

Believing in Community Capacity

**A reflection on the response to Cyclone Nargis
May 2008 - May 2009**

In the wake of a disaster, quantifying the damage and destruction is a part of the process of recovery and emergency response. The death toll is noted, the damage in dollars recorded and the homes and lives affected broken down into numbers. However, to focus only on quantifying what has been destroyed and rebuilt ignores the complex landscape that natural disasters and emergencies create for humanitarian organisations, governments, communities and individuals.

The one-year anniversary offers a useful moment to look back, to commemorate the loss, to note the progress that has been made towards recovery, to humbly reflect upon the lessons humanitarian actors can learn from the relief efforts and to remind ourselves of the dignity, strength and resilience that the survivors of Cyclone Nargis have shown.

This report seeks not only to cover what was lost and what has been materially restored in the most destructive cyclone to have struck Asia in over a decade. It concentrates on the experience and repercussions of Cyclone Nargis and its aftermath: for the people of the Ayeyarwady delta and for agencies such as ActionAid who are attempting to work in solidarity with the people as they rebuild their lives, communities and livelihoods.

The report focuses on some of the opportunities as well as some of the challenges that have played out in the year following Nargis, particularly with regards to the emergency relief efforts of both informal and formal humanitarian actors. It highlights some of the concerns regarding the impact of emergency relief on communities and offers some suggestions from the lessons learnt by the limited experience of ActionAid and its partners, particularly in relation to the crucial importance of putting people at the centre, and working with and investing in community capacity. This report is based on the analysis of ActionAid and draws on the observations and reflections of partners and the trained fellows and community youth volunteers who are currently living and working in 130 villages in the delta.

ActionAid is an international development agency whose aim is to end poverty worldwide. Formed in 1972, for over 36 years we have been growing and expanding to where we are today - helping over 25 million of the world's poorest and most disadvantaged people in 43 countries.



The community response to Cyclone Nargis

Cyclone Nargis hit the south of Myanmar on May 2, 2008 and over a period of twelve hours left a path of destruction affecting some 2.4 million people who live in the rice-growing and fishing region of the country: the Ayeyarwady and Yangon divisions. As cyclone Nargis ripped apart the social and economic fabric of the delta region it created a tragedy of epic proportions with widespread loss, grief and suffering as overnight whole families and village communities were devastated.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, access to the area was severely hampered and communities drew on each other for support and solidarity. Tens of thousands gathered in monasteries and churches for safety. Those less affected assisted others. Rice millers used the rice that had been soiled by the cyclone to help feed their neighbours. Outside of the delta, local people braved damaged roads and bridges to bring relief supplies to the affected region. Their commitment to provide for the affected communities was not systematic, but it was a spontaneous display of the solidarity felt across the country, as members of religious institutions and the business community, students and ordinary people gathered what they could and travelled large distances to provide for the survivors.

Despite initial difficulties to respond to the cyclone, one month on, Cyclone Nargis had sparked a relief effort the magnitude of which the country had never seen before. It created partnerships and collaboration between actors that had previously not worked with each other. In the aftermath, opportunities and space for development also opened up.

Opportunities for understanding

Previously, amongst many NGOs, aid workers and international donors, the understanding of Myanmar was limited. The relief effort since Nargis has offered the chance for a larger number of NGOs to engage with the people of Myanmar and to overcome some of the misunderstandings about the country and how international aid can function here. Equally it is hoped that at a local level it has helped actors within Myanmar to better understand NGOs and other non-state actors' humanitarian and development aims.

Prior to Nargis few NGOs or organised groups were working in the delta. One of the indirect results of this was that communities displayed a high level of self-sufficiency and for the most part did not expect support from external actors. This led to widespread local initiatives and an openness and

honesty in people's response to relief. Communities came together to support each other amidst the confusion and the chaos.

In the wake of cyclone Nargis there was a sense of solidarity that made people want to work for and with each other. "Even if it meant working with people with opposing views or ideological differences – what was important was reaching the victims. At a local level I think there is now more understanding between local people and their neighbours thanks to Nargis," explained Zaw Zaw Han, a founder of Ever Green Group (EGG) a social entrepreneur organisation that worked on relief efforts post-Nargis.

People did not wait for external assistance but mobilised themselves to do what they could, still mindful of others who were worse off.

Dignity in Communities:

In Pyapon communities expressed anxiety at being paid through cash-for-work schemes. These involved paying local people a daily rate to re-build village infrastructure. The communities felt they should not be paid to work on rebuilding parts of their own village which they considered a community responsibility.

Through discussions with Fellows, villagers decided a variety of other options including pooling cash-for-work money into a community fund to be used to rebuild other damaged infrastructure in their village.

In the first two weeks of the response an ActionAid survey team visited five villages in Ngapudaw who refused aid. They said they had already received assurance from another NGO of assistance and felt that other neighbouring villages who had not yet been visited by an NGO were more in need of support.

Opportunity for strengthening local capacity

ActionAid believes that the people of the delta's greatest resource for recovery is within themselves. Emergency response should enhance, not undermine this. The chance to provide further training, tools and capacity to the people of

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more formal attempts to integrate them into NGO and relief organisations. Across the entire NGO sector many people have received training and have gained a greater awareness of development and humanitarian work.

Opportunity for expanding cooperation

The emergency response efforts expanded cooperation between authorities, the business sector, individual volunteers, regional structures such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), UN agencies and NGOs. Taken together it vividly illustrates, that despite difficulties, humanitarian and development activities can and do function in the country effectively.

Opportunity for Social Change

Within Myanmar the relief effort has expanded the number of people, particularly young people, working both formally and voluntarily within the humanitarian sector. Participatory engagement with affected communities occurs at a time of crisis where there is the potential to create decision-making structures which incorporate more people from the community who are affected by such decisions. On an individual level village leaders have been overwhelmingly positive about the participatory approaches used within their villages.

The changed context has also impacted on women's participation. In many of the delta communities women were often not part of the process of decision-making before

Myanmar, has been opened up through the Nargis response in terms of access to the region as well as funding from donors. The commitment of young people to work for development in their own community is revealed both through the informal groups that spontaneously formed to bring aid to the delta following the cyclone and in

Nargis, where typically older male village leaders made the final decisions on behalf of the village. Although it is incorrect to say that this pattern has been changed as a result of Cyclone Nargis, the space has emerged for change in traditional gender roles.

As a result of Cyclone Nargis, space has emerged for change in traditional gender roles.

Village volunteers working with ActionAid and partners in Bogalay township specifically cited a change in women's role in decision-making since Nargis. "Before women were not interested in the same way, they focused on the nuclear family. But since Nargis women have wanted to participate in the meetings and become more involved in making the big decisions because they realise how important they are," explained a 21-year-old female village youth volunteer from a Bogale village. "For us volunteers, we were trained on how community participation methods can be inclusive and for example, give women and young people the confidence to speak. I have found people give me more respect and listen to me more."

Recognising both the incentive women have felt in participating in the future of their communities since Nargis and offering tools to ensure decision making processes are sensitive to the local power dynamics and more inclusive has been an opportunity in ActionAid and its partners' work.

Previously small scale fisher folk in the fishing villages in the delta region had not been organised to cooperate. Myanmar Fisheries Federation had worked as a representative body for large scale fisheries, but small-scale fisher folk had little representation in the organisation. Myanmar Fisheries Federation has become involved in the recovery efforts since Nargis, supporting small scale fisher folk with their recovery. As a result of this interaction the Federation have greater recognition of the role of the small-scale fisher folk in the fisheries sector and have decided to encourage their membership in the Federation.

(Footnotes)

¹ ActionAid's fellowship programme focuses on training young people, typically university graduates, to facilitate participatory processes to stimulate community development in the village where s/he lives and works for 12 months. Thirty fellows were from the delta area and others came from different states. Within a week of cyclone Nargis they were living alongside the affected communities facilitating community-led emergency response.

The challenges for emergency relief in ensuring the dignity of aid recipients

Recognising the drive, independence and extensive knowledge in communities in Myanmar, NGOs and other actors have an imperative to ensure that their interventions do not damage or destroy the capacity and dignity inherent in communities. Despite good intentions, aid can do harm to communities in various ways.

1. Dependency

A year on from Cyclone Nargis signs of aid dependency are beginning to be seen in the Ayeyarwady delta. In a country whose people have shown such strength and resilience this should be a wake-up call to NGOs, humanitarian actors and everyone working on the early recovery efforts.

Emergency response is not about charity. It is about justice. “Beneficiaries” have a right to assistance and should be active agents and not passive recipients.

The manner of distribution of material assistance is at the heart of many of the challenges inherent in emergency relief. The imperative to provide basic resources to a population who has lost almost everything is central to the humanitarian imperative to “save people’s lives”. Emergency relief is characterised by a heightened sense of urgency, a largeness of scale, the overwhelming of local capacity, and short-term thinking that can be disconnected from long-term development goals. Although aid distribution is an essential live-saving aspect to emergency relief, for many affected people in the delta there was a desire right from

The Experience of Bangladesh: The Creation of Aid Dependency

Shihab Uddin Ahamad - twenty years experience working in humanitarian aid in Bangladesh

Despite Bangladesh’s success in disaster management and its effective mechanisms for disaster preparedness and response, there is another aspect to disasters in Bangladesh – the creation of aid dependency. As a consequence of the thoughtless and/or irresponsible behaviour of some actors, poor communities passively now wait for and expect external support and sustenance from aid donors and NGOs. Dependency has become a part of the culture. However, historically Bangladesh had a very rich tradition and practice of volunteerism and community driven development activities such as the development of the village water supply system or education institutions. The independence movement in 1971 was predominately a volunteer force.

Humanitarian aid in response to disasters started soon after Bangladesh’s independence in 1972. There followed recurring floods, droughts and cyclones. The mindset of aid at that time was rooted in the humanitarian imperative: responding to people in need and preventing people from dying. The understanding of people’s right to assistance and to receive aid was not a part of the concept of emergency relief. Delivering aid as charity, with the “beneficiaries” regarded and treated as passive recipients of aid means that simultaneously the affected people were not valued as active players in the decision-making regarding the utilisation of the aid that is given to humanitarian agencies in their name.

The spirit of volunteerism, self-reliance and acting for and on behalf of one’s own community without thought of payment has been severely undermined. Villages will not clean out their water ponds or build wells unless an NGO pays them to do so. Communities will charge NGOs for their attendance at community meetings. Once a culture or mindset of dependency has been created it is difficult to change.

This experience should make us cautious in our approach to Myanmar.

Group discussion as part of Disaster Risk Reduction Training

PHOTO: ActionAid Myanmar



the beginning to receive livelihood support at the same time as food and shelter assistance so they could quickly regain their ability to provide for themselves and to safeguard their self-reliance. Emergency relief funding often fails to reflect this priority and organisations reliant on donor funding make the distribution of basic supplies central to their emergency response.

On an individual family level, distribution of basic supplies can breed dependency which undermines previously existing coping mechanisms, independence and dignity. This is compounded in an environment where many people have suffered emotional or psychological distress. Many people in the delta region lost their entire family and livelihood in Cyclone Nargis. Ensuring that people get back to normalcy and resume their livelihoods is a challenge.

2. Impact on social cohesion

If delivered without an awareness of the local context, aid distribution can create tension, conflict and long-term problems within a community. One example of the way community spirit has been undermined by aid agencies' interventions is in cases where agencies, due to limited resources, have insufficient aid to assist everyone in the community. If the agency does not have a transparent and effective mechanism to facilitate a participatory determination of which villagers are most vulnerable and most in need of the assistance, resentment and conflict can arise in the community amongst those who miss out.

There are some examples where lack of proper consultation and inadequate accountability mechanisms leads the person

in power being able to negatively influence the distribution of aid, also creating tensions within communities.

3. Coordination and duplication

Committees or Community Based Organisations (CBOs) have often been established quickly in villages for aid distribution without an adequate understanding of the pre-existing systems of decision-making. Multiple committees or village structures can lead to tensions both among the new structures as well as between previous leadership structures and the newer ones. This is particularly true, if, as in the wake of an emergency, the CBOs also have substantial control over the aid resources coming into the village.

Without adequate training and support the sudden influx of aid can result in the CBOs deviating from their original purpose.

4. Inappropriate aid

While most of the aid was suitable there are some examples of culturally inappropriate aid, resulting from inadequate consultations with the communities and assumptions about the kind of assistance considered to be necessary.

"They have been given [high-nutrition food] that is sent from America. Nobody knows how to cook it. They've tried so many different methods – boiling, frying, turning it into doughnuts – but we are rice eaters. The instructions for this food are on the box in English....After a while it starts rotting in the humidity". (Fellow, Labutta)

Effective Emergency Response - Do no harm

In Myanmar, what we have seen is that if young people are given the opportunity to learn and to do something good for their community they will grasp it with two hands.

Given that many of the challenges listed above are not new but have emerged in previous emergencies, the need for humanitarian intervention that is responsible, respectful of local capacity and which places affected people at the centre - supporting them in their efforts to recover - is vital.

Community Participation

A key principle is that people must have the opportunity to be actively involved in shaping their own destiny. However, following the cyclone, emotional distress, the breakdown of coping mechanisms and the chaotic nature of the changing situation made community participation particularly challenging. Vital for understanding the local context and to reducing the risk of externally imposed, inappropriate interventions, are local staff and fellows/village volunteers who are living and working in the communities. For ActionAid and its partners' community-led emergency response, the trained volunteers and fellows from the local communities have been the most essential resource in overcoming the challenge of effective community participation in the midst of the urgency and scale of the disaster. ActionAid's experience demonstrates that offering financial support and building appropriate capacity, while giving communities clear rules and information, allows them to decide their own priorities and address their own needs.

It is also evident that investing in youth to build their capacity to facilitate development in communities is not only an effective development approach in "ordinary" times but can also be transferred and utilised in the emergency response, particularly in a context where access for international staff or external actors is difficult. In Myanmar what we have seen is that if young people are given the opportunity to learn and to do something good for their community they will grasp it with two hands.

Bringing women's rights into the emergency response

Women's and men's experience of the cyclone and the recovery efforts are likely to be different. In the wake of cyclone Nargis, village disaster committees were formed in the project areas to determine how distribution and recovery would happen. ActionAid's Memorandum of Understanding with partners ensured that at least fifty percent of committee members were women so that women have the opportunity and encouragement to take up leadership positions and represent women's issues and concerns.

Livelihood recovery, cash for work and distribution activities specifically organised and listened to women's focus groups to ensure that their needs were covered. This ensured that women's livelihoods (for example livestock as opposed to fishing) were supported alongside male livelihoods. Similarly, it raised awareness of the need to support the recovery not only of male fishermen, but also female fish processors and traders. Listening to women's focus groups also ensured that partners' household distribution kits included appropriate sanitary wear and kitchen equipment requested by women.

Targeting the most vulnerable through participatory methods when assistance is limited

Participatory and transparent methods by which the community can identify its most vulnerable members who are in greatest need of assistance can reduce the likelihood of resentment and conflict. Communities are not homogenous. While the disaster affects everyone, not everyone is equally impacted. This is due to the differences in their vulnerabilities as a result of their socio-economic condition which affects their ability to cope with a disaster. It is critical that the community recognise that the most vulnerable people - such as women headed households,

people living with disabilities, older people, and children who had lost their families in the disaster – lack the reserves and support networks that they can draw on to assist them to recover, and hence have a greater need.

Accountability and transparency

In the urgency of the emergency response humanitarian agencies may feel they do not have time to consult communities, and that people everywhere have the same basic needs. If aid is seen as charity and not justice then an attitude of “experts knowing better” can prevail and over-ride local knowledge and priorities. If the community is regarded as passive recipients and not active participants in the response then the establishment of a mechanism by which communities can hold agencies accountable for the aid they are receiving is often not prioritised.

Methods to enhance transparency and accountability which have been successfully piloted in Myanmar include:

1. Providing information about the programme.
2. People being given the freedom to take the lead in deciding, through participatory processes, how the village budget allocation for the response can be spent from deciding what will be purchased through to the distribution of the materials.
3. When agencies take the lead in the purchase and distribution, transparency is possible through establishing an information board in a strategic place in the village.
4. Development of a complaint mechanism that is easily accessible to the villagers.

Turning aid into assets

Relief can become an asset rather than once-off, short-term support – for a community, family or individual - through selection of strategic activities such as livelihood support, rebuilding of community infrastructure through cash for work or provision of non food items such as a radio and long-lasting household goods.

Making the link: Integrating development and emergency programming

Disasters cost lives, devastate communities and people's livelihoods, and leave a lasting impact not only on physical infrastructure but also on people's psychosocial well-being. Myanmar is vulnerable to cyclones, tropical storms/storm

surges, rainfall-induced flooding, earthquakes, droughts, fires and landslides. While disasters can reverse development gains there is often an artificial disconnect between development practice and emergency response where the latter is viewed in isolation from development programs and from a short-term perspective.

The devastation Nargis inflicted revealed a lack of information, awareness and preparation for disasters. Community based disaster risk reduction is an essential component of development work to prepare communities for future disasters, and for the future integration of emergency work in development programming. During emergency response, disaster preparedness and mitigation activities can be integrated with the provision of aid, such as developing strategies that can reduce the risk of loss or damage to livelihood assets in future disasters. Participatory decision making processes and organising collective activities can lead to the development of social capital. This contributes not only to broader development aims but reinforces community capacity and cohesion for disaster response.

Flexibility in organisational planning

Responding to communities' needs and priorities requires not only working with a community participation approach, but also using that information to inform the programming of the organisation. ActionAid Myanmar's original emergency response plan allocated four percent of the funding for livelihoods and early recovery and a large percentage of the budget for food and shelter assistance. After consultation with the communities it became clear that people prioritised the recovery of their livelihoods to ensure they were not reliant on aid hand-outs. ActionAid altered its budget to set aside 40 percent for livelihoods which began two months after the cyclone.

Ensuring dignity

Villages frequently expressed the concern that the cyclone response has made them feel like beggars – an idea they abhorred. How affected people are viewed – as passive victims or active agents in their own recovery - impacts on how they are treated and involved in the emergency response, the latter perspective valuing their capacity and contribution. The processes by which relief aid is distributed can also demean or respect people's dignity. Providing information to affected people so that they can make informed choices is critical to assisting people to recover some sense of control over their situation and limit feelings of dependency.

Conclusion

The attitude and willingness of local communities to help each other was inspiring and should be taken as a future opportunity to build people's capacity and human capital for disaster management. The premise that communities are best able to drive their own development and have the right to do so, is as applicable in the post-disaster context as it is in "ordinary" times. It is clear that long-term investment in people and community led development are the best basis to prepare communities for future disasters and to strengthen communities' ability to decide their future development.

While progress in the recovery of Nargis affected communities indicates that much has been achieved, there are some emerging concerns which necessitate a critical review

and response by all involved. The humanitarian imperative of responding to people in need must be balanced so that the response simultaneously respects people's dignity, and their existing capacity, organisations and coping mechanisms. Good intentions are not enough. With the opportunity to strengthen community capacity and self-reliance comes a responsibility of humanitarian agencies not to destroy the valuable community coping mechanisms present in the cyclone-affected area. Humanitarian agencies must be mindful of their processes and procedures, the underlying assumptions and the accompanying attitudes and behaviours so that unintended harmful effects, such as dependency, are minimised. The spirit of volunteerism and self-reliance must be capitalised on for the future development of the country.

ActionAid has a unique vision and direction. We don't impose solutions, but work with communities over many years to strengthen their own efforts to overcome poverty. We constantly seek innovative solutions and ask ourselves how we can make the greatest impact with our resources. We make the most of our skills and abilities by working at many levels - local, national, regional and international.

Eradicating poverty is not a distant dream, but one we can realistically achieve. ActionAid believes that poverty continues to exist as a result of choices made over time about how societies should be organised and that by working together, we can choose differently - individually and collectively - if we wish.

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