facilities were damaged, as were 4,000 schools. Up to 600,000 hectares of farmland was destroyed having a huge impact on agriculture supply to the rest of the country.<sup>9</sup> The financial cost of the cyclone is estimated to be four billion US dollars with 2.7% of the country's projected GDP in 2008 destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> ICG (2008) *Burma/Myanmar After Nargis: Time to Normalise Aid Relations* Asia Report No. 161, 20 October 2008 at 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> TCG (2008) *Post Nargis Joint Assessment* July 2008 See [http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Myanmar/21\\_07\\_08\\_asean\\_nargis.pdf](http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Myanmar/21_07_08_asean_nargis.pdf) (Accessed 8 October 2008) at 1.

<sup>7</sup> Myanmar: Cyclone Nargis OCHA Situation Report No. 1 Available - <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/SNAO-7EBUYF?OpenDocument> (Accessed 6 October 2008).

<sup>8</sup> TCG (2008) *Post Nargis Joint Assessment* July 2008 See [http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Myanmar/21\\_07\\_08\\_asean\\_nargis.pdf](http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Myanmar/21_07_08_asean_nargis.pdf) (Accessed 8 October 2008) at 1.

<sup>9</sup> Siddique (2008) 'Cyclone Nargis cost Burma \$4bn, says UN report' *The Guardian Newspaper* 21 July 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/21/cyclonenargis.burma> (Accessed 7 October 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## The International, Regional, National and Civil Society Response

As news of the destruction filtered through to newsrooms around the globe, much media attention focused on the response of the Myanmar Government to the disaster and to offers of international humanitarian assistance. Stories of the Government's refusal to allow entry to foreign personnel from various aid and UN agencies, and the blocking of military shipments of aid from the US, French and British Governments, all came to dominate the media. France went as far as calling on the United Nations Security Council to intervene militarily under the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine of international law. This move did not receive the support of the Security Council however, and France later conceded this move would probably be illegal in the Cyclone Nargis context. Nevertheless it demonstrates the degree of international pressure sparked by the Cyclone.

After the Cyclone hit, the Government declared the most affected regions to be national emergency areas and brought together its Natural Disaster Preparedness Central Committee, of which the Chair was Prime Minister General Thein Sein. Overall co-ordination of the relief effort was the responsibility of the Ministry for Social Welfare, and each other ministry was allocated to one of the most affected townships.<sup>11</sup>

The Government did call for external assistance to deal with the Cyclone, specifying a preference for government-to-government aid, without the need for foreign workers or personnel.<sup>12</sup> Many international agencies, including Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) reported experiencing no problems in the distribution of relief supplies.<sup>13</sup> Indeed many organisations we interviewed for this book expressed that the Government were not a hindrance in performing their work. Others, like the World Food Program (WFP) did experience problems.

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<sup>11</sup> ICG (2008) *Burma/Myanmar After Nargis: Time to Normalise Aid Relations* Asia Report No. 161, 20 October 2008 at 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* at 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

Generally, there was a lot of frustration from the international community over the behaviour of the military government of Myanmar. In late May however, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator held a press conference on route to Myanmar and announced there had been some progress on all the key challenges of the relief operation. The four main issues were: access for international relief workers, both through the issuance of entry visas and the ability to reach the affected areas of the Irrawaddy Delta; the possibility of more non-governmental organisations going to work in Myanmar; the use of extra relief from outside to supplement what the Government already had in place; and the need to set up better logistical arrangements for the arrival and distribution of aid.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of foreign aid workers and their access to Myanmar and the affected areas was a significant talking point for negotiations between UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and Senior General Than Shwe, which occurred on 23 May 2008.<sup>15</sup> After his visit, reportedly, the process to obtain visa and a permit to the affected areas became a lot smoother.

To further facilitate the international and regional response to the Cyclone, a Tripartite Core Group (TCG) was formed on 25 May 2008 which included the government of Myanmar, the UN, and ASEAN. It produced a Post Nargis Joint Assessment to determine the scale and impact of the Cyclone.<sup>16</sup> This level of national, regional and international co-operation was unique in this context.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of financial assistance provided by the international community, the UN Emergency Relief Co-ordinator launched the Myanmar Cyclone Flash Appeal on 9 May 2008. This was revised on 10 July 2008 and for the 12 month period up until April 2009, \$482 million USD has been requested. As at 1 October 2008, only half of

<sup>14</sup>Black, N., Research Fellow, Applied Research Centre in Human Security (ARCHS): Update on the Humanitarian Response to Cyclone Nargis – No 7. Thursday 29 May 2008.

<sup>15</sup>Belanger J & Horsey, R. (2008) 'Negotiating Humanitarian Access to Cyclone-Affected Areas of Myanmar: a Review' in *Humanitarian Exchange* Issue 41, December 2008 at 4.

<sup>16</sup>The Report can be found at [http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Myanmar/21\\_07\\_08\\_asean\\_nargis.pdf](http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/Myanmar/21_07_08_asean_nargis.pdf)

<sup>17</sup>For an analysis of the role of ASEAN in the Cyclone Nargis Response see 'ASEAN's Role in the Cyclone Nargis Response: Implications, Lessons and Opportunities' in *Humanitarian Exchange* Issue 41, December 2008 at 5.

this amount has been funded indicating a reluctance to assist with subsequent phases of recovery and rehabilitation.<sup>18</sup>

Amidst the relief operation, the Government went ahead with the planned referendum to approve a national constitution. The proposed constitution guarantees the military have 25% of the seats in Parliament and enables the President to give all power to the military if a State of Emergency is declared.<sup>19</sup> The Government assert the constitution will pave the way for elections to be held in 2010. Initially scheduled for 10 May 2008, the vote was delayed in only the 47 most affected areas and pushed back to 24 May.<sup>20</sup> The affected areas in which the vote was delayed included the Irawaddy Delta area and Yangon. The Myanmar Government announced after 10 May 2008 that voter turnout was 99%.<sup>21</sup> Of that amount, the 'Yes' vote attracted 92.4% of the 22 million eligible voters. Such a landslide approval could not be affected by subsequent voting, yet it went ahead anyway on 24 May in the remaining 47 cyclone affected areas.

Cyclone Nargis caused destruction on a scale never witnessed in Myanmar. Whereas before the Cyclone, disaster risk reduction and relief work was not a priority for Government or civil society, it is now a clear target area. As is shown in this book, the response of civil society organisations to the Cyclone was rapid and immediate. International agencies already active in Myanmar responded with similar speed.<sup>22</sup> OCHA established clusters for facilitating relief which covered health, nutrition, shelter, water sanitation and hygiene, agriculture and logistics. The role of local organisations in the relief effort is showcased by the narratives contained herein. They demonstrate how assistance was delivered across previously divided ethnic and religious lines and against the backdrop of protracted civil war.

<sup>18</sup> ICG (2008) *Burma/Myanmar After Nargis: Time to Normalise Aid Relations* Asia Report No. 161, 20 October 2008 at 13.

<sup>19</sup> Research Fellow, Applied Research Centre in Human Security (ARCHS): Update on the Humanitarian Response to Cyclone Nargis – No. 5 Thursday 15 May 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Black, N., Research Fellow, Applied Research Centre in Human Security (ARCHS): Update on the Humanitarian Response to Cyclone Nargis – No. 3 Friday 9 May 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Black, N., Research Fellow, Applied Research Centre in Human Security (ARCHS): Update on the Humanitarian Response to Cyclone Nargis – No. 5 Thursday 15 May 2008.

<sup>22</sup> For a fuller account of the role of international humanitarian agencies see *Humanitarian Exchange*, Issue 41, December 2008.



## Lessons Learned from Cyclone Nargis Relief Work

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The calamity brought about by Cyclone Nargis triggered an immense relief effort by individuals and organisations. In conducting the interviews with those who had responded at an individual or organisational level to Cyclone Nargis, we sought to draw out the key learnings from their involvement. This section contains a summary of these key learnings to enable people to reflect on their own practice and benefit from the Cyclone Nargis experience. For a fuller account, please refer to the narratives, obtained through the interviews, contained in the Part B.

### **Importance of Networking and Building Relationships**

Many of the organisations interviewed placed great emphasis on the value of networking and building relationships, as a critical learning of the Nargis relief work carried out. This key learning had many dimensions and included: recognising and reflecting on how the patient building of relationships, which had taken place before the Cyclone, greatly benefited their relief work; and, looking to the future, capitalising on the potential direction those networks can take.

An important factor in our work was our ability to utilise contacts made prior to Cyclone Nargis. This meant our network representative could approach monks in the monasteries and other religious leaders in the camps to form relationships central to carrying out relief work.

Establishing networks at an international level and village level is fundamental.

Networking is very important, especially with local people because from this we can share information. For example, we know one lady whom we got in contact with by our friend. She was so good in giving us information. She wrote us a letter with good information on what is needed in the village. We were successful in delivering our relief program because we started the process early. We had data collection, planning with the community, and we worked with them through the process and we stayed in the village, so we were able to understand the situation in the community.

We have built many new relationships with organisations and strengthened old ones. We would normally work with like-minded organisations in Myanmar and internationally. We are a part of new networks and work with other organisations as a result of Cyclone Nargis. We have more opportunities through Nargis funding.

Moreover, building trust and relationships, both with participating communities and authorities, was found to be a vital activity in carrying out programming in a particularly restrictive environment. Building relationships was fundamental to creating a sense of security in contexts where restrictions and fear are pervasive:

The situation in Myanmar is confusing and we operate in a context where there are a lot of things we may not understand and there is a lot of emotion. Rumours make people hesitant and fearful. We would hear of other people getting arrested and become concerned about our own situation. We had to find ways of addressing these concerns and carrying out the work. We found building relationships was the key to feeling safe.

A further learning focused on the importance of building relationships amongst staff. This was found to be an excellent role modelling strategy and also increased staff morale:

In implementing this emergency relief project we learnt that building trust between staff is as vital as building trust with the communities and local authorities. It is not easy to build trust with communities if staff don't show this trust with each other. Buddhist and Catholic staff working together provides good role-modelling of solidarity and cooperation for the communities.

### **Adopting a Strategy for Cyclone Nargis Relief Work**

Formulating a response to Nargis was a process handled in diverse ways. Most organisations acknowledged an absence of emergency relief programming, prior to Nargis. Some had participated in trainings on disaster relief reduction or preparedness, but the subject had received minimal attention within their organisations.

Faced with the overwhelming needs caused by the Cyclone, organisations had to rapidly decide how they would be involved, if at all, and the boundaries of their involvement. This was an immensely difficult process to undertake in the context of an emergency, where demands were high and donors were making offers of significant amounts of money to become involved. Still, most organisations took the time to develop a strategy for their work, in order not to be diverted from their core roles and the fundamental direction of their organisation.

Whilst some organisations took on relief work as a completely new task, most organisations approached it as an opportunity to link the work they had already implemented prior to the cyclone. Several organisations therefore, made the deliberate decision to perform relief work as a way of strengthening or building upon existing programs. This strategy enabled new relationships to be forged:

We learned that emergency projects can open up the way for peacebuilding to start in areas that had previously been difficult for us to access. With the emergency and relief work as a shared interest among communities and leaders, cooperation and solidarity becomes possible or is facilitated by the emergency efforts as an entry point.

The relationship already established with participants can pave the way for peacebuilding and other program areas to begin to complement emergency components. The relief phase is all about needs and addressing them rapidly. However as we move into the rehabilitation stage it's about building communities. We need to work collaboratively and sustainably.

Some organisations, deliberate in their relief work, strategised to work with non-traditional target groups. This meant working with groups of different ethno-cultural and religious backgrounds:

Cyclone Nargis provided us with the opportunity to work with the majority Burmese community to contribute and influence peacebuilding concepts. We had previously worked with the northern part of the country and other ethnic communities and not directly with Burmese people. As a result of Nargis, we have

the opportunity to work together with the Burmese community. This is another step for us, another opportunity. Our training department is always looking for this kind of chance.

This strategy had many benefits, one of which was the impact on the authorities and their perceptions:

We learned that when we involved the communities, regardless of their religious and ethnic backgrounds, in decision-making and implementation, the authorities appreciate our strategy of non-discrimination and eliminate slowly the wrong perception that our religious organisation are concerned only with our own people.

Other organisations sought to deliberately target communities whom they had struggled to contact and build relationships with, and who could be future partners in their work:

After Nargis we found many co-ordinators for the relief work from the community itself. We were able to establish relationships with the most remote areas, like Hygnie Island. We previously had no contact with these communities. We could co-ordinate relief with them and it was a way for us to connect and support them.

Our strategy was to involve alumni youth groups and also other youth groups to carry out Cyclone relief work after Nargis...Before Nargis we did not have any relationships with the local youth groups. This is our new partner in the community. We got to know them during Cyclone Nargis and we worked with them because they knew a lot about the local situation.

A significant learning expressed by some was that the more strategic the engagement, the more influence was brought to bear:

Our engagement with the monks' organisations was very specific, strategic and political. Through Nargis we were able sell the idea of participatory planning to their religious organisation. These concepts were not familiar to them. They didn't know how to take people into account. It has also been a way for us to get their blessing for the environment movement.

We have been able to generate a greater influence as a result of Cyclone Nargis. For example, after Nargis the price of diesel really

rose. We organised with the private sector to flood the market without profit. The government then also took off the government tax. This broke a government monopoly of ten years. We have been trying to advocate for this tax policy for decade, and Nargis provided us the opportunity to break through it.

### **Using Nargis as an Opportunity For Further Capacity Building**

Each of the local organisations interviewed had been actively working to build capacities long before Nargis. This occurred through a multitude of means including workshops, training and exposure visits. Many organisations had been focusing on leadership skills but the range of subjects was broad and included: trauma healing; communication skills; disaster risk reduction and planning; civic education; gender awareness; peacebuilding; development; community planning and participation; federalism, etc. Many of those interviewed commented on how Nargis presented an opportunity to capitalise on training and infrastructure, and put it into practice. People were not only motivated to assist but had the training to contribute to the relief effort and were keen to use it.

After Nargis, we contacted our network of trauma healers. There are 200 from around Myanmar. These are the people that had trained with us in the trauma healing course. They had completed their four modules and had graduated from the course. They had the knowledge and skills, but had no real experience applying their skills. They wanted to practice what they had learnt and to test themselves.

We wanted to use this opportunity to improve existing staff. We have rotated staff amongst departments to get more skills. We have really tried to mobilise existing resources.

The use of experts was widespread after Cyclone Nargis for technical assistance and capacity building. One organisation found external experts was useful for rapidly building staff capacity. Instead of having experts arrive for one day or two however, it was found to be more beneficial if experts stayed with the organisation for up to three months.

With the experts guiding and showing us what to do, we were able to avoid serious mistakes and do our work in a better way than if we were doing it alone.

Skill transfer was a process that occurred on many levels. It was an exchange between staff, between affected communities, between volunteers and authorities. It was also a process in which donors took part, passing on skills in accounting, management and financing through secondments arrangements. At the same time it was acknowledged by almost all organisations that it would be of great assistance if capacity building was a focus of external organisations and they paved the way for this to occur.

### **Importance of Working Holistically and on a Multi-Sector Basis**

In carrying out emergency response work for Cyclone Nargis, organisations became aware of the interdisciplinary nature of relief work and the need to work holistically in responding to the context. This necessitated being flexible and creative:

Our organisation is very different now to before Nargis. We have become very active and very humanitarian based. Before Nargis we would work on separate issues – poverty reduction, HIV/Aids, health – and in very small ways. We have had to work in many different sectors now and often across sectors – education, health, livelihoods, shelter. All these needs were present at the same time. Our activities have become much deeper now.

We have changed our organisation and now work on a much more holistic level. We are engaged in different sectors. At an organisational level we are aware of the reality in the communities and are ready to give more based on our experience in relief and development. Our organisation has 14 different departments - youth, education, women, evangelism, etc - and now we co-ordinate across departments much better. We share responsibility and recognise the intersections in our work.



## We Can Work with Government

An acceptance that organisations can develop a working relationship with the Myanmar government, and benefit from it, was a key learning expressed by many of the organisations we interviewed. This learning is closely aligned with the recognition of the importance of networking and building relationships.

There is a demonstrable need for a strong commitment on our part, the implementers, to change our old and strongly held paradigm of generalising authorities as “impossible” and “hopeless” in cooperating with our work and mission. We have proven that once trust and relationship is built, they support our mission even if it means making our work “internally allowed” by them.

Understanding the government was an important learning for us. We anticipated that they were going to get the villagers out from the camps. We anticipated the camps would be closed and the villages would have to move back.

Instead of blaming the government, we just worked with them as much as we could. We worked with them and worked with smiles.

We need to still inform the authorities of our work but there is still a space to work in a silent way.

It is important to build relationships with the village level and the top level by reporting to the Ministry and always informing them.

We worked with the Government. We informed them about what we were doing and providing in the village. Working with the Government like this is a new experience for us.

After Nargis, we can see a lot of opportunities for our existence. Before Nargis we had no chance to work together with the UN or government departments. Before Nargis we would work with the township level government officers to deliver training. The participants were government officials and two to three non-government people. As an organisation however, we had no contact or relationship with government departments before Nargis.

It was critical that relationship building with government, and authorities did not jeopardise community relations:

While working on building friendship and trust with the local authorities, there is equal effort needed to build trust with communities who normally suspect/perceive authorities as abusive. If we become friendly with authorities, there is a tendency for us to be suspected by communities as favouring the authorities, thus they should be our primary allies in our work to achieve our objectives and goals.

### **Sustaining Staff and Motivation**

With huge demands placed upon people by the devastation caused by the Cyclone, sustaining motivation and energy levels amongst staff was a key challenge. Simultaneously, organisations were pressed for time trying to save lives and care for their staff and volunteers, in a particularly fragile security context:

De-briefing and storytelling sessions became one of the most important mechanisms that helped maintain a strong sense of commitment and motivation amongst the staff.

We learned that staff feel more motivated to work when they feel confident about their skills and knowledge in doing the job. The training sessions provided, such as trauma healing and psychosocial support skills, Do No Harm Analysis workshop, financial management and reporting skills etc. are very helpful in keeping the staffs' sense of confidence in themselves.

Celebrating small successes enabled our staff to maintain motivation and to continue their very difficult work in the devastated areas. This gave them the energy to continue working with the affected populations, providing support and assistance.

### **Keeping Donors Updated**

In an emergency context, maintaining communications is difficult. Some organisations who maintained communication with donors were able to maximise the support they received and develop enhanced relationships.

We found that it was important to keep our donors up-to-date on our work, accomplishments and issues. This enabled us to get more support from them, not only in terms of financial and technical assistance but also in the form of moral support.

We need donors to have a good knowledge of our reality. We don't want to pretend with them. They must accept our reality and think about our capacity-building. Trust is really important. We want a donor to always be involved with us and working collaboratively. Good or bad they are responsible for our work also. We want to develop proposals collectively and be flexible and open.

### **Myanmar is Disaster Prone and Disaster Relief Reduction is Vital**

In providing Cyclone Nargis relief, everyday was a learning opportunity. We now realise that Myanmar is a disaster prone area and we are training to prepare for future disasters. For us, we need to make ourselves able to be ready and strong enough to respond to these disasters. We are in a good position now to be able to do so.

Many organisations commented on how disaster prevention or Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) was not a priority before the Cyclone. There was a sense that natural disasters afflicted neighbouring countries but that the threat to Myanmar was neither real nor significant.

We had never expected a cyclone on this scale. Within the last one to two years we had heard about disaster response and disaster preparedness. However we had not intended to get involved. A few of our staff may have attended a training, but we were not seriously engaged with this work nor planning for disaster risk reduction. We thought cyclones only happened in Bangladesh.

Cyclone Nargis confirmed Myanmar's vulnerability to disasters. As a result, procedures have been put in place to make the community aware of how to prevent a similar natural disaster having as detrimental an impact as Cyclone Nargis. This has involved community education, early warning systems and departments dedicated to

monitoring disaster preparedness. This was a significant learning on an individual level as well as an organisational one:

Before Nargis, our information systems were poor. Now, organisations work very closely together and their networking skills are excellent. People are a lot more aware of the weather news.

Other organisations have used this new awareness of environmental issues as a springboard to other conservation work. Cyclone Nargis has been used by some groups to promote greater awareness of the environment and the need for sustainability.

As a result of Nargis, people are really engaging with the environmental movement and politics. The empowerment of civil society is a big change since Nargis. The political landscape is changing. The cyclone has really helped connect civil society and community-based organisations.

Certainly after Nargis we saw an opportunity to convince more people of the need for environmental sustainability and to take on environmental issues. We want to look into the viability of hybrid vegetables and products which has not been considered before. We are also thinking of offering seeds. Solar panel technology is also something we are examining. People would be able to charge their batteries at solar panel stations during the day and use them for the evening. This is feasible at present.

## **Changes in Civil Society, Before and After Nargis**

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## Civil Society After Cyclone Nargis

Cyclone Nargis has left a devastating impact on Myanmar as thousands of people were killed and 2.4 million survivors have been severely affected: many lost not only family members but their homes, food reserves, livestock, tools and livelihoods. Two million out of 2.4 million people remain in need of prioritised assistance.<sup>23</sup> Critical infrastructure sustained massive damage including electricity, communication and transportation networks, health facilities and schools. Physically and geographically, the scale of destruction is really huge.

On the one hand, Cyclone Nargis brought so much destruction. At the same time, it brought people together and provided the opportunity for people and civil society to take action to respond to the affected area with the affected people.

The following section highlights some of the changes that civil society experienced after Cyclone Nargis.

## Working across Difference

Myanmar is struggling with a civil war that has so far lasted over five decades; this internal protracted conflict has damaged the value and foundation of the whole society. The country has become so divided. According to John Paul Lederach, the characteristic of a divided society is that the people seek security in smaller and narrower identity groups such as clan, ethnicity, religion, or geographic/regional affiliation, or a mix of these.<sup>24</sup> This type of behaviour is evident in Myanmar society. However, the disaster has brought people together across their differences. One organisation interviewed expressed that: *In a divided community, we need to learn how to stay together, work together, and develop together without compromising our values and identity. We need to be restored as a peaceful community.* This has been proved during the response to Cyclone Nargis.

<sup>23</sup> Black, N., Research Fellow, Applied Researcher in Human Security: Update on the Humanitarian Response to Cyclone Nargis – No 7, Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Lederach, JP., *Building Peace, Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Society*, United States Institute of Peace, 1997, p. 13.

We didn't care if people were Karen or Buddhist or Burmese, we made no distinction.

Before Nargis there was a lot of discrimination between religious groups, especially, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. When Nargis happened, no one could stay in the house. Everyone came out to work for the affected people and people didn't want to stay alone. People don't see religion and race they just see human beings. These things came out, that spirit.

The response to Nargis crossed all ethnic lines. Many of the people mobilised from Yangon to assist had been taking part in our health and English education programmes. These participants are from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Many of our staff are from the same ethnic group as those affected by the cyclone. They were of great assistance because they speak the local language. They went to Buddhist and Christian communities and people would not ask what religion they were when receiving assistance. The response was across all religious lines. This was one of the first times that something has happened which has caused a breaking down of barriers between religions. When I worked there, our religious organisation would very much work in its own area and assert its position as being different from other denominations and religions. The Nargis response went beyond all that.

In our experience, Cyclone Nargis really brought people together. People began to form groups to respond to the disaster and that amazed us.

### **Developing New Relationships: Local Organisations Linking with the United Nations and International Organisations**

Without the effort of local organisations, the destructive impact of Cyclone Nargis would have been much greater. This was because a great deal of international assistance was prevented from reaching affected populations due to government restrictions on entering Myanmar. This situation provided the opportunity for local and international organisations, including the UN, to build their connections



and develop strong relationships for their field operations during the relief effort.

The United Nations had a Women's and Children's Protection Cluster. The cluster was eventually divided into two to become the Women's Protection Sub-Cluster and the Children Protection Sub-Cluster. To complement the Women's Protection Sub-Cluster, the UN established the Women's Protection Technical Working Group (WPTWG). As a local organisation, we were involved in the WPTWG, we had an important role and we were active members. It was the first time for our organisation to be working directly with UN organisations. This had never happened before as UN organisations in Myanmar used to only work with government departments and government organisations.

We have a lot more linkages with INGOs since Nargis. We share experiences, skills and knowledge with them. This is a good way of ensuring sustainability.

## **New Partnerships**

There have been a number of different types of new relationships built from the Cyclone Nargis relief operation. Some started during the relief stage and some had been on the agenda with parties intending to make links for somehow without it materialising. Nargis created the opportunity for them to get connected.

As a result of Nargis, we have been able to work with the mainstream Buddhist community. Many religious leaders have been a part of our trauma healing program. They are convinced now of the need for it and have even invited us to stay in the monastery.

Since Nargis we have been working with the monk community and this has built up relationships with community and religious leaders of the village.

Our Cyclone Nargis relief work involved a linkage with a very socially influential monk. He is the head of a Buddhist Missionary Association. Before Cyclone Nargis we found it difficult to get in touch with this association because we had no common ground on which to meet. Now we stand together.

Moreover, Cyclone Nargis has linked people from the business sector with other groups to get involved in relief work.

We co-partnered with a Yangon based businessman for our Nargis relief activities. This businessman is a devout Buddhist and a member of the Board of Trustees of a well known monastery in Yangon. The village in which we stationed our medical team as a base is the village in which his mother was born. He had also donated the funds required to build the village clinic and we treat and operate on patients in that clinic. The man also hosts our team in his house *as most other buildings have been washed away.*

Interviewers impression was that these new relationships developed during Cyclone Nargis would not perish after the relief work is completed. People strongly expressed that these partnerships will continue and they will find ways to work and cooperate together more strategically in the future.

We had previously worked with the northern part of the country and other ethnic communities and not directly with Burmese people. As a result of Nargis, we have the opportunity to work together with the Burmese community. This is another step for us, another opportunity.

### **Change in Relations between NGOs and the Government**

There has been a change in relations between the government and NGOs. One organisation expressed that:

Our approach to the Government is usually to avoid them. Our people do not have a relationship with them in the villages because we speak our own languages. At a community level we do not know how to work with them to discuss our issues and try to live together in a small community. After Nargis we had to deal with and present issues to the authorities. This was a good experience.

This is a big step for both the government and NGOs. It has been an opportunity to build their relationships based on understanding rather than ignorance and isolation. These behaviours were creating lots of fear and misunderstanding and allowed the unhealthy relationships

to stop cooperation and engagement for the good and development of the country.

### **Moving Beyond the Comfort Zone and Out Into the Field**

The limited access and work carried out in the community by the government, contributed to the situation whereby groups and organisations in Myanmar worked only among their own communities or institutions. This work was often clustered in the offices and buildings in Yangon division. During Cyclone Nargis however, some religious institutions made the decision to leave their compounds and move themselves into the field and work with community people.

The good thing about Cyclone Nargis was that it made our staff enter the lives of the local people. It made them get out of the buildings and offices and get into the ordinary lives of the people. From a religious point of view, this is what we are on about. Religion shouldn't be carried out in an elitist way.

Some were able to exercise their learning and capacity at the field level and mobilise their resources in the community.

We are now having the strategy to work in the field. Our organisation has now become strong and knows how to work and mobilise in the field. We are more active than before. Before we only sat in the office in Yangon and conducted training. After Nargis, we know our way and are able to work and mobilise more in the field.

### **Focus on Community Organising and Capacity Building**

The Myanmar situation left people with the spirit of building up community capacities to carry out the work. Many of the organisations expressed how they do not know when the door enabling this opportunity, will close. When it is open therefore, they try their best to access communities and also to ensure that structures are created in communities so that they will be able to carry out the work by themselves. The concept of building up communities was present in almost all of the local organisations interviewed as they see this as the way for development in Myanmar society to occur.

The standard operation procedure for us was to initially get in touch with villagers and help them to establish village 'Community Based Organisations' (CBOs) with a leadership team of five members. The village head could be on the leadership team but there also needed to be one woman. A rapid assessment was conducted as soon as there was access to the village. We then provide the village with our two volunteers to stay with them. At the same time we ask the members of the leadership team to recruit five volunteers from the village to assist and witness the distribution and cash-for-work activities. We provide training in relief work to these volunteers. Distribution is then run through the management of the CBO and our volunteers just witness the process. In all activities therefore, there is a team of seven plus the leadership team of the CBO.

Assessments and decisions about priorities are the responsibility of the five persons in the leadership team. We witnessed their distribution of the goods and collected signatures and photos for accountability but the rest was up to them. When trust with the rest of the village has been established, we pull out the two alumni volunteers. We would only do this when we know that the CBO and volunteers can take care of things themselves and we assess and ask people in the village whether or not they trust the leadership group.

In the relief context, involving and building the capacity of the community is not an easy task. Rapid responses are required and people have to act promptly to deal with the impact of the disaster. However, much of civil society in Myanmar kept focused on processes within their operational strategy. As a result of the constraints and restrictions placed on organisations, it is possible that they are creative and ready to capitalise on opportunities that arise.

From the beginning, our organisation has been focusing on community based organisations. We concentrate on the capacity of the community. We are always seeking to build the capacity of the community. This drives our work.

At all levels we tried to make sure that there was community participation. We trained them with participatory rural appraisal (PRA) so that there was ample and an open space for people from affected communities to actively participate.

## Cyclone Nargis: An Opportunity to Grow

Civil society in Myanmar has grown and expanded since Cyclone Nargis. Both in terms of human and financial resources, this growth has been significant.

Prior to this we had no track record. Now we manage a budget of one million US dollars. Whilst we did not have experience, we knew how to access and persuade Generals and we had access to our Alumni who became volunteers. We originally had 100 volunteers and now we have over 2,000.

We have expanded. Before Nargis, our partner had three staff and we had five. After Nargis, our organisation has 46 staff.

Many organisations in Myanmar had conducted training with different groups in the community. They had not had the opportunity yet however, to exercise and practice their knowledge in the community. Cyclone Nargis has allowed these groups to undertake learning at the field level, and use this knowledge to further their capacity and operations into the future.

Our work focuses on women and youth development programmes. Before Nargis, we only did training but were not able to do any practice and not able to see our alumni youth practice their skills. But during Nargis, we realised we could participate in a lot of field work. We knew that the youth we had trained are capable of doing social work. We have received great exposure. Before Nargis, village people didn't know about development work but now they understand and we have an easy time working with them.

Though the growth of the civil society was significant, some organisations raised concerns about the workload of staff.

Once Nargis struck, staff members and partners of our organisation were asked whether they could leave their current programs to join the relief effort. Partners were also asked to suspend their work to attend the relief operation.

Since Nargis, the workload for our staff has increased significantly.

Also, there are challenges in relation to staff capacity to handle demand at the field level and at the high level, where staff are required to deal with authorities, other organisations and donors, in addition to responding to funding requirements and dealing with partner INGOs.

Improving the capacity of local organisations is an ongoing challenge. Capacity is highly demanded. Every day we have to speak English, every day we speak with our international friends. If we cannot speak English then it is difficult to communicate and work together. The challenge for local organisations is how to speak with INGOs.

Another challenge is the high criteria for funding and partnership that the INGOs formulate. Most local organisations cannot meet these requirements. The funding application has lots of steps and demands are so high. The criteria applies international standard. Local organisations can't find the appropriate technical expertise however to meet these standards.

The following is a comment from a donor agency about the growth and changes after Nargis and the opportunity for building the understanding between donors and partners in Myanmar.

Nargis made a huge change in the interaction of local groups/NGOs and donors. It is quite new and difficult for most of them to comply with international standards. Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are not familiar with the concepts of transparency and accountability that are the key words of any international donor.

Hopefully this disaster will appear in the longer term as an opportunity for local groups/NGOs to attract the attention of the donors and to educate them to the specific 'Burmese limiting factors'.

## **Emerging Networks and Groups**

Networks are really important as they bring strength and the spirit of being and acting together. In the Myanmar context especially, there is a strong need for networking. In the interviews, one organisation mentioned that prior to Cyclone Nargis, NGOs in Myanmar had been thinking to organise in a Myanmar NGO Network (MNN). Progress,

had been slow however, and they only met once a month before Nargis. The MNN is a group of 20 local organisations. Their first meeting was in late 2007, and the attendance was different each time and numbers fluctuated. Nargis however, significantly sped up the process.

It was only after Cyclone Nargis that MNN really got organised. We came together once a week. We would meet together with most local NGOs. We would attend the cluster meetings on behalf of the local organisations and link local and International NGOs. MNN was really important for ensuring this linkage occurred. MNN was really driven to grow by Cyclone Nargis.

During the response of Cyclone Nargis, there are many organisations working in Myanmar doing relief, rehabilitation and recovery projects. This prompted a few large INGOs and local organisations to establish a Learning Resource Centre specifically focused on Cyclone Nargis. This programme brings the different organisations together. They conduct weekly, monthly meetings, and collect many documents. They do a lot of co-ordination and mapping work on who is doing what and collect all details. It runs like a documentation centre. They also report to every Nargis organisation with updated information.

The structures created after Cyclone Nargis are really important for Myanmar society where communication and interaction is always a challenge. Also, due to the diversity of the country and the different layers of conflict over the past decades, these structures will significantly contribute to creating the space for building relationships, understanding, and alliances to work together hand in hand for the development and positive change for the future of the country.





## Recommendations for External Actors

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In each interview we asked local organisations for their suggestions as to how external organisations can assist in further strengthening civil society in Myanmar. This section summarises ten of their main suggestions. As the following extract suggests, the challenging conditions in which civil society operates makes it difficult to spell out a formula for how external actors can support local actors. The general principles contained herein, however, can provide solid guidance for improving practices.

It is difficult to give advice for what the international community should do. Whatever you do will be good. In this system, nothing is predictable. Our organisation has adopted a diversified strategy and is multi-tasking because we don't know which door will close, when. We cannot stop our movement. We have to get more doors to open and keep knocking.

This underscores the importance of external actors being flexible and informed; issues elaborated upon further below. The Recommendations section will be broken up to focus on two clusters of external actors: international development actors operating within Myanmar (INGOs); and the wider international community.

## **Recommendations for International Development Actors Operating in Myanmar**

### **1. Understand the Local Context**

People do not know what it is like until they come and see the real situation, and try to understand the context and the backdrop.

Local organisations expressed in strong terms their desire for external actors to understand the local context. This involves gaining an understanding of the social and conflict dynamics, the religious and ethno-cultural diversity of the country and its political history. These factors greatly influence how local organisations make decisions and respond to issues. Without a contextual understanding, local organisations may be burdened by unrealistic expectations, and can face increased security risks. Engaging with the complexity of the context will build more effective relationships between external and

internal actors, and reduce the potential for conflict.

## **2. Be Flexible and Adjust Expectations to fit the Environment**

Myanmar's protracted conflict adds complexity and delays progress in an already challenging environment. Building up society and recovering from this conflict will take longer than current expectations suggest. . The conflict has devastated human resources, natural resources infrastructure, trust and unity, and the well-being of the Myanmar people. If external organisations are willing to work in this context, they have '*to start small and go slow and be prepared for many obstacles on the way*'. This idea was put forward by one of the external organisations we interviewed. He argued that external organisations need to be prepared as things might not proceed according to expectations and circumstances can change suddenly. In responding to this, external organisations need to be flexible and prepared to face challenges and problem solve alongside local organisations.

## **3. Trust Local People and Strengthen Local Capacities**

A number of organisations interviewed expressed that external organisations should place greater trust in local people to do the work. They identified that more could be done to support and strengthen local capacities in program cycle management and especially in reporting, monitoring and evaluation. For these mechanisms to work, it was made clear that participation in developing frameworks, and co-operation between external and local organisations, and community people was essential.

Please do not bring new or complicated frameworks because sometimes it does not work in our context and our villages. We want participatory monitoring and evaluation from the community. We do have our own format but it was rejected and disapproved by external organisations and we have to use their framework. We did not know how to use and apply these in our work. What we really need is for the external organisations to understand the context of our work and also consider whether or not to introduce new tools as we are not sure whether they are applicable.

External organisations should be flexible in working in Myanmar and should not be restricted to the international standard or their own policies while local people do not have the capacity to fulfil those requirements. These recommendations do not mean that external organisation should always change their policies and standards. It is important however, that such organisations are sensitive to the context and that they understand local capacities. They can then work gradually to build this capacity to enable them to eventually meet the needs and standards of international organisations.

#### **4. Be Creative**

Working in a restrictive context like Myanmar requires creativity from individuals and organisations. Local organisations drew attention to the way informal mechanisms are utilised to overcome obstacles. One organisation gave the following illustration:

The message I would like to get out to the international community is this: whenever they hear about any catastrophe, let them come into our country as a tourist if they cannot enter the legal way. If they cannot apply for visa to do relief work then let them come somehow as a missionary. They can take a place in the churches to assist. If they can't come in the legal way, I would encourage them to get around the system.

External actors need to find alternative creative ways to access affected communities.

#### **5. Work with Local Groups and Work with Different Groups**

The potential for harm caused by external organisations entering a context and duplicating or usurping existing structures, cannot be underestimated. Many of the groups we interviewed expressed frustration at this practice. External organisations were encouraged to find out about existing local organisations and ways of strengthening those groups before embarking upon operations. Local organisations cannot compete with the large budgets of international NGOs. Sensitivity to this reality and a commitment to strengthening and working with local groups will build confidence and trust and create

better partnerships.

To reach out to the community, we need local groups.

The INGOs can carry out this work for the long-term if they can partner with trustworthy local organisations. Otherwise they affect the situation in different ways.

While working with local groups or local organisations, there is also a need to work with different local groups. This could prevent favouritism of one group over the others, but also create the opportunity to make linkages between different groups in Myanmar society.

I would advise external organisations that you should source a local NGO to support that has credibility and integrity. Don't just work with one person. Don't just seek out one person and trust them.

## **6. Work With the Government**

Overwhelmingly, people within Myanmar recognise that the current government will be part of any present or future activity. Local organisations engage with this challenge on a daily basis and, as the interviews have recorded, in a variety of ways. Organisations who worked with the government after Cyclone Nargis report that constructive and effective relationships were built. Part of working with the context is recognising this complexity and the need to support efforts to engage the government.

To be successful in working in the Myanmar context, we have to work collaboratively with the government.

Isolated people are denied exposure to contemporary ideas and approaches. The more they are isolated the more they are entrenched in their own world or comfort zone where they do not have to confront or deal with others.

The isolationist policies adopted by the international community towards the Myanmar Government need to be reconsidered. Everybody needs to participate and be involved in the development of the community, especially the government. Engaging and working with the government is not just about involving them or asking them to permit the program

to operate, it also involves learning to understand the government.

Before external organisations start working in an area, they need to understand the situation. By this we mean the government policies and other related documents.

Local organisations suggested that this understanding has the potential to move development forward. All too often this perspective is lost within the milieu of criticism directed squarely at the government. Internal voices need to be heard on the issue and given as much attention as those advocating from outside Myanmar.

## **7. Build the Capacity of Local People**

We require capacity building as a way of strengthening our organisation. We require not just funding but also expert assistance and resource support.

Building the capacities of local groups is an issue of empowerment and sustainability. This is particularly important in the Myanmar context because many local groups are emerging and they have a strong commitment to their own communities yet their capacity may be limited.

Capacity building is important. INGOs should be used for their knowledge and resource persons. They have to give and share capacity. We need to know about project management, community development and emergency responses. We want to be taught how to fish, not to be given fish.

In the longer term we need capacity-building training. We also need institutional capacity-building.

While capacity building on how to work effectively in the community is needed, organisational capacity is also essential to keep the organisation connected and able to respond to the requirements set by international standards.

We are lacking in the area of writing and reporting. We are working hard and doing good in the villages with the people, but we are not able to write a good report about our work.

Additionally, during the interviews people expressed their desire to learn skills in handling or addressing conflict. Gaining a basic understanding of peace and conflict concepts and equipping staff with these skills was thought to have the potential to help organisations facilitate group work and address social and conflict dynamics. It could also assist in handling conflict arising or existing in their targeted communities. As one organisation expressed, this skill is needed over and above the demand for skills in project cycle management:

We have found that the people in the affected communities want to keep to themselves in small groups and do not want to work on an inter-faith basis. This is also good because we don't have the knowledge and skills to manage these activities. There are lots of problems in these communities and we don't know how to deal with them or minimise the conflict. We don't know how to address this conflict so it might worsen the conflict and there will be further trouble.

This organisation also mentioned that organisations really need to be familiar with conflict transformation concepts before they begin to handle conflict within their communities. He added that at least the organisation now realised the issue, albeit that the organisation has no capacity to deal with it yet. Having identified this need however, the organisation is now talking about it and will consider ways to equip staff so that they are ready to help in facilitating these issues at the community level.

## **8. Focus on Young People**

I would also like to request that there is a new focus on young people. In Myanmar society, old people stick to old ideas. The education system here has become very hopeless. The teachers are inexperienced and the students are not receiving a high quality of education. We need to teach people awareness. In the future, we don't know what will happen in terms of the political situation. If the young people are growing up and are aware of the situation and they have a commitment to the welfare of the whole country, the country will be changed. There is a need for consciousness and for young people to take responsibility for the country.



Building society will take generations especially in a post conflict country like Myanmar which has endured over five decades of civil war. The focus on building the capacities of the younger generation is essential as they are needed by society to lead the country into the future. They need to start learning to live and work together with other young people different from them; building understanding and trust among themselves. One method is to build a sense of community by engaging youth in community work and gaining exposure to different contexts. As well as including young people in social development and transformation, it is a way of addressing isolation and a sense of hopelessness that may exist amongst young people in Myanmar.

## **Recommendations for the International Community**

### **9. Keeping the Myanmar Issue Alive within the International Community**

Myanmar has been isolated from the rest of the world for decades because the country is subject to military rule. As a result of this isolation, many people have neither heard about Myanmar and what has happened, nor are able to easily get access into the country. However, in recent years there were two events that broke out of this mould and caught the attention of the international community: the events in September 2007 and Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. These have made the world understand more about the country, discuss issues and look for ways to advocate for Myanmar people at the international level. Myanmar needs to be connected and receive the support of the rest of the world. In return, the world needs to talk about Myanmar to keep the issues alive. They especially need to be able to understand its complexity and look for ways to lobby and advocate for transformation and development within the country.

It is difficult to access data and facts on Myanmar. External organisations can help out by keeping the issues alive. They need to talk, analyse and discuss what has been written and publicised. They can be advocating and lobbying the United Nations, Security Council, and anyone who has an initiative on Burma and can be on board.

## 10. Balancing Information in the Media and Reporting

The tendency to report only negative things, although with good intention, only increases the constraints and reduces the space to work.

Myanmar is not a well-known country to the world. It has been isolated for decades because of attitudes towards the military regime. In the past and even during Cyclone Nargis, most media articles focused on the brutality and ignorance of the government toward the development and human rights of the country and the fighting that is still going on in some parts of the country. This might be the reality, however, there have also been good and positive steps that people in the country have carried out, including by the authorities themselves, and these need to be heard and recognised.

Therefore, the recommendation to individuals and external organisations is that:

To say things that will encourage those who are working in a very stressful environment such as Myanmar, and to educate and advise on the things that need to be changed or improved by all implementers in a more friendly and constructive way.

Many have tried the conventional approach of being critical of the unacceptable levels of development for quite a long time now, but with no satisfactory result or no positive result at all. There is a need for alternative and creative approach if people willing to have the positive impact. The selectively report back in the international media only the negative things that have been seen by external people or organisation should not practice any more. They should try to make objective reports that will more truly reflect the positive developments as well as the challenges that the local organisations and the government are facing. People should understand that there are constraints but, at the same time, there are spaces to work as well. Therefore, the purpose is to lessen the constraints and increase the space to work.

**Conclusion**

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Cyclone Nargis had a significant impact on civil society in Myanmar. The landscape shifted a great deal. In performing relief work for Cyclone Nargis, organisations collected a large array of lessons learned. Most stressed the importance of communication in networking and building relationships. Adopting a strategy was also of critical importance and meant the opportunities presented by Nargis were maximised and the negative impact minimised. Learning around issues of working with government, handling fear, sustaining staff motivation and liaising with donors were also mentioned. Reflecting on the lessons learned can benefit organisations in similar contexts.

As a result of Cyclone Nargis, groups who previously had no experience of collaborating and working side by side, came together to provide a response to the devastation. The response mounted strengthened capacities and forged new relationships. Most organisations expanded and were able to capitalise on years of patient organising. In some instances, existing programs were integrated and new entry points were identified. The organisations we interviewed were hopeful about these changes being sustained into the future. The recommendations identified above make clear that external organisations can play a role in facilitating and supporting the further strengthening of civil society in Myanmar.

The following Parts B and C set out the narratives obtained through interviews. Part B contains the 15 interviews with local organisations. Part C contains the narratives of five external organisations who work in the Myanmar context.



# Part B

## Listening to Local Voices: Narratives







**Building Partnership with the  
Community and the Government:  
Alternative Creative Approaches**

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“If people really want to engage and make a change for our situation, they need to have a different paradigm of thinking. Many have tried the conventional approach of being critical of the unacceptable levels of development for quite a long time now but with no satisfactory result or no positive result at all. We need a more creative alternative approach at this point, if we want to have a positive impact. We have tried the old approaches of just being critical and we need an alternative approach. We need to be truthful as well as sensitive without any bias to be accepted as partners by the stakeholders.”

Cyclone Nargis happened on the night of 2 May 2008. Personally, we were affected by Nargis here in Yangon. We had no communication mechanisms as the phones were all out. We couldn't get around as there were trees all over the road and traffic couldn't move.

For the first two days there were lots of people out of their homes and on the streets clearing away the trees. We were all working together co-operatively and in solidarity in Yangon. On the second day we still had no electricity in our apartments. We had no water and had to share and transport water from other places and bring it back to our houses. People were buying generators and using it to pump water into their houses.

By 6 May, we had water and could travel a little from place to place. At this stage however, we had not heard anything about the Delta. News began to arrive from people who had been in the Delta and were coming back to Yangon. They said that one or two of their family members had been lost. It had such a very hard impact on the people.

We had only returned to Yangon from the Delta on 2 May. We had been there with our mobile health clinic. We were thinking about our friends and colleagues there and were worried.

I also received information from INGO colleagues about the Delta and they contacted us to assist with funding for relief work. The phone lines were still down and I couldn't access the office because of the roads but I managed to go to the offices of two INGOs, one of whom is already a donor for our programs.

We bought medicine and supplies to prepare to go to the Delta. We used our usual funding and our own money as at that stage we did not have access to any additional funding beyond an amount given to us by one INGO. We left for the Delta on 7 May.

When we arrived in the Delta on 7 May, there were very few NGOs operating there. People would come and do surveys and collect data, but there was not much relief being distributed on the ground.

In our area, we were the only medical team to arrive and start doing things. Others would contact us to find out what supplies we needed and come back with materials.

As we were attending to the local people during the first week, my husband was approached by two journalists for a story on the impact of the Cyclone. He was interviewed and spoke of the overwhelming needs that existed. This interview was broadcast across the world so he became a contact person for the international community and people wanting to help. He was contacted a lot and we were able to channel that assistance into other local NGOs.

We spent the next 20 days in the Delta. Over that time many NGOs came and went after they had studied the situation. Local people brought truckloads and truckloads of relief supplies from Yangon and beyond. They brought candles and clothes also. They drove into the Delta area with their supplies and set about distributing it. This was not systematic and was chaotic, but the need was so great. Children were by the roadside waiting and asking for help.

People in remote areas needed evacuation and could not get out. They were stuck there. We hired boats to get to the remote villages. They contacted us at the village for assistance. We provide rice, salt and pulses.

In the Delta we brought our mobile medical teams and worked with the health teams in the area and the village. We have been working in the area with our mobile medical teams for a long time so have strong local foundations.

We co-partnered with a Yangon based businessman for our Nargis relief activities. This businessman is a devout Buddhist and a member of

the Board of Trustees of a well known Monastery in Yangon. The village in which we stationed our medical team as a base is the village in which his mother was born. He had also donated the funds required to build the village clinic and we treat and operate on patients in that clinic. The clinic also served as a shelter during the storm and hundreds of villagers survived because of the building. This man also hosts our team in his house as most other buildings have been washed away.

The common injuries we saw after Nargis were abrasions from holding onto trees and branches for long periods of time. People would talk of the rain being hot and prickly and we saw the marks on people's skin from the rain. We also saw cuts and fractures and broken bones.

### Challenges We Faced in Providing Emergency Relief

This was the first time we had worked in a relief operation on this scale. In the early days it was difficult to get transport to the areas.

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*In a divided community we need to learn how to stay together, work together, and develop together without compromising our values and identity. We need to be restored as a peaceful community.*

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Gradually however people would organise themselves and they would come to us.

During the early days of the relief operation, after receiving the emergency treatment required for their health problems, the needs of the people were rice and water.

For those that were living in remote areas it was difficult to locate their family members. People were evacuated and it was difficult to confirm which family members were alive or in a different camp.

Many religious groups came to assist the affected communities. They were from different faiths - Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. They would supply food to people regardless of religion. There were many people in the monasteries for the first few weeks. China was quick to respond and reach out to help people.

The communities in the affected Delta areas are approximately 50% Burmese and 50% other ethnic groups predominantly Kayins. There

are mixed villages of Burmese and other ethnicities as well as villages of mainly one ethnic group.

Immediately post-Nargis, before the major assistance came from the government and from the international agencies, people had to rely on private assistance. Some people complained of favouritism by the authorities when they saw people of other ethnic groups getting evacuated first. However some communities were in more remote areas and it was difficult to get transport to these areas. There were delays in evacuating people and misunderstandings followed. There were not enough boats for everybody and concerns of discrimination based on race are in-depth.

The villagers from the villages that we could not reach also came to us for food and medical assistance as they heard about our work from others.

It is difficult to get accurate data on the region like population statistics or to measure the impact of the Cyclone. There were no accurate records before Nargis. Many of those in the Delta were migrant workers and not from that area. They may have been there for a long time however.

### **Working with Local Authorities**

We have a good relationship with the local authorities. We have spent time building up the health centre with them so we share a good working relationship. Being among the first groups going to the area after the Cyclone, they were quickly familiar with us and were willing to come to us for help.

Usually the government is not strict about Asian international people coming to the area. Our mobile health team was supported by another Asian group who were able to come with us.

The government servants who make up the local authorities are changed quite often. Each time this happens we go to them and explain our work. The Strategic Commander has changed twice since May. It is our strategy to prioritise going and informing them about what we are doing and requesting for support and cooperation as needed.

Our staff are primarily medically-oriented but now we have some experience in relief and development work. In terms of our organisation we are not bigger but our consciousness and awareness has increased. We are still sharing these skills and experience and are planning and preparing for the future. We plan for our Project Manager to go to India and receive training. We can use the international network of INGOs to support us and find other exposure visits we can organise to improve our capacities.

Some foreign INGO representatives would like to go to the affected areas but since their organisations are not yet officially recorded by the government, they have not been given the travel authorisation to visit the area. These organisations need to find help from local NGOs like us to get the information on the impact of the disaster. Our organisation has had opportunities to help these groups as well. Our organisation has grown in terms of its partnerships with others. Through the American Centre we have participated in a forum with the Myanmar Government, ASEAN, and UN, Tripartite Core Group (TCG). TCG worked together to solve the Foreign Exchange Currency (FEC) issue. There was a significant exchange rate disparity when donors organised bank transfers in the early stages of the funds coming in for relief. The TCG was able to negotiate the money exchange process so that there was no discrepancy in the value of the funds provided by the donors and those received by the cyclone affected people.

### **How External Organisations Can Support Us**

We would like to advise external organisations not to selectively report back in the international media only the negative things that they see. We urge them to try to make objective reports that will more truly reflect the positive developments as well as the challenges that the local organisations and the government are facing. People should understand that there are constraints but, at the same time, there are spaces to work as well. The purpose is to lessen the constraints and increase the space to work. The tendency to report only negative things, although with good intention, only increases the constraints and reduces the space to work.

We work hard to build trusting, credible, and accountable partnerships with the community and the government. We do not want to lose these unnecessarily or just because of the impression that we have friends who are the adversaries of our co-partners.

I would advise external organisations instead to: say things that will encourage those who are working here in a very stressful environment; and to educate and advise on the things that need to be changed or improved by all implementers in a more friendly and constructive way.

If people really want to engage and make a change for our situation, they need to have a different paradigm of thinking. Many have tried the conventional approach of being critical of the unacceptable levels of development for quite a long time now but with no satisfactory result or no positive result at all. We need a more creative alternative approach at this point, if we want to have a positive impact. We have tried the old approaches of just being critical and we need an alternative approach. We need to be truthful as well as sensitive without any bias to be accepted as partners by the stakeholders. The following are the points that I would like to highlight for our friends, colleagues and organisations who are trying to assist our people for relief as well as for development:

- People don't know what it is like until they come and see the real situation, and try to understand the context and the backdrop;
- To promote a certain popular issue without understanding the context could be more harmful for the vulnerable people who one would like to help and protect;
- Isolated people are denied exposure to contemporary ideas and approaches. The more they are isolated the more they are entrenched in their own world or comfort zone where they do not have to confront or deal with others; and
- In a divided community we need to learn how to stay together, work together, and develop together without compromising our values and identity. We need to be restored as a peaceful community.



**Linking the Environment,  
Participatory Development and  
Emergency Relief**

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“Our engagement with this Association was very specific, strategic and political. Through Nargis we were able to sell the idea of participatory planning to their religious organisation. These concepts were not familiar to them. They didn't know how to take people into account. It has also been a way for us to get their blessing for the environment movement.”

International assistance for Cyclone Nargis relief work is fading out now because of the international financial crisis and diplomacy issues to do with the Myanmar Government. However, people's needs as a result of Cyclone Nargis, are still huge. We have saved lives but it is now a question of continuing support to the affected communities, particularly after the rainy season.

Our organisation has been involved in doing development work for 20 years. We work with local groups in the area of community forestry. We do income generation, environmental awareness and environmental governance. Once Nargis occurred we had to think about what kinds of needs we can address to alleviate the suffering we witnessed.

Before Nargis, we were primarily working in remote areas with natural resource management community based organisations. We operate a base camp training school. We have an expanding partnership with another NGO in Kachin State. There is a problem there with illegal loggers and natural resource issues are causing instability.

When Cyclone Nargis occurred, the Government tried to block international assistance. The politicians thought it was insulting that people were offering help.

Our Cyclone Nargis relief work involved a linkage with a very socially influential monk, Y Y who is like the Dalai Lama of Myanmar. He is the head of a Buddhist Missionary Association.

Y Y was in Australia when the cyclone occurred. He flew back from Australia and started to help. He has a lot of public support so was able

to bring a lot of assistance to the affected areas. With this assistance he was able to open a clinic and provide food and shelter to the local people.

The government knew they couldn't stop this monk. As a result of him a great deal of assistance made it to the affected areas. This monk really led the way and started helping people. This took place whilst other NGOs were still negotiating with the Government to be allowed to assist.

YY was able to generate three million US dollars in two to three weeks. This was the first time he had been involved in relief but he was able to mobilise and provide assistance to more than 500 villages in one township.

Our organisation was able to get to the storm hit Delta area on 9 May. As we were active in the same area, we thought to try and approach YY and his Association. By chance, I came across a friend of mine who was actually working with this Association. I did not know he worked for this Association and was even a member of their Executive Committee. Through him, Green Organisation was able to get an introduction to this Association, meet with YY the monk and begin discussions on a collaboration.

We thought critically about how we, as a development organisation, could work in this context. Charities work on a one-off job basis. We, as a development organisation, have a different view. We believe in sustainability, participation, accountability, transparency, recording and accounting for monies spent. Charities, however, do not have much experience in this regard. They mobilise public support and receive donations, but these are not properly recorded with systems etc. They do not concern themselves with these details and just give to the needy.

We began to make contact with other INGOs to see whether they would support the work of YY and the Association. One INGO agreed to provide 280,000 Euros. They agreed to channel this financial support through us. They were eager to have transparency and accountability in terms of the financial arrangements.

We sat with the Executive Committee of this Association to develop the discussion on how and what we could do with the money. We discussed what kind of activities would be appropriate and how they would operate in terms of project cycle management.

To select the most needy in the village we used participatory evaluation exercises. Our volunteers talked with the villagers. Collectively we worked out the most critical and then selected the villages in which to work. We then sent out a team to the area to do a needs and assessment survey. We could then work out what kind of needs were the most important in the area. These were emergency needs of water and sanitation. Based on this assessment, 10 micro project activities began. We were able to provide technical assistance in implementing these projects and set up systems to ensure transparency and accountability.

We have developed a fact sheet for people in English and Burmese on the role of the Association of monks. This is good information management. There is a great deal of global support and we are looking at publishing a book and making a website which will be launched in December. This is in addition to two documentaries we are working on which tell the story of the Association. These will be in English and Burmese.

The second documentary looks at the real situation of the villagers six months after Cyclone Nargis. We have selected one woman-headed household, one male-headed household and one volunteer. We will look at their daily life and combine that into one documentary. My team is in the Delta shooting this now and it will be ready in December.

In the near future we are also organising a conference. The monks are really influential in Myanmar society and the conference will bring together monks and other social actors from the emergency sector. This was Y Y's idea. It was also his idea to support the monastic education system in the Delta area. There is a long history of monastic education in Myanmar. This is fading out now but there is no formal education system to replace it.

Monks still have a role in education. After Cyclone Nargis, many schools were destroyed and the reconstruction of these schools will take a long time. Trust funds have been established by Y Y to support the teachers and the monastic education movement.

### **Strengthening of Civil Society Since Nargis**

I was in the United States at the time of the Saffron Revolution. I tried to engage the monks after that but wasn't successful. We had no social contact until Cyclone Nargis. It took Nargis for us to get connected.

Green Organisation is not a big NGO but is a development NGO. Through Nargis we were able to build trust and work together with other organisations.

Our engagement with this Association was very specific, strategic and political. Through Nargis we were able to sell the idea of participatory planning to their religious organisation. These concepts were not familiar to them. They didn't know how to take people into account. It has also been a way for us to get their blessing for the environment movement.

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*As a result of Nargis, people are really engaging with the environmental movement and politics. The empowerment of civil society is a big change since Nargis. The political landscape is changing. The cyclone has really helped connect civil society and community-based organisations.*

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Skills and knowledge will be transferred to this organisation through our partnership. They have stepped forward and we now need to up-skill them in systems management. This includes project cycle management and engaging with the media and auditors etc.

The environmental impact of construction efforts post-Nargis is an issue we are currently monitoring. Everyone tends to jump into construction. We want to work with other organisations who use green technology to develop environmentally friendly construction materials. These new technologies should be used in the reconstruction of houses and schools.

We have a lot more linkages with INGOs since Nargis. We share our experiences, skills and knowledge with them. This is a good way of ensuring sustainability. It is also wise because we can't trust that this money will always be provided because of changes in the economy. We also know that for sustainability it is important to build the capacity of women. They can then take up the opportunity.

More institutions have appeared after Cyclone Nargis and more community groups. We now have 27 NGOs in our network. I chair the network and we share experiences through the network.

The biggest volunteer group I saw was a Chinese community-based volunteer organisation. They heard about the disaster and came to help. They mobilised their friends to come and help deliver aid. Mobile French teams also came and delivered aid. We, as a specialist in participatory training methods, trained some volunteers from the Chinese community-based organisation.

Information management is a complicated area for us. We cannot put all information into the public domain. We need to think about what our audience is and our purpose.

Information sharing and co-ordination was an objective achieved by INGOs and NGOs after Nargis. A big part of information sharing was knowing who is doing what. However, the work of OCHA did not impress me during Cyclone Nargis. They produced memorandums but they were not useful.

There is a bias in the humanitarian system. For example, the Chinese earthquake had less casualties than Cyclone Nargis but they received \$5 billion US dollars in aid. I was disappointed with the amount given after Nargis and at how it was administered.

Before Nargis, this Buddhist Missionary Association was a Buddhist teaching and dissemination organisation. They also did two things:

- Water and sanitation bringing water supplies to the country
- Health work

A lot of hospitals have been renovated and have better equipment as a result of this Association. Their primary work, however, is providing Buddhist teachings.

As a result of Nargis, people are really engaging with the environmental movement and politics. The empowerment of civil society is a big change since Nargis. The political landscape is changing. The cyclone has really helped connect civil society and community-based organisations.

### **Challenges in Engaging the Buddhist Association**

For us, we found it difficult to get in touch with the Association before Cyclone Nargis. We had no common ground on which to meet. Now we stand together. It was only when we went to the monastery that I met my friend and discovered that he worked for the Association. This delivered us a chance to talk and work with the monks.

The Association is now more engaged in social development, the environment and monastic education for monks. This is a reflection of our welfare to development strategy.

We ourselves are protected by the Association's flag. They have given us a lot of cover. Before Nargis, we would never have been able to film a documentary in the Delta. But Y Y has contact with the highest levels of Government and is able to break through Government systems.

We don't want a big profile. We are doing sensitive policy work so we are better keeping a low profile. There are many organisations with the same idea and we have a common goal. We try not to be so big so that we have a political safety net. We also want low administration costs and our funding to be sustainable. We try to be very small but efficient.



**Developing Identity, Creating  
Space and Engaging Society in  
Myanmar**

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“ If you don't make yourself ready to take the opportunity to occupy space then you never will. After Nargis, we got that kind of opportunity. It's important that we don't let this disappear simply through a lack of funding. ”

**K**arama is a non-profit organisation founded by Myanmar scholars and social workers who have been actively involved in various civil society activities in Myanmar for the last fifteen years. Myanmar Karama was set up in 2006 by a group of Myanmar nationalists committed to state building through positive change in a progressive yet constructive collaboration and working relationship with the government and all interest groups, both local and foreign.

### **Karama Mission**

The Mission of Karama is to:

- Promote and nurture democracy through the renovation of highly intelligent and politically motivated citizenry of the country. To capacity build and be the supplier of change agents;
- Feed related policy inputs to the governing body Think Tank;
- Shape public opinion via public media and opinion polls; and
- Promote environmental issues that in turn will serve the long-term benefit of the country.

### **Karama Structure**

Karama consists of four branches: a Capacity Development Centre, a Think Tank, a Media Centre and an Outreach Alumni Programme.

Karama conducts a Civic Education Package which covers topics such as: strategic management, leadership styles, political economy, comparative constitutions, public speaking, negotiation and presentation skills.

Karama also provides training for the Certificate Course for Social Entrepreneurship. This has modules in Development and development

economics, governance, leadership, management and communication and advocacy.

### **Network Activity Group (NAG)**

Network Activity Group (NAG) is a recently registered sister organisation of Myanmar Karama. It falls under the Karama Outreach Alumni Programme. The NAG initiative came about as a result of the involvement of Karama staff, associates and alumni in Cyclone Nargis relief work. When the organisation formed it was known as the Nargis Action Group but was later registered as the Network Activity Group.

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*After Nargis, we can prove our capacity in terms of achievements. The network of our founding members is huge. Our work is bold because it is critical and was widely regarded by those outside of Myanmar as being politically incorrect. We argue that we are working with the real politic. Before we faced a lot of resistance by Myanmar nationals living outside Myanmar but recently this has changed.*

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Three main factors influenced our decision to get involved in post-Nargis relief operations:

1. Our Alumni, from the civic education courses outlined above, came back to us and asked 'Shouldn't we do something?'
2. Also, some of our founding members were approached by international donors and offered financial backing to do relief work
3. Government restrictions were so weighty that it really did fall upon the local population to perform the relief work. The Government was chiefly concerned about funds being used to oppose them. They were worried what the international community might fund.

At the time also, we had a good working relationship with the Government, we thought we could exploit that trust. We decided to test the water and decided to go for the relief operation.

Current Activities for NAG include:

1. Relief and rehabilitation operations
2. Assessments
3. Service Provider

4. Policy/Advocacy/Go Between
5. Training Programs
6. Delta Newspaper for the Nargis Victim
7. Delta Electronic Bulletin for the Stakeholders (Humanitarian Liaison)

As part of the Relief and Rehabilitation Operations, NAG has provided food and non-food items to 100 villages or 25,000 people. These items have included: rice, yellow beans, cooking oil, potatoes, water, mosquito nets, blankets, jerry- cans, slippers, cooking pans/pots, 200 gallon water baskets, roofing sheets, medical care together with medicines (we have two mobile doctors team) all female doctors, and cash for work.

The standard operation procedure for Karama was to initially get in touch with villagers and help them to establish village 'Community Based organisations' (CBOs) with a leadership team of 5 members. The village head could be on the leadership team but there also needed to be one woman. A rapid assessment was conducted as soon as there was access to the village. We then provide the village with two NAG volunteers to stay with them. At the same time we ask the members of the leadership team to recruit five volunteers from the village to assist and witness the distribution and cash for work activities. We provide training in relief work to these volunteers. Distribution is then run through the management of the CBO and our volunteers just witness the process. In all activities therefore, there is a team of seven plus the leadership team of the CBO. Follow-up distributions happen at the field office and we provide diesel for their transportation.

Assessments and decisions about priorities are the responsibility of the five person leadership team. We witnessed their distribution of the goods and collected signatures and photos for accountability but the rest was up to them.

When trust with the rest of the village has been established, we pull out the two alumni volunteers. We would only do this when we know that the CBO and volunteers can take care of things themselves. We assess and ask people in the village whether or not they trust the leadership group.

## Invitations to Carry Out Assessments

In addition to the assessments that we have conducted, we have received many requests to conduct assessments on behalf of different organisations. These include: Myanmar Fisheries Federation, Tripartite Core Group (TCG), Village Track Assessment (VTA), FAO and UNICEF.

The Myanmar Fisheries Federation wanted us to do a damage and loss assessment. They wanted us to investigate livelihood options. Certain areas were just affected by wind; others were affected by wind and tide. Most deaths occurred due to the rising tides. Fisheries people were most affected which is why we wanted to help them.

We were also the logistics provider for the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) operation: the study commissioned by the TCG to measure the impact of Nargis. This was a village track assessment, a very micro study. We provided 50 volunteers for PONJA. This was also a damage and loss assessment. We organised SUVs and everything except helicopters. We also provided access to technology so they could operate their laptops and hardware in difficult parts of the Delta area.

For the FAO, we did an impact assessment for the whole of the Delta and gave training to their enumerators before they went to the Delta. We also worked for UNICEF and conducted qualitative assessments of the social impact of Nargis on behalf of the World Bank. We are the first ever Myanmar partner of the World Bank in 40 years. In the Delta we are getting reports now. We have relatively enough assistance for relief, no less and no more, but there is no hope for jobs now as the assistance being given is really being reduced.

## Service Provider

NAG is the service provider for:

- Local Area Network for the all of the organisations working in the Delta
- Sahana / Dumbo AIT- MCPA - NAG joint operation

## Policy/ Advocacy/Go-Between

NAG has been involved in policy and advocacy at the highest levels. We held meetings with the United Nations, the Government and ASEAN.

We also found ourselves operating as a mediator between organisations. For example, we have mediated between various international NGOs and the Government. Recently, we have mediated for Action Aid, Oxfam Great Britain and the Government over the development of a new Memorandum of Understanding between the groups.

We have also been active in initiating and facilitating Cyclone Nargis Stakeholder meetings to map involvement and identify gaps. Inviting all stakeholders to participate in a meeting and be in the one room together was a rare event. Through this we were able to initiate dialogue and minimise overlap.

## Training Programmes

Project Cycle Management training was identified as a significant need after Cyclone Nargis. NAG has provided:

- Enumerator training and workshops
- Delta project cycle management training
- ICT (Information Communication Training)
- CBO (Community Based Organisation) leadership training

## Publications

- **A Delta** newspaper for victims: To increase access to information, we created the Nargis insert in our regular VOICE publication. This is for people in the affected area and comes out with the weekly edition of VOICE. We believe this is important as it gives people access to information, thereby empowering them. This insert has news for victims of the cyclone and others, including the Government, NGOs and donors.

- We also initiated an electronic **Bulletin for Stakeholders doing Humanitarian Liaison**. This is distributed via a google group and is a collection spot for lessons or shortcomings for the purpose of humanitarian worker learning.
- [www.nargisaction.org](http://www.nargisaction.org): We have also launched a website since Nargis, which promotes the purchase of model schools, villages and boats. This website provides scope for individual donors to contribute. Some have contributed \$1000 USD to build a house or \$45,000 USD to build a school.

### **NAG Delta Empowerment Strategy**

We have developed the NAG Delta Empowerment Strategy which will be launched shortly. The key focus of this strategy is:

“The expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate, negotiate, influence, control and hold accountable, institutions that affect their life.”

We think that in order to empower people they need access to resources and opportunities for linkages. The strategy aims to provide:

- Access to information
- Inclusion and participation
- Accountability
- Local organisational capacity

Practically speaking, the strategy will provide resource centres with wireless telephones, internet access, TVs and DVDs, newspapers, radios, internet access and generators.

The NAG Strategic Empowerment Package has several parts:

- **Empowerment package 1: Capital formation package to the people from the agriculture and fishery sectors**
  - Microcredit package as a first step
  - Village credit union as a second step
  - Post Nargis Trust Fund as a final outcome



- **Empowerment package 2: The Information and communication services**
  - Village IEC facilities
  - Newspaper distribution
  - Radio Distribution
- **Empowerment package 3: Various capacity development programs**
  - Delta Version PCM
  - Basic ICT training
  - Basic Internet training
  - Basic leadership training for the CBO leaders
- **Empowerment Package 4: Environmental sustainability**
  - Mangrove Rehabilitation and community awareness
  - Mangrove conservation and supportive income generation activities
- **Empowerment Package 5: Production Technology Package**
  - Appropriate technology package for the agriculture sector
  - Appropriate technology package for the fishery sector (small scale aquaculture)
- **Empowerment package 6 : Local Infrastructure Projects**

In terms of the environment, we are looking at small-scale agriculture projects. Certainly after Nargis, we saw an opportunity to convince more people of the need for environmental sustainability and to take on environmental issues. We want to look into the viability of hybrid vegetables and products which have not been considered before. We are thinking of offering seeds and solar panel technology is also something we are examining. People would be able to charge their batteries at solar panel stations during the day and use them for the evening. This is feasible at present.

Job opportunities for the Delta poor are a real priority. We want to obtain 2-3 month business grants for people to kick start small business in the area.

## Civil Society Organising Since Nargis:

Karama has had a good working relationship with the Government for some time. One of the Karama founders was arrested some years ago. Critically, he was arrested with a number of policy documents. This was fortuitous because the Government got to see that we are just scholars. The officers read the documents and eventually invited Karama to submit more documents. The criticism we provided was harsh, but nothing to do with power politics.

They see now that Karama, as an organisation, provides scholarships for people of all backgrounds to come and study with us. We offer scholarships to people regardless of whether they are police, intelligence officers, or people who work with Government organisations and NGOs. We do not discriminate and have no agenda. This is honest and this is how we sell ourselves.

We think a lot depends on how well you sell your organisation and portray yourselves. Some people and organisations don't know how to occupy the room that's available.

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*Many people complain that there is no civil society in Myanmar. When Nargis happened, however, we could prove that there has been, and there still is, a civil society here. We have been saying exactly that for the last ten years. There is a space for civil society to occupy but we could not prove it. What we had been saying before Nargis about the space for civil society and the social capital has been proven.*

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*We have been able to generate greater influence as a result of Cyclone Nargis. For Example, after Nargis, the price of diesel really rose. We organised with the private sector to flood the market without profit. The Government then also took off the Government tax which broke a government monopoly of ten years. We have been trying to advocate for this tax policy for a decade and Nargis provided us the opportunity to break through.*

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Through NAG, we were able to achieve a great deal. This was significant as prior to this we had no track record. Now we manage a budget of \$1,000,000 USD. Whilst we didn't have experience, we knew how to access and persuade Generals and we had access to our Alumni who became volunteers. We originally had 100 volunteers and now we have over 2,000.

In providing Nargis relief, we had to work in the areas in which we were assigned by government. If the government didn't give us permission then we would have no room to open a grocery store or a tea shop. You could do it but it would be at your own risk. It was government policy to assign areas to each organisation. We convinced them that we could do this and that the impact would be greater. The government realised and let us in and now we are registered.

We have been able to generate greater influence as a result of Cyclone Nargis. For Example, after Nargis, the price of diesel really rose. We organised with the private sector to flood the market without profit. The government then also took off the government tax which broke a government monopoly of ten years. We have been trying to advocate for this tax policy for a decade and Nargis provided us the opportunity to break through.

Things in the Delta now are serious. There is a lack of agricultural production. We categorised the Delta area originally into three belts but now we have just two:

- Ground zero: This is the area affected by wind and tide
- Belt one: this is just wind and infrastructure damage, not life and animals

Belt one can really double its yield to compensate for the damage to Ground zero.

In the beginning, it was really difficult to get funding. This was because we had a limited track record. Initially, therefore, we spent our own money. One of our founders is our bank. We had some funding from a German foundation, but it was difficult to get funding from the international community. Our proposals for Nargis were attractive because we had low administration costs. We had to operate on a really low budget to get funding. Now we have defined ourselves it is different. But the bulk of our work is on a volunteer basis.

Now because of Nargis we are asked to do a lot. We are asked to do assessments and partner with INGOs. It's easier now to get funds.

After Nargis, we can prove our capacity in terms of achievements. The network of our founding members is huge. Our work is bold because it is critical and was widely regarded by those outside of Myanmar as being politically incorrect. We argue that we are working with the real politic. Before we faced a lot of resistance by Myanmar nationals living outside Myanmar but recently this has changed.

### Support By External Organisations

There is a significant gap between what was pledged by the international community and what has been provided. At present the gap is about 50%.

International assistance and attention are both reducing rapidly. They

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*We shouldn't anticipate a lot from the international community. It is not fair to their taxpayers to do so. Instead of food, non-food items, relief and recovery, in the longer term we need capacity-building training. We also need institutional capacity-building. We need a quick fix for national ownership. For institutional capacity building this involves a lot of practices, norms, funding training and project cycle management competency. We need to empower Burmese and locals to do this themselves. To some extent, it's not strange that the Burmese do not trust: they see expatriates being brought in on high salaries and having airfares provided. They are lacking capacity also. Capacity-building makes sense and is an investment in the future.*

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have said they will match their pledge but how? The priority will go to other areas. We are off the priority list. Myanmar is only on the Karama priority list.

We need an urgent outcry through the TCG on immediate needs. We need a collective outcry and for funding to follow.

This is going to be difficult in the current global financial crises. We have concurrent disasters also in China and Pakistan. Myanmar is no longer the priority. In terms of dollars, Pakistan got 60% of funding, 30% went to China and 5% to Myanmar.

In terms of method for capacity-building, one has to realise that

the quality of education in Myanmar is so low you wouldn't be able to believe it. Exceptions are those who have gone to study abroad.

If you don't make yourself ready to take the opportunity to occupy space then you never will. After Nargis, we got that kind of opportunity. It's important that we don't let this disappear simply through a lack of funding.

These opportunities don't come around very often. If we didn't have Nargis, then the government wouldn't listen to us. Nargis is a sad story. It affected many people's lives and people are still suffering.

The good side to Nargis was the larger volume of problems it caused. The Government has to be more flexible and has to listen to us. They realise that by themselves they can't cope with the problems. We can't afford to lose that leverage for civil society in the country to make more out of this for the future.

Many people complain that there is no civil society in Myanmar. When Nargis happened, however, we could prove that there has been, and there still is, a civil society here. We have been saying exactly that for the last ten years. There is a space for civil society to occupy but we could not prove it. What we had been saying before Nargis about the space for civil society and the social capital has been proven.

It's difficult to give advice for what the international community should do. Whatever you do will be good. In this system, nothing is predictable. Karama has adopted a diversified strategy and is multi-tasking because we don't know which door will close, when. We cannot stop our movement. We have to get more doors to open and keep knocking. On the diesel tax issue we have been knocking for 10 years. Only now are we starting to see movement on the issue. Nothing was happening up until now. If we don't keep knocking then the door won't open.

We need support, that much must be clear. We need to be very innovative, very creative and very responsive.

### **Experiences and Lessons Learned Since Nargis**

- Send out people to the village first. Let them manage themselves by forming a CBO. Don't worry about logistics - they get the diesel for the boats etc, we just get the supplies

- Understanding the Government: we anticipated that they were going to get the villagers out from the camps and anticipated the camps would be closed and the villages would have to move back
- Establish networks at an international level and at a village-level
- Build relationships at a village-level. We were assigned a new village and we used our contacts (a former army officer) who knew how to deal with the local authorities. He was a good General. It is easy to get access with these contacts
- Good communication with top-level Ministers is important. We are on a first name basis with top-level Ministers now. We also have good communication with the local level co-ordinators.

## **Integrating Existing Programs in Responding to Cyclone Nargis**

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“*The Nargis hit area was not our area before the cyclone. After Nargis, this is a new area for our organisation. Our healers have a good relationship with the monks and villagers. Maybe in the future we can turn this into peace building programmes.*”

Our organisation was affected by Nargis. We could not get to work because the office was damaged and so were the roads. Nobody could really get to work until a week after the Cyclone. Staff were struggling for themselves in the beginning.

Initially, we thought that doing Cyclone relief work was not our organisation's area. We thought we would continue with our normal work from before Nargis. However, we are an organisation working not only on peace building but also for development. We have trained many people in trauma healing. We therefore asked ourselves, 'Why are we not working on trauma healing in this immediate context?'

We also received pressure from the outside to provide a response. In the end, it was a combination of this external pressure, our willingness to respond and the resources that we already had to respond. We felt this was our responsibility.

We contacted our network of trauma healers. This network consists of about 200 trauma healers from all around Myanmar. These are the people that had trained with us for the trauma healing course. They had completed their four modules and had graduated from the course. The trauma healers responded by saying they were really willing to go and assist with the Cyclone response. They had the knowledge and skills from the course but until then had no real experience or opportunity to apply their skills. They wanted to practice what they had learnt and to test themselves. We then had to work out how to go to the Delta. We needed to think of financial and material things to support the trauma healers. We wrote proposals and submitted them to financial organisations.

Trauma healing is really important. Physical materials are important

but mental health should also be a key concern. Most organisations do not know about the importance of trauma healing. They think it is something you need to address after three months but don't see it as an immediate need. This changed when the Chinese earthquake happened. People saw that many people were brought in straight away to do trauma healing. Many people in Myanmar then came to realise the importance of mental health and psychosocial support.

We are the first organisation working on trauma healing and recovery. We have a large programme for Nargis. We are carrying this out in partnership with other organisations. We began our trauma healing program three to four years ago. We are ready for this kind of situation.

In responding to Nargis, we have been providing trauma healers to the villages but also training and advising other organisations who need these skills.

### **Changes in Civil Society Since Cyclone Nargis**

The Nargis hit area was not our area before the cyclone. After Nargis, this is a new area for our organisation. Our healers have a good relationship with the monks and villagers. Maybe in the future we can turn this into peace building programmes.

It is also the first time for us to be operating in lower Burma. Our work has previously focused on working in the ethnic States of upper Burma.

As a result of Nargis, we have many partner organisations. We all come together to help the affected communities deal with their trauma.

We are working closely with another organisation that is working directly in the affected areas with a particular target group. On the basis of their recommendation we have been granted access to work in the same affected areas with the same target group.

Also, as a result of Nargis, we have been able to work with the mainstream Buddhist community. Many religious leaders have been a part of our trauma healing programme. They are convinced now of the need for it and have even invited us to stay in the monastery.

This growth will be sustained because this is coming from the inside of people. They are not being active and involved because of money; they are actually willing to help. Many new groups have emerged this way.

A big challenge for us is government policy. If the government policy stops then we have to come back. If they don't give us permission then we will not be allowed to go there.

Cyclone Nargis provided our organisation with the opportunity to work with the majority Burmese community to contribute peace building concepts. We had previously worked with the northern part of the country and other ethnic communities and not directly with Burmese

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people. As a result of Nargis, we have the opportunity to work together with the Burmese community. This is another step for us, another opportunity.

Many organisations are now working in our country doing relief, rehabilitation and recovery because of Nargis. This prompted a few large INGOs and local organisations to establish a Learning Resource Centre specifically focused on Cyclone Nargis. This programme brings the different organisations together. They conduct weekly meetings, monthly meetings, and collect many documents. They do

a lot of co-ordination and mapping work on who is doing what and collect all details. It runs like a documentation centre. This centre also provides training and recovery work. They have 12 staff which includes a regional and field co-ordinator. They also report to every Nargis organisation with updated information.





# Carving Out a Space For Civil Society in Myanmar

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Our organisation covers a total of 61 villages.

In the beginning, it was very hard for the villagers. They had to come from the villages to the city looking for shelter, food and security. After 10 days they were relocated back to the villages. It was a hard time for them.

We saw many injuries as a result of Cyclone Nargis. Some had large cuts on their whole bodies from climbing up coconut trees and clinging onto them for up to eight hours. In areas where there were lots of trees and plants, people were safer; they could grab hold of the trees. In the plains people were more vulnerable.

For many villagers they had to restart their life and it was a new life. Most of the villages were empty because of Cyclone Nargis. It had killed so many that in some villages only 10-20 persons were still alive. It was very hard for them.

Our fellows and volunteers have been trained on how to be trauma healers. We sought this training because we need to know how to take care of the villagers' minds. Most of their family members have died. Some villages have only one female left. In others, all the females have died. There is a real need for trauma healing and counselling. There is not enough of that at the moment.

We are working with our local partners in the area. They communicate what they need to us. Initially, they sent an advanced team to assess the needs in relation to food and shelter and how they could be best distributed.

Before Cyclone Nargis, no-one in Myanmar had experience in disaster management or disaster reduction. Maybe we had attended a training session for one or two days, but it was not a significant priority for us. We did have the heart and spirit to work, however. We were perhaps not systematic in our work and there was lots of overlap, but we did not have experience in this area. We have accumulated a lot of experience since then.

We had a lot of volunteers, fellows and full time staff in the affected Delta area. They were already there to do development-related projects and then came to work on Cyclone Nargis. We had very few staff assisting from Yangon - probably only about four persons. Most of the staff were therefore all from the affected area.

Our activities consisted of the following:

- Initial phase: Provision of food, clothes, daily needs and other requirements; and
- Recovery phase: Provision of tractors, seeds, food, temporary shelter, fishing boats and equipment

Our partners were three INGOs. They worked on rebuilding nurseries and schools for children. We had worked with one of these donors before Cyclone Nargis but not the other two donors. We actually got to know one of these donors as we were on the same plane flight from Bangkok to Yangon after the cyclone. We sat next to each other on the plane and talked. The relationship came about from there. These have been good partnerships for us.

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*We need to still inform the authorities of our work but there is still a space to work in a silent way.*

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During the cyclone relief effort, there were lots of organisations involved and many did not know each other. There was some overlap in relief efforts but we would always try to clarify which area we were going to work in and what basic or specific work we were going to provide. We were not experts but could rely on the experience of our partners for technical assistance.

We divided areas up based on geography. It was difficult to get from village to village so it was easier to divide up the villages and work on meeting the needs that way. It would also be difficult to do monitoring and reporting on a large area.

For our organisation, we mainly worked in the areas in which we were familiar. We didn't care if people were Karen or Buddhist or Burmese - we made no distinction. We had to be careful of our security situation



and safety net. Ordinarily, we could not enter a Burmese village and begin an assistance programme. If we didn't have a pre-existing relationship with the local authorities they would have lots of questions about us. They would want to know where we come from, who we are, where did we get our funding etc.

In the 61 villages in which we worked, we maintained a good relationship with the local authorities. We had this before Nargis so this was not a new thing. We visited the Delta area regularly to meet with our local partners and find out their needs. We assess with them what should be done in the future.

We don't know what will occur in the future so it is important to plan. Before Nargis we were taking very little interest in disaster management or disaster risk reduction. We did not have a plan and wondered why we should do that. Now we know it is needed and we have learnt from our experiences in providing relief for Cyclone Nargis. We are discussing now how to plan for the future in relation to disasters such as this.

### **Challenges That Lie Ahead**

Whilst there are a lot of government restrictions, we find that we are able to work freely and we have room to work. Even in the most difficult situations, we can still find a space to work. Not only in the Nargis hit area but in other parts of the country also. We need to still inform the authorities of our work but there is still a space to work in a silent way. Yes, we can co-operate with local authorities, but even in such organisations we can work by ourselves without the local authorities and trying to know them.

In Myanmar there is a lot of space where we can work. We have the space but what we are trying to do now is to say ok, maybe the government know what we are doing but we don't let them see. The government is restrictive but they are trying to decide if we are good or bad, are trouble or not. Their intelligence systems are good and sometimes they tolerate us. They don't give us much trouble when

we are working for the community. We don't tend to ask permission and we just do by ourselves.

### **Further Strengthening of Civil Society Since Cyclone Nargis**

Many more NGOs emerged after Cyclone Nargis. We are all better networked and more visible. We have over 100 civil society groups in Myanmar from different places all over the country but mainly from Yangon. What we need is technical assistance for agricultural needs and how to revitalise the soil or advice on crops. Water and sanitation assistance would also be useful.

There are many local organisations we can work with but we can also work with international organisations if they can be found. We find INGOs want to work by themselves. They have their own rules and principles. It is the goal for them to be able to co-operate and collaborate. They can carry out this work for the long-term if they can partner with trustworthy local organisations. Otherwise they affect the situation in different ways.

To reach out to the community, we need local groups. If INGOs come to Myanmar and do not have any contacts, they will set up an office and call for people to work for them who have fluent English and have pursued higher education overseas. People from the city will get the positions they offer and these people will not have connections with local people. This is particularly important in Myanmar where the situation is very difficult and you have to deal with the authorities at every corner.

Monitoring and reporting is ok if it is performed according to a proposal. But in mid-May, immediately after Cyclone Nargis, we implemented a project for which we eventually got funding approved at the end of August. The project brought tractors to the Delta area for the recovery process. If we waited until the funding came through to work on establishing the livelihoods of the people in the affected area then there would be no crops or planting this season. We couldn't wait for the funding agencies to provide these goods and we had to

purchase them ourselves. In this context how do you monitor and report on the project three months afterwards? If you get the funding before the implementation then monitoring and reporting is easy to carry out but in this context it becomes very difficult. Also, in these restricted areas, it is difficult to monitor implementation when your organisation is very far away from the affected area and those who receive the benefit of the project.

We have planning in place now for future disasters. We are now ready and prepared.

We think we will continue to grow after Cyclone Nargis because of this devastating situation. We will keep in touch with the affected communities we worked with and other organisations. They are now more responsible for building their houses and communities. This includes local people and those from other areas.





## Bringing People Together

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Our organisation was working in the Delta before Nargis but we would hardly see any other NGOs active in the area. Cyclone Nargis led to many organisations becoming active. It brought international NGOs to the area and created local NGOs also. Different religious organisations and others began working in the Delta as a result of Cyclone Nargis. Our organisation had been involved since the tsunami in 2004 but we had found working in the Delta very difficult and restrictive.

Even before Nargis, the Delta was a tourist attraction that would bring many people to the area. It had beaches and people could freely go there. After Cyclone Nargis the government began blocking the road. We think the government were frightened. Entry to areas where previously people could move freely was suddenly restricted. Now the situation has changed again. Now the Delta is easy to visit compared to other parts of Myanmar. It is now possible to get permission to go there. However, we are not happy with the procedural delays in obtaining permission to go to the Delta. We have to wait at least four days for permission to be approved. It is a waste of time and money because we have to pay to keep foreigners in hotels whilst permission is obtained.

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*In our experience, Cyclone Nargis really brought people together. People began to form groups to respond to the disaster and that amazed us.*

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Moreover, we cannot apply for two types of permission at the same time. If we want to apply for permission to fly, we cannot apply for permission to go by road also. This causes a lot of worry and concern.

Prior to the Cyclone, it was difficult to get official recognition from the Government and difficult to do our work. Now it is still difficult but Cyclone Nargis has exempted some groups as long as what you are doing is not connected to political or Government matters. Any organisation who is responding to the impact of Cyclone Nargis is free to work.

Immediately after the Cyclone, we were doing mainly relief and recovery work. Now we are doing reconstruction and livelihood support projects. Our first relief assistance package was sent to the area on 7 May. By this time, however, our volunteers and field staff

were already actively engaged in the relief effort. In the beginning, we were involved with distributing food and non-food items. Alongside this we provided capacity building training for volunteers, staff and community leaders in planning and designing recovery programs, counselling and communication skills, trauma healing, data collection, documentation and livelihood support.

Some of our staff went on exposure visits to tsunami affected areas to learn about cyclone resilient community centres and shelters for the reconstruction effort.

### **Changes in Civil Society Since Cyclone Nargis**

The new community based organisations that formed in the wake of Nargis came about by themselves. Their emergence was not facilitated by any particular NGO. There were many of them that arose. Also, many other pre-existing organisations got involved in the relief effort. We have many of these organisations in Myanmar, like professional associations etc. They initiated their own response to Nargis and contributed money. They relied on assistance from other NGOs to distribute their goods. Even though there are tight government restrictions in Myanmar, we have traditionally had many civil society organisations and those you cannot remove. They have been in place and doing work since time immemorial.

At all levels we have to be careful and make sure we have a good relationship with the authorities. The situation is never fixed and can change rapidly. The police can change their practices and procedures suddenly and some have a good impact and some do not. We have to be very careful and maintain good relationships with the authorities.

From the beginning, our organisation has been focusing on community based organisations. We concentrate on the capacity of the community. We are always seeking to build the capacity of the community. This drives our work. Additionally, we are proud to say that we operate with very low administration costs. Only 10% of our funds are used on administration and the rest goes to the community.



After Nargis, we found many co-ordinators for the relief work from the community itself. We were able to establish relationships with the most remote areas, like Hygnie Island. We previously had no contact with these communities. We could co-ordinate relief with them and it was a way for us to connect and support them.

In the wake of the tsunami many committees were created in the villages. These committee members had been selected by the communities themselves and they were the ones taking care of the relief work after Cyclone Nargis. They had been functioning for a long time already before Cyclone Nargis.

After Nargis there were many INGOs operating. They were careful to try and avoid overlap.

We have an issue with access to the UN helicopter. So far we have never been allowed to ride it without a foreigner. Our application to access the helicopter has never been approved when there is no foreigner on our application. We think the government has nothing to do with this but it is a concern for us.

At all levels we tried to make sure that there was community participation. We trained them with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) so that there was ample and an open space for people from the affected communities to actively participate.

### **Sustaining this Strengthening Into the Future**

For these groups to be sustained into the future there is a need for capacity building. They need to be able to cope with the difficult political and government situation. If we can build them up in this way then they can be sustained. We need to train them that their work must be in harmony with the needs of the context.

Prior to Nargis, we had a good relationship with the local authorities. We were able to freely do our work. We had a good understanding with the local authorities and the Chief Commander. After Nargis, however, everything changed. In the places where we previously used to work we found we were prohibited. We had to expand our

relationships and begin relationships with the authorities at a higher level. After Nargis, some government departments came to the Delta area and we had to create a good relationship with them. In the beginning this was very difficult.

Cyclone Nargis brought about the opportunity to expand to higher levels and create new relationships, but this has created more challenges also and more stress. It has led to more confusion. We have to be very sure to bow down to them and this is very stressful.

Last week, we went to the field with permission from the highest level. Despite this, we were still questioned by local authorities. People are fearful. We realised that because of this fear, we have to create relationships with all levels including the lower levels.

Improving the communication and negotiation skills of our staff is critical to building good relationships with the authorities. If we have a good relationship with the local level then generally we don't need to go to the higher level.

Our organisation has been able to develop relationships with two kinds of groups since Cyclone Nargis:

1. The first is our new friends from the donor community and our new local partner organisations.
2. The second is our relationship with the monks in the monasteries. Since Nargis we have been working with the monk community and this has built up relationships with community and religious leaders of the village. In some villages we had already been working closely with religious leaders but it depended on the situation in the village. During Nargis we had to work strategically with the monks and religious leaders because many shelters were constructed in monasteries.

### **Support from External Organisations Into the Future**

In thinking about how external organisations can assist us, a lot depends on how the external organisations want to be of assistance. We were really appreciative of the farming experts that came from

Bangladesh. These experts have been providing technical assistance on how to farm and plant and have been providing training to the community. We could really use technical assistance in agriculture and fisheries. This is a good way outsiders can support us.

Documentation and building the capacity of local staff is also vital. We would really like to have specialist documentation training.





## **Engaging the Government Worked**

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**F**or our organisation, three days after Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar we started our work. We started by collecting things from the churches in Yangon like clothes or any item that people wanted to share. Later we learned that people faced problems with drinking water so we also collected water kits. Then we found that people needed food, so we provided food. We also sent volunteers to take villagers to another village for a week because they were having problems accessing safe drinking water. After a week, the government came and informed us that we needed to either send the villagers back to the village or to the government camp because of many reasons. Some villagers did not want to go with the government. They ran away as a result of the difficult situation they faced in the village. One of our religious leaders went and brought them back and now some of them are still in that village. We have also built a school for the children. We understand there are many people that need support but we do not have enough resources to support them.

We held a meeting and many donors came to us so we started the emergency relief work. This was three weeks after the cyclone. As it was the planting season, we sent the villagers tractors. Some villagers started to plant but it did not work because of the salt water in the land after the cyclone as the area had been flooded by sea water. We also provided fishing boats and nets to the villagers.

### **Successes in Providing Cyclone Nargis Emergency Relief**

We have developed new ways to contact other organisations and donors from any background. We have also built new relationships with INGOs and local NGOs.

Before Nargis, I did not speak any English but now I can talk and communicate with international people in English.

We went about providing relief in a very flexible way. For example, we were sending 40 packages (in the package there are fishing boats and nets etc.) but when we got into the village, we found the need

was greater than that amount. We were able to divide the material and distribute it to 140 families.

Working with the government was a success for us. We informed them about what we were doing and providing in the village. Working with the government like this is a new experience for us; however, we were able to work with them. We were able to sit and work together with the authorities and in some villages they tried to help as much as they could, especially the local authorities. This is a good experience for us since before, we tended to ignore and neglect them. Now we have learned to work together with them.

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### **Challenges in Providing Cyclone Nargis Emergency Relief**

We were not able to work with other groups in this case because if we go to the villages and collect all the data, we will be asked or told that we are not allowed. So, we only collected the information from our religious community but when we provided the materials and food we provided them to all people regardless of their religion. It is very difficult for us to work with the people and we faced many problems especially communication since the phone and communication access is quite limited in our context.

The situation in our country is quite limited in terms of accessibility so we have to work in a very wise way. Even when we do relief work, it is like we are risking our lives. This is a challenge for us.



## **Lessons learned from Cyclone Nargis**

We need more knowledge about the environment and more warning indicators of a disaster

We learned a lot about project implementation, in particular for humanitarian work. We did not have much experience, so we did not know the codes of conduct of humanitarian work and therefore we could do harm to the community instead of helping them. For example, we brought ten tabbing sheets for roofing but in the village there are 100 families so the people began to blame us and our response. Also, we did not have very good data and information about the mobility of people. This meant it was also difficult for us to work.

## **How These Initiatives can be Strengthened Into the Future**

We have new relationships with different organisations, access to donors as well as a new relationship with the authorities. We can continue to work together more in the future even in another area beyond the cyclone affected Delta area. We have the capacity in relief work but this needs to be further built and strengthened.

## **Our Thoughts on How External organisation Can Provide Support**

Capacity-building in relief work and help us become well prepared would be of assistance. This could be done both through training and exposure visits to other disaster prone countries. This way we can also learn about their response and their rehabilitation work. We could find out how they work with the community and the government. This capacity building is really essential and is a priority over sending volunteers to help us in the country. We will also require financial support.

## **Some Recommendations for External Organisations**

Before external organisations start working in an area, they need to understand the situation. By this we mean the government policies and other related information. The Delta area was a conflict area

before Nargis. People need to understand this context before they work there.

Also, to be successful in working in the Myanmar context, we have to work collaboratively with the government.

## **Addressing Gender through Emergency Relief**

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**A**t first we believed emergency relief was not our task. We thought this way for two reasons:

1. We have limited resources. We felt we didn't have the financial and technical skills, or the capacity to respond
2. We are an organisation doing gender and women's rights. We thought relief work was not our task.

For these reasons, we were silent for the first two to three days after Cyclone Nargis hit.

On 7 May, our thinking changed. We knew that this is the time for a common response. Everyone from civil society has to respond at this time.

We met as an organisation on 8 May and decided to get involved in the relief work. We felt this was a common task for all and every single person should respond to the devastation brought about by the cyclone. We also reasoned that after disasters, many gender issues arise. There might be violence and gender-based violence so we should get involved. We have been learning by doing since 10 May.

As we planned our activities to go to the field and distribute food and non-food items, we felt it was our responsibility, as a gender organisation, to think differently about women's and men's needs after a cyclone. We therefore brought special things for women. We brought women's underwear, sanitary pads, other hygiene materials and clothes etc. We tried to respond to the needs of women. We came to realise that this should be our role. We are working on gender issues so we need to bring that experience to disaster relief work. We really tried to understand and ask ourselves, what was our role in this context? We had talked and advocated a lot for women's issues but now we are distributing things. Is it our role to distribute aid? Is it sufficient? We decided yes, it was. We need to advise other organisations to think of the needs of women.

## Relationship Building and Networking

Originally, the UN had a Women's and Children's Protection Cluster. We were involved in this cluster. The cluster was eventually divided into two to become the Women's Protection Sub-Cluster and the Child Protection Sub-Cluster. To complement the Women's Protection Sub-Cluster, the UN established the Women's Protection Technical Working Group (WPTWG). The WPTWG began in the first week of June and we were part of this as well.

As a local organisation involved in the WPTWG, we had an important role. We tried to directly transmit to the WPTWG our experience before Nargis and the case studies emerging from the field through our relief work. There were lots of case studies for the WPTWG. We were active members of the WPTWG and it was very wonderful for us. It was the first time for our organisation to be working directly with UN organisations. This had never happened before as UN organisations in Myanmar used to only work with Government departments and Government organisations. If they work with local organisations it is only the registered ones. We don't have registration so it is impossible for them to work with us. This was a big step forward.

The Myanmar NGO Network (MNN) also really grew through this process. The Myanmar NGO Network is a group of 20 local organisations. Gradually, our organisation is being recognised as an active organisation for the protection of women, women's rights and equality.

The idea for the MNN came about before Nargis. It was only after Cyclone Nargis, however, that it really got organised. Prior to Nargis, we would meet once a month and it was a slow process. Our first meeting was in late 2007. Attendance was different each time and numbers fluctuated. After Nargis we came together once a week. We would meet together with most local NGOs. We would attend the cluster meetings on behalf of the local organisations and link local and International NGOs. MNN was really important for ensuring this linkage occurred. MNN was really driven to grow by Cyclone Nargis.

At the time, local women's organisations were not involved in the civil society movement or the MNN. They were working differently on a grassroots level in their own ways. This meant that for the first three months of MNN meetings after Nargis, there were only a few women's organisations in attendance. They were left behind. They had no connection with the MNN but they were clearly active on the ground.

These women's organisations, working on a grassroots level, were generally faith-based organisations and not community-based organisations. They are actively supporting women, pregnant women and children but operate on a low profile. They don't want to come out and expose themselves to the authorities. Despite this, they deal with the concerns of women and children in the whole Delta area. We realised we are missing these groups and got together to work out what we could do to change the situation.

Our organisation initiated a local women's organisation network meeting in August 2008. Ten different women's organisations attended.

The first meeting was focused on women's livelihoods. It was held on 4 August, four months after the cyclone. The relief phase had already finished. It was the necessary time to be starting to think about women's livelihoods.

The group brought up the need for psycho-social support from the very beginning. They said without psycho-social support then there can be no comprehensive livelihood. We got together and responded by organising training on gender based violence and psycho-social support for participants in the local women's organisation network.

After this successful first meeting, the local women's organisations network decided to meet once a month. We met again in September where the focus was on the document, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) report for our country. We have also had a meeting with a small group of lawyers to challenge some of the CEDAW report.

The third meeting of the group was for the purpose of discussing a common project in the Delta. A collaborative development project involving six townships was devised. This project would entail capacity building of women volunteers in the village. This is a new development. Some of the organisations this linked with are new and some are old. Some have been motivated to participate by the local women's organisations network.

Also on the occasion of the third meeting of the local women's organisations network, the UN Review Team attended. The UN Review Team had many questions for the women at the meeting. They wanted to know why the women were meeting separately. They could not

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*Through these township projects we want to build local mechanisms. Many people talk of women as being victims but they have agency. This is a way of strengthening women's agency. We want to build proposals that further women's empowerment and work for women-centred family recovery. From families to the community is our philosophy. The framework we use is the framework for welfare, assessing, having an in-depth understanding, participative and then building towards a conclusion. We want to use the welfare approach and the assessing approach.*

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understand how, when there is a Women's and Children's Protection Cluster meeting and a WPTWG meeting, why there would be a need for a separate forum.

The women answered by saying that there are lots of gaps to having women participate in these international forums. English is one barrier. Even though translators are present, nobody really wants to translate everything. Also, the meetings are only 90 minutes in duration. To translate everything into

Burmese would take too long and then meetings would have very little discussion time left at the end.

The location of the Cluster meetings was also an issue. They are held at a grand hotel. The participants of the women's organisations are from the villages in remote areas. They are worried about their dress and footwear. They have to pay at least 2000-3000 kyats to get to the location of the hotel. These people are performing their work on a



volunteer basis. They do not have administration funds to cover transport costs. Some have to travel very far to attend the meetings and we provide some travel allowance for them to come.

The third issue relates to the language used during the cluster meetings. It is very technical but also people discuss the big picture a lot. They discuss Hurricane Katrina in the US and the impact of the tsunami on Sri Lanka. The women are working at a local level in the Delta and are not familiar with the international context so feel excluded.

The women told the UN Review Team that they needed a separate meeting to strengthen their network, to get experience and to create opportunities for women's organisations to enhance their capacity. At every meeting we invite at least one donor to present about themselves. So far, we have had three INGOs present. This is a targeted way of introducing the donors and assisting the local women's organisations create donor relationships. These women's groups work with very limited financial resources and on a very voluntary basis. This would be a way of creating access to adequate resources.

We have our next meeting on 27 November. We want the network to be able to sustain itself. We will only be the backstop for finances and resources for the meetings only.

The first collective achievement of the network was our conduct of the training on gender based violence and psycho-social support. In future, we will have the six townships project. This is a one year project. We will be managing the project. The women in the network will take responsibility for each of their townships and villages. Every women's organisation is involved and they will involve community people, women volunteers and the villagers of their village. We are very principled in our donor selection. We need donors to have a good knowledge of our reality. We don't want to pretend with them. They must accept our reality and think about our capacity-building. Trust is really important. We want a donor to always be involved with us and working collaboratively. Good or bad, we have shared responsibility for our work. We want to develop proposals collectively and be flexible and open. It can be difficult to find donors like this.



Through these township projects we want to build local mechanisms. Many people talk of women as being victims but they have agency. This is a way of strengthening women's agency. We want to build proposals that further women's empowerment and work for women-centred family recovery. From families to the community is our philosophy. The framework we use is the framework for welfare, assessing, having an in-depth understanding, participative and then building towards a conclusion. We want to use the welfare approach and the assessing approach.

Before Nargis, we had carried out a gender analysis in some areas of the Delta. We had found out that most of the households were the responsibility of the wife. The husband did the farm and took care of the trucks, tools, fishing etc. All family matters were handled by the women. The research made clear that when you empower the women, you empower the family and the women to grow.

In the future we will be partnering with a Buddhist organisation. We have organised to provide gender training for the nuns. We are in the process of deciding whether it will include monks. Another local organisation is involved in this partnership also.

### **Moving Forward After Cyclone Nargis**

After Nargis, we can see a lot of opportunities for our existence. Before Nargis, we had no chance to work together with the UN or government departments. Before Nargis we would work with the township-level

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*After Nargis, we observed significant change. UN Agencies and International NGOs try their best and as much as possible to promote their relationship with local organisations.*

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government officers to deliver training. As an organisation we had no contact or relationship with Government departments before Nargis.

Staff energy levels are a concern for us. Before Nargis I would spend every day in the office but now I have to attend a series of meetings everyday and many times have to go out of the office. It is a considerable thing for us to be growing and recruiting new members. We are in a

transition period at the moment. October is the last month of our other projects and our new projects start 1 November. Staff have to sign their contracts again to stay.

From an organisational development perspective, we are moving forward. We are in the growth stage. Last year we had five staff members and every day we would be in the office together. We would talk about work issues and have lunch together. In the period since Nargis, there have been lots of changes. People have to exercise their abilities by themselves. Delegation has happened automatically. This has increased the capacity of our staff and has been very challenging for them. They realise the situation and manage their own strengths. No one can avoid it in a situation like this. There has been lots of stress which has made the staff uncomfortable at times.

We are recruiting six new staff members. We have three projects to start from this month. Some have already started. One is the townships project. The other is a national project which has been planned for a long time.

A lot of CBOs and local organisations emerged after Nargis. We don't distinguish between these and others. We work with the newly established CBOs. We try to strengthen the capacities of the women's organisations. After Nargis, we can see a lot of opportunities for our existence. Before Nargis, we had no chance to work together with the UN or government departments. Before Nargis we would work with the township-level government officers to deliver training. As an organisation we had no contact or relationship with Government departments before Nargis.

### **Future Plans**

Physically we are holding monthly network meetings. We have already prepared the budget for these so they have tangible support. Meetings are based on the needs of those organisations attending. We very much feel that these organisations should build their own capacities. These network meetings should only be held if they feel it is appropriate and it has their support.

Also, we don't want the network to mean uniformity. We want to have individual organisations and have it operate as a consortium. If they can enhance their capacity then they will attend. At present a few organisations talk a lot. Others will participate but talk no words. We want for network meetings to build capacities so that people become more confident in public speaking. We are planning to have the chair rotate amongst the organisations themselves. This will feel more representative and also help the groups to mature. Every meeting they will have an agenda and space to share experience. Every organisation has to speak to a limit. We must abide by this also. We also have to contain ourselves and limit ourselves to the allocated speaking time.

Another challenge for us is to involve young people in the civil society movement. We are presently working to do this through our networks. It is a critical part of our work

### **Challenges That Lie Ahead**

Improving the capacities of local organisations is an ongoing challenge. A few NGOs in this country are big organisations. They are well known and have a reasonable capacity.

INGOs, the UN and the Government have to pay attention to the fact that most of the local organisations are smaller and face challenges of our own capacity. Every day we have to speak English, every day we speak with our international friends. Capacity is highly demanded. If we cannot speak English then it is difficult to communicate and work together. The challenge for local organisations is how to speak with INGOs.

In addition, we face challenges recruiting staff. It will be difficult for us to recruit a programme co-ordinator. We need someone of high quality but it is difficult to find. We have a limited facility here, no air-con and low salaries and so, therefore, it is difficult for us to get high quality staff. Local NGOs produce resources for INGOs. We do a better job. We organise people and create networks in the field.

Another challenge is the high criteria for funding and partnerships that the INGOs formulate. Most local organisations cannot meet these requirements. Their funding applications have lots of steps and demands are so high. The criterion applies international standards. Local organisations can't find the appropriate technical expertise, however, to meet these standards. Monitoring and accounting requirements are also sometimes unrealistic.

Every single step that we take we want to be clear about:

1. Building capacity
2. Understanding the reality and why it is important to be flexible

We need to work on our documentation. We have lots of good case studies. We have paperwork problems. We do reports for our international friends but we are only doing a small amount of documentation.

We need someone to document for us. We need help for buy-in from donors. This would get the work publicised. We are employing a documentation officer. Perhaps they can create another documentation project.





## **New Opportunities For an Interfaith Youth Group**

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“ We are at the beginning of the journey into the future. For young people, they now have strength, new opportunities and volunteering support. We are united now and no one can break that. We are small groups but we are strong groups of 15-16 people. We are very strong. We build not for the money but for ourselves. ”

**N**argis was a general motivator. Volunteers got a big chance. One of the benefits was young people got jobs and got work. Before Nargis, young people were jobless and there was a lack of work. After Nargis, many people are working. Companies can't provide opportunities but NGOs can. Within three years of working, people are financially safe. They can give their family money and feed them. For young people, Nargis showed people's spirit. It brought jobs and it created networks.

This interfaith youth group have known each other since 2007. Members are from all different faiths - Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian. They worked in their own faith communities to respond to Cyclone Nargis. This is a collection of their stories:

**Kar:** Our Hindu Youth Group got together and mostly helped in Yangon. It depended on the circumstances of each household but some groups went to the Delta area to directly provide assistance. We divided ourselves up into A, B, and C sections on the basis of what we could contribute. We donated money and organised through our Central Committee which has young and old Hindu members.

**Monsu:** I organised in two areas: my university and my Buddhist group. My Buddhist group organised to give advice on how people could assist with the relief effort. We also contributed money for victims. We have no independent funding sources ourselves. We just collected money from this group and donated it to those in trouble. We didn't go directly to the areas affected by Nargis but we made items for the funerals of dead people and prayed for them.

*Tess:* As a family, we donated money as soon as we heard about it. Not only money but other things like clothes. As an organisation, I worked with different Muslim groups.

*Tou:* We have different Muslim groups. We formed an Emergency Committee to collect money at the mosque and ask people for donations. Rich business people gave lots of money. We also collected clothes from neighbours. This organisation took the clothes and money and went to the affected area in boats. Mostly youth went to do the distribution in the Delta but we got help from adults. It was difficult to get enough water for the people.

My organisation went to donate rice and other things also. I helped send this to the poor people. At the same time I was also attending class and getting together with friends to package goods and send them. I also worked with a foreign diplomatic institution to carry out a needs assessment in the Delta which then informed a relief campaign.

Most people who were affected by Nargis were not rich people but they are having a really difficult time because they have lost everything. Some businesses took advantage of this. Not all, but some. There was no money to buy enough food for people. Sometimes we unite and people come together and want to help people; some take advantage of others and raise the prices of rice etc.

*Xu:* I didn't go to the affected area but helped friends in collecting money and second hand clothes for the basic needs of the victims. I was involved in collecting and packaging things and collecting people to go to the Nargis area to help victims.

Working out who was the neediest was a difficult decision. I also collected money through a faith-based organisation. We collected money from our people and others in Yangon and we gave it to the Nargis victims.

*Pid:* I'm not from an organisation but I got together with people from this residential quarter and collected things and found things to give.

During Nargis, people went to the affected area with clothes and rice. On the roads, people didn't have a shirt. I didn't take clothes - I only had food and other things. I didn't take new clothes so I just gave them the shirt off my back. After I came back I could go and collect clothes from friends to donate.

*Tou:* Immediately after Cyclone Nargis, people from my township area also went to the affected areas and some people cooked noodle packs and provided water. My family went and donated goods. Individuals and families would cook together and distribute the food.

*Apel:* Before helping others, I had to help our house. Our roof flew

away. We had to sleep under the sky. There was a lack of water. I had to wait two to three hours for one bucket of water. Two days later, I heard many things about the Delta area. When I heard it was people from my ethnic group that were affected; my blood relatives; I could not stay at home so I went to the camps.

When I arrived at the camps, I could see that women were menstruating without any sanitary materials. There was a strong smell from this. There were also pregnant women. I knew what they needed so I came back to Yangon and gave 200,000 kyats to buy pads and donate them to the women. I also collected clothes from relatives and brought them to the Delta. I donated these to the Laputta region. Laputta was the most affected area here. I went back to the camps and helped the project officer

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*Before Nargis, we were also united. People really organised, however, through Nargis. After Nargis, people are more close and united with each other. This is regardless of race and religion. People don't discriminate over who is Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim or Christian.*

*Before Nargis, there was a lot of discrimination between religious groups, especially between Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. When Nargis happened, no one could stay in their house. Everyone came out to work for the affected people and people didn't want to stay alone. People don't see religion and race, they just see human beings. These things came out, that spirit.*

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there. I wrote on their behalf to donor agencies, drafted reports, distributed donations and initiated donor relations. Many Donors came to the area and had dollars to help. Two days later I went back to my organisation. They counted on me for psychosocial and trauma healing. They developed a trauma management program. I contacted people from the camps and we arranged to visit. They had 4,000 victims. I went there around 24/25 May as a logistics person for the trauma healing staff and as a translator and facilitator.

I heard many sad stories from people. I had to take rest to be calm and stable. Every household had lost at least one person. The Government tried to force the camps to close and move people to Government camps. People were told that if they did not go they would be in trouble. They were worried about not having enough food. As a result of Government force, 2,200 people had to move to the new camp. They would come back to old camps for food and other things.

### **Lessons Learned From Cyclone Nargis**

Many people came to help as individuals. They don't give much, just a little bit. That was a big thing for the victims. They also didn't care about colour, race, or religion. They just wanted to help willingly. What I got is that people are united. It was a success in that regard.

Many local groups came back and built themselves up. They formed groups and tried to do just the smallest thing to help. Most people helping are young people, 18-34 years of age. Old people cannot do the work because of their age.

I really felt that we are one, united. We are willing to have discussions and we don't discriminate on the basis of religion, colour or race etc. We just want to help the victims.

*Xu:* Women and children were particularly victimised and vulnerable after Nargis. Commercial sex workers in the Nargis areas have a growing presence. NGO workers go there, hotels spring up etc.

People who don't want to go back to the Delta come to Yangon and business people take advantage of this opportunity.

We heard about a teacher being raped and that other girls were raped. We heard soldiers had raped them. Girls were raped by villagers also and by those who delivered goods. There is a lot of pressure on the women. We also witnessed conflict between the Burmese and Karen people.

*Apel:* We are at the beginning of the journey into the future. For young people, they now have strength, new opportunities and volunteering support. We are united now and no one can break that. We are small groups but we are strong groups of 15-16 people. We are very strong. We build not for the money but for ourselves.

*Kar:* We want to believe this about young people, but many have difficulties and expectations and they don't want to unite. This is human nature. As a Hindu, I believe you need to be in front of people and lead them or try to lead them to try and be a role model. If this process is real, it will be our dream and it will come one day.

*Pid:* Before Nargis, we were also united. People really organised, however, through Nargis. After Nargis, people are more close and united with each other. This is regardless of race and religion. People don't discriminate over who is Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim or Christian.

Before Nargis, there was a lot of discrimination between religious groups, especially between Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. When Nargis happened, no one could stay in their house. Everyone came out to work for the affected people and people didn't want to stay alone. People don't see religion and race, they just see human beings. These things came out, that spirit.

*Kar:* Before Nargis, our information systems were poor. Now, organisations work very closely together and their networking skills are excellent. People are a lot more aware of the weather

news. People are also more aware of political affairs in Myanmar. Most of the local NGOs appeared because of Nargis.

*Xu:* In the past, in Rakhine State, we had storms very often. Many children and parents died. Nobody knew about these and no one came to assist. Now people from Asia know that Myanmar has disasters, we have hope that maybe next time we can also get help to cope.

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*I really felt that we are one, united. We are willing to have discussions and we don't discriminate on the basis of religion, colour or race etc. We just want to help the victims.*

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Cyclone Nargis also brought a big opportunity for young people to work as volunteers in Nargis affected areas. They can get work experience through working in these areas.

### **Response of the Victims**

Most people we went to interview were Karen people. They said they don't want to work with Burmese people. They say Burmese people are rude and oppress them. This conflict began decades ago. They see this as an opportunity to fight against them. For the Burma side, they said this is punishment to the Karen from God because of the sins they have committed.

When you go to help, people ask you where you are from. When I say Rakhine State, people remembered that our state has a lot of cyclones. They said we will remember you helped us and we will remember you next time. We appreciated that and we cried together a lot.

*Tou:* The people felt strange when they saw Muslim people come and help and they were amazed with our help. Cyclone Nargis was able to mobilise all people from different backgrounds to come and help each other.

Lots of small groups emerged after Nargis. If people need volunteers, lots of people know each other now. Nargis generated volunteer spirit amongst the young people of Myanmar.

*Apel:* Nargis was a general motivator. Volunteers got a big chance. One of the benefits was young people got jobs and got work. Before Nargis, young people were jobless and there was a lack of work. After Nargis, many people are working. Companies can't provide opportunities but NGOs can. Within three years of working, people are financially safe. They can give their family money and feed them. For young people, Nargis showed people's spirit. It brought jobs and it created networks.

### **How External Organisations Can Further Strengthen Civil Society in Myanmar**

Before Nargis, people had a lot less of a helping mind. After Nargis, many people start to know what is the real helping mind and get an interest in community development.

Many small groups emerged after Nargis. Without external support or donations they can continue working. However, if INGOs provide help to small groups it will support them to stay alive. When the money is cut off they may die off.

We believe it comes down to economics and financial institutions. This must be the work of a big business and not just small groups.

*Apel:* We Myanmar people have a volunteer spirit. When we face difficulties from the heart, we work together. Such kind of activities and things will continue if we face another Nargis. To sustain these groups we need to sustain the volunteer spirit, work together, form working groups, collect the community leaders and give knowledge to people. It will be difficult to organise each group into one.

Commitment and togetherness are two qualities that are important to develop and sustain post-Nargis. The group might disappear one day but if it is sustained, it can come again and be a strong network.

Capacity building is important. INGOs should be used for their knowledge and resource persons. They have to give and share

capacity. We need to know about project management, community development and emergency responses. We want to be taught how to fish, not to be given fish. We need to know how to motivate people to run organisations and work with people. They know how to motivate. People have spirit but not the background or experience.

*Xu:* People should also give funds to small businesses. This would combine profit and NGO work on the side. After training, people can get ideas and a social spirit to work together. This is what they're doing now. Then people come together and can do social work.



**Nargis as an opportunity to  
Engage Young People in  
Social Action**

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Our organisation was started in January 2004 by women who were interested in doing development work. We work in the area of women and youth. We do empowerment, vocational and income-generation training. We also provide leadership training for women and youth. This is a local organisation working to support women and youth.

During the emergency stage following Cyclone Nargis, we helped the affected people by providing shelter and clothes. Now that we are in the recovery stage, we provide a small amount of funds for small businesses, livelihoods (seed, fishing nets and boats etc) and livestock.

We worked in the community and selected the area in which to work by following our belief that we are the facilitators and we exist to nurture local groups. We paid local persons and they coordinated the village work. First, we went together with them and the community. Later, we only did follow up and monitored that they are able to do the work by themselves in the community.

Before Cyclone Nargis, we provided training for women and youth. After Nargis, we invited the local youth groups that we were working

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*Our strategy after Nargis was to involve alumni youth groups and other youth groups to carry out cyclone relief work. We invited many youth groups including local Buddhist youth groups. Before Nargis, we did not have any relationship with the local Buddhist youth groups. This is our new partner community. We got to know them during Cyclone Nargis and we worked with them because they knew a lot about the local situation. Our partners during Nargis were also INGO, individuals (friends and old friends) and a religious association.*

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with to come along and attend our training. We also extended the invite to our partners to have training and share to build their capacity.

It is our first time doing relief work and it is a new experience for us. After Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar, I didn't know what to do. We got the space to do this work because many youths who had received leadership training from us didn't know how to do social work. They came to me and said that we should do something and we want to do something for the affected people. This meant we did need funding to be able to do the

work. Therefore, I went and approached individual donors and friends. We got the funds and started the work. The NGOs started to come later. This is our first experience and so many people, including myself, were so shocked and we did not really know what to do.

During the work, there were thefts and crimes but the government was also good in managing these issues. As to the Government, at first, they did not allow us to work. Now, however, we do not have any problem in working there during the recovery and we work together very well with the government.

After Cyclone Nargis we have relief experience.

We have the trust of the village. This is because we were there with them at this difficult time and needy time. We respected and encouraged them.

We were successful because we started the process early. We carried out data collection and planning with the community. We worked with them through the process and stayed in the village so we were able to understand the situation in the community.

We have an umbrella with our INGO, and every time we work with the government and authorities, we report to them about what are doing and providing in the village. For example, in our target village there is a man who tried to get land from the village after Nargis. We discussed with the village what type of land they resided on. There was an old man who knew that it is the old land on which they can build a house. So we tried to find the funds for the construction of the house. In the process, the villager tried to own the land by approaching the authority. The man is still trying to bribe and own the land and we are continuing to work with the group. The local Buddhist group approached the government and later news came from the village high government official that he allowed the villagers to own the land and they can build their house on that land. This was a successful case since the land was not owned by the villager before Nargis and now they own the land and we are also able to help them build the houses on that land.

## **Lessons Learned Through Delivery of Emergency Relief**

It is our first experience of relief work and really new for us as we were also shocked about the situation

We learned that I can do and we can help each other. I am able to mobilise funds from individuals. We don't think about others, about the outsiders or the government. We are ready to work and help the people in need because if people can't share money they share clothes.

We need management skills. We also realised, however, that we do a very good job. So developing management skills for us means that we make sure we learn from our own experience and what we do.

As a result of Nargis, we know that the youth are eager to help and willing to work.

We did not have a preparedness plan before the storm hit and both the government and NGOs were less prepared for this huge disaster.

We are more skilled at relief and humanitarian assistance having received training on these after Nargis.

We learned that networking is very important, especially with local people because from this we can share information. For example, we knew one lady whom we got in contact with through a friend. She was so good in giving us information. She wrote us a letter with good information on what is needed in the village.

## **Challenges We Faced**

The needs of different villages are different. We therefore have challenges and difficulties in our proposal. For example, we put medical assistance in the proposal but in some villages they need food and not medical assistance like other villages.

## **Future Strengthening of Civil Society**

Our work focuses on women and youth development programmes. Before Nargis, we only did training but were not able to do any practice

and not able to see our alumni youth practice their skills. But during Nargis, we realised we could participate in a lot of field work. We knew that the youth we had trained are capable of doing social work. We have received great exposure. Before Nargis, village people didn't know about development work but now they understand and we have an easy time working with them.

Now we are working on youth, peace, and women's initiatives that cross-cut many sectors. We also have a strategy to work in the field. Our organisation has now become strong and knows how to work and mobilise in the field. We are more active than before. Before, we only sat in the office in Yangon and conducted training. After Nargis, we know our way and are able to work and mobilise more in the field.

### **How External Organisations can Support Civil Society**

For external organisations to provide support, they have to understand the local people. External organisations are very good at reporting and financial management so they need specific information on time. Yet we can't do this as we are slow and sometimes we plan a good strategy but the situation changes and we can no longer do it.

Some external organisations only provide financial costs for the project but not the coordination and administration costs. If they are not willing to support these labour costs then corruption might take place in the future. Also, some people cannot work on a volunteer basis forever and they need support for them and their family. We find ourselves building the capacity of our volunteers but we do not have the financial resources to support them. After sometime they are able to find a job with an INGO so we lose our resources for our organisation.

Capacity building is really important. We are lacking in the area of writing and reporting. We are working hard and doing good in the villages with the people, but we are not able to write a good report about our work. To illustrate; for me, I can tell and share with people about our work' but when it comes to writing I am not able to do much. I have limitations in writing. If possible, we would like to have

capacity-building on report writing and we need specific and practical skills, not a very academic skill set.

Please do not bring new or complicated frameworks because sometimes it does not work in our context and our villages. We want participatory monitoring and evaluation from the community. We do have our own format but it was rejected and disapproved by

external organisations and we have to use their framework. We did not know how to use and apply these in our work. What we really need is for the external organisations to understand the context of our work and also consider whether or not to introduce new tools as we are not sure whether they are applicable.

Trauma healing is what we need. Many people lost their families and property, so they are really traumatised by these experiences of loss. People need trauma healing; however, the healing process needs to be simple to make people feel happy and able to release their heaviness.

Finally, I would like to say that because of this massive destruction, many people died and the villagers were sad and without hope. When we are there with them during this time and situation, however, they were so surprised and they started to work with us. Bit by bit they were not feeling sad or without hope any more. So we are the HOPE for the people when we are there with them, for them, and working together with them.

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**Engaging the Authorities,  
Coordinating Relief and  
Making Links**

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*“ Instead of blaming the Government, we just worked with them as much as we could. We worked with them and worked with smiles.”*

In the Myanmar context we do not think or have ideas of ‘civil society organisations’. It is not allowed by the Myanmar Government. We are not allowed to have an opinion.

After Cyclone Nargis, there was no civil society presence in the local areas apart from the government. The government were not aware and did not have enough resources to respond and protect people.

We wanted to respond by providing support and distributing materials to cyclone affected areas but, because of the lack of civil society organisations, we thought we could not do anything. The only option we thought we had was to deal with the government or local authorities yet there aren't the authorities to handle this kind of disaster. This was a big challenge or concern.

I developed my experience through the student movement. We started to initiate civil society organisations in student activities to get some experience of democracy.

We don't have a civil society in local areas. There are only government NGOs. These are the mother and children protection NGOs, the Red Cross societies and the National Solidarity Union. The government say these are NGOs but actually they are controlled by the Government. They are approved so that others cannot challenge the Government for not allowing NGOs to operate.

After Cyclone Nargis, we initiated contact with donor agencies and took on the co-ordination of relief assistance. We acted as a go-between to get relief projects operating and to get supplies to the affected areas. To do so, we established an Emergency Relief Committee (ERC).

Our organisation took on only the coordination and facilitation of funding. This is not a new role for us as we have always done facilitation.

The needs in this situation, however, were really large and everybody did not have experience in carrying out relief work. Looking over the work, but not influencing, is the role that we can play. We created the emergency relief and rehabilitation committee from the individual donations we received from other communities in Asia.

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*Our organisation did not go directly to the Nargis area. We directed donors to organisations and operated the Emergency Relief Committee (ERC). The ERC kept a low profile. It was a very impromptu initiative.*

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We have always had active religious committees working at every level – grassroots, association and national level. At a rural and grassroots level we are much more aware of the value of civil society groups. They are now better organised.

We need to have conflict management. We need for people to understand that we do have a certain faith background but that we are here for all of the community. It is a problem when Evangelical groups create conflict by seeking to proselytise communities.

We experienced difficulty working with the different government sectors at the national level. We were told we could reconstruct our religious buildings immediately but were then prevented from doing so. There was a land dispute about ownership, green land and having to use religious land for construction. We were prevented from reconstructing these buildings in their former locations.

ERC Co-ordinator: A huge number of people actually died after surviving Cyclone Nargis. They had injuries and infections from holding onto coconut trees for eight hours straight. Nargis emergency relief came two days late, people had fevers and no food or water for that whole time. They were in an area far from town so it was difficult to get transport to seek assistance. Within one week so many people had died again.

The families suffered immensely. They understood that because of the heavy wind they lost family, but they had difficulty understanding why they lost family again after Nargis? It was like punishment for the

second time. After one week, people were still waiting as assessments and investigations were carried out.

I was in the Delta when Nargis happened. I cycled back to Yangon the next day and it took eight hours. I saw a helicopter land in the affected area before I left.

We have documented our work but this mainly involved recording videos and pictures for donors.

We decided to send food and non-food items - shelter, tarpaulins, rice stores, purified water and other cooking items. People lost everything. Some people would be still living with their dead relatives as they had only their hands to bury them and they could not dig the ground.

We contacted the international community for assistance as we already had connections and the experience of working with them. We knew we needed to initiate contact with them as they have the power. We found their limitations difficult to deal with, however. It was difficult to get the figures they wanted as people would move from village to village. We would predict 3,000 people, but then the figure would be different.

Donors needed us, however, as it was difficult for them to enter the Delta areas. They have to apply for a special permit and it takes four days to approve. They can only send goods for distribution.

### **Challenges in Working with the Government and Local Authorities**

Instead of blaming the government, we just worked with them as much as we could. We worked with them and worked with smiles.

There was no response from the government until two to three weeks after the Cyclone. They got shocked. They did not have the ability to respond immediately. People had to send messages from the Delta and carry the news from the affected area.

The response from the people themselves was incredible. Everyday 100,000 people in cars would come into the Delta area bringing relief

supplies. The government began checking with people why they had brought these things. The Government wanted to know which organisation they were from and where they got the money from, etc. This made the people giving donations feel bad and stop coming to the Delta.

At the same time, the government would stop people coming to the road to collect relief supplies. Gradually the vehicles reduced. The road conditions worsened also.

The UN described our government's response to Cyclone Nargis as slow. The UN should be on the people's side. The response was not slow, it was silent. I don't understand why the UN didn't say this. This is a negative point about the UN.

Due to the country situation in Myanmar, whatever happens people tend to seek refuge in the religious institutions. For Cyclone Nargis, people went to the monasteries and the churches. As a result of the different religions of those affected, the spiritually formed civil society came to assist. The government then came to control this.

The Buddhist and church communities had a good response after Nargis. We didn't send enough but we showed our love to the local people. We distributed assistance to people of all faiths.

There is still a need for help. The rains have stopped but there is a drinking water problem. Some people have a built up resistance as the water has never been purified. For others coming into the area to help this was a problem. People came down from the mountainous areas to help. There were so many dead bodies. For people not familiar with the Delta area, the conditions were difficult. You have to know how to stay there. Simple transportation was very difficult and a problem during the emergency. Rain and wind were an unexpected problem.

Before Nargis, civil society was totally divided. Monasteries stuck to themselves, churches etc did their own thing. They would live in the same villages but carry out their own separate activities. The mind says work together but the spirit says stay as a family.

Before the Cyclone, the radio warned that a storm was going to come and it would be scary like a ghost. But they should have said it would be like a monster or a giant. We need early warning systems for Cyclones. Until now, the government has not confessed to their failure to warn people of the danger of Cyclone Nargis.

Ban Ki Moon's visit was good for convincing the government to stop the undercutting of currency. US Dollars had to be transferred into foreign exchange currency and this would take a significant slice of the amount being donated. Donors were losing money in bank transfers.

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In my experience, the situation is still difficult. We need government help. We cannot control each other as local people but the government can control. We need leaders. These have not yet emerged from the government.

Working together is something the government have not done. How can we go back from here? We share something special. The government came and divided the groups, but here we have a chance to work together, but how? The spirit is there. We are good at sharing information together.

When I manage the volunteers I try and boost their confidence. I tell them that they are powerful, they are responsible and they are confident, even though they are poor and share their own small amount. Now they have nothing. Their livelihood systems have been destroyed. Gardens, coconut trees and other crops will take at least five years to get back to the previous standard. They need to repair and replant. People are very humble and not greedy. They also do not want to depend on others.





## From Evangelism to Relief Work

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We are a faith-based organisation. We formed for the purpose of evangelism. For the last 10 years, we have also had a Department of Social Services within our organisation. This Department works together with other local churches and groups to do development work. It works along similar lines to an NGO.

Prior to Nargis we had experienced only small disasters. This may have been flooding which resulted in some locally displaced villages.

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*Our organisation has no sectoral limits like INGOs. These are our communities and we feel responsible for all their needs. NGOs work on sector and technical capacity like medical care etc. We had to take care of all needs simultaneously.*

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A few years ago we also had to contend with a landslide. Our disaster experience before Nargis was quite limited.

We had never expected a cyclone on this scale. Within the last one to two years we had heard about disaster response and disaster preparedness, however, we had not really intended

to get involved. A few of our staff may have attended a training but we were not seriously engaged with this work nor doing planning on disaster risk reduction. We thought cyclones only happened in Bangladesh.

This year, when Nargis came, I was in Pathein. I had heard that there would be a cyclone of wind speed 120 mph. I was not afraid of that. I did not think it would happen like this. Last week I went to Bogale Township. They had the same information and thought the wind speed would be 120mph. That wouldn't have been so destructive.

About two to three days after Cyclone Nargis, we began to hear about the death and destruction in church communities. As a result of Cyclone Nargis many churches were badly damaged. In response, churches in the city started to direct resources to Nargis affected areas. We started to send out people and food, water, shelter and a medical team. All the needs requested by the communities we tried to meet.

We were not experienced in this kind of work and felt very underprepared. We were not well organised. Some people who did have experience came and showed us how to organise and make plans and address the situation. We learnt a lot from them.

There were many media stories about the disruption by the government or local authorities and their role in preventing aid from being distributed. This problem was not experienced by our organisation. They did not limit our role. We found we could move freely without obstruction.

We carried out work collecting people from villages. Some villages were totally destroyed. There were no people living there and no way villagers could return to live there. Other villages were only partially destroyed and return was possible. Those who could not continue to stay in the village we brought back to the nearest town and camp.

We continued to provide food and medicine for the villagers. After a few weeks the government asked the villagers to leave the camps and go back home. This process was not so smooth. The local authorities said everything was ready for them in the villages but actually, that was not so. We knew, therefore, we needed to go to the villages to provide temporary shelter, food, water and other needs. Different organisations were also providing this.

In a way, the government's directive was also good because it meant people could return to agriculture and this season's planting. This enabled the food problem for next year to be addressed. We got focused on tractors, seeds, tools and other equipment necessary to get things ready for planting. The action from the government may have been right but there was no preparation for people to return.

There were lots of rumours about agricultural risks and threats after Cyclone Nargis. One such rumour concerned the flooding of rice paddies by sea water. This is a normal occurrence, however, and it is possible to replant afterwards. A real problem though, was the lack of fertilizer or insecticide. There were also problems with seedlings not growing and needing to sow them again. This largely depends on the quality of the seeds and can be overcome by sowing more seeds.

Last week, I went to the affected area and saw many paddy fields in good condition. Some villages are now preparing to plant fields. There will be a lot less production than before but the situation is still good. After planting, we also started to provide boats and other needs to support the return of people's livelihoods. At the same time, we also provided training on trauma healing.

Our organisation has no sectoral limits like INGOs. These are our communities and we feel responsible for all their needs. NGOs work on sector and technical capacity like medical care etc. We had to take care of all needs simultaneously.

The limits of our organisation are our knowledge and the scale upon which we have to work. We also have a lack of funds, human resources and our communities are not trained for this kind of work. A final limitation is the mistrust that exists between different religious and ethnic groups.

### Key Learnings For Our Organisation

In providing Cyclone Nargis relief, everyday was a learning opportunity. We now realise that Myanmar is a disaster prone area and we are training to prepare for future disasters. For us, we need to make ourselves able to be ready and strong enough to respond to these disasters. We are in a good position now to be able to do so. Through Nargis, many donors heard about our work and our brother and sister organisations overseas have come to our aid and improved our capacity to manage. We are receiving enough money for our capacity at the moment. In the future maybe we need to improve our fundraising capacity.

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*We have built many new relationships with organisations and strengthened old ones. Normally, we would only work with like-minded organisations in Myanmar and internationally. We are now part of new networks and work with other organisations as a result of Cyclone Nargis. We also have more opportunities through Nargis funding. We need to take care to find out who are the potential donors, however, and be clear on their intentions. From there we can decide whether to create long-term partnerships with these donors.*

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## **Strengthening Needed by Our Organisation and Civil Society Generally**

We have built many new relationships with organisations and strengthened old ones. Normally, we would only work with like-minded organisations in Myanmar and internationally. We are now part of new networks and work with other organisations as a result of Cyclone Nargis. We also have more opportunities through Nargis funding. We need to take care to find out who are the potential donors, however, and be clear on their intentions. From there we can decide whether to create long-term partnerships with these donors.

As an organisation we need assistance to improve our financial managements systems and our communication and reporting systems. We are used to our area of evangelism so relief is a totally new area for us.

This is also a change for us because we are working on a much more holistic level. We are engaged in different sectors. At an organisational level, we are aware of the reality in the communities and are ready to give more based on our experience in relief and development. Our organisation has 14 different departments - youth, education, women, evangelism, etc - and now we co-ordinate across Departments much better. We share responsibility and recognise the intersections in our work.

Due to the amount of schools destroyed, we are providing funds to build them again and are in the process of constructing 43 schools.

At an Association level, we have a greater awareness of disaster planning, management and reduction. Our co-operation has improved as has our preparation and capacity. We still need to improve this, however.

At a village level, we are equipped with the disaster knowledge and now need to work on planning, repairing and addressing conflict issues that exist. The history of our country is highly complex.

## Religious Leaders Respond

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When Nargis hit Myanmar, I was in Chiang Mai for an international conference. I couldn't get back to Myanmar but I had access to various news sources and I knew what was happening. My oldest son works for an NGO in Chiang Mai. He was collecting information.

I sent out special requests to international friends to pray and support us. Our international brother and sister networks provided us with a good response. I went back to Myanmar after two weeks.

The main role of our organisation is to provide scriptures. In a big calamity like this, however, we have to try and respond. We responded in two ways:

- 1. Providing scriptures:** We set about gathering resources for specially affected areas and provided them only to Christians. We didn't want to be accused of trying to convert people or exploiting the situation but people wanted assistance. We had 18,888 affected families in the Delta. We delivered approximately 10,290 scriptures to the affected families in the period up until September.
- 2. Humanitarian Aid:** We provided rice, clothing, utensils and mosquito nets. I recall school kits were also being provided by another organisation.

From a very early stage, we churches tried to voice our concerns to the State. As a group of recognised church leaders, we decided to come together and write a letter to the government regarding their response after Cyclone Nargis. Knowing the situation was deteriorating quickly we wrote saying:

1. Firstly, we appreciate what the Government is doing
2. Secondly, we are also trying to respond to this disaster by providing relief to people irrespective of faith
3. Finally, that we require the government to accept assistance from abroad in the form of in kind support, resource persons and expertise.

We did not get a response to our letter.

We were already working in the field for a long time before ASEAN, the UN and TCG arrived. We had tried to work out which communities needed aid and tried to assign senior staff to communities to identify the needs. Sixty percent of the humanitarian aid we provided went to non-Christians. We continued our work as more funds became available.

When we provided rice in Laputta and the Delta villages, we tried to purchase from the area. We arranged to bring the goods by boat. At least one senior staff member from our organisation must go and distribute the rice. Also, when we distributed aid, we formed a committee and worked through volunteers. We did not spend one percent of our money on staff.

### **Challenges Faced in Delivering Cyclone Nargis Relief**

When Nargis hit, all religious leaders met with the Minister of Religious Affairs. The Minister said they would provide whatever we needed to help the situation. Temporary camps had been established for 4,000 people. After two weeks, however, the Government said they had to go back. General Secretary of the Security Council, Ban Ki Moon, had said they should remain in place for six months. Villagers were disappointed as there was nothing ready for them to go back.

When the Government is strict for NGOs and INGOs, still church groups might not have a problem. The only real problems we had was with churches and Christian organisations and rebuilding churches in certain places.

Obtaining permission to work in the area is a challenge. When rebuilding houses and churches, the authorities always come and ask us about our permits and who provided them etc. We are a small organisation. We don't make special appeals to churches. We work through our international networks.

We were approached by a lot of organisations from the Netherlands, Hungary, Japan, the US and Norway. Some came in and helped with not just humanitarian but also trauma healing, water and sanitation,

agriculture - quite basic things. Needs and interests are different with donors sometimes. Sharing information is ok but some groups just come through and collect information and take photos and don't return.

We do not have a big budget. If we received a bigger budget we would have to have good management. Our approach to distributing rice in Laputta was to purchase it locally, provide it to the villagers and to always liaise with the churches.

### **New relationships with Other Organisations**

We have developed new relationships as a result of Nargis. We work more closely with other religious affiliated organisations and with donor and UN Agencies.

Before and after Nargis, our main work is the translation of scriptures for all people, in all national languages. We provide relief, however, because there is a need. Through Nargis, we realised the need to work in a holistic way with other organisations. We have now increased our external recognition although we have always done social work. Our staff numbers are set to increase from 17 to 20.

In Myanmar, you are free to distribute Scriptures but there are restrictions on printing. We have to get them printed outside the country. The Government has officially stated there are 135 national races. We need to translate and print in each of these languages. So far, we have printed 60 languages. We have 20 translation projects in process at the moment. The Christian population in Myanmar is only eight percent.

We have a better relationship with the majority Buddhists after Nargis. We worked with monks in one local community. They said to us, 'Please give us rice, we have had no breakfast for two weeks'. We then provided rice to the monastery. These are not links we have made at an organisational level with the Association, but are significant at the local level in communities.

## Advice For External Organisations

I would advise external organisations that you should source a local NGO to support that has credibility and integrity. Don't just work with one person. Don't just seek out one person and try and trust them. Find out if they are ok. In Myanmar, there are many of what we call 'Government NGOs'. These are the Women's Federation, and Children and Maternity NGOs and the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). These organisations work according to the guidelines from high above. I would also say to discuss a project and work out if it is relevant or not, effective or not.

Expertise and professional skills are also what we need. However we do not require new ways of evaluating our work. Donors have a certain style of how they want things to be evaluated. We want to do our own evaluation. We see a lot of NGOs coming up but still lacking the capacity to work with people. When Cyclone Nargis came even the government were not prepared with knowledge of disaster prevention or relief work. Communication and negotiation skills are really important.

I would also like to request that there is a new focus on young people. In Myanmar society, old people stick to old ideas. The education system here has become very hopeless. The teachers are inexperienced and the students are not receiving a high quality of education. We need to teach people awareness. In the future, we don't know what will happen in terms of the political situation. If the young people are growing up and are aware of the situation and they have a commitment to the welfare of the whole country, the country will be changed. There is a need for consciousness and for young people to take responsibility for the country.

## **Adopting a Holistic Approach As a Result of Cyclone Nargis**

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“Our organisation is very different now to before Nargis. We have become very active and very humanitarian based. Before Nargis we would work on separate issues (poverty reduction, HIV/Aids, health) and in very small ways. We have had to work in many different sectors now and often across sectors such as education, health, livelihoods and shelter. All these needs were present at the same time. Our activities have become much deeper now.”

First, let me say, I am 60 years of age and I have never experienced this kind of situation in my life. Never have I seen a catastrophe on this scale. I have seen flooding but not this kind of devastation. At a national level, it is difficult to foresee how civil society could be expected to deal with this kind of catastrophe. It was very new to us.

Cyclone Nargis struck on the night of 2 May, going into 3 May. On 5 May, I was contacted by foreign funding bodies. They were concerned with how we were coping. I said we are safe but not happy as thousands of people have been affected in the Irrawaddy Division. I told them I was ok but had no peace of mind.

On 5 May I started distributing rice. I used my own money to buy 10 bags of rice, pack them and start distribution. Being in civil society, many people contacted me to assist with distribution of food and non-food items (blankets etc). Slowly other donations started coming in apart from rice including tin food, canned fish, and cooking oil. We started distributing to the Delta area first.

In the initial days we were very limited in the relief we could provide. We would have to go to the Delta area and do assessments empty-handed. We saw many people dying. We could only start work with INGOs after one and a half months. Three faith-based donors provided assistance with distribution and packaging relief supplies.

Our organisation provided volunteers to help do the distribution in the Delta and Yangon Division. We were able to channel our staff into the relief work by shifting them from their usual roles to work on

providing Cyclone Nargis emergency assistance. We had to train them first in relief activities. They were taught how to do needs assessments. We then sent them to the field to get assessments and distribute food. We obtained instructions on the non-food items required and organised to deliver them to the affected people. The affected people would also come to us and tell us what difficulties they had and we would give them what they required.

We worked with all groups from a diversity of religious and ethnic backgrounds. People were not concerned about what religion or caste or ethnicity we were. They had real needs and invited any person to help no matter which background they came from. Our organisation is faith-based but we have staff from diverse religious backgrounds. We are human beings and assist on that basis. In our experience people were very appreciative of the assistance.

The emergency work stopped after one month and we focused on distributing non-food items. We worked on shelter assessments in the Delta and Yangon Division. Our partner organisations helped us with building shelters in the area and in carrying out food distribution to the needy people. These organisations are still working in the Delta area at present.

We worked through the monks and the monasteries to deliver aid. We did so because Buddhist monasteries are very influential in every place. Through them you can control your work and get good assessments to organise distribution. Our base was always the monastery and we communicated through them. They recognised we worked on an interfaith basis and our staff are from a diversity of faiths. Our

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Now assistance for Nargis is slowing down. After passing the emergency phase the focus is on shelter. There is not enough money to work on providing shelter. The government has also become strict. They want to know which donors are taking part in planning and construction. The donors don't want to show themselves off and want to keep a low profile.

The government also wants to build its houses, hospitals and schools first. We cannot guarantee that if the government becomes involved in distribution and construction that the donor funds will go to the most needy. The government ones will get priority.

### **Strengthening of Civil Society Through Nargis**

Also, we took everything lightly before Cyclone Nargis. When someone would come and ask me for food I would say, 'You need to work hard' and lecture them. Now, I find out who is really in need of food and provide it. I have seen with my own eyes how people can suffer. I visited and spent time in the field myself. Before Nargis I worked in a room. Now I am outside. I can feel the situation.

I witnessed the emergence of 20 new community based organisations that came about in different parts of the affected area as a result of Nargis.

Before Nargis, we did not have any local organisations comprising a specific cluster for relief work. In the future I wonder if we need to have special relief organisations? We had no experience in this so it is all new work for us.

Our team's capacities have been increased as a result of being involved in the Cyclone Nargis relief effort. After Nargis, we realised our organisation needs a division to do this kind of relief work. We didn't have this before Nargis and in the future, we need to establish one. We also have to build up capacities in the field for doing relief work.

Our organisation is very different now to before Nargis. We have become very active and very humanitarian based. Before Nargis we would work on separate issues (poverty reduction, HIV/Aids, health) and in very small ways. We have had to work in many different sectors now and often across sectors such as education, health, livelihoods and shelter. All these needs were present at the same time. Our activities have become much deeper now.

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### **Challenges in Delivering Cyclone Nargis Emergency Relief**

#### **1. Government Regulations:**

This is a big challenge. The government want everything to be given to them. They say they will distribute in lieu of us. Ultimately we know it will not reach who it should.

We visited the Department and Ministry of Social Affairs to provide assistance. They would not allow international assistance. They said to give them the materials and non-food items directly and they will provide it. They said we don't need foreign funds or resources. Again, we visited the Ministry to apply for permission to build hospitals and schools as per governmental requirements. The Ministry wanted to know how we got our money, from where, whether it had been approved by government etc. They told us to complete an amount of paperwork and legal documents. When we submitted the proposal they just said give us the money and we will do it. We did not pursue our proposal. It will take years for the schools and hospitals to be rebuilt.

#### **2. Local authorities:**

By this I mean corrupted authorities. They need their lion share

first. To overcome this, we used to approach people during the night only. We also used to distribute tokens so that people can come to a separate location to pick up the goods. Sometimes we would also take it straight to the monks or deliver it to the imams directly. This is because religious charity is protected and the local authorities can't and won't interfere with it.

Our relationship with the authorities changed after Cyclone Nargis. Before Nargis, we would completely avoid them. After Nargis, we had to co-operate because we needed their help. Once we stopped with our Nargis work then we did not need to go along with them. The Government is against civil society here. Even the United Nations agencies find it difficult to operate in this context.

### **How External Organisations Can Strengthen Our Work**

Our pre-existing relationships with external organisations have been strengthened since Nargis. External organisations played a useful role in building our capacity. They conducted workshops and brought in experts. They taught us many things about cleaning water and about sanitation. We have also developed a number of new relationships through our involvement in Cyclone Nargis emergency relief.

We require capacity building as a way of strengthening our organisation. We require not just funding but also expert assistance and resource support. We are new to this field of emergency relief and need training on relief activities.

The message I would like to get out to the international community is this: whenever they hear about any catastrophe, let them come into our country as a tourist if they cannot enter the legal way. If they cannot apply for visa to do relief work then let them come somehow as a missionary. They can take a place in the churches to assist. If they can't come in the legal way, I would encourage them to get around the system. Pushing for the legal way through the front door is not working with the reality of Myanmar. To not have international assistance in the form of donations and experts for more than one and a half months is too long. It was only after Ban Ki Moon came and

talked to our leaders that assistance was finally provided. In total, it still took about two months for assistance to arrive. Lots of lives were lost in that time. A quicker response is required.

Just like aftershocks follow major earthquakes, we anticipate another cyclone and we fear another Nargis. Some time ago, the Government announced a small cyclone of winds at 40 mph was to hit Patthein. The people responded by coming to the roadside. People are dealing with the trauma brought about by Nargis and this is a big issue we need assistance in dealing with.

We require trauma experts and resource people. Many have lost everything and will never return to their previous level. We met one lady who lost her son and daughter in Nargis. She didn't want to work, she didn't want to live and was very traumatised. She will not come back to her former self.

After the cyclone, nobody could provide trauma counselling. I tried to ask people to find out who could provide this role but there was no one. Now other organisations have taken the lead in providing trauma healing and counselling. It was a problem because even when we would distribute the food, people didn't have the strength to cook it. They didn't want to eat. They were not ready to receive any donations. I remember one girl, 10 years old, would shake uncontrollably as soon as someone lightly touched her.

Moreover, and on a related point, I would also request international organisations to put more pressure on our Government if there is another catastrophe. We need political pressure exerted at UN

Headquarters in a much shorter timeframe. I would encourage people to go to the UN Headquarters to put pressure on the agencies. The

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UN General Secretary was effective once he arrived here but it took one and a half months for him to arrive. This is too late.

Our Government may need a special Department to cope with disasters and to provide emergency relief. We cannot discount that in the future another similar disaster will strike. Nargis is on our mind now. It was over five months since it occurred and we believe another similar cyclone will arrive in the next one to two months. We need to do more planning for future relief work.

Our organisation itself spent not a single dollar on providing cyclone relief for Nargis. It all came from our own pockets and from members of Myanmar society and international agencies. We acted as a go-between to set up connections and facilitate the work of other organisations in the field.





## Psycho-social Support to the Survivors

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Cyclone Nargis, a Category 3-4 Cyclone, developed over the Bay of Bengal and made landfall at 4pm on 2 May 2008 in the Irrawaddy delta region of Myanmar. It brought winds of up to 200 km/hr and associated tidal surges, rain and flooding. The affected area, subsequently declared a State Disaster Area, has a total population of 24 million. On 6 May the declaration was revised to the divisions of Irrawaddy and Yangon only. These were the most affected areas. The Irrawaddy Delta in particular, has seen severe destruction. Here, the effects of extreme winds were compounded by a sizable storm surge that destroyed an estimated 95% of housing.

Latest reports estimate that more than 130,000 people are dead or missing (this figure has unofficially been reported as 182,000) and potentially another 2 million have been moderately to severely affected by the cyclone. The disaster caused widespread destruction to homes and critical infrastructure including roads, jetties, water and sanitation systems, fuel supplies and electricity. A large number of water supplies were contaminated and food stocks damaged or destroyed. The winds tore down trees and power lines, while the accompanying storm surge submerged countless villages.

Preliminary assessments confirm the following: major food shortages; little access to fresh and uncontaminated water; many houses are completely destroyed; and people lack basic essential items to live.

The ongoing political situation complicated the ability of religious institutions to operate in an open manner and access and communication issues remain an enormous obstacle. Despite these challenges a number have responded in a committed and humanitarian fashion to the people in their greatest hour of need.

## Psycho-Social Care

In the aftermath of the cyclone, there was lack of trained local personnel to provide psycho-social support to both the volunteers and survivors. Various projects were undertaken to train para-counsellors in trauma work. The short timeframe however, meant that the para-counsellors could not be trained well to carry out their work properly.

From the survivors we heard stories of: parents having lost all their children or having to make heart rending choices of which child to save when they could not save all; children who had become orphans and are now living in new homes and towns; people who had been partially submerged in water, not knowing whether they would live or die; both young and old witnessing death and corpses. All of the above experiences can create trauma in the survivors.

In the weeks after the cyclone, we know of children and adults who are still traumatised by the sound of rain and wind. There are people who are wandering aimlessly and not wanting to start afresh, and children not wanting to talk or play. There are also men and women who have lost their spouses, children who cry themselves to sleep each night and the elderly who have no one to care for them.

In the one month that the para-counsellors had worked with some of the survivors, we see some signs of recovery in both the children and adults.

Para-counsellors in their work with villagers, share about people being helped to cope with their grief and finding a new purpose. The facilitators who have gone through the training have indicated the healing they have personally experienced and the self-care that they are now more aware of.

Our organisation has undertaken a project to focus on three areas:

- Building the capacity of a core staff in psycho-social work at Yangon
- Training of smaller response teams

- Building up Community Based Organisations (CBO) so that with mentoring and training from the above two sectors, vulnerable communities can be supported.

The goals of the project are two-fold in nature:

- To support the holistic rehabilitation of survivors who have undergone trauma, in natural or man-made disasters; and
- To provide psycho-social support to staff and volunteers in this area of work.

Our strategy is to develop and implement high quality psycho-social response programmes. This will include:

- Ensuring all interventions are needs based, informed by analysis and guided by good practice tools and guidelines such as the ethical standards governing counsellors
- Ensuring that all relief interventions are appropriately linked to development processes and priorities
- Collaborating with relevant organisations.

There are ongoing initiatives in the relief and rehabilitation phases of the response being carried out in the delta region by a number of INGO and national NGOs. Tapping these groups, as well as others to be identified later, as resources for this project will help build the foundation for sustaining the project's initiatives.

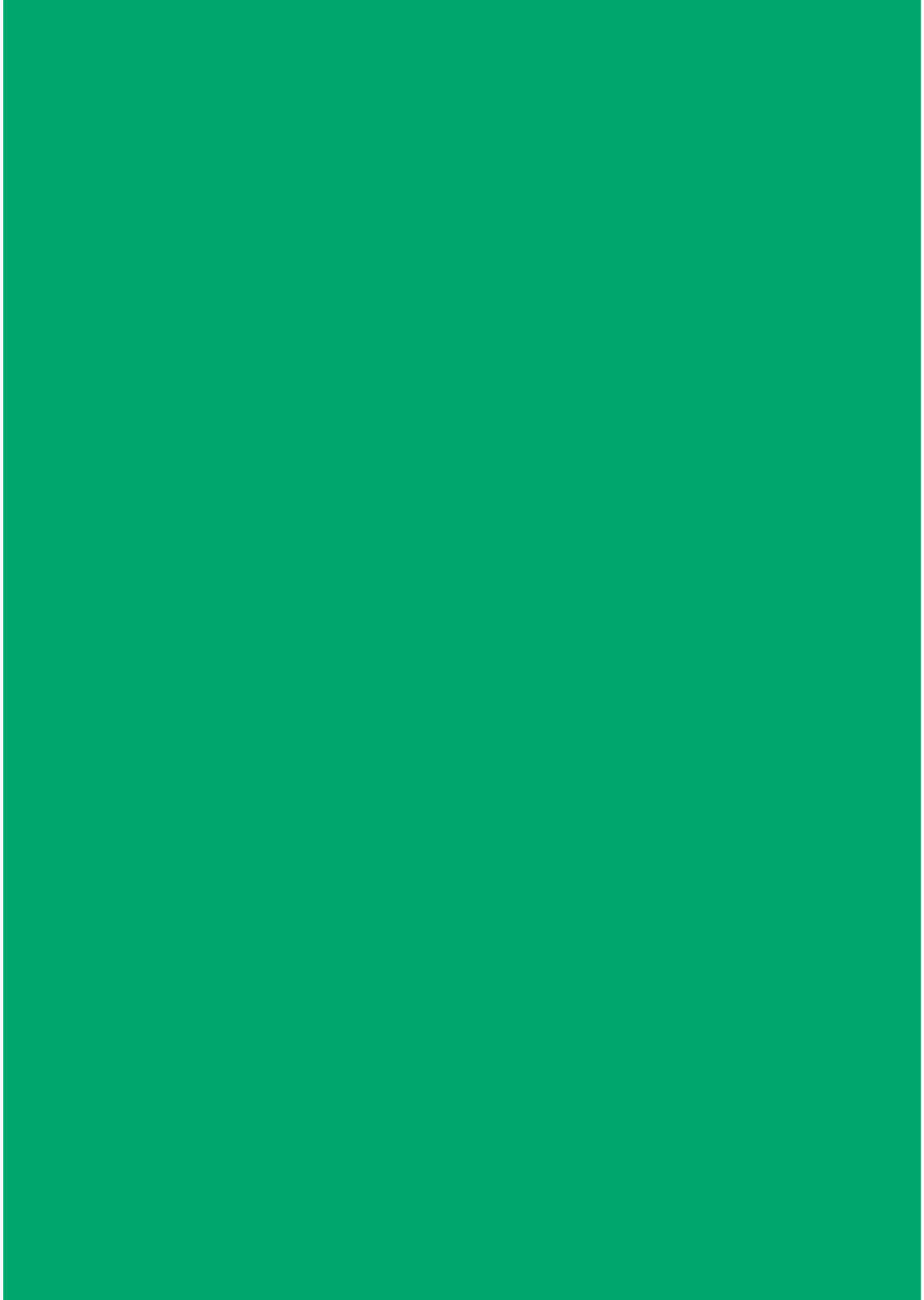
Capacity building at the community level, which will be built on participatory processes, relationship building and principles of good stewardship of the environment, will also help ensure sustained development effort by the communities themselves.



# Part C

## External Perspectives





## **Addressing the Impact of Isolationist Policy**

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Political life in Myanmar is controlled by a cohort of poorly educated generals with an extremely narrow world view because they are banned from travel to most parts of the world. This creates a paranoid attitude, an 'us' and 'them' perspective. Inside the country 'them' are the ethnic groups and 'us' are the only thing between 'them' and chaos. Nargis extended 'them' to outside NGOs/governments/agencies.

Societies operate on two distinct levels, the political and the personal, but in Myanmar there is little positive crossover between the two. Officialdom is (rightly) seen as oppressive, authoritarian and without understanding of the lives of ordinary people. The people have developed a way of appearing to submit to the indignities and inequalities of daily life, but have a superb ability to also live on another level. The internet is a good example of this. Sites such as Yahoo are banned, but all the internet cafes will bring up banned sites on request at no extra charge. Another example is those civil society groups that have suffered persecution which appear to disband, but reform with a different name and method of working and continue to do their work. I am in awe of this kind of personal heroism.

The 'double life' phenomenon carries over into civil society, where community groups pay lip service to restrictions but get on with the work they consider essential. As an Anglican priest once said to me when I apologised after I had placed him unintentionally in a difficult situation with the police, necessitating a lie on his part, 'It's certainly not a sin to lie to the police in this country'.

There is an element of risk in this approach, but it appears that citizens of Myanmar weigh up the risks against the potential outcomes and generally make wise decisions. There are drastic and severe possibilities when wrong decisions are made (e.g. the recent Zaganar case) but most civil society groups continually push the boundaries.

I left Myanmar three months after Nargis, so am not in a position to comment on long term changes following the cyclone. My guess is that small acts of heroism will continue.

In the immediate aftermath, many small groups of friends got together as volunteers and went back and forth from Yangon to the Delta providing small amounts of relief because they felt the government was not doing enough. (Some told me that they never expect the government to act appropriately, whatever the circumstances.) When I made informal suggestions about fundraising methods we use routinely here, such as progressive dinners, raffles etc. I was told that any of these would lead to arrest and probably a long gaol sentence. Whether or not this is so, it is certainly the perception, and must affect civil society groups.

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*Given the context of the government's attitude to international groups, without the superhuman efforts of local NGOs, church groups and monasteries, there would have been much more suffering and death. It was these groups who found temporary shelter, provided food, clothing and medicines for survivors.*

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Nargis was far and away the most severe crisis ever faced by civil society groups in Myanmar and my observation is that they responded splendidly to the challenge it represented. Given the context of the government's attitude to international groups, without the superhuman efforts of local NGOs, church groups and monasteries, there would have been much more suffering and death. It was these groups who found temporary shelter, provided food, clothing and medicines for survivors. I am still amazed that there was no major disease outbreak.

There were no communication channels operating between Yangon and the Delta, so many groups had to make on the spot decisions without reference to superiors. This is unusual in such an authoritarian society and will contribute to the long term confidence and capacity of groups. In addition, the cooperation between Buddhist and Christian groups will hopefully continue into the future, to the benefit of both communities.

### Requirements For Further Strengthening Civil Society Groups:

- Funds need to be raised both internally (through business) and externally. The former is difficult because of the risks detailed above. What is considered philanthropy in the West is in danger of being considered working for 'them' and against 'us' by the power structure in Myanmar. Organisations have continually shown that it is possible to work within the constraints using external funds, but I am not aware of any attempts to raise funds internally. Until this is done, however, civil society cannot be wholly owned by the people.
- Partnership with international NGOs to build confidence and knowledge. There have been many examples of this type of constructive partnerships which have built capacity and expertise.
- **Sensitive** publicity so that the outside world is aware that good things are happening in Myanmar, a country with mostly negative connotations in the West. This will hopefully lead to increased funding/partnership.
- Education in the form of scholarships, work experience, exchange visits etc. The people involved in civil society groups are also handicapped by a narrow world view and while it is amazing that so much is achieved, much more could be done.
- Advocacy with foreign governments who are hell bent on isolating Myanmar. This is stupid, for two reasons:
  1. it is impossible that sanctions can achieve isolation while China can provide all that the government requires, and only the government matters!; and
  2. Isolation is just what the government of Myanmar wants and what keeps the people down. There has been no real contact with the outside world since the end of the colonial period, three generations ago.

- More development aid is needed, though there is a delivery problem. No outside government will give bilateral government to government aid, so it must be done on a partnership basis between civil society groups and international NGOs. This again raises questions of capacity for adequate documentation, financial accountability etc.

**An Analysis of its Impact at a Local,  
Regional and Macro Level**

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*The following is a response to a questionnaire provided by an external analyst with a great deal of experience working in Myanmar.*

Unfortunately, I'm not in a position to make of a substantiated comment about the political landscape within the country as I haven't been back in over a year, but from the analysis I've been reading I hear a few main threads:

1. That the slow and poor response of the government may have increased divisions within the military that surfaced during the protests last September;
2. That this further increased the anger and discontentment within the country, but possibly also the despair; and
3. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of local civil society actors, with organisations becoming involved in the relief effort or emerging in response.

With regard to civil society's role, I think there is potentially more room for civil society, along with a reaffirmation for the view held by the Myanmar people that they have to 'do it themselves' and meet their own needs as the government will not.

In my view, Cyclone Nargis has been instrumental in making Western governments finally realise their lack of traction and inability to influence the government of Myanmar. This has led to new conversations at the European Commission, in the US (coupled with recent advocacy reports which detail the extent of Chinese investment in the country) and behind the scenes in the UK. This may ultimately lead to a change in policy which thaws the isolationist position currently taken, but the present political climate in the West suggests a public change in position is now unlikely.

Nargis also presented a turning point for ASEAN, and it will be interesting to see the extent to which humanitarian action may provide a point for further integration and regional action. The ASEAN secretariat showed leadership and innovation in their response, seeing the event as a

strategic opportunity to further consolidate its role in the region. I see the ongoing presence of an ASEAN body in the country (as part of the Tripartite Core Group) as a positive thing. The increased number of international actors in the country involved in the humanitarian response can only be a good thing, increasing information exchange, and understanding of the bureaucratic and other obstacles to equitable socio-economic development in the country.

The situation also highlighted the importance of China in the dynamics of influence. A particularly striking comparison is the response of the Chinese Government to the earthquake that followed Nargis, in which the Chinese Government displayed unprecedented openness and responsiveness. Equally, that China was not *more* active, but that other regional and international bodies were able to influence the situation is hopeful, in that it suggests whilst China may be a game-changer, there are a range of possible strategies, of which the co-operative, collaborative and genuinely engaging can hold the greatest sway.

In these state-level dynamics room was created for non-state actors to respond to the situation, for example easing visa restrictions for certain organisations (medical teams from surrounding countries, some non-UN humanitarian groups initially and later UN people). But other non-state actors were well placed to respond without state-level support. Companies and international humanitarian/development organisations that were already operating in the country provide two examples. PTTEP, the Thai petroleum company, arranged one of the first relief-supply flights to enter the country, and other foreign companies were able to provide humanitarian assistance immediately without needing to negotiate the same diplomatic mine-field as other organisations. Equally, international NGOs who had a record of work in the country were able to draw on their experience and established relationships to provide an initial response. For both companies and NGOs, their contacts with and knowledge of local people and local organisations, as well as with members of the government, facilitated their response.



The international private sector more broadly also played a role in funding the response. By the end of May, 2008, almost US\$9.5 million, or about 5% of the UN Cyclone Nargis Flash Appeal had been met by private sector companies or foundations. Whilst these funds were officially directed through the UN and organisations involved in the flash appeal, some of it was in-kind and distributed through the USDA, National Solidarity Union, or other 'Government-NGOs'.

The international focus on Myanmar and the Cyclone needs to be maintained so that the money continues to flow in, supporting the organisations that have arisen, and to meet the humanitarian need.





## **Cyclone Nargis and the Saffron Revolution: Potential Links**

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I arrived in Yangon one week after the cyclone.

Within hours of the cyclone, our religious organisation was part of a joint response alongside two other INGOs that immediately mobilised hundred local staff. The local staff had been trained in trauma healing, child protection and emergency relief work. People were out of their offices straight away as they had the capacity to respond to this type of disaster. Many young people were organised to go to the Delta.

We had longstanding connections in the Delta so we knew we had access to buildings and already had the infrastructure to provide relief. Immediately vehicles, funding, and rice from rice stores were sent to the area.

It was sometimes amusing how the international community responded. They sent packets of dried noodles. People don't know how to eat these. There were many stories of people sitting by the roadside holding these because they didn't have the wherewithal to use them or didn't know how to cook them.

The other major response was our work in rallying local staff to bury bodies. This was an operation run from Yangon that organised local people to deal with the masses of bodies lying rotting and decaying and polluting the areas. To have bodies decomposing like this is offensive to Buddhists and Christians. Most of those that took part were from young people of different religious faiths.

The response to Nargis crossed all ethnic lines. Many of the people mobilised from Yangon to assist had been taking part in our health and English education programmes. These participants are from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. They went with our organisation to the Delta to assist on three or four occasions.

The good thing about Cyclone Nargis was that it made our staff enter the lives of the local people. It made them get out of the buildings and offices and get into the ordinary lives of the people. From a religious point of view, this is what we are on about. Religion shouldn't be carried out in an elitist way.

Many of our staff are from the same ethnic group as those affected by the cyclone. They were of great assistance because they speak the local language. They went to Buddhist and Christian communities and people would not ask what religion they were when receiving

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assistance. The response was across all religious lines.

This was one of the first times that something has happened which has caused a breaking down of barriers between religions. When I worked there, our religious organisation would very much work in its own area and assert its position as being different from other denominations and religions. The Nargis response went beyond all that. My hope is that it will be sustained into the future through ongoing care and rebuilding.

There were many people who wanted to go and find orphans and bring them back to Yangon to an orphanage. This was a good temporary solution but I question the benefit of taking children away from the place that they came from and the people with whom they experienced this tragedy. I don't think it's a good thing to bring orphans who are traumatised away from their school mates. To pluck people out of their communities and relocate them might not be the best idea. There needs to be a balance between a human and a do-good charity response.

The good thing about Cyclone Nargis was that it made our staff enter the lives of the local people. It made them get out of the buildings and offices and get into the ordinary lives of the people. From a religious point of view, this is what we are on about. Religion shouldn't be carried out in an elitist way.

I think the cyclone response had significant links with the Saffron Revolution last September. When I lived there, I felt the whisperings

about the desire for change but the inertia, the complete lack of energy and the lack of organising know-how really stopped people. I felt that blood had to be spilt and there will have to be martyrs before something happens.

When I saw the maroon stream from Shwedagon I was filled with incredible hope. People were on the edge. This was an incredible symbol, particularly when people formed a human chain and linked up hand-in-hand. This was a transferring of strength from one person to another and showed great courage. Nargis was eight months later and that courage, linking, and strong determination mobilised people in a practical kind of sense.

This carried through to the cyclone response. People were driving down to the Delta with supplies but were turned back so then went at night so they could get through the blockades. I really believe the two are linked – the Saffron revolution and the Cyclone Nargis response.

Just recently, the handing down of long prison sentences and the way people were arrested, I think is associated with Nargis and the Saffron Revolution. It is evidence that people have been working and mobilising and risking their lives. People who had been on the run have now been arrested.

### **Advice For External Organisations**

It is difficult to access data and facts on Myanmar. External organisations can help out by keeping the issues alive. They need to talk, analyse and discuss what has been written and publicised. They can be advocating and lobbying the United Nations, Security Council, and anyone who has an initiative on Myanmar and can be on board.

I've been talking to lawyers in Cambodia working on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal about how they see their role in a tribunal for Myanmar and legally, what can be done in the Myanmar context. Why do we have to wait until the Junta is removed? How long do we have to wait? Why can't we analyse present abuses?

The biggest social sin is to keep Myanmar isolated. The cyclone was good as it brought Myanmar to the front pages of newspapers all over the world. The Saffron Revolution also brought it home to people.

The international community couldn't believe their ears that ships of relief supplies could sit off the coast of Myanmar for a week and then be turned back. Knowing the history of Myanmar and the Government, I could understand this response.

In Yangon after the cyclone, the streets were really empty for ten days.

I think the Nargis response confirmed that people had been trained. We have been doing training and capacity-building since early 2000. People knew what to do. I think people also got a lot of strength by those in the international community saying we can't go down there so you will have to and you can do it. People felt they could do it and had been trained to do it. Gradually capacity is being built. People are confident to say we can go and provide and respond.

Our organisation does focus a great deal on humanitarian issues. This is not ordinarily found in a religious organisation. We focus on capacity building in agriculture, water and sanitation. We also do a lot of work putting people in contact with INGOS. This occurred before and after Nargis.

Environmental issues are also becoming important. People are questioning the effects of deforestation and the building of dams in the Delta and the links with the impact of the cyclone. There are concerns about mining. These are important but are competing with many other issues.

### **Financial issues**

There was lots of money provided for relief work. The difficulty is, however, that there is a limit to how much emergency funding you can use. For how long is the 'emergency response'? Finding and targeting a specific group of people is also really hard. Funding is slowing down now but the next phase is sustaining the emergency relief.



I think there is a need for specific project proposals which are time-bound and deal with a specific group of people. The level of organisation needed now is expert. There is also a need to build communities again. Many of the ideas being used in Cambodia could be transported to Myanmar but people need to do it themselves. We need to capacitate people to refine their response.





## **Funding Decisions and Cyclone Nargis**

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The following is a selection of responses provided by an international NGO whom funds a number of organisations within Myanmar.

**1. What do you see as the impact of Cyclone Nargis in terms of the political landscape and the role of civil society in Myanmar? What has changed and how?**

Nargis was a challenge for the junta. Firstly, it struck Myanmar right before the referendum and secondly, it displayed to the eyes of the international community not only the obvious lack of emergency services but more outrageously, the hindrances of a government to support access to opportunities to survive, to their own affected populations.

After the initial denial of international aid and even the crack down on some local relief initiatives, unexpected reorientation has been perceived in the authorities' strategy. This relative opening of the junta was unpredictable a few weeks before. The margins of freedom – as always relative in the Burmese context – to access the Delta by NGO and INGO staff, has to be pointed out as an innovative approach stigmatised by the creation of the LOA (Letter of Agreement allowing NGOs to implement their projects in the affected areas) and Nargis short term visas, for example. Of course this positive change is not going along with any radical political transformation and it is dubious that the regime will keep this window open in the longer term, but, the crucial role played in saving lives and alleviating suffering by civil society made a real difference.

This is not something that should be neither underestimated nor forgotten. Nargis has somewhat to be remembered as a lesson given on the strength of the Burmese people when it comes to solidarity.

**2. What were the conscious funding decisions made in the Nargis context? How did you decide what funds went to which partners and how much was too much?**

We took a position to allocate priority in funding partners who had strong experience in development work and with whom we enjoyed long term trust relations. They have been carefully assessed as having the capacity to manage the challenge of being part of the emergency response. They had to combine a realistic action plan, efficient logistic deployment and financial monitoring skills.

We also decided to fund some smaller and innovative proposals directly emanating from civil society through the channel of community based organisations in the Delta.

If the most established and well organised partners could quickly reply to the demanding standards of international donors, it was more challenging for smaller ones to get access to funds. Here, our commitment to support partners through capacity building played a central role. Four of our staff were deployed in the country to support partners in that critical phase.

So as to insure transfer of capacity, we financed trainings and supported resource centres where NGOs and CBOs could find support in all the steps of their program cycle management.

Judgment calls and discussions within our organisation, as well as with the partners based on appraisals of financial risk management, systematically took a central place in the decision making process. The amount granted was conditioned by the size and capacity of the local partners to deal with it in a satisfactory manner, taking into account the very restrictive fostering environment.

**3. Any further reflections you would like to contribute from a donor perspective?**

Nargis made a huge change in the interaction of the local groups/NGOs and donors. It is quite new and difficult for most of them to comply with international standards. CBOs are not familiar with the concepts of transparency and accountability that are the key words of any international donor.

Hopefully this disaster will appear in the longer term as an opportunity for local groups/NGOs to attract the attention of the donors and to educate them to the specific 'Burmese limiting factors'. For example, access to the field cannot be granted to all donors due to the periodic restrictions on travel authorisations issued by the Government to foreigners. This is quite a rare case of a humanitarian crisis where donors have to pay – often rather huge amounts when it comes to emergency and recovery - but cannot visit projects not for security but for political reasons.







## **Communication Obstacles and Thai/Burma Solidarity Organising**

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We run a school for Burmese students based in Thailand. They study for 10 months to become more skilled and experienced 'earth rights' - human rights and environmental - activists and advocates for their communities, and most come to us from inside Burma or from the refugee camps on the border. As part of their coursework they return to their homes for 6-8 weeks from April-June where they conduct fieldwork research on a topic of their choosing. They then return to the school for another 6 weeks or so and make presentations and write reports on their findings, before graduating in July. Of course, the timing means that many were in Burma during Nargis this year. (One student was in Rangoon so was well aware of the Cyclone, which damaged her "Auntie's" house. Others were near affected areas but not in the thick of it. A few have actually joined projects to help Nargis victims - I know one left Chiang Mai to do that a couple of weeks ago). One student, a Kachin man, returned in early June from a rural region of northern Shan State. He hadn't known anything at all about the Cyclone until he reached Thailand. Other students knew of it, but had no idea of the details or impact until they returned to the school. We had been given a DVD of footage from the delta in the meantime and showed them that after they got back. So for the most part they were able to get far more detailed and accurate information about the cyclone in Thailand than they were inside.

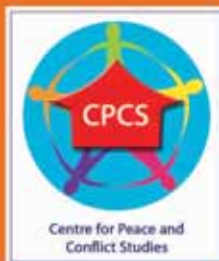
Another interesting thing that happened because of the cyclone has been increased Thai involvement in Burma issues. Most Thai people are either unaware of and/or unconcerned about Burma issues. Some Thais still don't like "Burma" because it invaded Thailand and overthrew it centuries ago; there is still a historical resentment. But most are simply in the dark about the true situation there. But after Nargis, quite a number of Thais in Chiang Mai spent a lot of time organising fundraising events for Nargis victims and finding ways of getting those funds into reliable hands in Burma. One of the leaders of this was a Thai alumna of our school in the Mekong. She had known little about Burma until she attended our school with several students from inside, and met the students at the Burma school. So that has been very positive.



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