

# **Myanmar – Surviving the Storm: Self-protection and survival in the Delta**

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Local to Global Protection (L2GP) is an initiative intended to document and promote local perspectives on protection in major humanitarian crises. So far, community oriented studies have been carried out in Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe.



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The analysis and opinions in this report are solely the responsibility of the credited author(s) and cannot be attributed to any of the above mentioned institutions.

L2GP studies from Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe are available at [www.local2global.info](http://www.local2global.info)

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This is the second full-length report of the Local to Global Protection (L2GP) project in Myanmar. The L2GP project explores how people living in areas affected by natural disaster and armed conflict understand 'protection' – what do they value, and how do they go about protecting themselves and their families and communities, and how do they view the actions of other stakeholders (for example the state, and local and international aid agencies). L2GP studies have also been conducted in Zimbabwe and Sudan. The full version of all L2GP studies can be downloaded at [www.local2global.info](http://www.local2global.info).

This study explores the perceptions and realities of people living in parts of the Irrawaddy Delta affected by Cyclone Nargis, which struck Myanmar on the night of 2 May 2008. It is based on field research and interviews with several hundred people, including villagers from affected communities, community workers, and the staff of local and international aid agencies. The majority of research was undertaken in late 2009 over a period of two months, in two Townships, by a team of four expatriates, and 15 local researchers from Myanmar CBOs.

### **Vulnerabilities and Threats**

For many people, the most abiding impression is the overwhelming ferocity of the storm. Particularly in the most vulnerable, coastal areas, entire villages were destroyed, with few if any survivors. The death toll was at least 140,000 people – and possibly as many as 200,000 – most of whom died in a period of less than twelve hours. Survivors were exhausted and traumatised, in many cases having lost their entire extended families. Some were left naked, having had their clothes ripped from their backs by the ferocious winds and rain; many were injured, and all were hungry and thirsty. Several villages, particularly the most vulnerable near the coast, were completely destroyed. Altogether, some 2–3 million people were affected by this natural disaster.

Among the immediate threats faced by vulnerable communities were drowning, and lack of food, water, shelter, health care or means of transportation or communication. In terms of the problems faced by communities, what is also striking is 'what was not said' – for example, very

few cases of rape or other forms of sexual harassment were reported by the people interviewed.

In the weeks and months after the cyclone, threats, risks and concerns included trauma and psychological shock, problems associated with the existence of numerous dead bodies, forced return from displacement and other patterns of non-voluntary migration, restricted humanitarian access (particularly for international agencies), lack of inputs for reconstruction of homes and livelihoods, lack of access to affordable credit or education, delivery of inappropriate aid items and local perceptions of unfair food aid targeting, inconsistent decision-making by local authorities and a general lack of support from the state including lack of protection from thieves. While some of these concerns existed prior to Cyclone Nargis, they were greatly exacerbated by this natural disaster. An overview of the threats/ concerns (risks) faced by affected communities, and some of the different responses (protection strategies or coping mechanisms) they adopted to protect themselves, is included in Annex 3.

### **Responses**

People's responses to the threats and concerns they are exposed to vary. A rigid classification of these does not capture the lived experience of the affected populations. However, an attempt to group the responses does highlight key strategies deployed by the affected population.

Faced with the threat of survival during the first night and weeks after the cyclone, people had few options but to confront and manage the very direct threat of death and disease. Local responses depended on ongoing assessments of the likely success and risks involved in different strategies. Villagers reported that such informal assessments took into account access to physical resources (money and transport for example), relationships (did they know people who could intervene with the authorities or aid agencies, or be sympathetic?); leaders' perceived influence and stature (could the local leader argue his case strongly with authorities or aid providers?); reliance on support from the collective; knowledge of laws or rights, and how to make use of these; knowledge and strengths/weaknesses of alternative options; and previous experiences, responses and rates of risk/success.

Local responses varied from avoiding or ignoring threats, to containing or mitigating, managing or negotiating or more directly confronting concerns. In most cases communities sought to manage the concerns/threats in an indirect, non-confrontational manner. If faced with overwhelming power, or the perceived threat that assistance would be stopped if they voiced their concerns, villagers often stayed quiet or managed the threat/concerns internally and out of sight of the authorities or aid agencies. Alternatively,

they would try to mitigate the threat by withholding or providing false information to the authorities and/or aid providers.

In cases involving direct threats to livelihoods, or access to services such as education (for example), respondents tended to first rely on their own resources. If unsuccessful (if the threat/concern did not ‘go away’), they would often resort to more collective and direct responses, such as appealing to or negotiating with authorities or aid providers.

Communities were relatively successful in managing, negotiating and confronting threats, in cases where they had strong leaders, good existing relationships with authorities or others in positions of power and the financial resources needed to respond. However, a number of issues, particularly when related to individuals’ well-being – rather than collective concerns – were not resolved by negotiation with the authorities. Likewise, the fact the communities did not have experience of engaging with aid agencies also limited their response. Importantly, the risk – real or perceived – that complaining to the authorities, or local or international aid agencies, might cause these outsiders to withdraw their assistance meant that many communities and individuals stayed silent. In all of the L2GP studies it has been noted that some self-protection strategies involved trade-offs – and often exposed individuals, families and communities to new threats.

Respondents rarely referred to legal or rights-based aspects of protection, either as articulated under Myanmar domestic or international law or conventions. Villagers did not refer to legal frameworks, and seem to have only very limited expectations of protection or assistance being provided by local or national government. Although some villagers (particularly elites within communities) did engage with the state for various purposes, few of the self-protection strategies reported related to the activities or responsibilities of the state. However, informants did place considerable importance on the ability of community leaders to negotiate with both government and aid agencies, in order to gain access to assistance.

In general, interviewees made little distinction between immediate protection concerns related to physical safety and security, and longer-term issues of livelihoods security. The protection and rehabilitation of property was also a key concern for many informants. Some respondents observed that those most severely affected by Cyclone Nargis were ‘rich villagers’ (e.g. landowners, who had the most to lose), while the most vulnerable were ‘poor villagers’ (e.g. landless labourers, with few resources). Many informants stated that the cyclone had affected both rich and poor villagers indiscriminately. Such varying perceptions have profound implications for

the manner in which affected communities relate to outside assistance, and engage with aid agencies.

In responding to and recovering from Cyclone Nargis, affected communities experienced three 'phases' of assistance:

1. First and foremost in importance were the self-protection activities of affected people themselves – the ways in which individuals, families and communities gathered together to help each other, and protect the most vulnerable.
2. The next phase of assistance came from within Myanmar itself – ordinary citizens, including businesspeople who collected donations and purchased supplies to send to affected areas, as well as more formally organised faith-based and secular CBOs and local NGOs. In some instances, Myanmar armed forces were also among the first to provide limited assistance, particularly in the most remote areas and where troops had been deployed for security reasons.
3. With some important exceptions, only a few international agencies were present on the ground in the most remote areas in a major way until around one month after the natural disaster. In part at least, this was due to restrictions on access on the part of the government.

This study describes the remarkable endurance, solidarity and ingenuity of many of those affected by the cyclone. Despite the utter devastation, from the outset affected villages were at the centre of self-protection, survival and recovery efforts, and later undertook many activities to begin rehabilitating their communities. The study describes such initiatives, which started in the first hours after Cyclone Nargis, as people came down from the trees, realised the enormity of this natural disaster, started to organise informally, to find food and drinking water – and began the process of contacting the outside world.

The self-protection mechanisms described in the study include self-help within communities, local informal leadership, prioritisation of protection and assistance for the most vulnerable, sharing and supporting within and between communities, activating social and religious networks beyond the community, (temporary) movement, secret redistribution of aid and (mostly low-key) advocacy with local authorities and aid providers. Community (and especially religious) leaders played important roles in organising and inspiring survivors. This demonstrates that affected communities can be important resources in disaster response. Local initiatives help to develop

(and depend upon existing reserves of) 'social capital'<sup>1</sup>, local resilience, and networks of trust and mutual support. Especially in the first days and weeks after Cyclone Nargis, informal networks and unofficial as well as official local leaders (many formal leaders had died and the distinction between formal and informal leaders largely vanished in the first weeks) were important in helping communities to survive, organise and protect themselves, contact the authorities and other outside agencies and bringing assistance from larger towns to the villages. Local leaders did not wait for instructions from higher authorities, but acted on their own initiative, taking on leadership and organisational roles in the first few days and week when survival was at stake. They were also active in deciding whether and how to move to government-organised temporary resettlement sites – although in some cases the decision to move was not taken voluntarily.

It is noteworthy that, in many cases in the most remote areas where troops were deployed for security reasons, the Myanmar armed forces were among the first to provide (albeit limited) assistance. This finding is particularly striking, given the role which the armed forces usually play in human rights reporting on Myanmar – that of the perpetrator of abuses. Informants seem to have mixed impressions of the role of the Myanmar Army, sometimes accusing soldiers are being quite rough, and not respecting the feelings of affected communities or the dignity of the dead.

Supplementing the numerous ways in which villagers helped themselves, outside assistance in the early days and weeks after the cyclone was provided by Myanmar citizens. Many recipients, and also local aid actors, understood such activities in terms of 'donation'. In a traditional Buddhist context, criticism of aid givers is considered culturally inappropriate. In many cases, the first outsiders on the scene were concerned individuals and families – and also private businesses – who responded to this unprecedented natural disaster with great generosity, and perseverance. Although early needs assessments and distribution techniques were necessarily quite basic, there is no doubt that Myanmar citizens contributed a great deal to the survival of many people. Among these initiatives, were many life-saving interventions on the part of the country's diverse civil society organisations, which often worked in partnership with affected populations, to save lives and restore dignity and safety. These included informal networks of citizens and businesspeople, and also a wide range of more formally organised CBOs and local NGOs. These locally conceived and led activities received more prominence (in media and aid agency accounts)

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam uses the term 'social capital' to refer "to features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions": *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1993: 167).

than might usually be the case in situations of massive natural disaster, due to the relative lack of international assistance in the early response phase. Of course, such local responses did not always demonstrate the professionalism expected of international aid agencies, and in some (exceptional) cases CBOs may have been created partly to exploit the opportunities of receiving foreign donations. Myanmar NGOs and CBOs learned a great deal in responding to Cyclone Nargis, and the civil society sector was generally strengthened through this experience. However, informants (especially local aid workers) said that international agencies and donors often failed to support local initiatives, or welcome Myanmar CBOs and NGOs into planning and coordination mechanisms such as the UN-led cluster coordination. This concern relates to one of the central themes of the L2GP initiative: the disconnect between local and international agency in disaster response.

Much has been made in advocacy circles of the Myanmar government's restriction of international humanitarian access, in the first weeks after Cyclone Nargis. The government failed in its duty to protect and assist a population in dire need. It did not give adequate warning of the impending disaster, and subsequently denied many communities access to humanitarian aid. Fortunately, due to the work of local and international agencies already on the ground – and above all, because of the resilience of affected communities – the anticipated second wave of deaths caused by diseases and lack of food and drinking water did not occur. However, the government's restriction of international humanitarian access in the month after Cyclone Nargis may have cost lives.

Meanwhile, threats by international politicians and activists to impose aid unilaterally, and attempts to mobilise the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine, had some negative consequences. Reference to the 'R2P' doctrine (which is still contested internationally, and was not developed with natural disasters in mind) seems to have reinforced the paranoid and xenophobic positions of 'hardliners' within the government, who responded by restricting humanitarian access to vulnerable communities. Observations in the Delta indicate that diplomatic and military threats – advanced primarily by France, the US and UK – resulted in aid to the most vulnerable communities being further delayed, as external advocacy helped trigger a defensive military deployment of Myanmar Army units. Thus, the already stretched resources of the state were deployed on a security setting, rather than in relief and recovery efforts. The deployment of Myanmar Army units to the most vulnerable and cyclone-affected areas in the southern Delta may have served to discourage local and international aid agencies from assisting people in these militarised zones. This is because international aid agencies have been reluctant to work closely (or even in geographic proximity) to the Myanmar Army, out of concern for the latter's poor human rights record.

Advocates for activating the R2P doctrine may argue that international pressure eventually forced the military government to open up access to humanitarian assistance. About one month after the disaster, access to the affected area for international humanitarian agencies improved dramatically, and has subsequently remained relatively good. In large part however, this 'breakthrough' in access was achieved through the diplomatic activities and 'peer-pressure' of ASEAN and the UN, rather than as a result of public advocacy campaigns.

In the three years since Cyclone Nargis, exile and overseas-based advocacy groups have on occasion criticised the Post-Nargis aid effort – often with limited acknowledgement or understanding of the achievements of ordinary Burmese citizens and civil society networks in providing assistance in an extremely difficult environment, as well as the work of international aid agencies. These comments notwithstanding, this report is primarily about the perceptions and activities of civilian populations and local organisations living and working in cyclone-affected areas. Their dignity and tenacity in response to this natural disaster has been an inspiration to those who undertook and wrote-up the research.

Despite many positive achievements on the part of affected communities, large numbers of people remain deeply traumatised by their experience of Cyclone Nargis. Among many other problems faced by affected communities are increased indebtedness, and concerns about achieving food security, in the short-and long-term. This is particularly the case in communities affected by plagues of rats, which in 2009–10 reduced rice harvests in many of worst-affected areas by more than half.

The study raises questions regarding what it means to talk about 'local' – as opposed to 'global' – approaches to protection. There is not one local ('grassroots') voice, but rather a variety of interests and identities, types of resource, and opportunities for and constraints on action and expression, at the community or village level. It is necessary to unpack these positions, in order to appreciate the complexity and richness of local agency and 'voice'. Such different voices and positions are illustrated by the issue of aid agency-promoted 'wealth ranking'. Most focus group discussions in affected communities displayed a 'consensus' that aid agencies should not distinguish between landowners and landless in targeting food assistance, but rather should distribute aid to all in the community. However, when interviewed separately (out of local elites' earshot), many of the poorest (landless) villages expressed less dissatisfaction with targeting – indicating that their voices in public discussions are often dominated by local elites.

Interviewees repeatedly expressed their gratitude for the assistance received from both local and international donors. However, many people questioned the appropriateness of all the aid items they received (e.g. the wrong type of boat or seed). There were a few stories of aid being mismanaged or diverted. More common were complaints regarding the manner in which outside organisations (particularly international NGOs and UN agencies) supplied relief items without consulting communities regarding what should be provided, and how. It should also be noted that beneficiaries were often reluctant to complain regarding goods and services received, out of fear that aid agencies withdraw their assistance. These findings illustrate the importance of external aid agencies understanding local perceptions and realities, and fully engaging local communities in designing and strengthening responses.

### **Recommendations<sup>2</sup>**

- Different forms of advocacy should be seen as complementary. While some humanitarian actors may engage in public advocacy (documenting and denouncing abuses), others work more quietly behind-the-scenes in ‘persuasive’ mode, in order to protect vulnerable populations. Human rights and campaigning groups should ensure that their actions do not compromise, discredit or hamper local, national or regional protection efforts. This sensitivity should include an awareness of the manner in which politicised advocacy campaigns may be perceived by state authorities, with possible negative consequences for affected communities. Advocacy efforts should be based on an assessment of the situation on the ground, rather than sometimes politicised assumptions made from a distance.
- Establish simple emergency early warning systems at the community-level based on existing structures, which can be effective in cases where national-level systems do not function. Conduct basic emergency preparedness training at the individual, family and village levels, involving different sections of society and both formal and informal community leaders.
- Work with relevant state and independent, local and international (radio) media to ensure that vulnerable communities have access to reliable information about threatening disasters, as early as possible.

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<sup>2</sup> The full set of Recommendations arising out of the L2GP Delta study can be found at the end of this report.

- It is necessary to 'unpack' the variety of different (and sometimes competing) interests and identities, types and levels of resource, and opportunities for action at the local level. This requires careful analysis of the situation on the ground, to ensure that relatively powerful local voices do not obscure the perspectives of potentially marginalised sub-groups.
- Agencies should ensure that targeting builds rather than undermines social capital and that beneficiaries are closely involved in establishing criteria. Although targeting of assistance may be necessary if aid agencies have limited resources, UN agencies, INGOs and LNGOs should be aware that this may go against local preferences, can exacerbate community tensions, and can often be circumvented by local initiatives (i.e. informal redistributions). Whenever possible, donors and aid agencies should give beneficiaries options and choices regarding the type of assistance to be distributed. Likewise, communities should be consulted regarding distribution methods (including questions of timing).
- Direct assistance (cash, tools, building materials) to communities' own recovery activities are useful alternatives to working exclusively on agendas set by outsiders.
- As protection is linked closely with improved livelihood options, supporting livelihoods is one way of promoting local self-protection efforts.
- As early as possible, adopt a local empowerment approach to assistance and recovery including strengthening the capacity of local authorities and communities. This could include addressing structural issues exacerbated by the disaster, important for recovery and prioritised by the beneficiaries.

## Nargis night

Many people's abiding and strongest impression is of the ferocity of Cyclone Nargis, and the utter devastation caused. Most people had some awareness of the impending storm, usually gathered through state radio – but in most cases did not realise this would be something beyond the usual rainy season tropical storm. Therefore, when the water level began to rise, people didn't realise at first how bad it would get. They often only started to worry when the water got to waist height.

A typical story: before Cyclone Nargis there were 110 people in the village; 12 hours later only nine were still alive. In another case, all 600 people in one village were killed during the storm. Most people died in the rapid tidal surge, and 125 mph winds. Particularly near the coast, the only survivors were those who managed to climb trees, or float on debris. When people came down from the trees later that night, or the next morning, they were often naked, their clothes having been ripped from them as they clung to treetops and floating debris. Many people had burns from the strong rain and/or cuts and bruising from hanging on for their lives. As the storm resided, others were discovered dead in – or expired and fell from – the trees.

Of course, some communities were more badly affected than others. In general, those closest to the coast, and in the direct path of the storm (see map), were most badly damaged. In many villages, not only were huge numbers of people killed or injured, but the entire stock of housing and most property were also destroyed.

### 40-year-old man:

We did (know in advance there would be a storm) but we don't think it would be that bad. When there was announcement at the daytime, we went to a wedding. We had never seen such a storm like this, even from our grandfather time. That's why we did not know how to prepare. The storm began since the afternoon. It was windy... at around 2 pm, the wave rose up. In the middle of the village path, the water reaches to the waist of a person. Everybody ran around and became all a mess...The water only came down again around 5 am in the morning.

### Husband and wife, who lost three children, with one surviving:

The day of Nargis it was windy the whole day. At 8 pm the water began to rise up and at that time our house already collapsed. We could not live in the house. So I pulled [out my] 9 year old son and 11 year old daughter. My wife took the eldest daughter and one year and two month old sons in her arms and we cross the river to reach the other side. We could not see well and the river flow was very strong. A log, floating with the river hit my chest and I lost consciousness. The next morning I was naked. While I was walking along the river side, I met with my wife and she was also naked. There were no children with her either. She looked stunned. Both of us do not know what to do, and were swimming around here and there so people came and got us. We later found our eldest daughter at the other side of the river. Three days later we found the dead bodies of our other children and buried them where we

found them. My wife could not speak for 3–4 month, and was wondering around looking stunned.

#### Housewife who runs a grocery:

The house on the other side of the river was newly built and it cost 60 lakh. They did not even have a new home celebration yet. During the storm I went there with my six years old son at around 8 pm. I have got two sons; the older one age 10 was not at home. My husband did not think it would be that bad so he stayed behind to take care of the house. On my way to the other side of the river, my longyi was torn off me and wrapped around my feet. At that time I put my son on my shoulder and cross the river. Soon after, a big wave hit me so my son was ripped out off my hand and I sank into the water. I took off the longyi and floated in the water. At that time I hugged onto a pole that floated along the river. I was hit by bits and pieces of the debris and almost lost consciousness. When I regained consciousness, I was on the other side of M–K–, without my longyi on me. If we have to travel to this place from our M–D– village it would take over three hours. I could not get up and I heard someone was making a noise, and I also made noise. The person made a noise like a dog and I answered back like a dog. In our area here we should not call someone's name, but have to make a noise like dog. This is because we heard that if you called someone's name in the jungle, that name could be repeated by an unseen thing, so the person might die. The man came to get me and both of us were naked, we could not feel shame at that time. We walked together and met a girl on the way and become three. We took some clothes from the dead bodies of people and covered ourselves. We could not walk properly and the land was all slippery. We took a step but fell down three steps back. It took us one hour to reach to C– village. An uncle took us by boat. After three days I came back to Mon Dine Lay village. But that morning my husband had already left for KK– by boat, as it was very difficult to stay in the village. I met him at that village later. He told me that soon after Nargis he went to search for me but could not find me so he left for the KK–.

#### Village woman:

I had three children. Our house was not strong enough to resist the storm. So once the wind became strong, our house collapsed. Then I moved to my uncle house. But the wind was so strong that I handed my children to my husband to run from there. I had one child in my hand. While I was trying to close the door, my child was ripped out of my hand. That was the last time I saw my child. After that I flowed with the current until I grip the wood and finally I found myself on the bank. I kept silent and was trying to observe the environment but it was too dark to see the surroundings. Then, I heard a man voice; he was shouting several names. I shouted back to him and fortunately it was my uncle. I was very happy to see him and I explained him my experience. He warned “keep gripping the wood; the tide might be higher again”. So I gripped the wood until next morning. My daughter's husband died the morning after the storm but not because of the storm but because he was trying to search his wife, my daughter the next morning. While he was searching for his wife, one house collapsed upon him and he died in my hands.

#### Weather broadcast from government radio as recorded by villagers in the Delta at 5pm on May 2, 2008:

“The strong Cyclone Nargis is passing by Hi Gyi Island, Ayeyarwady Division. Within the last 6 hours, that cyclone has been moving towards east and becoming stronger. The cyclone is expected to move north–east and the wind speed on the cyclone path is about 60 – 80 mph, and in the cyclone eye the speed is about 120 – 150 mph. There will be heavy rain in the areas: Ayeyarwady Division, Yangon Division, Bago

Division, Southern Rakhine State and Mon State, where the cyclone is passing. In the Delta region, the sea water can be more than 10 feet higher than normal.”

**Bout [landless labourer] man:**

Before Nargis we have six children and my mother-in-law; a total of nine family members. During Nargis some other people came to take refuge to our house. The house was not strong enough. It was too windy and the water also rose up. We dared not to stay at home so we went to S-L-'s house. Moments later the roof top blew off and the house also collapsed. At that time we called upon each other and held hands together. But later we were all separated by the water. I held onto the 3 gallon container and carried my youngest son. My 8 years old daughter floated along with water to the wood and stuck on to the tree. I could not see my second last daughter. The son who I hold on to also died in my arms. My wife was stuck on the tree. There were no clothes on any of them. My 8 years old daughter and other people were all stuck on the tree. At that time we were very thirsty. I found a towel floating by so I pulled it out. When it was raining I put the towel on my head and squeezed out the water and drunk it. Those who stuck on the tree make noise to each other. In the morning we were very hungry. Afterwards a boy got a cabbage so we all ate that cabbage. The strong men went back to the village to get the boat and we asked them to come and fetch us. We ate and drank whatever we found. We collected wet rice and cooked it. As the rice was mixed with sand we had to sieve it. We have to drink water by digging sand. We collected some tea leaves and put them in boiled water. We had to drink coconut water.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 What this report is about

This is the second in a series of 'Local to Global Protection' (L2GP) studies. The L2GP project is implemented by a group of Nordic aid agencies, undertaking research in Sudan, Zimbabwe and Myanmar/Burma.

The first L2GP area study focused on self-protection in conflict-affected areas of southeast Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> This study examines the perceptions and realities of people living in parts of the Irrawaddy Delta affected by Cyclone Nargis, which struck Myanmar on the night of 2 May 2008.

Several villages, particularly the most vulnerable near the coast, were completely destroyed. Altogether, some 2.5–3 million people were displaced by this natural disaster. The death toll was approximately 140,000 people<sup>4</sup> – and possibly as many as 200,000 (see below) – most of whom died in a period of less than 24 hours.<sup>5</sup> Some were left naked, having had their clothes ripped from their backs by the ferocious winds and rain; many were injured, and all were hungry and thirsty. Survivors were exhausted and traumatized, in many cases having lost their entire extended families.

This report is based on 'insider accounts'. It describes the experiences of many of those affected by the cyclone. Despite the utter devastation, from the outset affected people (mostly ethnic Burman and Karen) were at the centre of their own survival and protection efforts, and later undertook many activities to begin rehabilitating their communities. This report describes such initiatives, which started in the first hours after Cyclone Nargis, as people came down from the trees, and started to organise informally, to find food and water – and began the process of contacting the outside world.

This report is based on field research and interviews with several hundred individuals undertaken in several dozen remote villages in the southern parts of Bogale and Laputa Townships in the Delta. Obviously, the report's finding can only be representative for events in these particular locations, which were among the worst-affected areas. Nevertheless, as the number of people interviewed is significant and the areas and villages visited are quite wide apart, the finding may be relevant for other areas affected by Cyclone Nargis.

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<sup>3</sup> Ashley South, with Malin Perhult and Nils Carstensen, *Conflict and Survival: self-protection in south-east Burma* (Chatham House/Royal Institute of International Affairs, September 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Post-Nargis Joint Assessment report (July 2008).

<sup>5</sup> From uncorroborated observations at the time, it appears that more women may have died than men, because they tried to protect/stay with children.

In many cases, local community (including many religious) leaders played key roles in organising and inspiring survivors. Especially in the first days and weeks, informal networks were important in helping communities to survive, and contact the authorities and other outside actors. Over the following weeks and months, structures of political authority – and economic dominance – which had characterised the Delta before the cyclone began to reassert themselves. In some communities, particularly those where large brick monasteries had not been washed away by the cyclone, monks took a leading role in providing shelter and administer food and other donations to the community in the first weeks after the cyclone. In the long-term monks and religion were also a source of spiritual support and psycho-social healing to villagers.

Respondents had limited expectations of the state as an agent of protection, and made few references to Myanmar or international legal frameworks. Nevertheless, is noteworthy that in many cases the Myanmar Army (and Navy and Air Force) was the first external agency to provide some limited assistance. Troops were deployed to some of the most remote areas within a few days of the disaster, mainly for security reasons as these areas have previously been the site of armed resistance to the state, and also located near the sea where a possible invasion by foreign forces could take place (in the perception of the Myanmar government). Some of these troops provided assistance, albeit limited. In other parts of the Delta, the armed forces were deployed to restrict access of humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, soldiers providing assistance is a striking finding, given the role which the armed forces usually play in human rights reporting on Myanmar – that of the perpetrator of abuses. However, it must be acknowledged that – despite considerable efforts on the part of the research team – villagers may have been reluctant to share stories of abuses perpetrated by the Army or other powerholders, due to a prevailing climate of fear in Myanmar, and distrust of outsiders.

Supplementing the numerous ways in which villagers helped themselves, outside assistance in the early days and weeks after the cyclone was provided by Myanmar citizens. In many cases, these were concerned individuals and families – and also private businesses – who responded to this unprecedented natural disaster with great generosity, and perseverance. Although needs assessments and distribution techniques were necessarily quite simple, especially in the first weeks, there is no doubt that Myanmar citizens contributed a great deal to keeping many people alive. Among these initiatives, were many life-saving interventions on the part of Myanmar civil society<sup>6</sup>, which often worked in partnership with affected populations, to save lives and restore dignity and safety. These included a wide range of CBOs and local NGOs, whose inspiring activities received more prominence than might usually be the case, in situations of massive natural disaster, due to the relative lack of international assistance in the early response phase (see below). Some international aid agencies were already operating in the Irrawaddy Delta at the

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'civil society' has various normative connotations. In this report, the term is used descriptively, to refer to activities undertaken independently of private or family interests, and beyond the parameters of the state. This conception covers a broad range of formal and informal activities, including faith-based and other associations and networks, private citizen initiatives, the media and trade associations, as well as CBOs and local, national and international NGOs. While civil society agencies may engage in market-oriented activities, the sector is characterized by its orientation towards social goals, rather than profit maximization.

time of the natural disaster, and most of these were also on the scene in the first few weeks. This picture of nationally-owned response contrasts markedly with the manner in which local agencies were sidelined by the international humanitarian industry, in – for example – Sri Lanka after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Much has been said and written about the Myanmar government's restriction on humanitarian access, in the first weeks after Cyclone Nargis. This was in conflict with International Humanitarian Law and the government's duty to protect and assist a population in dire need, and denied many communities access to humanitarian aid. Fortunately, due to the work of local and international agencies already on the ground – and above all, because of the resilience of affected communities – the anticipated second wave of deaths caused by diseases and lack of food and drinking water did not occur.

However, the government did restrict humanitarian access in the month or so immediately after Nargis. Meanwhile, threats by international politicians and activists to impose aid unilaterally, and attempts to mobilise the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine (which is still contested, and is generally considered more relevant to situations of armed conflict: see below), may have reinforced the paranoid and xenophobic positions of regime 'hardliners' and contributed (unwillingly) to the delay in getting aid to some of the most vulnerable communities. These threats and the positioning of foreign navy vessels close to the Delta also resulted in the Myanmar Army positioning troops in some areas along the cyclone-ravaged coast, in order to defend against a possible invasion – possibly further delaying assistance to some of the hardest hit communities.

In the three years since Cyclone Nargis, exile and overseas-based advocacy groups have on several occasions criticised the aid effort. They might instead have celebrated the achievements of ordinary Burmese citizens and civil society networks in providing assistance in an extremely difficult environment, as well as the work of international aid agencies (whose achievements are usually of variable quality, regardless of political considerations).<sup>7</sup> Of course, the issues of access and impartiality raised by advocacy groups are legitimate, and need to be addressed. However, one consequence of negative international campaigning has been to signal to potential donors that their assistance would not be effective, and therefore to limit the amount of aid given to cyclone-affected areas of Myanmar – with grave consequences for vulnerable populations.

This report is primarily about the perceptions and activities of civilian populations (including civil society groups) living and working in cyclone-affected areas. Their dignity and tenacity in response to this natural disaster has been an inspiration to those who undertook the research, and wrote this report.

### **The Local to Global Protection Project**

The L2GP project explores how people living in areas affected by natural disaster and armed conflict understand 'protection' – what do they value, and how do they

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<sup>7</sup> The Human Rights Watch report "I Want to help my Own People"- State Control and Civil Society in Burma after Cyclone Nargis (May 2010), acknowledges the important role of local actors in promoting post-cyclone recovery.

go about protecting themselves and their families, and communities? The research also examines how affected populations view the roles of other stakeholders, including the state, non-state actors, community-based organisations, and national and international aid agencies. Are these viewed as protection actors, or sources of threat – or a mixture of both?

The L2GP initiative seeks to celebrate success. It adopts an 'appreciative enquiry' approach, in order to identify and promote what works in difficult circumstances, rather than focusing just on mistakes and abuses (which is not to argue that human rights violations should not be documented and denounced).

Since the Rwanda crisis in 1994 – and especially since the 2005 UN World Summit adopted the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine as part of its 'Outcome Document' – humanitarian agencies have sought to incorporate protection in their work (as illustrated by the recent drafting of protection indicators as part of the SPHERE project). Humanitarian organisations tend to have their own ideas about what constitutes 'protection', usually based on the definition developed by the ICRC and partners, focusing on rights articulated in international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law (see below). In most cases, these notions are imported (or imposed 'top-down'), without examining the views or realities of local people. Although aid agencies may elicit local participation in implementing programs, aims and objectives are usually designed to fit agency headquarters' and donors' requirements.

To a degree, the prioritisation of external agency may be an operational necessity, especially in emergency situations, where addressing immediate needs and the effective distribution of large-scale assistance is a priority. Nevertheless, opportunities exist to better understand and relate to people at risk and other 'non-system' actors, in order to capture and possibly build on their views and needs. The idea motivating the L2GP project is to appreciate and celebrate the agency of local people, affected by terrible situations, but nevertheless struggling to retain their dignity and control over their own lives.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Note on 'humanitarian protection'**

The humanitarian enterprise has traditionally been guided by the principles of neutrality and impartiality. Following the end of the Cold War however, some aid agencies re-conceptualised their mission, under the broad rubric of a 'new humanitarianism'. According to this position, humanitarian actors should address not only humanitarian needs (e.g. for food, medicine), but also the causes of vulnerability, including socio-political (and possibly economic) structures of violence.

The 'new humanitarianism' involved aid agencies paying closer attention to international human rights and humanitarian law. During the 1990s, debates focused on the right of humanitarian actors to intervene in situations of large-scale and systematic human rights abuses. During the subsequent decade, the debate focused more on the responsibility of states to protect their citizens – and on the international community's role, in cases where

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<sup>8</sup> As David Keen notes, "while some of the more unimaginative approaches to needs-assessment focus on what people *lack*, an approach that is in many ways more promising focuses on what people are seeking to *do*, and seeks to assist them in these endeavours": *Complex Emergencies* (Cambridge, Polity Press 2008): 109.

states were unable or unwilling to do so. In these debates however, protective actions remained focused on the level of the sovereign nation–state, or failing this and by default, the international community (including professional humanitarian agencies).

The state is accorded sole (if provisional) authority within its borders for securing the well-being of 'its' citizens. Although the legitimacy of the state may be contested domestically, this has not traditionally affected its 'negative sovereignty' within the international system. Building on the work of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty<sup>9</sup>, in 2005 the UN World Summit Outcome Document, endorsed the doctrine of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P), according to which international actors may intervene in situations of acute crisis, in order to prevent, mitigate or otherwise respond to widespread rights violations. This doctrine has been contested (especially by some non-Western states), and has not yet been universally accepted as part of 'international customary law'. Furthermore, the R2P doctrine relates solely to activities approved by the UN Security Council, and by extension to the actions of states and their agents – the international humanitarian system (UN agencies and selected international NGOs).

Elements within the human rights and activist communities have sought to mobilise the R2P doctrine in order to encourage and justify a broad range of rights-based interventions, including on the part of nonstate actors, such as NGOs. However, protection remains an activity undertaken primarily by outsiders, on behalf of vulnerable communities, especially in cases where the state is unable or unwilling to act – or is itself a perpetrator of abuse. To a significant degree, this prioritisation of state and external agency has been an operational necessity, especially in emergency situations, where addressing immediate needs and the effective distribution of large-scale resources is a humanitarian priority. Nevertheless, opportunities exist to better understand and relate to a range of 'non-system' actors, their views and needs – especially the views of affected communities themselves, in relation to assistance and protection concerns. This approach to protection relates to the 'second pillar' of R2P, according to which outside actors may help states (and by extension citizens?) to build their protective capacities.<sup>10</sup>

According to the most widely accepted definition, humanitarian protection aims to limit or mitigate the impacts of abuses, and "encompasses all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. international human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law)" (ICRC & UNIASC 2001). Although humanitarian and development agencies may endeavour to elicit beneficiaries' participation in their programming (an articulated in various standard-setting exercises – e.g. the SPHERE project, and the 2003 Stockholm 'Principles of Good Donor Practice'), aid interventions generally remain focused on the agency of international actors. Affected communities and other 'non-system' actors (e.g. civil society groups and affected communities) are rarely consulted regarding the overall design of projects, while the range of strategies they adopt, in order to cope with threats to

<sup>9</sup> ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (December 2001).

<sup>10</sup> The 'three pillars' of R2P may be summarised thus: 1. A State has a responsibility to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing (mass atrocities); 2. If the State is unable to protect its population on its own, the international community has a responsibility to assist the state by building its capacity. This can mean building early-warning capabilities, mediating conflicts between political parties, strengthening the security sector, mobilizing standby forces, and many other actions; .3 If a State is manifestly failing to protect its citizens from mass atrocities and peaceful measures are not working, the international community has the responsibility to intervene at first diplomatically, then more coercively, and as a last resort, with military force.

their safety and dignity, are often overlooked. External interventions which fail to recognise and support indigenous efforts may inadvertently undermine existing coping mechanisms, disempowering local communities. This is particularly unfortunate in situations where vulnerable populations are inaccessible to mainstream international actors.

This normative consideration is reinforced by the implications of the shifting global balance of power. The economic crisis has accelerated processes of change, whereby financial – and ultimately political – power is shifting away from the European and North American states which have dominated world history for most of the past two centuries. These dramatic changes will have significant impacts in many sectors, including on development and humanitarian activities. The declining economic and strategic power of the West may mean that in the future less financial and political capital will be available to back international interventions based on notions of human rights (derived ultimately from the European enlightenment, and associated with Western state power). This is not to deny the legitimacy of liberal–democratic values, but to recognise their historical contingency (and therefore limited universal applicability), and declining capital.

## 1.2 Methodology

The methodology adopted was similar to that used in the Karen Area Study. A week–long workshop was held in Yangon, with 15 participants from local partner groups (Myanmar NGOs, with programmes in the Irrawaddy Delta), and national and international resource people. The workshop introduced concepts of protection, coping and survival, and explored the relevance of these to a range of contexts, including natural disasters. The emphasis was less on international humanitarian and human rights law, and more on how disaster–affected communities try to cope and protect themselves, and the roles of other stakeholders.

Based on the L2GP project research questions, a set of interview questions were devised during the workshop, modified, and translated (see Appendix). These were adapted to the local context and sensitivities related to interviewing people about protection issues. The workshop also provided practice in interview techniques, and covered issues regarding the safety of researchers and informants, and issues of trauma and psychological distress (among interviewers and interviewees).

Field research was carried out in Laputa and Bogale Townships in the latter part of 2009. National researchers (or 'assessors') from the Myanmar NGOs undertook research through extended field visits, reporting preliminary findings and discussing their experiences where possible with members of the expatriate staff. Simultaneously, expatriate staff undertook visits (separately and as a group), in both townships. A large number of interviews were also conducted with CBOs and local NGOs, and a range of international agencies, both in the Irrawaddy Delta and in Yangon. Considerable effort was taken to protect the safety of local and international researchers, and of course of informants, and local and other humanitarian agencies. Despite some unanticipated delays and difficulties, several hundred people were interviewed, in addition to several dozen focus groups.

All interview materials were translated from Burmese into English. Follow–up workshops were held in Yangon, to begin the task of analysis. International staff then edited the interview materials, and the Lead Consultant drafted parts of the report. These were then shared with local assessors and other partners and

stakeholders, following which this final report was collated. Three further follow-up workshops were held in Yangon in mid-2011, with local researchers and affected villagers; with Myanmar CBOs; and with international organisations working in the country.

Participants in the debrief sessions reported having gained specific new knowledge about Cyclone Nargis, its impacts, and local and international responses, as a result of the project. It was felt that this new information enriched their understanding of the situation in the Delta, and more generally in Myanmar. Furthermore, several participants felt they had grown emotionally through the assessment experience, and gained a deeper understanding of – and respect for – their fellow citizens' plight, and efforts to recover from this terrible disaster. All of the local researchers said they had improved their information gathering and analysis skills, including interview techniques (supplementing existing approaches and knowledge, on the part of some). For at least three of the local assessors, the acquisition of qualitative data collection and analysis tools was an important addition to their skills. Several local assessors went on to use the knowledge and skills they had gained during the project in their own future work.

All quotations are taken directly from villages and other informants, as translated from the Burmese. Wherever possible, we have separated local understandings from those provided by the assessors, and the analysis provided by report authors.

Reflecting on the research experience, the Lead Consultant observed that:

Upon completion of group discussions with villagers, I thanked them for their time and patience, being aware that they had often received several visits from foreigners asking questions. To my surprise, in Laputa Township at least, in every village I was told that – while outsiders had suddenly come to visit before – I was the first to ask them about their experiences of Nargis and since. Other visitors had come with checklists of questions, and had not seemed particularly interested in the feelings and experiences of the villagers.

### Acknowledgements

This report is primarily about the perceptions and activities of civilian populations (including civil society groups) living and working in cyclone-affected areas. Their dignity, remarkable endurance, solidarity and ingenuity in response to this natural disaster have been an inspiration to those who undertook the research, and wrote this report.

The report owes everything to the Myanmar people and institutions who have participated and contributed in so many ways to the research – not all of whom may agree with all of our conclusions and recommendations. Obviously, the responsibility for the analysis and wording rests solely with the authors. While we have tried to be as inclusive and representative as possible, the findings and recommendations can only be suggestive, and limited to the specific contexts and circumstances covered in the research.

More important than any particular conclusion is the continuation of frank and critical engagement with the people and communities most at risk, and open

discussion of the difficult and complex issues raised in this paper. The authors would like to express their thanks to all those who contributed to research and analysis presented here.

### **1.3 Cyclone Nargis and since: an overview**

Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on the night of the 2 May 2008, with wind speeds of up to 200 Km/hour. The storm surge pushed a wall of water, at places some 12 feet high, as far as 30 km inland. The cyclone affected 50 townships in Ayeyarwady Division ('the Delta') and Yangon Division.

Official data records the number of dead and missing at approximately 140,000 people. However, aid workers estimate that as many as 200,000 people may have been killed. One reason for this discrepancy in numbers is that there were perhaps 50,000 unregistered migrant workers from upper Myanmar at the time of the cyclone (in Laputa Township alone), none of whom were included in official figures.<sup>11</sup>

Altogether, some 2.5–3 million people were displaced by Cyclone Nargis. It flooded over 783,000 hectares of paddy fields with salt water, damaged irrigation systems and destroyed seeds, killed livestock, and devastated infrastructure in the Delta and beyond. Some 800,000 homes were either damaged or destroyed.

For about a month following the cyclone, the Myanmar government denied, or seriously restricted, access for a large number international humanitarian agencies, which wished to enter the disaster-affected area, in order to assist vulnerable populations.<sup>12</sup> These restrictions denied many communities access to aid, adding considerably to the suffering of already vulnerable people – not least due to donors' reluctance to commit funding in the context of some campaigning groups' criticism of the relief response. Fortunately however, due to the work of local and international agencies already on the ground – and above all, because of the resilience of affected communities – the anticipated second wave of deaths caused by water-borne diseases did not occur. In the meantime, the government chose to focus its efforts and resources on conducting a referendum engineered to endorse a new constitution for Myanmar.<sup>13</sup> The government's direct humanitarian response to the Cyclone was overall ineffective and inadequate given the severity and scale of the disaster. While it – particularly in the first weeks – made use of Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) volunteers, which are closely linked with the government, it did not have experience, capacity or commitment to fully assist the survivors. During the recovery phase some initiatives were taken to distribute seeds and farm equipment while several access roads and schools were rebuilt. In the area of Disaster Risk Reduction some progress was made – but this came many months after the initial disaster.

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<sup>11</sup> Insight provided by senior UN coordination officer.

<sup>12</sup> The UN World Food Program has provided an admirably frank account of government restrictions, in the first weeks after the natural disaster: *Cyclone Nargis, Myanmar 2008* (WFP 2008).

<sup>13</sup> In the 47 most cyclone-affected Townships the referendum was delayed for two weeks.

In the absence of an effective government response and a restricted and limited international presence and capacity, Myanmar citizens and communities took the initiative in responding to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis. A broad array of formal and informal local associations and individuals participated in an impressive range of relief activities. Monasteries, churches and other civil society organisations, as well as various business entities, mobilised to deliver assistance, including substantial quantities of money and material donated by international organisations (see below).

### Access and assistance

It should be noted that, while the government did restrict international humanitarian access in the month or so after the cyclone, many of the most badly affected communities would have been difficult to access immediately after the cyclone anyway, due to their remoteness and the destruction of infrastructure. Nevertheless, if the authorities had granted timely access to international aid agencies, suffering for many relieved more quickly.

The military government's position presented the 'international community' with an acute dilemma: whether, and how, to intervene in a humanitarian crisis, when the sovereign state refuses to co-operate. Debate crystallised around the principle of the 'Responsibility to Protect'. Powerful actors – such as the French Foreign Minister (and MSF founder), Bernard Kouchner – argued for a moral imperative to persuade the government to accept aid, and prevent the further suffering of its people. If the Myanmar military government should refuse to accept this responsibility, it was argued that aid should be imposed unilaterally.

By promoting unilateral humanitarian intervention – with or without the backing of the UN Security Council – the advocates of such action dramatically raised the stakes. If the international community did not follow-through with concrete action, there was a danger that the doctrine of humanitarian intervention might be significantly damaged, undermining the prospects for future 'R2P' initiatives (for example, in clear-cut cases of genocide). When, in early June, French and American naval vessels<sup>14</sup>, which had been waiting off the coast of Myanmar, steamed off to Thailand, to unload their aid supplies, it seemed that the military regime had successfully called the international community's bluff.<sup>15</sup>

Diplomats from the afore mentioned three countries on the other hand, has continuously argued that the threat to invoke R2P, and the presence of the naval

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<sup>14</sup> The American warship was USS Essex, taking part in Cobra Gold exercises between the US and Thailand (Mary Callahan, in Levenstein 2010: 66).

<sup>15</sup> Gareth Evans, one of the architects of the 'R2P', provides an account of the problematic mobilisation of this doctrine in the case of Cyclone Nargis. He argues that this was not an opportune moment to test the fledgling doctrine, which was devised more to deal with cases of 'mass atrocity' than those in which the state fails to adequately assume its responsibilities to protect victims of natural disaster. However, he does acknowledge that this case is "a difficult, borderline one [in] that the Burmese military regime, in initially resisting all held in the way that it did ... appeared to be so recklessly indifferent to the fate of its own people that it was arguable that it was committing crimes against humanity": *The Responsibility to Protect: ending mass atrocity crimes once and for all* (Brookings Institution Press 2008: 66).

vessels, helped the ultimately successful efforts by the UN General Secretary and ASEAN to convince the Myanmar government to allow for unhindered international humanitarian assistance in the Delta.

Some advocates of humanitarian intervention went so far as to argue for a military 'solution' to the crisis. Others called for air drops, in order to supply desperately needy populations with aid. However, such demands did not come from within the professional humanitarian community, members of which realised that this would not be an effective way of reaching vulnerable people – and could in fact expose cyclone survivors to further victimisation, at the hands of a military government which is highly sensitive to issues of 'national security'.

Some exile groups went further. For example, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, together with the Mae Sot (Thailand)–based Emergency Assistance Team, “appealed to the international community to more carefully review the political reality in the delta region in the military–ruled country before further assistance is delivered.”<sup>16</sup> It seems likely that such calls for conditionality, with the implied message that assistance to cyclone victims should be withheld, caused at least some private and public donors to restrict their aid, during the key ‘window of fundraising opportunity’. Given the funding crisis faced by humanitarian agencies in the Delta – who have been unable to provide cyclone victims with sufficient shelter, food or water (see below) – it might be questioned whether such advocacy campaigns did more harm than good.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, rhetorical mobilisation of the ‘R2P’ doctrine served to reinforce the paranoid and xenophobic positions of regime ‘hard–liners’, possibly contributing to further delaying aid to some of the most vulnerable communities in the remoter parts of the Delta. The posturing of foreign politicians and exile groups resulted in the Myanmar Army positioning troops in some Karen–populated areas along the cyclone–ravaged coast, in order to defend against a possible invasion. This positioning of troops caused some aid agencies to be reluctant to work in the areas in question.

These criticisms notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that some twenty individuals who were involved in relief activities were arrested by the government.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Center for Public Health and Human Rights of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Emergency Assistance Team -Burma, *After the Storm: Voices from the Delta* (6-5-2008) - press release. The main report documents the government's "obstruction of relief aid, wilful acts of theft and sale of relief supplies, forced relocation, and the use of forced labour for reconstruction projects, including forced child labor" (13).

<sup>17</sup> It is of course quite common for donor interest and public sympathies to move on following a natural disaster, to focus on the next global crisis.

<sup>18</sup> See Human Rights Watch (May 2010), and Amnesty International, *Myanmar: End arrests of activists and continue aid after Cyclone Nargis* (November 2009).

These included the well-known activist and comedian Zarganar, who was given a 35-year jail term.<sup>19</sup>

It should also be noted that – following its initial reluctance to engage with the international community – the government eventually coordinated quite closely with at least some UN agencies and international and local NGOs (even allowing access to US military planes delivering relief). The breakthrough came after UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon meet with Senior General Than Swe in late May and received confirmation that unhindered humanitarian access would be granted all aid workers regardless of nationality. Unfortunately, this degree of relative cooperation was not extended to other parts of the country.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to its problematic relationship with some Western countries, from the outset the Myanmar government was willing to accept assistance from Asian governments. Several Asian states donated relief supplies, and in some cases also specialist personnel, directly to the government (or in some cases to the Myanmar Army). In mid-May, the ASEAN regional grouping announced the formation of a Tripartite Core Group (TCG), with high-level representatives from ASEAN, the government, and the UN, and a Task Force to coordinate assistance to cyclone-affected areas. The following month, an ASEAN-led group conducted the first comprehensive vulnerability and needs analysis in the Delta.<sup>21</sup>

The TCG worked quite well for a while, acting as an interlocutor with the government, facilitating visas for international staff, and conducting useful needs surveys. However, from early 2009 its effectiveness waned, as its mandate was extended (due to donor demand), while many of its powers were restricted. These problems were exacerbated by underlying tensions between the UN, who wanted to expand the role of the TCG to the rest of the country, and ASEAN, which did not.

The government's choice of ASEAN at its main international partner in the relief operation reflected a lack of trust in relation to the UN. In adopting this unprecedented role, ASEAN acted as a 'cushion' between the government and international donors. Such a regionalized intervention might set precedents for

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<sup>19</sup> It has been suggested that the arrests of Zarganar and other high-profile activists were due to these prominent individuals having made anti-government comments to the international press. Other civil society actors involved in cyclone response were able to continue their work unhindered.

<sup>20</sup> According to Refugees International (8-9-2008), "three months after Cyclone Nargis, the world has an outdated image of the situation inside Burma. Although aid agencies delivered assistance within days after the storm and continue to do so, the story of a recalcitrant government that rejects aid from the generous nations of the world has not been updated... Since June [2008], over 1,000 visas have been granted to international aid workers. Similarly, agencies report the ability to resolve problems with the government, and praise the Tripartite Core Group ... as an effective mechanism for resolving disputes... Agencies also praised the Post Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA), the first comprehensive, independent assessment of humanitarian need... The demands of the relief effort have emboldened some ministers within the government of Burma to facilitate international cooperation, a story ignored by international reports that focus on the government's obstructionism. Their success has created a new set of operational rules that are unique to the delta."

<sup>21</sup> Post-Nargis Joint Assessment report (July 2008).

future international action – breaking the pattern of disaster response as an exclusively western-led enterprise. (As the world experiences more catastrophes of this kind in the coming years, each region will have to develop its own capacity to respond – as is already the norm in the strategic/state-centric security sector). However, a response led by Asian states – many of which are characterized by authoritarian political cultures – was unlikely to focus on the human rights-based principles which underpin the global humanitarian regime, as it has developed since the end of the Cold War. In time, the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis might therefore herald a new era of regionalised ‘humanitarianism with Asian values’.

### The civil society response

The primary finding of this report is that communities affected by the devastation Cyclone Nargis did a great deal to protect themselves and survive, in the immediate aftermath of this terrible natural disaster, and since.<sup>22</sup> Particularly after the first few weeks, affected communities received help from a variety of sources, most notably from a range of Myanmar civil society actors, and international agencies.

At the time of Cyclone Nargis, Myanmar national NGOs and more locally-based Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) were active across much of the Delta.<sup>23</sup> In addition, several large government-organised NGOs (‘GONGOs’) operated in Myanmar, including the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) – a mass-membership organisation, established in September 1993.<sup>24</sup>

As noted above, many of the most significant early interventions to provide relief to victims of Cyclone Nargis came from loosely organised groups of individuals, and their extended family-social and business networks. This inspiring story has been

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<sup>22</sup> “Before Nargis, social relations and cohesion were strong in Delta villages. The social impacts monitoring found that social capital continues to be strong and has grown since Nargis. Villagers have worked together to overcome immediate challenges, which has strengthened social relations. Villagers have cooperated in rebuilding houses, rehabilitating public goods, and sharing aid and basic necessities such as shelter. In most of the villages studied, crime and violence levels have not risen since Nargis” (Tripartite Core Group, *Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring*, November 2008: viii).

<sup>23</sup> A survey conducted in 2003-04 by Save the Children UK found that large numbers of CBOs and local NGOs had been established since the early 1990s, and that Myanmar “might be on verge of [an] NGO/CBO explosion.” This study estimated that there were some 214,000 CBOs throughout the country, and a total of 270 local NGOs: Brian Heidel, *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar* (Bangalore: Books for Change 2006); see also Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: states of conflict* (Routledge 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Illustrating its pro-government political orientation, in 2010 parts of the USDA were transformed into a Union Solidarity and Development Party, to contest the November elections. In several cases, USDP candidates (including recently retired generals) have used the USDA’s association with post-cyclone recovery projects to boost their electoral support.

partially documented elsewhere<sup>25</sup>, and involved many individuals and groups spontaneously collecting donations, buying relief supplies and undertaking the difficult task of transporting these to the Delta, and beyond. Furthermore, several Myanmar business organisations and entrepreneurs contributed to relief efforts, including for example a prominent Yangon businessman and restaurateur, who set up a highly regarded temporary wet feeding centre in cooperation with a local monastery. Some other – generally larger – Myanmar businesses established partnerships with international NGOs. Such local businesspeople played key roles in the early post-cyclone response, using their networks to provide assistance to victims of Cyclone Nargis, and often making large personal donations in cash or kind. However, the association of Myanmar entrepreneurs with aid agencies was criticised in some quarters, as the former often have close ('crony') contacts with senior government figures. Indeed, several well-known Myanmar business figures received contracts to 'rebuild' parts of the Delta, in exchange for various concessions.

In some cases, local NGOs may have been created in part to exploit the opportunities of receiving foreign donations. Indeed, rumours have circulated regarding elements of corruption in the cyclone response. Furthermore, supplies distributed by civil society and business organisations were not always equally appropriate. Furthermore, it was difficult for concerned Myanmar citizens to reach the most remote (and generally therefore most needy) communities. Nevertheless, this local-national response was one of the 'silver linings' of the Cyclone Nargis story. The lack of an effective state or international response opened the way for ordinary citizens and civil society actors to demonstrate their capacities – and generosity.

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<sup>25</sup> Some publications have addressed local agency in response to Cyclone Nargis - for example, *People and the Cyclone Nargis* (Nhin Wai Nay Winn Publishing House, 2009; English and Burmese language versions), which focuses particularly on the activities of Yangon residents in providing assistance to people in the Delta. See also Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar civil society's response to Cyclone Nargis* (Phnom Penh, 2009): "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... External actors need to be informed, responsive, trusting and careful in how they support local civil society ... external perceptions of what is possible ... are the result of skewed reportage ... 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" (vi).

[...]

"The majority of civil society groups we interviewed for this project were balancing working with the Government with their commitments to communities" (x).

[...]

"Groups operating externally are able to effectively utilise various mediums to be heard on issues. Hearing voices from the inside is paramount ... external actors tend to view civil society in Myanmar as is non-existent, or at the very least inactive ... Skewed media reportage compounds communication challenges.

[...]

"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' organisation 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" (24).

It is necessary to distinguish between the larger Myanmar national NGOs (the biggest of which eventually had Nargis programs of about \$60 million), which were run much like INGOs, and smaller, community-based organisations (CBOs). While the former mostly originated beyond the Delta (e.g. in Yangon), many of the latter were more organically embedded in local communities. Also worth noting is that many of the first Myanmar NGOs in the field were associated with ethnic nationality communities, including churches, monasteries and other places of worship, already present in the Delta and beyond. Many Myanmar NGOs established before Nargis saw their budgets expanded hugely as a result of responding to this natural disaster. Myanmar NGOs and CBOs learned a great deal in responding to Cyclone Nargis, and the civil society sector was generally strengthened through this experience. However, limited capacities and levels of 'professionalisation' among Myanmar NGOs restricted their participation in co-ordination mechanisms (such as cluster meetings). Thus several civil society respondents identified capacity-building as a need among Myanmar agencies, and requested that international donors and agencies pay greater attention to what local communities and CBOs/NGOs have to offer.

One positive consequence of Cyclone Nargis was the development of new partnerships between international donors and organisations in Myanmar, and local civil society networks.<sup>26</sup> However, such relationships were often characterised by a lack of trust, and unequal power relationships, with local organisations not always consulted in strategic decision-making. Furthermore, international donor guidelines are often rather inflexible, disempowering local agency, and failing to understand the particular social, cultural and political contexts at work in Myanmar. For example, some INGOs and donors demanded a 50% gender balance among local partners, regardless of the latter's views or capacities; international donors also often required arduous documentation of activities, without taking account of local agencies' limited capacities.

This local response contrasts markedly with the manner in which local agencies were sidelined by the international humanitarian industry, in – for example – Sri Lanka after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. However, in the early phases after the disaster, international aid agencies (especially within the UN system) often failed to support the important roles played by civil society groups. This lack of appreciation was reflected in the limited participation of local NGOs in the Myanmar Inter-

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<sup>26</sup> The Local Resource Centre and Oxfam study on *Progressing Through Partnerships: how national and international organisations work together in Myanmar* (2010) identifies five types of INGO-LNGO partnership: “**Complementary**: Complementary roles but no funding relationship or mutual accountability; **Convergent**: The largest category of those working in partnership, characterized by funding, and monitoring/capacity-building; **Creation**: A new LNGO grows out of an INGO (or experienced LNGO) project; **Cooperation**: Joint INGO-LNGO implementation with responsibilities delineated within the project objectives and activities, and some cooperative planning and assessment; and **Contracting**: LNGO contracted to achieve objectives set by a partner, who normally will not implement on their own in that region or sector” (e.g. WFP’s approach). The study argues that effective partnerships require: “Ability to *achieve the organisation’s objectives* through partnership; LNGOs having a strong sense of *ownership*; LNGOs having a sense of *equitable power relations*.” However, another report warns that external “funding of civil society groups has the potential to reinforce rather than reduce centralisation of power.” This can lead to increased conflict within the group, and between the civil society agency and local communities, as well as promoting ‘aid dependency’: *Doing Harm to Civil Society: cautionary tales from Paung Ku* (2010).

Agency Standing Committee. (However, since this was replaced by a Humanitarian Country Team, more local agencies have been included.)

Nevertheless, many Myanmar civil society actors found that responding to Cyclone Nargis was a learning experience – if sometimes also traumatic, and frustrating. New relationships were established, both with international agencies and donors, and within the rapidly 'thickening' Myanmar civil society sector.<sup>27</sup> The maturing of the civil society sector is illustrated by number of developments, such as the May 2008 establishment (in partnership with several INGOs) of the Local Resource Centre, in order to better coordinate between local and international agencies, to build national NGO capacity, and to advocate on behalf of Myanmar civil society. Another important indigenous forum is the Myanmar NGO Network. In general, those national NGOs which already, before Cyclone Nargis, had well-established values and coherent agendas were better able to resist being 'bulldozed' by international agencies and donors.

An ALNAP study of civil society responses to Cyclone Nargis<sup>28</sup> is worth quoting at length:

Within hours of the storm, thousands of self-help initiatives within the Delta were spontaneously providing life-saving assistance. This was soon matched by a second wave of support from formally organised civil-society actors (school-based, faith-based, developmental, and private-sector) and the wider public of Yangon and other cities and towns. With a far greater knowledge of the local context, and of how to overcome operational constraints (logistical, social or political), this local response was in many ways better equipped to respond to the disaster than was a more typical, centralised international aid response... The familiarity of these groups with the local environment and with local needs meant that they could overcome the significant constraints hampering international aid agencies. They knew which local markets and supply chains were still operating – all they lacked was the money to buy food, medicines, clothes and shelter, and later to fund the restoration of livelihoods.

[...]

Networking and communication between existing and emerging local civil society organisations was all but non-existent, compounded by the lack of channels for dialogue with the large agencies shaping much of the international response.

[...]

By the close of 2009 ... 530 civil society organisations [had implemented] almost 800 of their own proposals to provide 550,000 victims of the cyclone with life-saving and livelihood-recovery assistance using grants worth over \$2 million.

Many recipients understood the aid they received in terms of Buddhist notions of 'donation' – i.e. not as something they had a right to receive, or question the quality of, but rather something that more powerful people granted them, and for which

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<sup>27</sup> The maturing of the civil society sector is illustrated by number of developments, such as the May 2008 establishment (in partnership with several INGOs) of the Local Resource Centre, in order to better coordinate between local and international agencies, to build national NGO capacity, and to advocate on behalf of Myanmar civil society. Other important indigenous forums are the Myanmar NGO Network, and Paung Ku.

<sup>28</sup> Justin Corbett, ALNAP CASE STUDY NO. 4: *Supporting community-based emergency response at scale: innovations in the wake of Cyclone Nargis* (2010).

they should be grateful. Likewise many local benefactors provided aid as 'donations' bestowed on unfortunate victims, and for which the giver would accrue merit. Of course, compassion for other human beings also played an important role. Such religious orientations must also be taken into account when assessing the activities of donors from Myanmar.

### International agencies

Following the violent suppression of the 1988 democracy uprising, most donors terminated assistance to the new SLORC military regime. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have not provided any loans to the government since 1987.

Against this backdrop, between 1991–93 MSF Holland and World Vision became the first INGOs in July 2010 to (re-)establish official programmes in Burma (as the country was then still officially called). Since the mid-1990s, the number of international organizations working in the country has gradually increased. By late 2007 (on the eve of Cyclone Nargis), there were over 50 registered INGOs in Yangon, with Memoranda of Understanding with the Government (mainly the Ministry of Health, and also with the Na Ta La, Home Office and Ministry of Education) – with several studies others hoping to negotiate agreements, plus the two branches of the International Red Cross.

At least after the first month or so a particularly harsh government restrictions, international organisations (INGOs and UN agencies), played key roles in helping cyclone survivors to stay alive, and begin the task of rebuilding their communities. As such activities have been well-documented elsewhere, they are not addressed in detail in this report.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that some INGOs already present in the country at the time of Cyclone Nargis had relatively little problem accessing affected populations, due to the good relations they had previously developed with the Myanmar authorities.

### Humanitarian clusters

The origins and progress of the UN-led 'humanitarian reform' process are beyond the scope of this report.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Myanmar, the 'cluster approach' was first rolled out in response to Cyclone Nargis but only very slowly did it manage to include a meaningful representation by local actors. A number of factors may have contributed to this – among them lack of knowledge, a degree of suspicion and distrust, arrogance, language barriers and some very real security concerns shared by all sides. In particular, participation by local NGOs in the cluster system was limited, due to the small number of appropriately trained national staff, with good English language skills.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, WFP's 2008 account of its activities - which almost entirely omits any mention of the organisations which it sub-contracted to actually distribute food aid. Indeed, this glossy, and otherwise informative, report only mentions WFP's international and local NGO 'Cooperating Partners' on the final page.

<sup>30</sup> For a recent assessment see *Review of the engagement of NGOs with the humanitarian reform process* (October 2009: <http://www.icva.ch/ngosandhumanitarianreform.html>).

In 2009 the UN and its partners moved to extend this approach to coordination, to cover (in principal) all parts of the country. In late October an inaugural Protection Working Group meeting was held in Yangon, to map out a country-wide protection strategy.

The Protection Working Group aims initially attempt to identify protection issues regarding which there is some likelihood of constructive engagement with the government (or other) authorities – hopefully, moving on later to address more 'hard-core' issues. Therefore, topics such as the protection of women and children (e.g. trafficking) are expected to be prioritised for the discussion. As with other cluster meetings, these discussions focused particularly on international agency coordination. Little consideration was given to the roles played by affected communities, CBOs or local NGOs. The instrumental (/dismissive) attitude towards community-based protection was perhaps best illustrated by a quote from one UN agency representative: "we need to identify which local actors and CBOs are present on the ground, so that we can use them to gain access to the community."

In 2010 the indigenous NGO community in Myanmar established a Contingency Planning Working Group (CPWG), as a national-level emergency response mechanism. In many ways this mirrors the UN cluster systems, with local NGOs acting as cluster heads in different sectors such (health, shelter etc.). The CPWG proved its worth in the impressive local response to Cyclone Giri (which affected more than 260,000 people in western Myanmar) in October 2010, in a context where international organizations could not initially gain access to some sensitive areas.<sup>31</sup>

### Assessing assistance

According to the Tripartite Core Group (TCG)'s initial assessment of the social impacts of Cyclone Nargis, and humanitarian responses:<sup>32</sup>

Levels of aid vary between and within villages. Although there is a broad correlation between the level of aid received and the level of damage and loss, there is a negative correlation between the level of aid received and distance from urban centres. A number of villages close to urban centres received high levels of aid despite being relatively less affected by Nargis. The types of aid most frequently received were food, household goods, and shelter and farming inputs, which were distributed to most of the villages studied. Health assistance and fishing inputs were received by fewer villages. Aid appears to be helping villages recover: there is a link between the amount of aid received and the speed of recovery. However, the level of damage and loss is a larger determinant of recovery. Many moderately or highly affected villages were not recovering quickly despite receiving relatively high levels of aid. This suggests that the scale of aid and/or its effectiveness is still insufficient... In almost every village, aid providers rather than aid recipients determined what kind of aid would be provided to whom.

### The situation in 2010

In April 2010 the TCG reported<sup>33</sup> that quantities of aid were declining, especially in terms of food, household goods and the provision of shelter. Furthermore, serious 'disjunctions' existed between villagers' expressed needs (for agricultural credit and inputs, and local infrastructure development), and the types of aid provided by

<sup>31</sup> The cluster approach is currently (mid-2011) undergoing review, including efforts to include greater efforts to ensure accountability to affected populations.

<sup>32</sup> Tripartite Core Group, *Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring* (November 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Tripartite Core Group, *Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring* (April 2010).

outside groups. One conclusion was that "villagers are not being involved sufficiently in aid provision... Aid providers continue to be the main decision makers when it comes to determining both the type of project and the process of implementation."

The TCG report detected some recovery in the agricultural sector. However, many villages remained affected by a range of problems, including rodent infestations and soil salination. Furthermore, most fishing communities and day labourers had yet to recover from the devastation of Cyclone Nargis. As a result, indebtedness remained widespread, leading among other things to asset depletion.

The TCG report also observed that "owing to a strong social fabric Delta communities have stayed resilient despite the continued challenges they face... People in all villages continue to work together in a wide range of development and social activities." Many women had reportedly experienced empowerment as a result participating in post-cyclone relief and rehabilitation activities.

By July 2010, the results of the final TCG assessments in the Delta indicated improved food security and physical health, including access to clean water. However, the reports also highlighted "the need for continued support to livelihoods and shelter sectors" and that despite reported signs of recovery in the farming sector, the harvest in majority of villages was still more than 30% below pre-Nargis levels. Moreover, the situation of fisher-folks declined significantly over the previous year due to "decline in fish stock and lack of credit and livelihood support."<sup>34</sup>

In July 2010, ASEAN-led TCG recovery assistance in Cyclone Nargis-affected regions was wound up. Many local and international agencies have continued their work with affected populations but at a lower scale than previously due to the improved conditions and the lack of continued funding. Access to the cyclone-affected area for humanitarian agencies has remained relatively good. However, the process of obtaining travel permits and visas for international staff and renewing Letters of Agreement to operate has become more cumbersome as the agencies now have to go through respective line ministries rather than the more streamlined channels under the Ministry Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. The operational humanitarian space on the ground has remained good for both local and international agencies and disruptions during the period of the first elections in 20 years in November 2010 were minimal. No comprehensive assessments of the rate of recovery have been carried out since the end of the TCG. Sector and geographically-focused assessments indicate that recovery continues to improve, reaching near pre-Nargis levels in the northern parts of the affected area - while structural constraints, such as lack of access to affordable credit, lack of modern farming technologies and generalized poverty remain ingrained. In the worst-affected southern area, recovery in the livelihoods situation has improved significantly in comparison to 2009-2010, mainly due to a good harvest. A survey carried out in late 2010 and early 2011 for large parts of Bogale Township by the Bogale Agriculture Technical Working Group (BATWG) - comprised by local and international NGOs, and local businesses and government staff - indicates that "the

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<sup>34</sup> TCG, Myanmar: Aid is still needed despite progress in Cyclone Nargis-affected area (July 2010)

situation seems to be improving with an average increase in (rice paddy) average yields by 25% between 2009 and 2010". However, a number of constraints, such as lack of investment, continues to hamper further progress.<sup>35</sup>

As of May 2010, only \$125 million had been committed to the TCG's three-year project for post-cyclone recovery efforts, out of a projected budget of US\$691 million. (Funds of US\$326 million were committed to the original 2008 Myanmar Flash Appeal, out of US\$477 million requested.)<sup>36</sup> Updated figures are not available. However, in the livelihoods sector the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), a multi-donor consortium, has provided around \$20 million in 2010 and plans to provide a further \$15 million in 2011–2013.

#### **1.4 Terminology and governance**

The terminology used in this report is based on the literal translation of the Burmese terms. Interviewees generally referred to different occupational groups as farmers, fishermen or *bout*. The latter is the local term for landless labourer engaged mainly as seasonal farm labour, but substituting their income with small-scale fishing or odd jobs (e.g. making thatch out of palm leaves).

Regarding governance structures, interviewees generally refer to the official village leader (as sanctioned by the government) as the '100-household leader' (*Ya Einmu*), irrespective of the actual number of households in the village (except in larger villages, that may have several '100-household leaders' and one overall village chief). For every 10 households a representative is also selected who is referred to as the '10-household leader'. The official village leader and other leading members of the community are often referred to as the *lu gyi* (literally meaning 'big people'). Most villages also contain informal groups of village elders (including retired village chairmen), referred to as the *Ya Mi Ya Pa* (literally, the 'parents' of the village) or sometimes the *na ya ka* (literally, the 'patron').

As per the government structure, a cluster of villages are combined into a Village Tract governed by a Village Tract Chairman, most frequently referred to as the *yayaka* (with reference to the Burmese abbreviation for village tract) or the *okkata* ('chairman'). Village tracts are combined into Townships where various ministerial departments are also located. Townships (and larger Districts) are combined into the 14 Regions and States (previously Divisions and States) which make up the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Following the transfer from military rule to a military-controlled government in late March 2011, Regions and States are governed by regional assemblies with limited powers. The village and village governance structure has stayed the same, although some titles have changed.

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<sup>35</sup> BATWG Monsoon harvest survey 2010, Bogale - 8th April 2011 - GRET/FAO.

<sup>36</sup> According to Bishow Parajuli, the UN Resident Coordinator in Myanmar, "the consequence of insufficient funding is that there are serious unmet needs for more sustainable shelter and agricultural support... Programmes have been scaled back, cut or cancelled and staff numbers have been reduced." Only 12% percent (less than \$22 million of the \$176 million requested) of funds necessary to provide adequate shelter have been received, leaving around 800,000 survivors (160,000 families in 11 townships) without a proper roof over their heads: Reuters (30-4-2010).

## 2.0 FINDINGS

### Immediate aftermath

Much of the material contained in Part 2 focuses on villagers' experiences in the weeks and months after Cyclone Nargis. However, we begin by examining the immediate aftermath of this unprecedented disaster. When reading villagers' testimony, it should be borne in mind that experiences of and responses to Cyclone Nargis varied considerably, depending mostly on the extent to which communities were affected.

These interviews have been altered, in order to disguise the identities of specific individuals and places visited. In most cases, the number of people interviewed and their general situation is indicated, in order to provide context, although in most cases only one voice is recorded.

### 2.1 Villagers' experiences, and tales of survival (and not surviving)

#### Threats/concerns:

- Drowning
- Lack of food & water
- No shelter and other supplies to sustain survival and livelihoods
- Lack of medical care
- Lack of protection from theft in the days and first weeks after the cyclone
- Lack of means of transportation (boats)

#### Responses:

- Climbing and holding on to trees or rooftops, staying in more solid structures, clinging on to floating trees/debris
- Trying to hold on the weaker/younger family members (children)
- Scavenging for food & collecting rain water
- Sharing among survivors
- Giving priority to most vulnerable in the community
- Informal & formal organisation among survivors
- Departure/movement
- Staying & rebuilding
- Reaching out for help outside community

Survivors were often deeply traumatised by their experiences of the storm. Those who lived, did so by staying in the tops of trees or other high places (for example, those few rice barns which were not destroyed), by holding onto tree trunks, or sometimes by floating on debris. When they came down from the trees, people were dazed and exhausted. Many were injured – often severely – and for those who had been swept away, there was a long walk back home, or to the nearest settlement. Along the way, people often encountered large numbers of dead bodies. Compounding all these difficulties was a terrible thirst experienced by most people,

as they had not drunk for many hours, and most water sources (e.g. wells and pools) were polluted.

Many people reported drinking coconut milk to stay alive, and eating coconut flesh, together with grains of wet rice and other degraded foods salvaged from the receding flood-water, including dead chickens and pigs. Occasionally, people were also able to salvage goods from destroyed small shops which existed in a few villages. Often, great difficulty was experienced in making cooking fires.

These first tasks of survival seem in most cases to have been organised quite spontaneously, sometimes with local informal leaders emerging, including monks, pastors and teachers. Survivors report that, in these early days, people felt themselves to be equal in the face of disaster – i.e. social and political stratification fell away, as communities struggled to survive in the aftermath of the cyclone.<sup>37</sup>

In the first hours and days after the cyclone, people searched for their lost relatives and friends. They found scraps of clothing, including rice sacks and plastic sheeting. A few women reported dressing themselves in scraps of monks' robes – which is culturally taboo. However, as everyone was in the same situation, no disapproval was expressed.

One elderly and dignified Muslim gentleman, who had lost more than a dozen close family members, described the joy of finding other survivors: "I hugged many at that time, and offered them my ragged shirt, because they were naked and I still had undergarments. At that time, every man was my brother."

In some of the more remote and worst affected areas, for the first 6–8 weeks people survived almost entirely on their own resources and initiatives. This aspect of survival and self-protection has been largely overlooked in most accounts of the cyclone and its aftermath. Due to destroyed infrastructure and other difficulties, it was often many days or weeks before outside help reach the most remote villages. This would likely have been the case regardless of any obstruction of humanitarian access by the government.

Survivors explained how, in these first days and weeks, they tried to save the little food and water available for those they saw as the most vulnerable: children, women, the elderly, sick and injured people. These were also the first to benefit from available shelter and transport to safer places. This findings also illustrates how basic humanitarian principles are not just something owned by humanitarian professionals, but that these values are widely shared cultured norms and practises across humanity.

The main threats faced by people in the first post-disaster phase were lack of food, water and adequate supplies to sustain survival and livelihoods, and also in the first days and weeks after the cyclone, a widespread perception regarding lack of protection from theft. Some villagers responded by staying in the village, to rebuild their houses and protect what few possessions remained. Some people stayed behind in villages where they had lost their loved ones because they felt an

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<sup>37</sup> As in the Karen Area Study, the quality of local (including informal) leaders seems to have been a key variant in terms of gaining access to resources.

emotional tie, and also to 'maintain a presence', and deter opportunistic thieves. Others chose to depart when the opportunity arose – at least for a while. When people moved from disaster-affected villages to government-organised resettlement sites (see Section 5), some did so spontaneously, while others were instructed to do so by the authorities.

Some survivors explained how they were picked up by private or government rescue boats to go to the resettlement sites in or near the larger towns. This generally occurred a week or so after the cyclone. Others managed to travel to these temporary settlements by their own means. For example, despite the almost total destruction of some villages and all their boats, groups of villagers mended the severely damaged boats in a joint effort and organise their own rescue, or to evacuate wounded villagers. Others were rescued by relatives living elsewhere who travelled to the worst-affected areas and evacuated the villagers in their own boats. As one group of men put it:

We tried to help them [fellow villagers] as best we could. Those who had badly bruised or broken body parts we tried to help with bandages from pieces of clothes and other materials to support and protect the wounded parts. We then mended a broken boat so we could row those who were badly wounded to Bogale. That was a downstream trip of 5 – 6 hours, and 9 – 10 hours going upstream.

#### 34-year-old Ya Einmu (village leader):

We lost everything and nothing was left. The next day we gathered together and we all went to Bogale. [...] We saw an empty boat which we, the men, managed to drag out of the water. We got another broken boat machine that was left behind and fixed it. There was another boat left in a tree; altogether there were three boats. With the three boats we carried all the people – 170 of them – to K-C-G but there was nothing not even drinking water, so we proceed to Bogale. Some people who had relatives at M- went there.

At that place [government school] we had to live on a tin of rice. We had to try to find things to eat as much as we could. We stayed there for 7 days. In between the school principle took a lead and asked for rice at the rice mills. We got a little bit of wet rice. After that we were asked to work. As we felt really fragile we could not work. First they said they would pay us 1,000 Kyat. We thought that it is not bad if we could get 1,000 Kyat, but actually they did not give us. A village sectary asked us to carry the rice. We also had to carry the aid that arrived at the jetty. Early morning he gave us a packet of instant noodles to eat. Can you imagine how long this noodle will last? At noon we all got empty tummy. We asked him to give us rice but he did not. He did not give us money either. So we said, if it is like that we will leave.

#### 32 year-old married male graduate:

We could rebuild the village four month after the Nargis. Some people went to take refuge at Bogale. Some people stayed behind in the village and took refuge at ... the monastery and the school. There were around 40 –50 people. [...]We boiled some leftover rice. After that the army arrived and began to distribute a tin of rice per person. We just had to rely on that ration. Some farmers living inside the creek still had their house and paddy containers, so we did not completely run out of food. [...]Soon after Nargis the army arrived. Battalion No. 35 said they would rebuild the village, and so they did. Previously as people lived scattered around the village and it was hard to manage them, so the army planned to build at the top of the village, gather all the houses together and make a block.

#### Group of eight farmers:

In the wake of Nargis, some went to Bogale and others M- G-. There were about 30 people left behind in the village. About five days after the incident, when military men arrived, fresh water was provided. Immediately following Nargis we had collected rain water for drinking. The army also gave each villager one condensed milk tin of rice in the morning and another in the afternoon. Rice was rinsed in the salt water, drained with the bamboo sieve and cooked. [...]We also received the packets of dried noodle and tins of rice gruel from the military men. The people lived in the corridor of the monastery, school and granaries. They also lived in the two zinc-roofed houses which weren't carried away in Nargis.

#### Group of five women:

Most of us were left hung in the trees. A father was looking around for clothes to wear. Later he found a box of clothes. We stayed at U- house at the mouth of the creek for about four days. We lived on broken rice and also green bananas boiled with salt water. We use rainwater only to cook rice. Then we went to M- G-, and afterwards made a plan to go back.

Since we didn't have utensils to cook the rice distributed by the military, we had to borrow these from the villagers. When in M- G-, we received the bowls and fish paste from the military men... In the afternoon, dead bodies were buried and the obstacles were removed from the roads. The men were cutting the fallen trees with saws, and women were clearing the debris up. In spite of being one of 'the gentle sex', I buried the corpses – and was not scared of them. I was only one woman who did it. I buried two dead bodies... Clearing up took about ten days. When the military men were present, we mostly received snacks, tinned fish, condensed milk tins, and dried noodle as well as the ration supplied by airdrop. Even before we left for our village, they gave us the ration, chopper, and hatchet. ... At that time, there was a plenty of fish in the paddy fields. If we caught prawns, we exchanged them for rice. While living in the monastery, we went out together for catching fish. The military men also did.

#### Well-off farmer:

The whole village was destroyed because all the houses were made with thatch and bamboo. My house was two stories, made with wooden and zinc-roof top and all the roof top went with the wind. All the farms were destroyed. Next to my house there was a paddy container. It was quite big so the whole village came and took refuge.

#### According to one village man:

[The water begin to rise] at around 2:30 pm. A few moments later it rose up to chest height. At that time the whole village could not move. When the water reached up to 12 feet everyone disappeared. Most people lost their lives because they tried to save others. At 7 in the morning the water went down but the water level was not the same in all villages. Most people from D- village were floating here [dead].

Our families were separated earlier. We swam and did not know where we were anymore. I think we landed on an Island. I saw two people there. I picked a coconut and ate it. I found a bottle of oil and drank it. Oil is good for the thirst. I asked other people to drink the oil. At first they did not want to. But after a while they drank it. The next day we waited for the situation of the river and to hear about people and we went back. When we arrived in the village ... Only seven or ten people were left alive. We would have liked to boil a dead pig but did not have any matches. We tried to use a stone to make the fire but it didn't work. Ten days later villagers gradually

arrived back. [...] They brought matches, hammer and saw, and the materials to build the house.

As I did not have anything to eat I just drank alcohol. The alcohol bottle came from the shop, and was buried in the earth.

#### Group of village men:

Just after Nargis night we tried to get some remaining rice and then dry it in the sun – enough to eat. We recovered it from damaged granaries in the ruins of the houses. [...] In the very first days, 6 or 7 men [emerged as leaders]. These were men the villagers agreed were the most reliable and included village elders and heads of 100 and 10 houses. The group decided that the salvaged food should be shared, with priority given to: 1. children, 2. women and 3. men.

In practice this meant that the first days after Nargis, children were given 2 meals per day, women 1 or 2 meals per day with the men only receiving one meal per day and some men surviving for up to four days on only coconut and coconut milk

On the first day, the villagers took the surviving women and children to the monastery, where most of the building was still standing. They stayed in the monastery for four days after which they left for two nearby villages with relatives – only to start returning back one month later. The villages where they took shelter is three hours away by motor boat.

In those villages they were taken in and given food and shelter because they were not so badly affected – they had more food as their fields had not been flooded by salty water.

#### Group of six male bauk:

After about 3 days the military came and gave 1 tin of rice for each person. After about 5 days the first private people from Yangon started coming by boat with help – snacks, plastic cups, plates, tarpaulins and clothes. The villagers often would have to jump into the river and swim to these boats to get this help. The first NGOs/aid groups started to come only after about two months after Nargis. Until then we survived this way – from what we could recover and find – and then from help from private donations.

#### Group of 15 men:

Five days after we came back, we got a donation from the military – rice, potato, beans, noodles, salt, oil – but it was not enough for everyone. Some received 2 tins of rice, 2 spoons of oil, 2 onions and tomatoes for one week. After that the village leaders could go once a week to the military and get food rations. This continued for 6 months.

#### Group of village women:

We had no rice at the time, we did not even have clothes on our body – we were all naked and tried to cover our bodies with anything – clothes and even plates to hold in front of us. Some girls even had to hide in the bushes, where all the bodies were, asking others to find clothes for them. Some even had to cover in monks' robes. [They survived the storm by floating] on the water grabbing on to some wood, then using light from lightening to find bigger pieces of wood or tree trunks. I floated with the water and bumped into some trees. I was stuck here but the bodies of

family and friends had drifted far away and I never found them again. While they were floating some people were killed and wounded by roofing materials and other objects in the river.

[Later,] whenever we washed in the river, it was near the dead bodies and you would stink from that afterwards even if you had just washed.

#### Group of nine village men (Karen/Burman & Christian/Buddhist):

24 rich families gave rice from their granaries – altogether 740 baskets of raw rice for the first 4 –5 weeks. No rich family declined to help in this but the families gave different amounts. The assistance from the rich families stopped when outside assistance began to arrive. From this ‘rich rice’ everybody including the displaced people from outlying areas could eat two meals of rice per day during first weeks. [...]Everybody agreed to share the rice also with the outsiders. We were all victims and all shared fair and square. The committee also tried to organise help to some others with shelter and clothes. They collected tarpaulins floating in the river to build temporary shelters for individual families but now they are destroyed by the sun.

#### Village man (bout):

Before Nargis we had six children and my mother in law, making a total of 9 family members. During Nargis, some other people came to take refuge to our house. The house was not strong enough. It was too windy and the water also rose up. We dared not stay at home so we went to SL- house. A moment later the roof top blew off and that house also collapsed. At that time we called upon each other and hold hand together. But later we were all separated by the water. I held onto the 3 gallon container and carried my youngest son. My 8 year-old daughter floated along with water to the wood and got stuck in a tree. I could not see my second last daughter. The son whom I was holding on to also died in my arms. My wife was stuck in the tree. They were all naked.

## 2.2 Disaster preparedness

### Threats/concerns:

- Risk of another storm or flood

### Responses:

- Observing changes in weather
- Listening to radio weather forecasts
- Keeping watch men
- Wish for stronger and higher placed (Cyclone) shelter
- Temporary movement to safer areas/bigger towns
- Keeping/hiding essential food and water containers ready and secured
- Testing and keeping floatable/inflatable objects ready and secured

As illustrated by the government radio broadcast of a few hours before the cyclone (see transcript: 'Nargis Night'), communities did not receive sufficient warning of the magnitude of this impending natural disaster. Most informants felt unprepared for the ferocity of the cyclone. To the extent that people did understand that this would be a very severe storm, most felt unable to prepare their families or communities appropriately.

Following the cyclone, villagers watch out more than previously for any sign of changes in the weather and they listen to radio broadcasts (weather forecasts) more than they did before. In most cases, distrust of government information was – and remains – high, so villagers also listen also to BBC and VoA radio stations.

Several people expressed the desire for cyclone shelters to be built in their village, and/or for construction of artificial hills, to help people stay above the flood water in the event of any subsequent natural disaster. Some suggested that monasteries and/or schools should be rebuilt much stronger – and where possible higher – so as to double as a cyclone shelter. Other people described strategies to prepare food and water stocks, in case of another cyclone, including burying these essential supplies in plastic, under the ground. Even if they themselves might not survive next time, these supplies could help those who did.

In May 2009 warnings/rumours of a possible storm resulted in a significant number of people evacuating outlying villagers, and rearing towards safer areas including bigger towns. This illustrates the increased levels of awareness of natural disasters and their potentially devastating impacts among affected communities.

A husband (age 42) and wife (age 52), who re-married after Nargis said they made a few preparations for future disasters, because:

If something [as bad as this disaster] is going to happen, we will hear about it one or two days beforehand. [...] We once rehearsed swimming in the creek with tubes filled with air ... [and] we have kept them.

#### Old lady:

[During the cyclone] trees saved our lives. I think [next time] we will tie ourselves to the trees like a cradle. We will also keep the plastic containers so that we can stay inside.

#### Group of 15 men:

Q: Do you listen to the radio?

A: Yes – we listen much more to the radio now than before.

Q: Which stations do you listen to?

A: We listen to BBC, VoA, Radio Myanmar.

Q: Which ones do you prefer to listen to?

A: We prefer VoA and BBC because at the time of Nargis, Myanmar radio/TV reported very little about Nargis.

Q: Did you hear any warning of Nargis?

A: Yes – but at first they announced a warning of only 75 miles per hour and that did not scare us because we had experienced such storms before and survived them – but we had never experienced anything like Nargis...

#### Group of villagers:

This is my wish and the wish of everybody: we'd like to get life jackets. If a disaster comes, then we could wear these and could maybe survive better as there is nowhere here where we would be safe

[If there was another disaster?](laughing) we can only swim or run to a safe tree – here there is no place to take refuge.

**Small group of village women:**

In the past we did not have those feelings, now it is like a nightmare. We cannot sleep and we will look at the clouds and the level of the water and we'll wake each other and watch and wait to see what will happen.

**When asked what she worried about, a village woman (age 40-plus) said:**

Currently we are worrying about the natural disaster, and if the aid agencies stops the aid what will happen afterwards, we don't know. We are worrying for eating and living.

**Village woman (age 36):**

I would like to live without taking aid from other people, so I am trying really hard. I am worrying about my children. If Nargis returns again, how can we protect ourselves [this is what] makes me worry.

## **2.3 Psychological issues; trauma**

**Threats/concerns:**

- Trauma/psychological shock after and illness after exposure to threats to survival, loss of family members and often all earthly possessions

**Responses:**

- Sharing stories and experiences
- Supporting those most traumatised materially
- Re-marriage
- Moving to another location (temporarily or permanently)
- Religious ceremonies and togetherness
- Participation in recovery efforts that enhances psychological health

Cyclone Nargis was a terrible shock to a great many of those affected – both physically (injuries, and of course death), and mentally ('psycho-social trauma', in the humanitarian jargon). Many people are still disturbed by the cyclone and its aftermath. Some people are perhaps suffering 'survivor's guilt', and of course mourning for lost relatives and friends, as well as their previous ways of life, and suffering the hardships of their present condition. In contrast, some informants and CBO workers reported that participation in recovery efforts helped people to regain psychological balance. Talking about their experiences to fellow community members also seems to have been helpful to many people.

As well as the very serious personal difficulties they face, there is a fairly widespread perception that those most traumatised by the cyclone are less productive (in agriculture or fisheries), and economically inefficient – especially if they become 'aid dependent'. As well as influencing people's mental health and self-confidence, psychological problems can impact on local food security and communities' abilities to recover. Some people said they would prefer not to think

or talk about Nargis night again, as this would reawaken traumatic emotions and memories.

With little or no available resources or outside assistance aimed at addressing the abundant and deep psychological traumas, it is obvious that individuals and communities are very far from being able to cope with the many and varied and often very severe challenges posed by the psychological traumas after Nargis. However, it should also be noted that the Buddhist or Christian faith of many individuals and communities helped them to cope with this terrible natural disaster. It seems likely that religious faith is also important in post-traumatic recovery and rehabilitation. Certainly, faith-based networks were central to many early responses (see Section 19).

Supporting local initiatives seems to have been particularly important in helping people begin to deal with trauma. When 'victims' were encouraged and helped to be busy in rebuilding their lives and villages they started to emerge out of depression and despair more quickly than when just treated as helpless victims. International and national NGO workers reported many cases of individuals who had lost all their family members finding mental solace by being able to help others.

#### Fishermen (42 years old), lost wife & children during Nargis:

I just lived by myself for a long time [after the cyclone], and after that I got married with this 'elder sister'. If I hadn't, my mind goes everywhere and don't want to do any work.

Oh, it makes a big difference. I am not just saying good things, but we love each other and we have never argued. Beforehand I had no one to speak to. Now, as we are a family, living and eating is more routine and also we can with the business. I have regained a willingness to get back to work.

[Many people have remarried since Nargis.] At least I think there are eight or nine pairs. A while ago, two households next door to us got married.

#### 100 household-head (32 years, married) graduate:

Some people who lost the whole family, their mind went out and they did not want to do anything anymore. We don't know what to say about them. There are some people if you asked them to choose between a fish and fishing rod, they will choose the fish rather than the fishing rod [because they are so dispirited].

#### Male bout (age 32, married):

Still there are many people facing dilemmas. Their families were destroyed so they are facing trauma. They could neither work nor become normal people. Some people do not eat but drink alcohol all the time. [...] They won't live long live.

The village has to look after them. They got drunk and sleep by the creek, so people take them to go back home. We tried to comfort them but it didn't work.

#### Five village women:

There was a schoolboy who had lived at the house and was lost to the storm. [My relative's] troubled mind was weighed down with that tragedy and then went worse. He ordered all the members of the family to collect rain water when it was raining and serve him with it. He drank till his stomach became swelled out. After that he ordered to throw all of the collected rain water into the gutter. When it carried the water away to another gutter, he demanded to take it back. How could it be possible in the rain? With the stick and sword, he threatened us to do so. Sometimes, he

ordered us to climb up the trees. Eventually all of his sons and daughters tried to make their escape.

#### Husband and wife, who lost three children, with one surviving:

My wife is looked stunned and could not speak after Nargis... She could not speak for three or four months, and just wondered around, looking stunned. So I moved to this village. We do not want to bring bad memories from our old place. We missed our children so much, we could not sleep or eat... Be cannot put ourselves together because the despair we have for our children.

#### Villager (age 24):

As my whole family had gone with Nargis I did not follow to go to the [IDP/ resettlement] camp, but went to my brother's village. He is the only relative left for me. I don't want to stay in the village anymore as my mother, sister and family had gone I felt really lonely and empty. When I went to stay with my brother I got some aid like rice, oil and beans. [...]Now I had become like a stupid person. As I had nothing left, I stayed with my brother, but my sister in-law disliked me. She told me that the house is not my mother's house and I can't stay like this forever. I felt really unhappy so I came back to the village.

Currently I do not have a house and live with other people. I don't have buffaloes, seeds all equipment so there is nothing I can do. [...]

I did have parents and a house and money before.... Currently I hate myself a lot. I have no one to ask for help. As I have to take initiative, I don't know where to start. I know I have to work but I do not have money and the equipment... I feel really sad and have to start all over again. In the past I don't have to work but I do not need to look to anybody. I did not learn to work while my parents were still alive – now I am really in trouble. Everybody looks down on me and I can't take it.

#### Mother with baby:

It was all my fault ... I asked all my relatives to come and work here that's why they all died. Oh, I forgot, my grandson also survived. After Nargis my head is not good, I am too forgetful. When the aid came here my grandson thought that his mother is around and so he went on calling her "mother, mother". He would say in the night that he missed his mother, oh what a painful event!

## 2.4 Disposal of the dead

### Threats/concerns:

- The survivors' need and wish to identify the deceased and if possibly give them some kind of decent burial
- Theft and other violations against the deceased dignity and property

### Responses:

- Burial in individual or mass graves – the latter often organised/ordered by the military
- Leaving bodies to decompose in open areas
- Local organising to protect against theft

In the days after Cyclone Nargis, streams and villages were littered with dead and decomposing bodies, including those of animals, such as buffaloes and pigs. Most of the first aid workers into the field were Myanmar nationals – in part because of government restrictions placed on international agencies' access. They report

coming across huge numbers of decomposing corpses – an extremely distressing experience. One agency reported bringing a group of 60 Myanmar medical doctors into the Delta in the week after the cyclone – of whom only 15 returned for the second trip, the others having been traumatised by their experience of driving their boat through a sea of dead bodies.

One pastor described how at least 600 bodies were scattered on the beach, not far from the village. These included many members of his own family, including his wife and children. Despite requests to bury the dead, the authorities refused permission to do so, and the corpses eventually sunk beneath the sand or were washed away. In several cases, Myanmar Army (see Section 6) personnel oversaw the digging of mass graves. Reportedly, on at least one occasion, a Myanmar Air Force helicopter doused large numbers of bodies with petrol from the sky, and then ignited these. There were no efforts by the authorities or others to systematically identify the bodies, as happened for example in Thailand after the 2001 Tsunami. This made ‘closure’ for grieving relatives difficult.

In many cases, the bodies were simply left to decompose in the rivers and fields where they had ended up after the cyclone – without any burial. Skulls and bones were still visible several months after the disaster. In some cases, survivors took jewellery and other valuables from the dead. Such phenomena – or at least, widespread perceptions looting and theft – help to explain why some villagers decided to stay behind, rather than relocating temporarily after the cyclone, in order to protect their own and community possessions.

#### Group of five village women:

[While searching for food,] we found the body of my friend. While I was weeping for it cradled in my arms, a man appeared. He berated me, “Get out, kids... What are you doing here?” He continued to persuade us to leave, saying “there are banded snakeheads over there.” Therefore I turned round and left the scene. When I looked back at, I saw him cutting the tip of the corpse’s ear for earrings with a small knife. I just, “please, don’t do that, uncle – it is my friend.” But it was too late. Without any reply, he fled. I know who he is. [...] He wasn’t like that before; but, now he is wicked. In the early days after Nargis, he was thriving on the stolen properties.

#### Housewife who runs a grocery store:

The first group to arrive was soldiers from Battalion no. 66. Soon after the Nargis they came here to stay. They collected the dead bodies and burnt them.

#### One fisherman, one farmer, and one boat:

[After Nargis] we fixed the engine and travelled to Laputa. On the way there were too many bodies lying around in the river, so we had to push the dead bodies away to reach Laputa. [...] Eight days after Nargis, the army arrived. They asked us to bury the bodies. If we hesitated, they would scold or shout at us.

#### Widower (age 50):

There were many human dead bodies and it was a really foul smell. We had to cover our noses with the blanket.

#### Group of 12 women, interviewed together with the village leader

In the days after Nargis there were so many bodies stuck here so we could not live here – so we went to Bogale and stayed with our friends and relatives for a few days. Only after 1 month did we arrive back here. The dead bodies were everywhere, on the land, in the sea, in the river. [...]

The reason we went to town and only some men stayed behind was all the bad smell from the dead animals and the bodies – and we were scared. The reason the men stayed behind was that there was still material floating here. We women were afraid that someone might come and snatch it – we were afraid of thieves.

## 2.5 Flight, short-term survival, 'economic' migration, relocation sites and returns

### Threats/concerns:

- Involuntary movement
- Involuntary return
- Survival (food, water, shelter) in camp/site
- Protection en route and in camps and temporary locations/sites
- Hugely inadequate supplies for return trip and survival/recovery upon return to home village
- Aid induced (empty promises) return

### Responses:

- Limited and low key local advocacy/negotiating/pleading with authorities
- Advocacy with authorities by NGOs/UN
- Community cohesion
- Assistance from surrounding community, family, aid organisations and authorities
- Spontaneous return or resettlement
- Quiet acceptance

Within a week or so of Cyclone Nargis, large numbers of survivors – especially from the more remote and badly affected villages – had moved into IDP shelters in and on the edge of the towns. Such movement was at first largely spontaneous, but many people also received assistance from government and Myanmar Army. In many villages, some survivors stayed behind, in order to maintain a presence and guard the village (see Section 1.)

### Asked if he would ever consider moving, one of a group of 15 men said:

No – never. We will not leave our own place. We will live here where we have a lost so many family members – even if another Nargis should come. We have three main reasons for wanting to stay: 1) We have land here and can grow rice; 2) We know this place very well and therefore it is easy for us here to catch the fish or make money in other ways; 3) Our family members died here and we want to stay here where they died.

### Bout man:

The pastor suggested that children, elderly people and pregnant women should go to Pathein. I stayed behind and asked my wife and children to go to Pathein. They stayed there for one month and 5 days. At that time, we heard some rumours like everyone should go to town, or if not they would be shot. Some even said they would

have to stay in town for three years. I have never considered moving because this village is my native place and my parents also left farms for me. My children also died here so I don't want to move.

In the larger towns in the Delta, monasteries, schools, churches and other large buildings quickly filled with disaster-affected villagers in the days after the cyclone. In particular monasteries served as shelter and monks played a role in organising the donations of assistance received by well-wishers. Many interviewees reported moving voluntarily from cyclone-affected villages in the days and weeks after Nargis. Often they stayed for just a short period in the 'resettlement sites' before returning to their old locations (or sometimes moving on to new places). In the 'camps', assistance to the survivors was first provided by local faith-based or secular organisations, private and business people, and also by the government. Later, international organisations and the UN directed assistance to these temporary resettlement sites. The people who spent time in the camps provide a mixed picture of the situation. While most report adequate food provisions and acceptable conditions, others stress that the situation was crowded and unsafe. There were no reports of rape or physical violence. The reports of camp experience portray a quite 'passive' response to the situation by the displaced. A 36-year-old woman said that:

Staying [at the camp] was fine. We were given food twice a day. But when more people came in, the space become tight so some people had to move [to another camp]. We had to live in the storehouse. They provided rice and bean curry but at irregular times – like breakfast was served at 12 noon; evening food was served at 8 pm. Some children were very hungry and they cried. We heard that two people died in the storehouse as poisonous snakes bit them. In the storehouse we had to lie and sleep on tarpaulins.

One man stated that the camp was "the most miserable place – full of disappointment. It was a mess, people just staring out into space." Often, after a few days, the authorities moved relocated civilians again to new locations. Within a month, the majority of 'IDP camps' (or 'temporary relocation sites' as the UN preferred they were referred to at the time) had been closed by the authorities, and people instructed to return to their villages. However – particularly in Laputa Township, after the intervention of UN agencies and INGOs – some camps stayed open for much longer until the inhabitants could be relocated or returned with access to safe housing and other basic facilities provided by INGOs and UN agencies.

Neither returnees nor the public, nor for that matter the UN, were informed of any particular reason for the sudden closure of the camps, beyond statements by some local officials that this was due to the schools re-opening following the end of the school holidays. At the same time, the government communicated to the UN, INGOs and the public that the 'emergency phase' response was coming to an end, and that it was time to 'return to normal'. Some observers suspect that the government was also concerned about having large crowds of displaced people congregated together, which could lead to public protest causing a 'security concern'. Upon return, in many cases, people were handed a small amount of cash by the authorities (generally 5–15,000 kyat), and given some basic utilities such as a

mosquito net or cooking pots, and very limited food supplies (bags of noodles or rice). This support was inadequate for meeting the basic needs of the returnees. Many people in the camps were informed that upon return to their villages they would receive substantial assistance and support for rebuilding. However, in most cases, this assistance never arrived. There is some possibility that aid was used to induce such population movements (see Section 5).<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, many people reported also wanting to go home, to the place where they had lost their relatives, and in order to rebuild their communities.

#### Group of women:

Before we left the camp, the government took pictures of us and said, "See now everybody returns to rebuild their own lives." They provided us with 2 or 3 baskets of rice, and then we were told to leave the camp and return home. [...] The government took us to nearby villages by double-decker boat, and then we were told we had to walk back to our village. [...] There is a saying: 'a dog in an empty space doesn't know where to go' – our lives were like that.

#### Woman (age 36):

The villagers organized the trip [relocation to M-]. We went with the government boat. We teamed up 35 people in a group y father is elderly, so he led the trip. In the team 3 people had found their friends so they left for other team. After that they (the soldier) asked my father's team to come into the boat. As there were only 32 people left in the team the soldiers asked where were the other three. My father answered we cannot persuade them to come along. He hit my father's head with a metal pole. My father got dizzy and could not say anything. Before we reached M-, on the way, the donors gave us food and snacks.

#### Traditional midwife:

I went to M-. All the staying and eating was fine there. Then they sent me to SDG village. They [said they] planned to build a house for me at M-. But here [at K-village], there were many pregnant women waiting to give birth. There was no woman to help them deliver their babies, so I returned to here.

#### 45-year-old widow:

[We stayed at the camp for] one week at Pathein, and then a further month with relatives. We went back to the camp as we are refugee people, so we were happy to stay at the refugee camp. We don't want to stay with those who were not affected by Nargis as they often asked us about the Nargis experience and we don't want to renew it. Among ourselves we don't want to talk about it. No one asked about it but encouraged each other. When we came back to the camp my younger son felt sick so he was hospitalized. I was crying like anything but a villager and an NGO worker helped me out. They sent some food and helped us with the cost. I stayed at the hospital. I have known many people and shared our dilemma. I felt a lot better afterwards. Everyone tried to help out and we came back. I met with my daughter in-law there. She got really thin. We tried to find out our village situation and planned to return, but we did not have the money. Later we got the money and went back.

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<sup>38</sup> In many cases, return from resettlement sites contravened the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (Brookings Institute), *Protecting Persons Affected by Natural Disasters: IASC Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters* (June 2006).

Very few interviewees reported that they made any attempts to oppose the instructions, or bargain for a different solution. Some people did not immediately return to the villages they had left, but went to stay with relatives in less-affected areas often for several weeks/months. Spontaneous return by people who had stayed with relatives (instead of going to the camps and/or after leaving the camps) was also widespread in the months following the cyclone.

Another major issue to emerge in this context is 'economic' migration: people moving out of affected villages, in order to seek work or otherwise secure livelihoods (or at least achieve minimal food security) beyond the cyclone-affected areas. There were various reports of people, including vulnerable women and children, moving to Yangon – and even to Thailand – to find work. A related issue is the return of such migrants from far-flung places of employment, to seek out loved ones in the cyclone-affected areas, and contribute towards the task of rebuilding (see also aid migration: Section 11).

## **Aid**

Whether people decided to stay in the villages, or returned home after several weeks (some after several months), they faced a huge task in rebuilding their communities, and to secure food, water, shelter and income. From the outset, the response of local NGOs, the Myanmar Red Cross Society, businesspeople and private donors to meet the needs of the population was impressive. The international aid effort started to gather momentum after about 1–2 months, when restrictions on access were eased. The government response was in size and scope inadequate to meet needs, but did contribute, at least in the initial stages. While the aid had a substantial positive impact on people's lives, it also led to conflict and discussions, which again prompted new strategies and responses by the local population. The following sections outline the main threats/concerns and responses in relation to different types of assistance following the cyclone.

It is noteworthy that respondents rarely mentioned legal or rights-based aspects of protection, either as articulated under Myanmar or international law. Villagers did not refer to legal frameworks, and seem to have only very limited expectations of protection being provided by government agencies. Although some villagers (particularly elites within communities) did engage with the state for various purposes, few of the self-protection strategies reported related to the activities or responsibilities of the state. However, informants did place considerable importance on the ability of community leaders to negotiate with both government and aid agencies, in order to gain access to assistance.

### **2.6 Myanmar Army**

In several cases, the first outside assistance received by the cyclone-affected communities interviewed for this report was from the Myanmar Army (and in some cases also the navy and Air Force). This assistance was more apparent in the most remote and security-sensitive locations where extra troops were deployed shortly after the disaster, mainly for security reasons. This aid may have consisted of

poorly targeted relief supplies (e.g. provision of two tins of rice per week, plus a very little cooking oil, instant noodles and a few onions was mentioned by several informants). Nevertheless, it was appreciated. Villagers reported that the level of support received from the Tatmadaw varied, depending on the personality of individual field commanders. Some also mentioned that larger supplies were not distributed to the affected population but kept by the army.

**Male 32 years:**

We boiled the left-over of some rice. After that the army arrived and began to distribute a tin of rice per person. We just have to rely on that ration.”

**Group of farmers:**

About five days after the incident (Nargis), when military men arrived, freshwater was provided. ... They also gave each villager one condensed milk tin of rice in the morning and another in the afternoon..... We also received the packets of dried noodle branded Yum Yum and tins of rice gruel from the military men.

**A mother with the baby was asked about the Army's response:**

They provided 2 tins of rice and 2 tins of condensed milk, twice. They also gave instant noodles, soap, medicine and monosodium glutamate [plus some Burmese food items].

In several villages, the Myanmar Army stationed soldiers to assist villages in recovery efforts. Troops often stayed for several months, and generally took the lead in ordering – often traumatised, and thus supposedly 'apathetic' – villagers what to do. Soldiers reportedly worked side-by-side with villagers, to re-build roads and other infrastructures. Myanmar Army personnel were also involved in disposal of the dead, sometimes ordering villagers to assist in this unpleasant task against their will (see Section 4). Villagers did not report large-scale systematic abuses perpetrated by the army such as rape, torture and killings. However, some mentioned that some of the soldiers were rude, verbally abusive and would make use of villagers' assets, such as boats etc., without asking permission.

**Village woman:**

The first group [to arrive in the village after Nargis] was the soldiers. Soon after the Nargis they came here to stay. They collected the dead body of human and burnt them.

**Group of women:**

Then the army arrived and asked the villagers to bury the bodies. The army and 20 villagers buried the bodies and a helicopter dropped some food at that time.

**Group of men:**

They [the villagers] fixed the engine and travelled to Laputa. On the way there were too many bodies lying around in the river, so they had to push the dead bodies away to reach Laputa. They asked for help.

...After eight days of Nargis, the army arrived. They asked us to bury the bodies. If we are hesitate to do it they would scold or shout at us.

Several villagers interviewed appreciated this assistance – although they may have been too scared to express negative opinions, either at the time or subsequently to outsiders.<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, a few stories emerged of individual soldiers' transgressions, for example in interrogating and punishing wrongdoers (e.g. suspected thieves). There was also widespread Myanmar Army involvement in forced resettlement, to and from temporary relief sites (see Section 5).

#### Group of men, women and children:

At the first 15 days, the military distributed two cans of rice per one person even the new comers also received the rice. At the early days of post-Nargis, the military took the duty of security for the villages and it lasted for two months... After Nargis, we depended on the distribution of porridge at Bogale for 15 days. After that we were moved to M- and one month later, we were asked to go back to our village. At first, we went to another village but we were not allowed to stay there by the military.

There were some reports of forced recruitment of young men into the army, although whether this was a systematic problem was not possible to assess. Awareness of these issues in the community is a major asset in being able to resist forced recruitment.

#### On the issue of recruitment a man said:

Even yesterday the soldiers' recruitment team arrived here. They said we have to give them one person per village. I told them that please don't do that and it would be good to ask the villagers first... I heard from the villagers that they persuade the boy at the teashop by saying, how much salary he will get and after that he will be promoted. They asked the boy to look at them and said how smart they are now. The boy listened to them quietly and after that the conversation was interrupted by the man. He told the boy your mother is calling you. So they stopped.

Security is also mentioned by people as one of the army's tasks, though interviews reveal little about the impact of this security presence.

#### A 40 year-old man said:

After two weeks of Nargis, some soldiers from air force arrived in our village. Their main responsibilities are security and to help rebuild the houses, other buildings and road. They brought some zinc for the roof top

#### Village man:

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<sup>39</sup> Many informants demonstrated ingrained fear of the army ("we can't talk about that to you"). This may have resulted in under-reporting of abuses. In attempting to respond to such concerns, the researchers triangulated data generated during interviews with key informants and in group sessions, together with other sources of information.

Soon after Nargis the army arrived. They said they would rebuild the village so they did. Previously as people lived along the village and it was hard to manage them so they plan to build at the top of the village, gather all the houses together and made the block.

In some areas (particularly those populated by Karen people), communities are perceived as historically opposing the Myanmar military government, and were targeted in counter-insurgency campaigns in the early 1990s (see local histories: Section 23). In the aftermath of the cyclone, Myanmar Army units were sometimes positioned in such areas considered antagonistic to the government – presumably, in order to prevent any expression of discontent. This was the case especially in the context of international calls to invoke the ‘R2P’ doctrine, in order to insist that the government provide humanitarian access to aid agencies – by force if necessary. Such actions encouraged the government to divert troops away from emergency relief. Another consequence was to 'scare off' aid agencies, as humanitarian organisations generally did not want to be associated with Myanmar Army troops positioned in sensitive areas, and thus avoided working in villages with a strong military presence. Thus, international rhetoric in the weeks after the cyclone in that respect may have caused some harm to the most vulnerable communities, who received less assistance than they might otherwise have done. Such 'negative targeting' persisted into 2009.

## **2.7 Civil society responses (formal and informal)**

### **Threats/concerns:**

- Limited/delayed access to disaster affected areas
- Distant donors with little local knowledge

### **Responses:**

- People surviving by helping each other
- Local leaders or groups help organising the community
- Sharing of scarce resources
- Organising aid distributions informally
- Formal aid distributions from outsiders
- Trading of aid

It is very important to acknowledge the key role which surviving people and diverse Myanmar civil society groups played in responding to the natural disaster, particularly in the first days, weeks and months after Cyclone Nargis. The interviews focused particularly on the key importance of local leadership. The ability of Cyclone-affected villages to access supplies in the early days depended on their guts and solidarity, and the hard work and imagination of local leaders – e.g. the pastor who went to Laputa, and then beyond to Bathein, to access supplies, and personally saw that they got back to the village in a timely manner. However, in some cases, village leaders were regarded as less than effective, and therefore not very 'clever' in engaging with the authorities or aid agencies, in order to access assistance. Some village and village tract leaders also demonstrated corruption.

Local leadership is particularly important, in the relative absence of an effective state response. Many communities reported difficulties in accessing local authorities, or aid agencies – and thus much-needed assistance – especially in the early weeks.

As in all disasters, the first people to offer help were fellow community members. In the case of Nargis, this was true for quite a long period after the natural disaster, as access for aid agencies remained difficult. In the first immediate phase, sharing and equality was the main survival strategy.

**Villager, male, 40 years:**

[After Nargis] we did not go starving. Because, there are rich people in this village and they feed the villager. There were some wet rice, we washed it out and cooked it in a big wok. The whole village lives in one place and cook together.

**Man age 45:**

[on the night of Nargis] the water already had gone down and a man with a touch going around and called upon people. I thought that he was from the rescue boat. He asked me whether I still got my longyi on me and I said no. He went to get a blanket for me and I asked him about my son he said he did not know. He gathered the villagers. I found my sons in the morning but not my daughter.

**Religious leader:**

Q: How did you live after Nargis?

A: We had to collect some piece of wood and bamboo and made shelter. I had to lead the whole village and cook for them. I had to feed the children first and adult later. I had to prepare some boiled water and cool them down and keep it for the children. I just do it out of my knowledge.

**Group of villagers:**

Here, there are 13 women organized themselves (self supporting system) and set up breeding pond. They plan to keep the profit for the village's fund.

**Group of villagers:**

Q: Who led to solve the problem?

A: Soon after Nargis everybody tried to do it themselves. No one had led the village. People in the village could not go here and there. Afterwards when the donors came the Yayaka organized and helped out regardless of race or religion.

**Group of villagers:**

Q: How did people live in the village survive during Nargis and after?

A: There were nothing left and we had to drink coconut water and ate the flesh. We collected the wet rice and ate them. We collected broken pieces of houses and made shelter and we all live together. One week later people from village X came to give us clothes and food. The pastors from another village came to get us with boat. We stayed in the camp for a month and came back. We had to live on the donor's aid. .... I would like to express my heartfelt

thanks to all donors. Especially to the teachers and villagers from N- as they have helped us a lot.

#### Group of villagers:

Q: Who took the initiative to do the activities?

A: Everyone worked together.

Q: How long after you rebuild the village?

A: Six day later we made shelter to stay underneath. One month later we built the house ourselves. Some people live together and some went to the camp.

We could only get proper house the March, 2009.

However, villagers did not always distinguish between different 'donors' of assistance. In many cases, aid recipients understood transactions with donors in terms of Buddhist concepts of 'donation' – i.e. something they should be grateful for, and which they should not question or criticize. Aid was rarely seen as a 'right'.

#### Relations between local, national and international agencies

Interviews revealed that relationships between various aid actors were not very clear in the aftermath of the disaster. Many villagers did not know the agencies or the donors at all, and many mentioned duplications of aid (see the following Section 8, on targeting). As mentioned above, not many actors were present in this area prior to the disaster, and due to the state's security restrictions, access was not cleared until a few weeks into the disaster, so the international aid response was slow compared to other emergencies of similar scale. Hence, this was a unique situation, in which national and local actors were the main agencies present, but where not necessarily geared up to undertake large-scale disaster response. Furthermore, while social structures were more-or-less intact in some places, they were disrupted in others. When access was gained outside agencies, it was often not very clear on who these actors were. Such concerns extended to the issue of humanitarian coordination.

In the aftermath of the disaster, a UN-led 'vulnerability network' was set up in place of an official Protection Cluster as even the term 'protection' was deemed too sensitive for the authorities. After several months, the vulnerability network was formally recognised as the Protection Cluster. It already had active participation from Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. The Township-level Physical and Social Protection Cluster meetings focused primarily on identifying needs, and the co-ordination of assistance. The research team attended a sub-group meeting in Bogale, which was designated to address 'sensitive issues', in a less crowded forum than the main session. However, this was mostly devoted to discussing the (very real) needs of vulnerable women and children. No formal forum seemed to exist at township level in which to discuss issues such as human rights abuses (e.g. land rights issues). Such issues were mainly dealt with in a more discreet manner in agency-to-agency meetings. Most local and international aid agencies (Myanmar or expatriate staff) with a few exceptions were cautious or reluctant to engage in such discussions – and possibly jeopardize relationships with the authorities. In late 2009 the Delta Protection Working Group was re-constituted, to become a nationwide Protection Working Group.

#### One in a group of men:

If possible the NGO should have connection among themselves but I don't know what the upper level planned things.

#### Group of youth:

Q: As the donor gave priority to the boat and fisherman how did the farmer feel about it, or are there any conflict?

A: The donors directly contact with the Yareimu [village leader]. If one complains for a few people it might affect the boat and fisherman so they do not dare to complain. The Yareimu does the adjustment for the villager.

Example, in some household there are many children, in that case, the Yareimu will exclude a child in the list so the child will not get his or her quota. But that quota will be shared to a new a comer household. But a person who left the village temporarily was excluded in the list. Like an uncle went out of the village to earn money for his children school fee. He does not leave for good but his wife did not get his quota.

#### On perceptions of donors and authorities

The interviews revealed much interesting material on concepts of patronage, and reciprocal obligation. For many informants, there was an understanding that making donations to cyclone victims bestowed Buddhist merit on donors. Furthermore, assistance provided by Myanmar private citizens sometimes flowed through networks of patronage. The interviews also implied much about different understandings of state responsibility. In general, villagers seem to have very low expectations of the state, and in some cases to be critical of its responses and services. They rarely mentioned the state is a potential source of assistance. (See material on religious authorities and local history: Sections 19 & 23). Furthermore, beneficiaries were often reluctant to complain regarding goods and services received, out of fear that aid agencies might withdraw their assistance.

#### Group of women and a man:

Q: Does the government assist you at the moment?

A: Currently, the government does not give us anything. We have to rely on the donors to keep us alive.

Q: How does relying on the donors make you feel?

A: We are happy to receive from donors but as they can only give for one more month we feel sad and don't know how and when we get aid again. It's like if our parents died and we had nobody to rely on. In a way we say we are happy to receive aid but in a way it is sad when we really think about it. Probably because in the past we did not take help from anybody and we could stand on our own feet. Now we wear other people's old clothes. I don't feel good about that. Every time I pick up other peoples' clothes to wear I think about it and feel bad.

#### Group of women:

I think the government can do something better to this situation because all the organizations are under government control and the more organizations the government allow, the more benefit we get. I want the government allow more donors from abroad because all the donors have to contact directly with them.

#### Village man:

Q: Did you get it [rice]?

A: No, because I do not have any connection with the rice mill owner. He has to guarantee. For the village tract authority, he cannot grant to all. I am just a member of the village so I have no high hopes. I think it is because he does not trust the farmers.

Q: Is there anyone else you can borrow money from?

A: There is no way we can get money. Even if from NGO, they can only give a few as there are so many. Only one can efficiently assist and that is the state. This is the time for plantation and we did not get so it [rice seed] is too late.

According to the people interviewed, immediate and longer-term livelihoods survival is more-or-less up to each individual, but with some help from fellow villagers and civil society donors. Less trust is put on state structures and other formal systems. Typically, people said that they put their trust God, or that it is up to yourself to do what you can to survive.

#### Group of villagers:

Q: Who are responsible for your safety and well-being?

A: Only God could. (Said by a woman) if God touch the heart of the donors they will help us. We need some support at the same time we also have to try hard. The donors could help only a certain period of time so if we want to get back to the normal situation we have to work hard.

#### Man and with his child on the issue of safety:

Q: For your safety and wellbeing who do you think could help you?

A: Ourselves. We have to try hard for our safety. If some aid organizations or donors help us we will be able to build our lives to be safe quickly. To be safe is to survive.

#### Village man:

In the past I have never taken things people gave me but now I cannot be shy anymore. After Nargis, I did not even have clothes on my body so I had to take it.

#### School teacher, age 60:

I am old but have been helping out with aid distribution. As I run the grocery shop I don't need to worry for my eating. If the aid stopped, we have to work harder.

#### Village man:

Q: What changes do you want to see next year?

A: It is all depend on the upper level people. I can be a good follower. I wish the business could become as usual.

Q: Who can help you for your wellbeing?

A: Only God could. We also have to try hard. I wish the donor continues to support us so that we can be able to live nicely.

Donors, and especially international or outside donors (i.e. national donors that had never worked in the area before) were often perceived as distant and not really understanding the local realities. As mentioned above, this could partly have been a result of aid agencies' gaining access to a very sensitive area, resulting caution.

Old man:

Q: Thank you very much for your time, do you often experienced the foreigners came and asked questions like this?

A: Foreigner came to collect the list and left. They have never asked such questions like this. This is the first time that we can speak friendly.

Group of women and a man:

Only the top leaders of the state can do better to this situation because no one can give assistance to the people without their permission. The organization and the government agencies are necessary to give us the money but they can give as a loan, and we will pay back next year. By doing so, we will recover within a very short period. We heard that Htoo Trading will give loan and then, we took photos and submitted the application but nothing happen yet

The perception of donors as distant could also be explained by the fact that aid per se was not previously experienced by many of the people in this area. Therefore the manner in which aid agencies operate was unfamiliar to many people, and did in fact interfere with the social structure in these communities. Also, as in other disasters, people would compare the present situation to that before Nargis, and often find it difficult to accept the new reality. There were some cases were villagers openly said that aid was not really understood by the people, and that aid organisations should take more responsibility for making sure that aid dependency did not occur. Often, such views were expressed by those who had been in dominant social and economic positions prior to Nargis.

Group of villagers:

Q: Any questions or suggestions?

A: Not suggestions but just to tell you. Some donors did not collect the list. They could not give to everyone, which stirred unhappiness among the villagers. It would be good to collect the list and set up the target group. Some people do not understand how to value the thing they have got. It is also difficult for the donors.

Man age 60:

Q: Do you have anything to say or suggestions to give?

A: I would like to give some suggestions. An international donor came here and called upon all the villagers and they ranged the level of people like 1,2,3. The bout people ranged 3. Now as we all are in the same level we would like to receive the same rights. The bout people received aid and they did not want to work anymore. The aid organization will not provide aid in the rest of their lives they should know.

Religious leader:

Q: How do you think about the donors?

A: It is good that they donate to us so we could eat. Because they often come some people just look to get things and do not want to work anymore. They gradually misused the aid. They sold the aid.

Q: For the wellbeing of the family who are responsible?

A: I think God is responsible. We also are responsible for ourselves.

Group of villagers on the issue of anything further they would like to say:

Q: Do you want to ask or suggest [upon completing the interview]?

A: You ask us this so what will you give us?

The most common aid agency response was to distribute non-food items. This was mostly done according to standard aid agency procedures, with the most vulnerable and being prioritised, according to selection criteria. However, aid agencies often provided communities with insufficient explanations regarding why and how these procedures were undertaken. All donors, including the state, distributed types or volumes of relief items that were more-or-less useless for the various occupations in the villages (see Section 9). This again resulted in items being traded, sold or just not being used. In a situation of scarce resources, this was very frustrating for villagers who did not have the power or means to solve some of their livelihood issues without some external assistance (See Section 12 on livelihoods).

**A man gives an example on new items distributed but not explained:**

Previously the government gave us a sack of rice with fire place and charcoal. As the charcoal was white, we did not know it was charcoal so we eat it. It was very bitter so we spit them out. They also gave purifiers tablets. The odour was very bad so we could not drink the water and we stopped using it. We boiled and drink water.

**Group of villagers:**

Q: Why they [the farmers] have become jobless?

A: The farmers lost all their property and could not invest on the farming anymore. In addition, they are not used to fishing business so it is not very helpful. The aid agency thinks that the farmers have the farm so they gave priority to the bout. To work in the field farmers do not have buffaloes or cow or seeds so they don't know what to do

Q: For your safety and well-being who do you think are responsible?

A: We, ourselves are responsible. We have to do it ourselves. The donors try to pull us up and we also have to try to get up on our feet. I think if the donors continue to pull us up I think we will be able to get up on our feet.

**Village teacher, male, 45:**

Those who provided aid provided with good heart but the system is a bit different. Like I said before, there are three groups A, B, C. A group is rich people group for example, like those who own land. B group is middle people group for example, who own, ducks 50-100. C group is those who live on day to day basic, like Bout people. For example they do all sorts of job like, working in the field, and fishing. At this point what I would like to say is, those who own land called farmers but they only have the name (farmers) but they also are in debt. They have to ran the business by borrowing money with interest. Frankly speaking they are sink in debt they don't have much. The aid provider assumed they the farmer should be fine, so excluded from the provision list. So they main focus on group C. at this point there are gap between NGO and the villagers.

**2.8 Vulnerability and targeting (wealth ranking & aid distribution)**

To talk about the 'local' – as opposed to 'global' – approaches to protection is to oversimplify. There is not one 'local' ('village', 'grassroots') voice, but a variety of interests (and identity constructions), types and levels of resource, and

opportunities for action and expression, at the local level. It is necessary to 'unpack' these positions, in order to appreciate the complexity and richness of local agency.

#### Threats/concerns:

- Unequal distribution of aid
- Corruption among authorities
- Targeting not perceived as fair
- Inappropriate aid
- Timeliness of aid
- Village unity at risk
- Social positions put under test
- Hunger and poverty due to lack of livelihood and food

#### Responses:

- Playing along with aid agency
- Redistribute aid after distribution
- Referral systems in the community
- Complaining to donor (rare)
- Sharing with villagers and relatives
- Silence: beneficiaries were afraid that agencies/donors would leave or that villagers would get into trouble with authorities
- Complaints to local authorities, in cases of perceived unfair distribution

For a number of informants, targeting of aid was not perceived as 'appropriate' by communities. Such concerns sometimes lead to conflict. In particular, many informants<sup>40</sup> expressed dissatisfaction with the 'wealth ranking' and targeting procedures used by agencies, particularly in relation to the distribution of food aid (health assistance being more widely distributed). Dissatisfaction was particularly prevalent with the 'A-B-C-D' ranking of communities, according to agencies' perception of villagers' wealth and levels of assets, and the subsequent targeting of assistance according to these rankings. Particularly from about the end of 2009, food distributions were mostly targeted only at the supposedly poorest sub-groups within affected villages (ranked D). These were generally landless labourers (bout), whereas farmers, fishermen (except very small-scale fishermen) and shop-owners were generally excluded. This targeting was generally carried out by WFP's implementing partners (a mixture of local and international NGOs). WFP often adopts such practices, especially in situations where limited funds are available; furthermore, WFP is concerned to target only the poorest-of-the-poor, thus keeping 'aid dependency' to a minimum. Many villagers responded that such distinctions were divisive and promoted conflict within communities, favouring some groups of villagers above others. They argued that the cyclone had been indiscriminate and its impacts, affecting rich and poor alike. Many informants said that they preferred instead that food and other aid items should be distributed to all in the community – as was generally the case in early distributions, in the immediate after the cyclone. Most frequently, the targeting was seen as leading to or risking disrupting 'village unity'. According to villagers, this form of targeted

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<sup>40</sup> At the end of interviews, when interviewees were asked if there was anything else they would like to add, explain or comment, the most frequent issues raised by interviewees was dissatisfaction with wealth-ranking procedures.

assistance is contrary to local traditions, is unfair and often leads to conflict over 'who is on the list', who is not, and the reasons for exclusions and other targeting decisions.

In many cases, a strong preference was stated for assistance to be shared equally between all villagers – often with the rationale that even 'big farmers' (those cultivating 50 acres or more, before the Cyclone – ranked A) had been badly affected. Often, all in the community had lost their possessions, and of course also family members have died. Such people were only rich 'on paper', due to their ownership of (currently unproductive) farmland, which they were unable to cultivate now, due to lack of labour and other inputs. Furthermore, local landholders were arguably in (greater) need, as they could only provide funds for investing in local agriculture, thus providing employment opportunities, if they received some assistance themselves. It was argued by many respondents, including many landless labourers, that only by also supporting landowners could local economies be re-started, thus providing labouring jobs to landless people (ranked C). Otherwise, the poorest-of-the-poor would remain dependent on outside assistance, without access to local jobs. Some villagers felt able to raise their concerns regarding perceived unfairness in aid distribution mechanisms, particularly if they enjoyed non-threatening relations with village authorities.

#### Husband and wife, who had lost three children (with one surviving child):

Nargis did not choose to hit either poor or rich. It was hitting everybody regardless of status. So we would like the aid organization to consider for everyone to be equal. We don't want them to range the level. Like because he has the land he was exclude; as he is not a landless labourer he is entitled. If you cannot provide to everyone then don't. We all would like to get the same. It is because I have the ducks; it doesn't mean I am rich. We have to save some food to share with the ducks too.

#### Male village teacher:

Those who provided aid, provided with good heart but the system is a bit different [to what we know]... there are three group A, B, C. A group is rich people, like those who own land. The B group is middle people, those who own 50–100 ducks, for example. The C group is those who live on a day-to-day basis, like landless labour people. For example they do all sorts of jobs, like working in the field, and fishing. I would like to say that those who own land are called farmers, but they only have the name (farmers) but they also are in debt. They have to run the business by borrowing money with interest. Frankly speaking, they are buried in debt. They don't have much. The aid provider assumed they the farmer should be fine, so excluded from the provision list. So these two main focus is on group C. At this point there are gap between NGO and the villagers.

#### For another villager, a married woman:

The problem is that the class C only receives the assistance but there are so many people excluding from the list who need food. For now we are also in the class A, but we have nothing and are in the same situation with the class C people. We only have crab-trap and boat – but it is nothing!

Informants mentioned that aid agencies often failed to communicate effectively with communities, regarding ranking and needs analysis approaches, or to consult with or explain to beneficiaries, regarding distribution methods. The impression was

that the targeting criteria and methods had been imposed on the communities. In some cases, the field staff of aid agencies went to considerable efforts to explain the targeting criteria to the population, and negotiated who 'qualified', which to some limited degree lowered tensions. However, the criteria were rarely seen as 'fair'.

There was a danger expressed by some villagers that (only) supporting the least well-off may encourage 'aid dependency', and reinforce the 'laziness' of – often traumatised – people. Some stressed that 'capability' to manage the aid should also be a targeting criteria for provision, such as asset replacement (for example, of fishing boats and nets). They claimed that there was a higher risk of assets being wasted or sold off, if provided to someone generally known in the village to be careless or short-sighted.

For example, a 30-year-old Ya Einmu (a university graduate) said that:

All of them [the villagers] have faced difficulties, farmers as farmers, fisherman as fisherman. Amidst the difficulties the worse thing are those who are lazy and stupid to work. Some people just sit and wait to get aid without doing any work. Actually what they should do is live on the aid and work hard to save some wages to rebuild their lives... Some people who lost the whole family, their mind went out and they do not want to do anything anymore. We don't know how to say about them. There are some people if you asked them to choose between fish and fishing rod, they will choose the fish rather than the fishing rod.

However, this view was primarily expressed by better-off villagers, and seemed not always to be the position of the poorest-of-the-poor. It would be a mistake to assume that all in the community share a single 'voice', or point of view. Different sections of the community have different interests, variable resources, and different abilities to express their views, and make their opinions count. It seems that relatively better-off (A–B ranked) villagers are unhappy with the ranking and distribution procedures (which see them denied access to some assistance), while poorer (C ranked) people expressed more mixed opinions, and in some cases lack 'voice'. That said, they did generally also critique the targeting procedure and argue that they could only get jobs if the farmers got support to farm.

Several informants were concerned about relief assistance being targeted (particularly by local and international Christian agencies) more towards Karen/Christian communities than towards Burman/Buddhist villages. This 'access bias' (if it exists) reflects the networks developed over the previous years by local and international agencies (see Section 19). This is an issue to be taken up by donors, and not intended as a criticism of local agencies.<sup>41</sup>

Communities responded to the concerns described above in a number of ways, including by re-distributing assistance. Indeed, the widespread sharing of very

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<sup>41</sup> As of early 2010, there had reportedly "been no further cases of aid targeting only one identity group... Villages continue to receive aid from religious groups, but other faiths also benefit from it. As a result, previous tensions related to the provision of aid in three mixed villages have dissipated, and intra-village relations across identity groups have improved": Tripartite Core Group, *Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring* (April 2010).

limited resources often characterised the first stages after the cyclone (see Section 1). This included instances of better-off people (and those with more access to food, immediately post-cyclone) sharing with less fortunate neighbours.

'Wealth ranking' seems to go against long-established community practices, according to which resources are often shared in times of need. Often, people with more resources share or lend to the poorer, who rely on this community coping mechanism for their livelihood and survival. The most predominant response by villagers to the perceived threat of inappropriate targeting was to share or re-distribute the aid among themselves. This generally took place after the aid agency had left the village, following an aid distribution. If resources were 'share-able' such as food, the villagers that had received aid would pool it all together and it would be re-distributed generally to all in the village, leaving everyone with an equal share – and those who had been targeted by the aid agencies, with less than they had initially received. The re-distribution sometimes included even newcomers, often relatives who had previously not lived in the village – or returnees who had returned to the villages several months after the cyclone – and had therefore been excluded from the distribution lists of the aid agencies.

#### A 34-year-old Yah Einmu described the process

As we all are facing the same problem, what we have is also theirs [new-comers]. We have to share, and the villagers are willing to share. When we think of it, all of us are related to each other.

#### According to a male village, with a six-month-old baby:

It is good if everybody receive the assistance equally, because all are totally in the same situation. There are some people who are moving here for the opportunity only, and we have to consider whether we should provide the assistance or not. But for the ones who are willing to work for the community, we have to provide them by any means.

Often the official village leaders, or other more informal leaders – such as the 'elder's council' (informal advisory group) – would organise this re-distribution. The practice was widespread throughout the affected Delta area, and in some cases tacitly accepted by the implementing aid agencies, who found it challenging to re-enforce the targeting criteria after the aid had been delivered to the target households. One local NGO supplemented the WFP assistance with food bought by private funds to limit conflict at the village level. The practise of sharing or re-distribution was generally preferred by a cross-section of local communities, and in particular by local leaders who often found it difficult to justify the targeting criteria set from outside – and who were at the heart of having to solve disputes resulting from targeted distribution.

A related response was the use of the 'lottery method', in the case of distribution of assets such as fishing boats, building tools or other assets that cannot easily be divided. Lots with the names of everybody in the village would be drawn up, and a public lottery would be organised. The lucky winners would receive the allotted gift (the fishing boat, the hammer etc), which was generally seen as 'fair' by the

community. In this way nobody could legitimately claim that they had been left out or accused of showing preference for particular individuals.<sup>42</sup>

#### According to one villager:

If there were less aid we used lucky draw or gave priority to those are most in need. We provided a list for the rest who did not get this time, for inclusion another time.

To what extent this practice is a reflection of a responsive community coping mechanism which is part of a wider web of shared social and economic obligations among villagers, and to what degree it is an exploitative practice by the more powerful to extract resources from the poorest is hard to ascertain. The fact that the practice was widely used, and also supported by some of the targeted aid recipients, suggests the former. However, some respondents did oppose having to share with higher-ranked groups. In some cases, this led to the C group grudgingly handing over aid and not daring to complain. In other cases, people did actively oppose it by refusing to hand over their food ration.

In any case, these were the most preferred responses by local leaders seeking to preserve village unity by striking a compromise and a solution whereby nobody could argue that they had been 'left out'. This reflects a strong desire to preserve village unity<sup>43</sup> but also the intimate social relationships at the village level, where 'everybody had lost everything'.

#### An ideological debate with immediate humanitarian impacts

These debates raise ideological questions, regarding whether assistance should be targeted at the most immediately needy (more appropriate in the immediate aftermath of disaster, in the short-term), or in a way that is most likely to promote longer-term recovery and food security (perhaps more appropriate for rehabilitation, in the medium/longer-term). These questions are of great relevance to aid workers, development practitioners and policy makers. They also raise fundamental questions related to perceptions of how resources should be shared in a society and what promotes economic progress (i.e. assisting the poorest or promoting development through supporting private 'business' - 'bottom up' or 'trickle down'?).

#### Vulnerability, as perceived by villagers

The preference for 'equal' distribution does not mean that communities do not recognise and prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable. One aid worker commented that targeting criteria generally seemed to be accepted in communities were only the clearly most vulnerable (very old, very large families and the like)

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<sup>42</sup> Playing the lottery is widespread in Myanmar, most frequently the illegal '3 figure' lottery from Thailand.

<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, aid distributed by the Myanmar Army, or through the government, tended to be distributed equally - even if this meant that each person only received one spoon of oil, two nails or a single onion.

were targeted – rather than 30–50% of the populations marginally worse off (according to village classifications), but receiving vastly different amounts of mainly food aid due to the occupation-based wealth rankings used by most the aid agencies. The response of the communities in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone demonstrates how ‘stronger’ survivors assisted the weaker. The interviewees also clearly define – when asked – the most vulnerable as those with many children, without job opportunities, who do not have anyone to rely on, children, orphans, widows/widower, old people, pregnant women, traumatised people (who cannot work and get drunk), sick or disabled people. Few made references to occupational status, and when they did, opinions were mixed in terms of who is most ‘vulnerable or ‘in greatest need’.

#### Married 30-year-old male bout:

Still there are many people facing dilemmas. Their families were destroyed so they are facing trauma. They could neither work nor become normal people. Some people do not eat but drink alcohol all the time. [For] people like that, their lives will not be spared. They won't live long lives. Still there are three four people [like that in the village].

Q: How could the village help them?

A: The village has to look after them. They got drunk and sleep by the creek, so people take them to go back home. We tried to comfort them but it didn't work.

Q: Are there other people in the village who could be vulnerable?

A: Others could be widows and old aged people. The village gives priority to those who are weak. If there were extra aid they are given priority. The village leaders also look after them.

#### When asked who in the village who are the most vulnerable, and why, a middle-aged woman stated that:

Those [who are the most vulnerable are the ones] who do not have any basic requirement and those who do not have relatives, especially old aged people and orphans are the most vulnerable. They could not rebuild their life after Nargis and only if the donor gave [assistance] to them they could. Those who have some plantation and farms are better as they could rebuild their lives.

#### To the same question, one of the village elders said that:

Concerning this I have to answer you in two parts. One part is, during Nargis old age people, women and children were the most vulnerable people. Women tried to save their children's lives and also lost their lives. They are physically weak people... mentally men are weaker. As most men are the head of the household, they worry about the upcoming problem, like food and living. If you look at some children, now they became orphans, so they are the most vulnerable as they do not have parents to rely on. The second part is work opportunity. Before Nargis, a farmer could manage at least five landless labourers. After Nargis the name of the farmer is just the name without property. For the landless labourer, before they were landless and now they are landless. In the past, if the farmer was doing well the landless labour was also doing well. They both lean on each other. After Nargis the aid agency gave priority to the landless labourer. Therefore I would say now the farmers are facing more problem than the landless labourers.

Another common response to these issues is 'staying quiet'. Villagers were in many cases reluctant to complain to aid agencies, as they were worried that if they did,

the aid 'would be stopped', as they would be perceived as difficult to deal with as a community, and not united. In terms of considering complaining to government officials, many were worried that they would get into trouble at worst or that it would be in vain to do so, at best. Generally people were very appreciative of the aid, and often choose to stay quiet. Few had previous experience with aid agencies, and questioning the donors who were perceived as placed in a more powerful position with access to resources, was seen as full of risk, in a society where demanding accountability of higher-placed individuals and authorities can have serious consequences. Often the landless were also in a reciprocal relationship with the village leaders, and therefore did not see a benefit or relevance in directly opposing them. That said, the targeting issue was brought up repeatedly when informants had gained some level of trust with the interviewers, and seem to have been discussed at length at the community level.

#### According to one married couple

No [we did not complain about the aid], as we did not want the aid to stop because of us. Because of a foul fish, we don't want the whole boat to get foul. We don't want the organization to think bad about our village. We lost a lot of things – including our family – in life already. The selfishness of the people became three times greater than before.

Another response is more proactive, and involved instigating discussions, and sometimes even complaints. Generally, lengthy discussions would take place at the village level about how to (re)-distribute and (re-)target the aid – and people with the courage to complain would do so to the official village leader, the village development committee (set up for the purpose of aid distribution: see Section 10) elders' council or among themselves. In some cases, villagers would also complain to the field staff of the NGO, but were often met with the response that they were 'only' field staff, following orders and could not intervene. Some INGOs initiated more formal complaints mechanisms, whereas others handled complaints more informally. In more severe or persistent cases, mainly related to corruption and misappropriation of aid rather than 'aid targeting', complaints were also directed to village tract and township government officials.

#### On bribery, corruption, misuse of aid

Interviewees reported very little regarding the misuse of aid. However, some spoke about small-scale, localised corruption, on the part of authorities. These included demands for payment (e.g. on the part of some Ya Einmu), in order for villagers to be included on beneficiary lists, and otherwise to gain access to assistance. In a number of instances, interviewees felt that local authorities or leaders of village 'aid committees' had prioritised friends and relations. (See also village leadership and dynamics of decision-making, and also issues relating to the distribution of assistance (Sections 8,10,& 18).

There were also cases reported where relief items had been stolen. Mostly this was handled by the village leaders or township government officials, while some cases were also reported to the army. It remains unclear on how common this was. The overall impression is that these cases were few in the areas visited. There might

also be incidents of theft which go unreported, due to fear of the authorities, or of not getting any further aid in the future.

**Bout family, 3 members:**

One group of people said they will build houses for us and collect the list. They said they will build 6 houses. Both me and my mother included in the list. For this we have to pay the head of the area 3000 Kyat. We had to pay the village authority. The organization did not ask any money to us.

**Village man:**

Q: Why was the village authority fired?

A: I did not remember the name of the group. Soon after Nargis they provided 100 sacks of rice, 10 diesel and 400 longyis. When it was checked there were 7 diesels missing. So he was fired.

**Village man:**

Q: Did the farmer complain when they do not get aid?

A: Of course they did. They also checked with the donor. The donors said there was no aid for the farmer. Previously the former Village head (Ya Einmu) kept some of the aid. Now he does not live in the village anymore. I would say he fled away and live in another village.

## **2.9 Appropriateness of aid: quality of relief items**

**Threats/concerns:**

- Low quality of rice seeds leads to less food
- Maintenance costs of power tillers and machines
- Timeliness of aid
- Mismatching boats and nets – leaving fishermen without any means to do their profession
- Vouchers are less valuable as the goods are not appropriate egg rice seed vouchers will not be used if rice seeds are bad
- Lack of food or livelihoods due to lack of assistance
- Cultural concerns
- Risk of aid dependency where livelihoods is not prioritised
- Live from hand to mouth as versus long term planning
- Risk for conflicts over scarce resources (see also livelihoods: Sections 12–15)
- Risk of conflict over perceived unequal distribution
- Confusion on distribution and selection criteria

**Responses:**

- Cope with the situation somehow
- Sell off the donation /change vouchers for cash
- Exchange for another item
- Sharing among villagers and relatives
- Only few complaints to the agencies/donors reported

All the interviewees were grateful for the assistance received. However, many respondents suggested that some items could have been more carefully selected. For example, some of the fishing boats and nets provided were inappropriate to local conditions and/or skills. Such findings illustrate the importance of consulting with communities, in terms of the assistance required, and types of relief item most appropriate to local conditions (e.g. what type of boat/net is most useful, in terms of local conditions, resources, skills and livelihood strategies). In many cases, affected communities were deciding to use grants to buy paddy seed or fishing lines or ducks etc., weeks before external assessments suggested such projects.

#### Farmer:

It would be good the donor came to observe or ask what the villager requirements are first so that they know what they should give. Some donors did and there were not problem with it. Some donor did not realize that the thing they gave us were not meant for our area. Therefore they should check with the villagers first before donating the materials.

Especially for (rice) seeds, some donors preferred to distribute vouchers, to be redeemed by beneficiaries at shops in nearby towns. However, in several cases, the quality of seeds available in shops was not good. Therefore, beneficiaries preferred to redeem vouchers for cash (at 90–95% of face value), and take this to shop elsewhere. This was understood as a local coping mechanism. Therefore, it might have been more appropriate to provide cash in the first place.<sup>44</sup> When asked about what would work best for them in terms of assistance provided, many interviewees said they would prefer cash assistance.

#### Male age 34:

Q: Was the aid useful?

A: How can I say, if compare with getting nothing it's sorts of good. But brother, the seeds that they gave us did not work. The seeds that they gave is used for broadcast seeds and not suitable with machine. The voucher that we got from an NGO, we went to exchange to the rice mills. It is worth 1 lakh but some mill refund only 90,000 Kyat while some refund only 85,000 Kyat. Of course we loose.

Q: Why you did not exchange the voucher with the seed?

A: The paddy at the mill could never be the seeds. All are mixed up. What I mean that it could be the same but the life length of the seeds are not the same. If you grow such kind of seeds like that you are in trouble.

Q: For the seeds, in stead of providing the voucher what could they do?

A: The best way is give us money directly. The farmers are happy if they have to buy the seed themselves. If they [donors] are worried that the money might be misused they can form the committee. When the farmer found the right seeds and the committee can pay for the seeds. They can do it that way. The most important thing is the farmers are happy with the seeds.

#### Group of farmers:

Paddy seeds were provided. Their quality wasn't good. Some sprouted, but some didn't. People who didn't like the seeds went to other villages to seek for their preferred ones. They borrowed from close friends and relatives under the

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<sup>44</sup> WFP did distribute cash in some areas around Yangon - before the authorities put a stop to this practice (WFP 2008: 52).

condition that they had to repay in terms of the basket of rice only when harvested.

Although recipients were grateful for power tillers received, many would have preferred to be given buffalos. They are more familiar with the latter, which do not require expensive maintenance and fuel. (See also vulnerability and targeting: Section 8).

#### Village head:

Food assistance is very useful for us but the problem is that some are very dependent on this assistance and they don't want to work for living anymore. For the farmers, this assistance is not that effective, last year harvest, they lost ... An NGO provides power-tiller for farmers, and then they can cultivate about four to five acres of paddy fields. There is a problem with the tiller also. As the tiller has to be used alternatively, they can't agree on the term for using it. For the seeds, they have 100,000 Kyat and as they have to go to Bogale to get that money, it only left 80'000 Kyat as they have to spend for travel. Again they have to borrow some money. The worse case is that there are fights among them regarding the using of power-tiller.

Q: Do you mean that the situation is getting worse because of the assistance?

A: No, I don't mean that because they can solve the shortage of the machine by using alternatively but they didn't solve in this way. I just mean that coordination and responsibility is important. They use the power-tiller until the machine is broken down as they have their turn. At the beginning, it nearly turned into fighting and finally I requested to the organization to solve the problem and the tension was getting ease.

In many cases the aid especially buffaloes, seeds and fertilisers were not distributed timely which again made it impossible for farmers and bout to start working the fields as necessary. In cases where piglets and poultry were distributed, this sometimes turned out to be a challenge for recipients, as there was not enough fodder available to feed for them, and in people did not have the skills and knowledge necessary to keep these animals healthy.

#### Group of villagers:

Even if we want to give pigs or ducks it is not good for them as they have no food for them but if we want to give duck the villagers insist that it must be big as the small ones take more time to grow. When the FAO wanted to give the small ducklings the villagers do not want to take. The FAO explained that it was good for them – you should accept [and they accepted]. FAO gave food for ducklings for 1 month so some ducklings are dead. For the first time they accept 15 ducks and 10 weeks later they must give back 10 ducklings so afraid they can't give back.

#### Man age 40:

Q: What kind of assistance is the most useful for you?

A: Like paddy seeds, machines and fuel. But there is only one thing to say that it didn't work. But I'd like to say that we're really in need of buffalos.

(Another man) Buffalos are the best for this place. There are a lot of stumps. And there also is a group of mechanics. But the machine broke down again, right after they've gone. We tried to call them but they didn't hear us.

Machines were provided late. If we got buffalos and cow in time, we would be successful.

**Another man:**

There is a suffering for the farmers this year. Millions of dollars were donated to Myanmar. But we feel like being fed like chicken. We'll be getting into difficulties if we don't get the assistance. Giving assistance is good. But I think, checking thoroughly before giving assistance would make it more effective. I wish I could report the villager's real need; Nets for the casual workers and cows or buffalos for the farmers. We've been in trouble since the Nargis struck. What we were in need was cows and buffalos, but what we received was machines.

In some cases, there have been misunderstandings about distributions, and again people raised issues and concerns about what they perceived as unequal distribution. Thus, not only did the assistance not always meet beneficiaries' expectations, but it also was sometimes perceived as being unequally distributed. In some cases, there was direct criticism of the distribution criteria. In one village for example, the distribution of boats was perceived as unjust, with smaller households not understanding why they were not entitled to receive boats. In part, such complaints stemmed from unclear communication about the criteria used. Other confusions arose due to lack of coordination between the two NGOs working through two different committees in the village. In other interviews, it is clear that the criteria used for selection of beneficiaries was not fully explained, and therefore not well understood.

There were also numerous issues concerning villagers' relative social positions, and patron-client relationships, which were also noted during interviews concerning the quality of aid (see previous Section). Villagers who prior to Nargis had been better-off talked about the difference between living hand-to-mouth, as opposed to planning for the future, which they felt better able to undertake than less well-off members of the community.

**Group of villagers (men, women and children):**

The kind of assistance is not very important to improve the situation of our village. It totally depends on our villagers. Last month, we received 100,000 Kyat from an INGO. If they [villagers] just spend all of the money on food, it will simply go without many advantages. If they spend it on the tool they need for their works, I believe that they can recover rapidly. It should be the system using in an INGO, that is, they give us loan with one or seven month interest only but we have to pay back all the money at the certain period. Some materials are useful but not all.

**Man age 37:**

Q: How do you want to distribute the assistance?

A: I want to distribute to all. But recently the fishermen are more difficult than the other. They need boats for short and long term because fishing is the only mean for their lives. ....It is better to assist the farmers and businessmen. If the assistance goes only to the poor, they will rely too much on that and then reluctant to work. Now there are no buffalos here and as a result, the farmers are hard to find the labours for their field..... The best way is to distribute the

assistance directly to the villagers. By which way, both we and the donors can delight about the donation.

[A man age 40, nearby him interrupted the conversation]:

For me, I don't receive the food assistance because I am a farmer and own some paddy fields. If I were in the list, I think I can do something better for my living than now. On the other hand I can create more jobs for the Bouts. Last two or three months ago an INGO provided 100,000 Kyat but I was not in the list. If I had that assistance, I can do something better for my paddy fields. Most people who receive the assistance are just sitting and waiting for the next distribution only and sometimes, they said that they received the assistance because of their good fate. I envy them and sometimes I want to live like them. The assistance should be distributed to everyone especially to the ones who keen to work. I just want to know that do the donors decide who should receive the assistance or the distributors decide. For my opinion, I want to distribute to the people who really use for his livelihood. If you just give the assistance to the poor, I am sure they will waste it. Anyway the assistance should go to the people who work hard regardless of his status.

## **2.10 Village committees, and participation in decision-making**

Many villages reported establishing numerous committees. These initiatives were generally externally motivated, in order to manage relations with aid agencies and other donors, and organise the distribution of assistance. Although membership of these committees was sometimes perceived as an onerous duty, in most cases villagers recognised that some form of structure is necessary, to mediate between themselves and outside 'donors'.

Local 'downward accountability' regarding the use of emergency aid appeared very strong during first 3–6 months after Cyclone Nargis – perhaps due to the huge sense of need, and shared experiences of the horror of this natural disaster. Rapid distribution of small grants thus seemed to increase local protection capacity with few negative consequences. However, as time went on, this sense of egalitarianism seemed to decrease, and the rapid distribution of relief and grants without first ensuring local systems were in place to hold CBOs or grantees to account became more problematic, possibly undermining social cohesion and self-help by encouraging local corruption, social friction and the misuse of resources.

**On the issue of how many committees were formed in one village:**

Q: How many committees in the village?

A: Bank committee, village committee, bridge committee and saving committee. There are two main committee, Church committee and village committee.

**Village man:**

Q: Who lead the distribution [of aid]?

A: When an NGO comes the NGO committee leads the distribution and if another NGO come the other NGO committee leads the distribution. As there are many groups it is overlapping. If one consists in this group he can also be the member of another group.

Often, membership of committees was overlapping. Often, however, different people sit on different committees, spreading the workload. In some cases, less 'well-off' villagers expressed a desire for donors to engage with them directly in mass meetings, rather than through the village leadership – which tended to dominate the committees. Thus, the aid agencies preferred method of working through committees was perceived locally as favouring the more privileged within the community. Reportedly, assistance was sometimes distributed disproportionately towards the friends and relatives of the village leaders (see Sections 8 & 10).<sup>45</sup>

It is a very common strategy in humanitarian assistance to work with or through local committees. Although effective in many ways, this approach can be risky in cases where outsiders' knowledge of the local setting is limited. Outside aid can sometimes reinforce the positions of local elites, while in other cases assistance can be implemented in a genuinely participatory and 'bottom-up' manner. Therefore, the use of such approaches should be carefully evaluated, to make sure communication is working between community and committee.

Interviewees' views regarding committees differed, often markedly. In many cases, committees are regarded as the only option for communities to participate in aid distributions; in other cases, committees are perceived as representing the interests of their (often elite) members, and therefore not contributing to a fair system of aid distribution. Given the many committees in some villages, it is clear that overlapping membership becomes an issue. Often committees were functional and instrumental in distributing aid, but were not involved in setting priorities for distribution or involved in designing project interventions. However, working through committees does often seem to have been a genuinely participatory process, especially after the more acute phase of the disaster had passed and when there was access and room for more long-term programming. However, the sustainability of these committees can be questioned. As they were often viewed (by communities and committee members themselves) as an extension of the aid agency which helped set them up.

#### Man age 34:

Currently there is VDC [village development committee], mainly for development. ... When NGO arrived they said that it would be good if we formed the formal group that can represent and approved by the authority. So we choose those who are interested and willing to work for village development and formed the group. When we formed the group we included all types of people, bout, farmers and fishermen. We got separate roles like, Okkata, Sectary, treasurer and members. As we also have to be balance in male and female, a total 10 people there are 6 male and 4 female.

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<sup>45</sup> The Local Resource Centre has produced a very interesting *Study Report on Committees: effective community-based responses to Cyclone Nargis* (August 2009). According to this study, influential villagers were most actively involved in the establishment of committees, which generally only informed the wider community of their decisions, after these had already been decided. There was therefore a lack of genuine participation from, or consultation with, communities. However, most committees did communicate effectively with donors. They therefore "seemed more concerned with upward, rather than downward accountability." Although women's participation in committees was quite low, particularly in the early post-cyclone stages, this situation did improve with time.

Q: After you have formed the VDC how did you share the responsibilities?

A: The generator behind this place was donated by an NGO. It was a compressor before. So we all thought about it how we were going to use it. So we thought that we could use it for electricity distribution to the village. The NGO donated the machine and we contributed the oil. When we worked it out it would cost 50 Kyat per night. For this the village would take the responsibility so we did it.

#### Group of farmers:

The farmers of large holdings lead in the community. Since they are affordable, they mostly take initiative. But when the military men arrived after Nargis, cooperation was taken place among the military men, one hundred-house headman and villagers.

Q: What's about the role of village's elders?

A: We want the elders who are able to establish a good relation with the organizations and treat the villagers fairly.

#### Group of men:

The relief committee was formed on 28 May 2008. The members were nominated by the community and such nomination was further agreed by the village authority and the formation of the committee was informed to the village track authority and township authority together with the list of the members. The village leader was not included in the committee but was the patron of the committee. This committee is one and only committee in the village and responsible for management and distribution of all the assistance received from outside organizations in consultation with the village authority.

#### Group of villagers:

Q: Was it good to have committee? What about having four committees or was it good to have one only?

A: It was decided by the village so it is good.

#### Group of men:

Q: Who decides and how do you share the assistance, the food with the others?

A: The village committee decides.

Q: What do you prefer? That the assistance is given directly to the village committee and let the committee decide – or is it better if the assistance is managed by the NGO?

A: We prefer giving directly to the village committee.

## 2.11 'Aid migration'; roles and status of newcomers /migrant workers

### Threats/concerns:

- Difficulties with distributing (or not) aid to people migrating to the village from outside
- How to look after relatives that live in a different village?

### Responses:

- Coping by not showing your resent or staying quiet about aid migrants who receive aid
- Share scarce resources with new comers that seem reliable
- Limited sharing of aid with suspected aid migrants
- Move to relatives in the delta area to help out
- Move to a new area where you know there is greater opportunity to survive and possibly more aid

Several informants were concerned about the (perceived) 'opportunism of outsiders' – people moving into villages where assistance is available, resulting in tensions with longer-settled residents. Some instances of 'serial migration' were reported, with people moving repeatedly to access multiple sets of assistance in various locations. Respondents – and indeed, some aid agencies – wondered whether new arrivals would stay in villages, after relief assistance winds down, and the arduous tasks of long-term rehabilitation take precedence.

As well as to access aid, people also move in order to be close to relatives and friends; people also returned to the Delta from elsewhere, including to be with and look after family members (see Section 11). Also of course, people move away from areas which have become unviable, due to de-population (death), storm damage to infrastructure, and the collapse of agriculture – and also perhaps because of government resettlement policies (see Section 5). Some traumatised people also moved because the memory of their lost families is unbearable.

### Woman, age 32:

Q: Why have you moved here?

A: I was this village previously and my husband is from other village. After Nargis we have to come to live closer to people who we know.

### Group of men, women and children:

If we move to the upper region, we have nothing to do for our livelihood. I just want to stay where my family passed away.

Here, at least, we can resume our farm and we can feed our family even with a small boat.

### Man age 40:

I think that they have to reconsider the way they are distributing the assistance because there are so many newcomers (for the opportunity of getting aids) settling here. So there are tensions among the native villagers. The villagers who lost family and properties do not receive the assistance but the opportunists have all the assistance.

To be frank, the assistance should be restrictedly given to the villagers who really suffered from losing family members and relatives. If rice were not distributed, most of the people would move to another place. Most were come from other villages. They are running after the assistance and they move where the assistance is available. The residents don't say anything about them. But they are very greedy. I want the assistance to be given to the people who really work hard.

### Group of women:

When people give aid they just count people in the village. They don't see if they are really affected or not. People who came here after Nargis, should not get aid automatically. We get less than them. Among the new comer some are affected and some are not. We'd like to give priority to those who are really affected from Nargis, no matter if they lived here or not.

### Village woman:

Q: Are there anybody moved in or moved out of this village?

A: Yes, 10 household move to live by the river side. These people came here to collect the goods and they went back. But now they moved here again. Some people came from X village. Only the village head (Yareimu) moved out from here. He took some advantages and went to stay at his wife village. Previously there were two Yareimu but now it is only one left.

## Livelihoods

Across the Delta, people's livelihoods were devastated by Cyclone Nargis and have been slow to recover particularly in those areas, and among sub-groups, most severely affected by this natural disaster.<sup>46</sup> The cyclone did not only destroy people's immediate lives and livelihoods but also had a significant negative impact on people's ability to re-establish their livelihoods and income in the medium to long term. Nevertheless, communities have found often ingenious ways of coping, and helping their loved ones and communities to survive. Outside assistance has been essential in this effort – but it has often arrived late, not always worked, or been perceived, in the ways intended by aid agencies and donors. When discussing livelihood issues, many informants prioritised the protection (from storm damage and theft) and rehabilitation of property. Thus people talked about the importance of local organisation to protect against thieves.

### Threats/concerns:

- Decline in rice cultivation and fishing and associated employment opportunities
- Slow recovery in worst affected areas
- Lack of sufficient and timely funding for livelihoods support
- Limited government response
- Risk of land confiscation due to 'under-cultivation'
- In-adequate data

### Responses:

- Seeking to survive on reduced income
- Change and/or diversification of occupation
- Incorrect reporting of data on cultivation and yields

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<sup>46</sup> “Cyclone Nargis has drastically reduced the opportunities for paid work for landless labourers, who face reduced demand for their labour from the larger-scale farmers and fishermen who would normally employ them. Labourers have received relatively little livelihoods support compared to other groups. As a result, many face immense difficulties in getting by”: Tripartite Core Group (2008: viii).

## 2.12 Food security (and general livelihoods)

Rice cultivation and fishing are the main sources of income and employment in the Delta area. Both have declined significantly following Cyclone Nargis and, in the worst affected areas, have yet to recover, almost three years after the disaster. The most vulnerable parts of the Delta, in the south, have only one paddy growing season (compared to two in the north), and were proportionally hit much harder. The disruption of agricultural cycles, the destruction (or depletion by salination) of assets as well as paddy fields, rodent infestations, lack of funds and access to credit for livelihood inputs along with ecological instability has further destabilised livelihoods security and recovery.

However, it is questionable whether the government and its partners fully understand the plight of farmers in cyclone-affected areas. In part, this is a problem with data. When villagers declare their harvests to the local authorities, they often over-report the amount of land cultivated, in order to access government services, and fulfil requirements to have certain acreage under cultivation. Such practices constitute 'local protection mechanisms', inasmuch as they protect villagers from losing access to resources including particularly land which can be confiscated if not utilised for cultivation (and possibly also prevent the wrath of the authorities, in cases where villages have not fulfilled their agricultural targets). Furthermore, data are often aggregated at a township level which leads to masking of geographic variances that are often significant within townships. – including overestimates the rate of recovery in worst-affected areas. These factors phenomenon may have led both government departments and some UN agencies to predict higher harvest than estimated by farmers in real terms. For example in 2009, WFP predicted that the 2009 harvest will be 'normal' whereas interviewees for this report in the more severely affected areas estimated a 50% lower actual harvest than pre-Nargis levels.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the harvest ended up being 80% lower in one of the research areas, mainly due to a plague of rats (the rat situation improved significantly in 2010-11: see Section 15). Moreover, due to the lack of purchasing power, an increase in overall food production at township level does not necessarily lead to improved livelihood security for the most insecure communities and households. Finally, funding and planning for <sup>48</sup>immediate recovery by aid agencies were relatively higher and more effective than long-term livelihoods efforts which were introduced relatively late and rarely in a comprehensive manner due to mainly a lack of resources.

Due to problems in the agricultural sector, larger numbers of villages than was the case before the cyclone are engaged in fishing and crab-hunting activities – which has led to a significant and worrying decrease in fish and crab stocks, exacerbated

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<sup>47</sup> WFP data is aggregated at the township level, and therefore includes data on less severely affected villages in the north of the Delta (most of which have brackish or 'sweet' water, and cultivate two - or sometimes three - rice crops a year); as well as those closer to the sea, which are worst affected (with salty water, only one annual rice crop, and traditionally lower yields).

<sup>48</sup> For example while WFP managed to raise adequate funds and in-kind contributions for its interventions, FAO did not. Further more, the LIFT (Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund) consortium which ended up making a \$20 million available for livelihood interventions in the Delta in 2010 - but only did so almost 2 years after the disaster hit and still focused on relatively short-term interventions (max. 12 months) for its first disbursements.

by the ecological impacts of the storm (see Section 15). It will be several years before the most severely affected areas can return to the relatively high degree of food security enjoyed before Cyclone Nargis.

### 2.13 Loans, credit and asset depletion

#### Threats/concerns:

- Destruction, depletion and lack of replacement of livelihood assets
- High interest rates
- Inability to pay money lenders
- Lack of rural credit

#### Responses:

- Borrowing money from money lenders, relatives or employers
- Selling assets
- Selling agriculture/fishing products at reduced prices
- Providing labour at reduced salaries
- 'Mortgaging' expected harvest/catch in advance
- Sharing and pooling resources
- Buying on credit –
- Negotiation with money lenders
- Use of low-cost agricultural inputs

The severe loss of livelihood assets and agriculture inputs, combined with the reduction in yields and the inadequate response by the government and aid agencies to meet the livelihood needs of the affected population, have increased the need for rural credit as a mean to re-establish livelihoods. Moreover, the existing credit system has also been disrupted by the disaster, and is in any case inadequate to properly support sufficient or increased food security.<sup>49</sup> More generally, lack of access to credit is a symptom of unequal power relations in Myanmar. Villagers use a number of strategies to deal with the resulting problems, including use of low-cost agricultural inputs.

A proper banking system, as well as a government-supported comprehensive rural credit mechanism or an adequate small business or micro-credit lending system is absent in Myanmar. However, borrowing money from private lenders is a well-established – although perhaps not very sustainable – coping mechanism. In the past, credit was more easily available, but since the cyclone, lenders who are often rice millers, business people or richer relatives, and themselves lost significant assets due to the cyclone, have been much more reluctant to provide money, especially to those without assets (who are, of course, the most needy and

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<sup>49</sup> On credit issues in the delta post-cyclone, see Tripartite Core Group (April 2010).

vulnerable). Numerous examples were recounted of villages having to accept indebtedness, at exorbitant interest rates.<sup>50</sup> As explained by one small farmer:

In the past, it was easy to borrow. Even when a child was sent for that, it was ok. Now it is hard to have loans even when we, adults, go for it. Having a sense of certainty is decreasing.

**A male farm labourer put it this way:**

It was a lot different [before Nargis]. In the past if anything we would like to do things and want investment we can just go and borrow money from the rich people. Now we have no one to borrow. We can survive because of the aid agency come and help us.

Villagers employ a range of strategies seeking to manage this situation and mitigate its effects. Almost all farmers ‘mortgage’ most of their harvest before the cultivation season. In order to raise capital for agriculture input which forces them to pay-off loans with paddy (at the harvest season) at much below market rates. If the harvest fails, farmers are left with huge debts which are often carried over to the following year and reduces their capacity to obtain new loans. According to a group of heavily indebted farmers:

We don’t need to store the paddy as we have to give it all away as debt ‘cause we take money with interest. We worry how we will pay. We’d be surprised if anyone could even clear their debts from this year. Due to the debts, we are also on the edge of stepping into ‘the mouth of the prison’. [...] When we borrow money there is an agreement/contract so they [money lenders] can do whatever they want. As the first thing we have to beg to them, it depends on the money lender’s satisfaction. If they want our land, it is up to them – or if they move to make a problem. Previously some had to give up land but for the last 2 years we still have to see. The money lenders have been tolerant with us already this year so we don’t know now. [...] We borrow from contacts in nearby townships – with those who are well to do such as business people who deal with paddy rice. They are not that rich but if you compare to us they are better off.

Likewise, many landless ‘sell’ their labour to the farmers at lower than average labour rates in advance of carrying out the work in order to obtain cash – if farmers are at all able to lend to them:

[Sometimes] we have to take money in advance before the harvesting season. Or we pawn some assets. We asked advance money to the land owner [the farmer], who we work for. They just give with limitation as per they could give us. Sometimes they also do not have money to give. So when we did not get money or we could not

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<sup>50</sup> “Reductions in harvests have increased the debt burden of farmers, who have been unable to repay old loans and have had to borrow to meet their consumption needs... Fishermen are struggling to recover. This has affected those at every point in the value chain. Reduced catches and a lack of fishing boats and nets mean fishermen have been unable to repay their debts. This has prevented them from gaining access to new credit. This downturn in fishing is having knock-on economic impacts on those previously employed in supporting industries, often as day labourers”: Tripartite Core Group (2008: viii).

catch much [fish or crabs], we have some days that we could not eat three times per day.

Larger money lenders generally decline lending without collateral. A landless woman, around 50 years old explains:

It [the interest rate] depends on the relationship with the person. If it is relatives or friends or they are fond of them, then it is with lower interest. But if you just know the person, then its high interest (high is 10–15 % per month) [...] If it is more money then its low interest, if less money then its high interest. The person who gives the loan looks at the person's present situation.[...] As for me don't even think of the interest, nobody will give me even the smallest loan! Only if you are a farmer and have a crop, you can take loan in that. One will give for example 10 acres of paddy and begin to harvest. The money lender looks at the land and asks how much you own. But someone like me 'No No'"

Fishermen often seek to obtain credit from wholesale fish buyers, which they pay back in-kind reducing their available income. However, many of these have been unable to provide credit after the cyclone due to their own lack of available funds.

In many cases, when in need of cash for food consumption, to cover health costs, school fees or to invest in income generation activities (farming, fishing or small enterprise) people have had to sell-off possessions (including land and livelihood assets) to repay debts.

#### Village teacher:

My four buffaloes were either lost in Nargis or died I don't know. I could not find them anymore. My 10 acres of land, I pawned them with interest ... At last I had to sell out the land to pay back my debt.

However, land acquisition due to lack of repayment of loans has been relatively low post-Nargis, as even money lenders have not been interested in taking over land due to the high investment costs for land cultivation combined with their own lack of capital.

In some cases, people have sold assistance items including much needed fishing boats – especially if these are not optimally/locally appropriate. According to a village woman (50 years old):

A young man in the village just sold the fishing boat that the NGO had donated. He had just gotten married and need rice for himself and his wives family.

Such practices have contributed to cycles of impoverishment: first people liquidate assets (often at unfavourable prices), then get into debt, fail to cope, and become desperate (and sometimes migrate). Such concerns expressed preferences by some people for cash assistance rather than food. As one villager said:

If we receive money, there is no need to sell the rice. When we sell the rice, we got a lower price for it.

Others, often women, specifically prefer rice rather than cash assistance as it is less likely to be sold off and guarantees that at least family members will have enough to eat.

When possible villagers try to help each other out. Small village shops will let people buy on credit (which they have difficulty in recouping) and neighbours and relatives will lend each other small amounts of money or share food if they are able to.

#### Six women, one man:

We first try to help our own family. Then we try to help others who do not have much. We cannot ignore our neighbours or others in the village as we are the same. We cannot ignore children. Adults can survive for themselves but for the sake of children we will lend.

The testimonies regarding how loans and credit work demonstrate the variety of threats and responses to livelihoods, in a repressive socio-economic system. They also get to the heart of people's survival and coping mechanisms. Response mechanisms centre around the need to cultivate and negotiate relationships with various economically influential people, in order to secure livelihoods.

## 2.14 The fishing license system

### Threats/concerns:

- High fishing license fees
- Confiscation of fishing assets and imprisonment
- Forced to sell catch at lower than market rates

### Responses:

- Borrowing to pay for fishing licence fees
- Avoiding paying fishing licence fees.
- Negotiation with and appealing to fishing licence owners or their representatives
- Paying fines or going to prison
- Fishing illegally and at night

Fishing is – in addition to paddy farming – the main source of income for the cyclone-affected population. Generally the interviewees divide the local population into three broad categories: farmers, (small-scale) fishermen and the landless (bout). Most of the landless rely on a combination of farm labour and subsistence fishing for their income, and thus the divide between them and the fishermen is blurred. The lack of available farm jobs due to the farmers' difficult situation has pushed many landless into an increased reliance on fishing, including crab catching. However, the availability of fish and crabs has decreased for ecological reasons (see Section 15) and further worsened the livelihood situation. However, the

greatest threat to the livelihoods of fishermen and landless is the fishing licence system and the confiscation of fishing equipment, fines and threats of prison terms. Among the interviewees in the southern part of the Delta, the fishing licence system was consistently described as the most problematic and repressive issue the communities were facing.

Local interviewees explained their understanding of how the fishing licences for particular areas are sold-off annually by the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock in the capital in Nay Pyi Daw. In addition to the official price, the licence buyer, who is generally a large businessman, must allegedly pay a large amount 'under the table'. The buyer then sells the licence to a man at the township level who parcels out the area into smaller creeks and rivers – the licenses for which he sells to smaller businesspeople. They must pay him in both cash and kind (catch) at fixed prices. Finally, the local fisherman or landless must then pay the local fishing licence owner to fish in the local creek or river, and are obliged to sell their catch to the local license owner at prices set by the owner, often lower than market prices nearby and using his scales to weigh the catch which the local poor often complain are systematically incorrect (in the owner's favour). While this system might serve to reduce over-fishing, it also results in the fishermen having to bear the brunt of the corrupt system where costs are passed onto him at the lowest level of the 'food chain', forcing him to sell his catch to the owner (to whom he is often indebted). Moreover, threats of confiscation of fishing gear and imprisonment if he cannot pay the fishing fee are common. Due to the depressed livelihoods situation in the Delta, it has been impossible for many small fishermen and landless to pay the high fees with direct and severe consequences such as loss of fishing equipment, high fines and jail terms.

The protection responses deployed by the local fishermen range from trying to negotiate a lower price (often unsuccessful), to avoiding paying the fee and fishing at night or out of sight of the licence owner's enforcement agents, to pleading not to pay the fine – or a reduced fine – if caught. In most cases, they are unsuccessful in avoiding confiscation of their fishing equipment, but manage to avoid jail by paying a fee. Their responses highlight the often desperate measures that people will go to in order to obtain a livelihood – and the importance of managing to plea for lenience with officials and businesspeople. No systematic, jointly-organised response take place to protest against the fees, or the enforcement of them. Only one example of direct open confrontation or defiance appeared during the numerous interviewees – and even village leaders or elders seemed to have minimal influence over authorities or licence owners if a fisherman is caught for illegal fishing. The following testimonies from interviews demonstrate the variety of threats to fishing livelihoods, in a repressive and corrupt political and socio-economic system. They also illustrate the main ways in which people seek to avoid, circumvent or confront the threats as well as include their suggestions for policy and practice change – or more often how they suffer in face of them.

#### Man, 40 years old:

Some people catch the fish with net but we are not allowed to catch the fish anywhere. There are auction people that bought the rivers. If you are caught they would fine you. We cannot catch it openly[...] Some people have been caught fishing [illegally]. When they are caught they have to pay a fine according to the rules. Or they can take the thief to the respective authority and take action. In other village

they were sent to jail. [...] Those who bought the fishing license, spent a lot of money to buy the river, so, of course they would like to make some money. On the other hand, there are landless people who have to work day to day and rely on the river. I think the government should be in control of this, in order not favour one side to much.

**Bout, husband and wife:**

There are the owners of the river. If you were to see catching fish in the area they own, you will be fine and they will take away your net. But people do it in the night time.

**Woman, 26 years old:**

[If someone were caught for fishing without a license] ...he or she will be arrested, all the equipment will be confiscated and some buyers [fishing license owners] bring the army to frighten the villagers. This woman [pointing the woman next to her] used 300,000 Kyat for fishing nets but she only made 20,000 Kyat from that net. The problem is the auction system. It will be better if the auction system were abolished so that everybody can freely work. Last year, we received the assistance, and that assistance made us better, even we could save. Right now we all barely survive.

**Village leader:**

I want most is to abolish the auction system in fishing at Nargis struck area. Because of that system, some fishermen and landless are fined for not paying for fishing. [...] I think Nay Pyi Daw have to solve this problem. The punishment is very serious; catching crabs beyond permitted area have to pay 30,000 Kyat for one viss. They don't consider whether he can pay or not. The auction system was here for very long time ago but for my opinion, the authorities should exempt the Nargis struck area at least three to four months so that the people can recover rapidly.

**Village leader & group of men:**

If we catch fish in the river we are not allowed to catch. The owner makes an auction for the river [...]. When we catch and they see us, they ask for money. If we cannot pay the money, sometimes they take our things and take us to the police station. Many people cannot pay the fine as they have nothing. It [the fine] depends on their mood. If you get on their nerves, they'll fine you based on their mood - at least 50,000 to 100,000 Kyat. .... if you have money then you can go. If no money, we have to stay in the jail.

## **2.15 Ecological instability and issues of environmental sustainability**

**Threats/concerns:**

- Decrease in fish stock
- Environmentally damaging fishing practices
- Rat infestation destroying most of the paddy crop
- Depletion of mangrove forests
- Lack of drinking water

**Responses:**

- Trying to get by with reduced catch
- Police and licence owners catching those who use damaging fishing practices

- Catching rats using various methods
- Some replanting of mangrove forests
- Buying water from outside, sharing scarce water resources
- Restoring water sources, using less water

Cyclone Nargis upset the ecological stability in the affected area, which resulted in increased direct threats to livelihoods that are still present almost three years after the disaster. This has forced local communities and authorities to adopt a number of strategies to mitigate the threats. Some of these are successful, while others have resulted in bringing about changes that cause new threats to people's security and livelihoods.

The threats are mainly related to a decrease in fishing stock, resulting in lower catch and thus lower incomes, rodent infestation destroying large parts of the paddy harvest, and destruction of mangrove forests which also serve as natural 'storm breaks'.

#### Decrease in fish stock

In an effort to boost incomes, villagers (especially the landless) have been involved in more fishing and crab-gathering activities than before the cyclone, including some who had not previously been fishermen. However, this increased reliance on fishing has clashed with a decrease in fish and crab stocks, most likely because spawning grounds having been disrupted by the cyclone. Villagers suggest that increased fishing activities may also have led to overfishing, combined with the use of poison to kill crabs (eating paddy seedlings), and thus the decline of stocks. This has placed the already most vulnerable in an even more precarious situation, not being able to pay back loans or afford fishing licence fees (see Section 14). In a single case, some fishermen have used explosives to kill the fish – a practice which is illegal and highly environmentally destructive for which risks of long-term imprisonment is high.

#### A couple who married after the cyclone after their respective spouses died explains:

Today we put the net in the river but we get nothing. We had to pay the auction fees one day a head, now we lost it. I am worrying that it might happen tomorrow. Before Nargis there were so many fish, prawns and crabs. Now we don't get much and try to pay for the auction fees.

#### A young local NGO field worker is of the following understanding:

Other people used to catch fish but due to the scarcity of fish in the river they would now also like to catch prawns but they don't have the nets. I ask them for the reason for the scarcity now and they said that it was due to that when the crabs came and eat the seeds – then the farmers put poison that killed the water animals. They are spreading all the poison in the fields to kill the crabs but later that came in the river. The farmers focus only on their own needs without thinking about other people's livelihoods.

#### Rats, and responses

The plague of rats in the worst-affected cyclone-affected areas has been a very serious threat, prioritized by affected communities, but seemingly under-

appreciated by many aid agencies. For example, in early 2010 WFP estimated the rat damage and only 5–10% of total concentration in the Delta. However, in the southern part of the Delta, visited during this research, farmers rated destruction by rats as one of the most severe threats to their livelihoods, with severe knock on effects for the landless who rely on farm labour. However, government authorities and local and international NGOs, along with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), have responded to some degree to the seriousness this issue.

The rat infestation problem started in 2008, and got much worse in 2009. While the problem continued into 2010–11, its severity did decline during this period. The problem is not evenly spread, and seems to affect those areas with only one rice crop (and less good irrigation) and larger land holdings, which it has been impossible for farmers to cultivate following the cyclone, more than areas with multiple crops, smaller landholdings and better water supplies (which are generally further to the north) – i.e. it impacts on the most vulnerable and cyclone-affected communities (in the southern Delta). Explanations for the rat plague vary. Many traditional predators (snakes, dogs etc) were killed in the storm. Furthermore, the high amount of fallow land scattered across the Delta since then has provided a fertile nesting area for rats.

Estimates provided by villagers must be understood in the context of their desire to continue to access assistance, and their understandable concern to have the problem taken seriously by authorities, and aid agencies. All villages surveyed reported an infestation of rats in 2009, with estimates of the amount of crop damage varying from between 20–50% (perhaps more in Laputa Township). On average, villagers reported about 30% of the rice crop to have been destroyed by rats (or an expectation that this amount would be damaged, by harvest time). Villagers also reported problems with crabs stealing rice seedlings from the fields.

Villagers report a range of local coping mechanisms: trapping rats, and eating or selling them (the animals having some nutritional value), and use of poisons (which can have serious environmental impacts: see Section 15). Traditional beliefs are important in dealing with the rat plague: some people reported making offerings to the rat Nat (spirit- deity), and requesting that his followers depart; others suggested (semi-seriously) that the rats may be the reincarnated souls of cyclone victims, come back to eat the village rice.

The other main coping mechanism is sponsored by the state, and involves killing rats, and collecting their tails (as proof). In principle, those who collected insufficient rats' tails could be fined by the authorities – although reported cases of such punishment were rare. Often, those with sufficient tails to fill the quota would sell or share with fellow villagers. Several of those interviewed appreciated this approach from the state. One local NGO came up with an ingenious solution, paying villagers to produce locally appropriate traps made of bamboo, as an income generation project, and in order to trap rats without the use of poison. However, community mobilization to hunt rats, destroying their breeding grounds, increasing the area under rice cultivation and rebuilding irrigation embankments (which keep rats out of flooded fields) have proved most effective.

### Two farmers:

The main problem now is that the rats eat the paddy seeds ... I planted 10 acres and 30% was destroyed. [...] I'd say 20–25 % more before harvest time. The reason we could not overcome the rat problem is that we could not afford the poison. If we could use 3 packages the rats would clear up – but instead we could only afford and use one. [...] We only have 14–15 rat traps. If you use the trap you need to know the rats route but these rats go here and there so it is difficult to place the trap. [...] there is an instruction to submit 1000 rat tails to the government. One household has to submit 20 rat tails twice a month. [...] For example, if I catch 40 then I will sell them to another family. The price is 100 kyat per tail. In the town over there the price is 300 Kyat... The rats are hard to find at day time.... In the past we had small embankments between the fields so it was more difficult for the rats. It is also a problem due to that we now cultivate at shifting times – we could not finished all the fields at the same time, so the rats move from field to field [...] If we don't submit [the quota to the government] then there is a fine. But the village tract leader can also understand....If one household cannot submit then the village leader will take the name to the village tract leader and he will call the household and ask why they did not submit. This is to make some pressure but they don't beat people or so.

### Village leader & group of men:

We use some traps and sometimes dogs drive away the rats. And also poison. Cats are only in the house. Some rats are so big that the cats are afraid. Even the rats bite the dogs and they come back bleeding ... [...]The rats are eatable] – we skin it. Sometimes we fry it, sometimes smoke them, sometimes dried. It is delicious.[...] We can sell the dried rats.

### Three farmers:

The side effects if you are using poison is that not that it is not effective – but it has some side effects. [...] I cannot use mask or gloves so when mixing the poison in a pot we inhale the 'smoke' from the poison. While holding the bucket going to the farm, it can affect the lungs. [...] We also use many different kinds of traps. The poison we use is made by the government. After 2 days of eating it, the blood vessels expand and that kills it. [...] We also chase the rats with dogs. We have to do that because we have to submit 20 rat tails to the government. 10 every 2 weeks.

### Group of men:

I want to say, how can you ask me with getting the rats out of the paddy fields. It seems we are working for nothing [...] I have 20 acres but the rats have eaten already 6 acres so I only have 14 acres left. [...] We heard that if you offer the chief [in a spiritual sense] of the rats some food, Savory and snacks [like an offering] then the rats will go away. We did that and it seemed to work as the rat numbers declined following this. [...] We request to the rats, please don't eat anymore of our fields – we offered the food and said 'please eat only this, not the field.' [...] We are not using poison but other people are but the effect if people use poison, then the rats eats more [...] This not only works for our religion [not killing others], also for Hindus, Muslims and Christian if they have a good mind/heart, it will have a good result.

### Mangroves

Cyclone Nargis not only destroyed virtually all of the housing, but also in the most badly-affected areas, a great majority of trees. Their destruction clearly places communities at greater risk, next time a storm strikes. Research indicates that mangrove forests in particular help to protect coastal villages from storm surges.

Unfortunately, in the Delta, many of these have been destroyed in recent years – among other reasons, to produce charcoal and make way for shrimp farms. Given the precarious livelihoods situation in the Delta post-cyclone, many villagers have been forced to extract resources from already precarious mangrove forests. At the same time, some government authorities and NGOs have sought to regenerate mangroves. which in some areas have led to eviction of villagers living in or near degraded mangrove forest, and confiscation of paddy fields which have expanded into areas classified as forest land (see Sections 15 & 16).

### Drinking water

Lack of clean drinking water was one of the main unaddressed needs (together with shelter) identified by aid agencies, in the context of appeals for continued post-cyclone funding. This has been a major threat in many areas, because sources (wells and reservoirs) were contaminated by salt water during the cyclone. Many water sources remain unusable – although communities and assistance agencies have made considerable efforts to rehabilitate wells etc.

The drinking water issue brings up the important topic of time-sensitivity in needs analysis and assistance: the problems and needs identified during one part of the year may have changed in nature and priority, by the time that assistance is delivered – i.e. concerns regarding access to water during the dry season will be different to the situation during, and immediately after, the rainy season. Therefore, needs analysis undertaken at a time when water is relatively plentiful, should take account of what the situation may be like several months later – when assistance is actually delivered – and should take account of local knowledge.

Interviewees reported many instances of people sharing scarce resources, including water. In Laputa Township, some villages without water were sharing with neighbouring communities, sometimes of different ethnicity. In other areas, villages without water would request water from nearby villages with water and would be denied this as they themselves were worried about running out. Traditionally villages would buy water at the end of the dry season from ‘water sellers’ who operate boats transporting fresh water from village to village. However, interviewees had difficulty in paying for this water in the large volumes required to meet their needs after Nargis. In one instance a village leader reported buying water – after Nargis – from his own funds with the intention to sell it at reduced costs to the villagers. But as they could not pay, he ceased the scheme. Although inspiring, such local self-help initiatives can cause tensions and conflicts between and within communities.

### Group of men:

The most serious (concern) now [in January] is water. They have a tube well from before Nargis but they need the engine to pump up the water. Before they had an engine and the well had been established through a mix of private contribution and from the village. This was organized through a committee. They charged a fee for villagers from another village – one barrel [approx. 50 gallons or 200 litres] of water 200 Kyat. This tube well had been in place for one year before Nargis. Before that they used to buy water from commercial water supplier (in dry season) who brought water by boat at a price of 5 – 600 Kyat per barrel. Now (after Nargis) commercial

water costs 1,500 Kyat. Per barrel because of fewer suppliers. Now some can afford to buy the commercial water but others cannot and fetch water from the mouth of the river/stream they live along. Now this water is not too bad but soon this be bad and will cause them stomach problems – diarrhoea, dysentery and cholera.

## Other Issues

### 2.16 Shelter, housing and land

#### Threats/concerns:

- Lack of shelter/houses
- Lack of resources to rebuild
- Involuntary relocation
- Tension within and between communities in relation to shelter/housing and authorities and INGOs' attempts to enforce relocation plans
- Forced to live further away from sources of livelihood
- Confiscation of land

#### Responses:

- Reconstruction based on individuals' own resources
- Complying with instructions
- Indirect or direct resistance to relocation
- Appealing to and negotiation with local authorities and/or INGO field staff
- Maintaining a presence in two locations
- Ignoring (at least for a while) orders to relocate
- Providing false information to authorities

The vast majority of the families in the area researched lost their houses during the cyclone. Most houses were simple bamboo and wooden structures, while a few richer persons had brick buildings – all of which were totally or partially destroyed. Few donor agencies made funds available for reconstruction of houses in the aftermath of the cyclone, resulting in many families continuing to live in inadequate shelters. While some shelter projects took great care to ensure local participation, appropriate procedures and consultations in relation to ownership and land issues, some did not. One of the research areas was particularly negatively affected by shelter interventions (by an Asian INGO) that threatened livelihoods, induced involuntary relocation and land confiscation in cooperation with government authorities.

Often, donors were unable to provide shelters for all (surviving) residents of an affected community. Instead of discussing with villages the most appropriate way to proceed, NGOs sometimes built the number of houses for which they had a budget, and then left it to the community to sort things out. On other occasions, aid agencies carried out targeting in relation to shelter which was not considered appropriate by local people. Sometimes the houses built for cyclone survivors were of considerably lower quality (seemingly involving a lower financial outlay) than the international NGO had originally promised villagers – raising questions of

accountability and corruption on the part of contractors (on corruption in the aid response, see section \*).

**A village woman said:**

The houses that built by --- [NGO] were not strong enough. The rooftop was made with plastic, the partition made with bamboo and also the flooring was made with bamboo. The organization that planned to build the houses but there were not enough for the whole village.

In one group discussion, several women in their 40s stressed that the new houses built for them are very bad. Before Nargis, they could “never have imagined living in houses like these.” Where housing and/or infrastructure projects were implemented by government authorities and by international agencies land confiscation and involuntary relocation was a cause of concern to many villagers. In several instances, the authorities confiscated land from villagers in a coerced and forced manner without providing compensation or generally following legal provisions set out in Myanmar law or international best practice, in order to provide for new housing on agriculture land.

In some instances communities have been resettled away from areas considered to be particularly vulnerable to future natural disasters. Such initiatives may be viewed as part of the government's responsibility to provide citizens with safe locations.<sup>51</sup> However, the manner in which communities were move was rarely the result of participatory processes, and often went against local people’s expressed wishes. An old lady about to be relocated to another village said:

We don't want to move from where we live. We are settled here, as we have been living here for a long time. If we have to live with other villagers, we are worried about our livelihoods. According to our religious beliefs, we want to stay where our family members lost their lives. ... If we moved to other place, we feel that we are far away from them.

In some cases, resettlement has involved the development of new villages, sometimes clustering together people from several previous settlements – which can induce tensions, and/or undermine community cohesion. Moreover, it poses a threat to people’s livelihoods, as the new villages are often located away from traditional fishing grounds and agriculture land.

**One of a group of eight affected farmers explained:**

I put my name on a list because I was informed that we would have our collapsed houses rebuilt. I did it because I thought my home would be built in whichever place I liked. Later on I learned that the new housing program would take place on the riverbank as a model village. The one hundred-house-head decided unilaterally to implement it at the township meeting. We weren’t consulted with [in advance]. Living there isn’t convenient for us. Beside it [the original place] is where our paddy fields are. We go to the fields from here. If we live there [in the model village], there will be a long way to the fields, and besides, there is no [natural] protection on the bank against wind. If we had lived there before Nargis, no one would have survived. The place we live in before is garden land with trees. These trees saved our lives [during Nargis].

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<sup>51</sup> See the UN IASC guidelines on, *Protecting Persons Affected by Natural Disasters* (June 2006).

**One man, whose daughter survived, but who lost his wife and three children said:**

We have been living here our whole life and earning our living in this river. Now we have been told to move to the place where the four villages would be combined. We don't know whether we will be fine there. On this river, I paid 4,000 Kyat for the auction fees. I am not sure if I moved there [the new place] if I might have to pay again.

The impacts have often been harder for the more vulnerable parts of communities, such as the landless and fisher-folks, for whom finding work and ensuring a good catch has been made even more difficult, while many farmers have faced long travel distances to their fields while some have resisted relocation and continue to reside in the old location. Such problematic aspects of resettlement have sometimes been facilitated by aid agency compliance. On several occasions, one particular international NGO said that they would follow villagers' decisions regarding where to build new houses – but in fact only provided shelter in a resettlement site designated by the government. They thereby indirectly forced people to comply with relocation order issued by the authorities, if villagers wanted to receive any assistance with rebuilding their housing. As an international staff member of this INGO put it:

If the villagers can follow the [government's] order to relocate, then we can build houses, but if they cannot move, we cannot build them houses. It's up to them.

**A group of villagers explained:**

All the villagers submitted to [the INGO] where they want to build but [the INGO] did not accept the villagers suggestions, as they had to build as per the government plan – so [the INGO] cannot accept the villagers' preferred place.

Such concerns raise issues of government involvement in forced resettlement, and the positions of local and international agencies. Aid agencies who be considered acquiescent in forced migration – or even as facilitators of inappropriate, top-down government planning. However, it should be emphasized that many other agencies followed proper procedures while this case demonstrate a 'worst-case scenario'. In 2009, UN Habitat in cooperation with UNHCR developed a set of guiding principles for agencies to follow when implementing shelter projects, and UNHCR employed one local staff with particular responsibility for providing advice to humanitarian agencies in the area of shelter and land.

Prompted by a suggestion by an international agency, the authorities also moved farmers from parts of the Delta less affected by the cyclone into those devastated by cyclone Nargis, in order to re-start agriculture. The new arrivals brought with them agricultural expertise, energy and much-needed capital and other assets. However, such development has sometimes resulted in local people losing ownership of or access to their land. Furthermore, new arrivals have sometimes taken advantage of aid distributions, and are sometimes therefore perceived locally as 'aid migrants'.

The interviews detailed a variety of protection strategies deployed by villagers. In terms of physical reconstruction, many managed – often within days and weeks – to

semi-rebuild their houses with waste material. Sometimes this was undertaken as a joint effort together with neighbours, and other times family by family.

**One husband and wife, with three children said:**

No one had helped us [rebuild our house]. We did it ourselves. We did not buy anything.

The research highlights brave and ingenious local responses to forced relocation orders, including villagers' appeals to authorities, and clever mobilisation of local power relations and knowledge. But it also highlights how the fear of negative repercussions often leads individuals to not seek address. The interviews speak to the variety of different formal and informal relationships which exist between communities, and authorities at different levels (Section 18). The responses generally ranged from compliance to avoidance, negotiation and appeals to local authorities and INGO staff. Rarely, is direct confrontation used to deal with often very challenging circumstances.

**One man noted regarding moving that:**

The decision is already made so we have to follow it.

**Group of villagers who'd been told to move:**

The situation is a little improved including that we have the new houses but most people don't want to stay there as it is far from their fields. [...] The village tract authorities ordered them to move so we had to... People are also afraid that houses will break down if there is a strong wind.

In a number of instances, villagers felt that they could not openly confront the order to move. Instead they complied with the construction of houses in a new location but quietly refused to use the houses, often remaining in sub-standard housing in their old village. Mainly richer farmers deployed this option. The local authorities did not actively oppose this solution as long as it did not get them in trouble with higher authorities

**A local NGO worker explained that an international NGO:**

built new houses near the narrow creek, so that is not good for transportation for the villagers. Also it is not good for their own business. That is why they are not going to live there, but rather want to stay in the old place. All the [INGO] houses are empty. If they go by boat then there is about 20 minutes distance between the two sites - by walking it is about 40 minutes. Before building, the villagers tried to negotiate with [the INGO] but they recommended not to build near the wide river where the old village is located, due to the risk of storm. But then Htoo [a commercial] company came and built a new school in the old place. The government supported [the INGO] and told them that they had to build in that new place.

**Group of three men:**

We received instructions from the government that previously there were 31 villages and now there should only be 11 villages. So the government asked us to gather among ourselves to decide on which should be the 'gathering place' [location of main village]. For example 5 villages can be in 1 place - but they let the village tract leader decide after that. We went to raise our concern to the village tract leader. [...] But no villager come and live in this place after the houses were built - they all go back and live in their own place [original village] [...] We cannot move the houses to

the old village site as we dare not move yet because we are worried we will be punished by the top authorities.

In some cases the relocation has brought inter-village conflicts to the surface. One older woman among a group of eight said:

After Nargis we are relocated here by the state authority, because the access here is easy. They also plan to build the school so that if the cyclone comes again it can be used as a cyclone shelter. Everything has been planned and we are happy about it. But you see the rich people from old village they have money so they can move back to old village, but we can't afford to do that. They do whatever they want to do without considering for us. We don't have our own village leader here, so for us it's like living with a step-father [being administered by the village leader from a nearby village]. Although the village leader from the other village helps us, it is not effective as he looks after his own villages interests only. Two villages in one is not good. I am very unhappy about that.

In another group discussion, a middle-aged woman stated that she would like to complain about the village leaders plans to move the village. She said that, although the village leader had promised them all jobs:

This is not true – he cannot get us all jobs there. [...] The leader says he already submitted a letter to combine the villages into one but he will not move there and we won't. [...] He even has his home somewhere else – he has money and can do what he likes – it's easy for him to talk. [...] He has his own business there and he wants us there to make the village bigger and himself bigger and more important. [...] There are some people with him – and some against him. But we'll stay in the middle.

In other cases, villagers were able to negotiate not to move by appealing to township authorities or managed to come to an agreement with local authorities about only partially moving the village – or reconstructing the new houses in ways that made it appear as if the village had relocated while the majority of villagers had not.

#### **Interview with group of villagers including village leader:**

Before Nargis, we were staying across the area – most of the villages. The State thinks that because the villages are very spread out they cannot help each other if hazards so the state thinks it should combine in larger villages. Like here, the State tried to combine but the problem is that the farmers' fields are far away so they try to stay in the original place. For that reason we negotiated a long line of houses [that connects the village with the neighbour village where the village was to be relocated]

In cases where individual farmers lost land to house building and did not receive compensation, they generally felt powerless and grudgingly accepted their loss.

#### **One widowed female land owner explained while in tears:**

They [the INGO and village authorities] took some of my farm land. I only found out when the field staff of the INGO arrived to measure the plots. I told them that they could not take my land but they said that they were only field staff and could not do anything. I also talked to the village leader but he said that if I had a problem then I could go to higher authorities [...] But I do not want to cause trouble and don't have money to take my complaint to higher authorities. Now, I worry about how I will keep my children in school. I have lost so much. I have heard I should get compensation.

When asked if she wanted to seek assistance with UN agencies to see if they could intervene she declined in fear that she would get into trouble with the authorities. She also observed that she did not have the 'required money' to take her case to the authorities where – even if the claim is legitimate – bribes would have to be paid to move it forward within the local administration.

As mentioned in Section 12, confiscation of agricultural land by government authorities is an ongoing concern to farmers who have not been able to cultivate a all their land following the cyclone. According to Myanmar law, farmers do not have ownership but only user-rights, as all land belongs to the State. If the land is not utilized for agriculture purposes the State can confiscate it. Such land confiscations have not been widespread after the cyclone, despite concerns that this would take place on a systematic scale. Some of the land upon which farmers have 'encroached' in the Delta are officially forest reserves, which have subsequently been confiscated and placed under mangrove reforestation programs. In any case, some farmers have found ways to try and mitigate the threat.

#### Two village men:

Last year we planted 50 acres. This year we planted 200 acres but I lied about it to the village tract leader, and said that we had done 420 acres. We heard that if we did not finish it all, they would take back the land and give it to private companies so we had to lie. [...] When the Township people found out that the land that was not cultivated, they sent people from 5 other village tracts here to work the fields. We spoke to these farmers from outside about not planting on land that belongs to other people. They said that they did not want to work here and take other people's land. I send them to the yayaka [village tract leader] and we all – the yayaka, the Ya Einmu and the others [the labourers from other Village Tracts] had a meeting. The yayaka asked the Ya Einmu to come to an understanding with the people. The people did not want to take other people's things and also they do not want to hurt people living here. So I just arranged with them to leave our area, which they did.... But we are still afraid that if we do not plant more of our land, the authorities will grant the right to plant there to others in the future.

Informants reported instances where aid agencies had helped to build shelters on land owned by local farmers. From the agency perspective, this may be considered a failure in planning. Local communities sometimes responded by arranging for the allocation of compensation to landowners (a figure of 20,000 Kyat was quoted by one respondent), paid by those moving into new shelters built on others' land. This may be considered a local coping mechanism, allowing for an equitable dispute settlement.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> As one local NGO worker put it: "the quality of the house provided is the responsibility of the NGO; the location is the responsibility of the government."

## 2.17 Access to education

### Threats/concerns:

- No or little access to education
- Risk of (I)NGOs contributing to forced relocation
- Forcing people to choose between education and livelihood
- Creating conflicts between and within villages

### Responses:

- Communities compensate insufficient/lacking government spending/ salaries/ buildings out of own means
- Sharing within community allows kids of poorer homes to attend school
- Low key advocacy by communities with authorities
- 

Affected communities place a very high value on education. However, villagers often experience great difficulty paying school fees, buying uniforms etc. Several parents reported withdrawing their children from school, and/or tertiary education, due to lack of funds. In many cases children are taken out of school, in order to work or otherwise support the family. Parents are often unhappy about this, but feel that they must prioritise basic food and livelihood security for the family. Another constraint on education is lack of money for transport, to often far-distant schools.

Teachers are often reluctant to be posted in remote (and cyclone-devastated) communities. Despite local efforts to attract teachers – including local fundraising for salaries, and providing food from village resources – teachers often depart before the end of the school year.

The subject of school building demonstrates that aid may end up being provided according to donor (and government) agendas, rather than as a result of close consultation with beneficiaries. For example, one international NGO builds schools (which can double as cyclone shelters – an excellent idea) according to lists provided by the government. If the head-teachers of non-assisted villages approach this agency for assistance, this can only be provided if the village is already on the government lists. Such lists may be inaccurate, or they may be deliberately designed to further government relocation plans, or be used in other ways to reward ‘loyal’ communities, and exclude others (particularly in remote areas, populated by groups not perceived as supportive of the government). Such concerns raised issues of relationships with authorities (see Section 18).

Interviewees talked about disputes regarding the location of school buildings, which relate to land and property issues. A male village (30 year-old) leader said:

The children said they would like to attend school in town, so we have to force to ask them to stay. If not there will be no school-age children here.

### Male teacher (45 years-old):

My salary alone is not enough. Because of my parents in-law I can survive. They have many farms and also have some capital. Our family have to rely on them.

#### Father of 14 year-old boy:

This year business is not doing well so I have had to take him [son] out of school – but I will let him go back to school later. I am not educated, so I want my children to be educated. My daughter, who was doing well, but death took her away. I have only one son left with me, so surely I will have to support him for his schooling.

#### Group of eight women:

Our main concern is the children's education. We cannot afford the school fees. These are the difficulties we are facing. We are trying to work it out ourselves.... we try to stand on our own feet. We recruited a teacher and got some books from an NGO, but we could not afford to pay the teacher so he does not want to teach here anymore.

#### Researcher's notes:

As part of the government and INGO re-housing plan, one village was supposed to move to a new location next to another village (about 1 hrs walk, 20 min by motor boat). Some people moved in April or so but moved back to their original village in May or so (a month later) as they want to be close to their fields and stay in their original village. This has caused a lot of conflict between the two villages, in particular in relation to the location of the school. The location of the partly combined village had been designated by the government as the place of the new government school – to be built with the assistance of a commercial company. But after the villagers from the distant village moved back to the old village near their fields, they want the school in their original location. The two villages have a conflict about the location of the school.

#### Twelve women from the original village explains:

The children here have to go to school in the other village but we don't have a boat so they have to swim to get across and that is dangerous when the water is running fast. Also there is no bridge so we stopped that. Some people can't swim so they have to hold on to plastic containers. When the river flows hard then you cannot pull each other.

#### A group of women explain about difficulties with education:

Two thirds of the school children cannot afford their children's school fees, especially the families with many children... One month the teacher said, if you cannot pay me then I have nothing to survive on. So she said that once so of course we have to try hard to find the school fees to pay her 'cause we know that the teacher tries very hard to teach and we try to pay her.

We tell our okkata [village tract leader] but not to others as he is the bigger one [authoritative person] so we can submit our complaint [to okkata].... We only did it verbally – we did not complain on paper because we don't want the village to loose face. We don't want the lu gyi to loose face and dignity. We just sacrifice ourselves. We don't want to hurt someone ...

....We will try to keep the teacher happy with food but with the last one that did not work and the teacher left. For the government teacher, he/she does not only get the government salary but we also give rice out of our quota [from the NGO] so that they don't leave – and also some presents. We try to serve [helping her out with household chores] the school, tell children to do this and that but still they leave. It is no use.

## 2.18 Village leadership and dynamics of decision-making

In the context of Cyclone Nargis, to talk about the 'local' – as opposed to 'global' – approaches to protection is to oversimplify. There is not one 'local' ('grassroots') voice, but rather at the community level there are a variety of interests and identities, types of resource, and opportunities for and constraints on action and expression. It is necessary to 'unpack' these actors and positions in order to appreciate the complexity and richness of local agency and 'voice'. Such different voices and positions are illustrated by the variety of different perspectives on, and interest regarding, external interventions, such as the 'wealth ranking' methods used by many aid agencies (see Section 8).

Local leaders play key roles in managing village affairs, administrative tasks, negotiating within and with higher authorities, as well as managing relations with aid agencies and implementation of aid and recovery interventions post-Nargis. However, the influx of aid and the allocation of resources have challenged the role of local village leaders and village 'unity'. Village leadership was most frequently centred around the official village leader, assigned by the government as the 'village head' responsible for government administrative tasks, government laws and regulations, and ensuring village 'peace and unity'. However, other more informal leaders with varying forms of authority and influence are also of importance such as the *ya mi ya pa* or the 'elder's council', which is a voluntary, self-appointed group of often (but not always) experienced older men who provide advice and guidance on village affairs including resolution of disputes. In addition, after the cyclone, many NGOs set up Village Development Committees (VDCs) tasked with coordinating the aid delivery between the NGO and the village (often the official village leader and *ya mi ya pa* members form the core part of this group. Other important local powerholders and leaders include religious leaders (see Section 19) and various influential individuals, such as for example a former official village leader, a successful businessman or rich farmer, or even a well-educated younger person or persons respected for their engagement in village development affairs.

### Group of villagers:

The leader of the village elders (*ya mi ya pa*) is the most experienced person in the village – he has authority over the 100 household-head. He can tell the 100 household-head what to do and the 100 household-head has to listen to him, and respect him for what he is saying.

When the village elders and the 100 household-head make decisions they call for a village meeting and explain what the plan is and what they are going to do. Whoever agrees or disagrees can say as they are open for suggestion.

An official village leader is assigned by the Village Tract Chairman and officially appointed by the Township authorities. In many cases, the Village Tract leader will consult villagers, particularly the *ya mi ya pa* – but this is not a given. In some instances, potential village leaders will approach the village tract to have the current leader disposed and himself (it is always a man) appointed, and frequently a bribe will be paid to 'facilitate the selection'. The official village leader can also be removed from office if villagers are successful in bringing complaints about him to the Village Tract leader or Township authorities. Likewise, several village Tract

Leaders have been replaced following complaints of corruption related to government aid distribution following the cyclone. Generally, there is a tendency that official village leaders who are liked and respected by the community and/or who enjoy good relations with the Village Tract leader will stay in the position for longer periods. This has been particularly noticeable in the areas worst-affected by the cyclone where changes of official village leaders have been fairly frequent. Nevertheless, in most instances villagers are dominated by wealthy elites, family members of which make up the leadership strata.

#### Married man (36 years-old):

[The village leadership changes frequently because] It depends on his performance; when the villagers complain, he is forced to resign.

People interviewed expressed quite similar views regarding what makes a good official village leader, including the ability to access assistance and other resources (i.e. to attract good patrons), and to establish appropriate relations with government authorities, aid agencies and other 'donors'. Other important characteristics were said to be 'good heartedness and sympathy', someone who can 'manage well for the village', honesty of character and fairness i.e. not providing preferential treatment to friends and family.

#### Group of three men:

We prefer choosing our leader ourselves. For now, it is a younger leader who does not care about us and is selfish, and who does not stay in the village. [...] He stays in the old village as there he can get some favours because of his position. A good leader is a leader who knows what we need, who cares about us and who knows what has to be done for the village.[...] A bad leader is one who just cares about himself and his family.

Most people agreed that 'village unity' is improved by having good local leaders, who may or may not be official state authorities. However, leaders can sometimes be domineering and 'top-down' in approach, and not solicit local participation in decision-making.

Village leaders, particularly officially appointed village leaders, have been challenged in the wake of Nargis in relation to managing aid delivery, including selection of beneficiaries, and seeking to mitigate between different opinions of who is most deserving and who is not. Some have been accused of favouritism, while some village leaders express disappointment, if they do not perceive themselves to be appreciated and supported by the community. Moreover, the 'aid work' takes up time, not always allowing the village leader time to focus on his 'own business' i.e. making an income (as the position is unpaid). This has sometimes led the official village leader to resign from their positions.

#### Village leader:

When the villagers understand and unite we can be successful. [However,] There are so many difficulties, I even want to quit especially when the villagers misunderstand. I have to try hard to explain things to.

After Nargis, we shared the rice.... the villagers are very united. One word from the 100 household-head was very effective, and everybody followed. But when the aid agencies arrived there was no longer unity.

### Old lady:

I would like them [aid agencies] to come personally and speak to the villagers and listen to them. Some groups came to the village without going around. They went straight to the 100 household-head and asked how many households exist in the village. They left the things with him. We would like them to come and check first with the villagers what their needs are, and then they can decide which aid they should provide. If someone already has got a boat they shouldn't give to that person, but rather give to those who are really in need.

The whole family of our former 100 household-head died during Nargis so we nominated a new one. That guy he was nice before he became 100 household-head – but now his attitude has changed. As we nominated him it is not easy to fire him. Now as there is less aid he has tried to appoint someone to do the work. In the village, if you get on well with him you will get all the aid available. Yesterday a group of people came to collect the list of elderly people. He gave only three or four people's names – those who get on well with him.

Village or Village Tract leaders are sometimes absent from their supposed areas of responsibility, for business or personal reasons. Such absences can undermine villagers' sense of unity, making people feel more isolated and vulnerable, and resentful towards 'absentee leaders'. Also, some village leaders are less capable than others, and/or more oppressive, and/or more or less corrupt. That said, many leaders interviewed were responsive to the needs of the local community, would argue their case vis-à-vis higher authorities or seek to implement 'instructions from above' in ways that would cause the least hardship to the villagers.

### 100 household-head:

Yesterday the soldiers' recruitment team arrived here. They said we have to give them one person per village [for recruitment into the army]. I told them please don't do that, and it would be good to ask the villagers first. If I were to force them to go they will turn around and tell me "why don't you go". I heard from the villagers that the soldiers persuaded the boy at the teashop by telling him how much salary he will get and after that he will be promoted.

### One fisherman, one farmer and one labourer said:

[Myanmar NGO] said they would build 180 houses, and the government authority told them that they should build the houses outside the village in the fields. They are not allowed to build them in the village. In order to make a model village, the houses should be built in a row. The village leaders discussed the matter and told them that they should build the houses in the village, if not the villagers decided not to take the houses. It was because if they built the houses in the farm it would destroy most of the farms... The three village leaders argued with the government people. They had to try hard to explain them. After all, they let us build the houses in the village as we wanted it.

Interviewees commonly expressed the view that it is necessary to have good – honest, committed and well-educated – local leaders, in order to engage successfully with the higher authorities. However, villagers seem to have low expectations of government authorities. They generally expressed more appreciation of local and international agencies.

### One male 100 household-head (34 years-old):

If we faced another big storm, we would we to rely on ourselves. Here, there is the Village Tract Chairman and Secretary, who live in another village. However, if we need them for something urgent, they are never there. Probably they avoid it.

### Married man with a six-month-old baby:

The government provided us with rice, oil and clothes soon after Nargis. The army helped clear things up for us. That's all we got from the government. The rest all came from the aid organization. So I would say we rely on the organizations.

### A fisherman with one daughter, who lost his wife and three children in Nargis, when asked who was responsible for his well-being, said:

The government as responsible but they did not take any action. What could we do? [...] If we have a problem, we go to 100 household-head; for the money, we go to the auction holder. We can also pawn our assets and get money.

Submitting complaints about various issues ranging from dissatisfaction with local leaders to forced relocation or the location of the nearest school is a common practice among the interviewees. However, in many cases people refrain from complaining out of concern that they will get into trouble. Moreover, complainants need to have money, in order to get their cases heard, at escalating levels of authority. In principle, complaints which are not successfully resolved at the Village Tract level can be submitted to the Township, thence to the District or Division-level, and finally to the national level. However, the saying goes that "if you cannot afford to take your case to Nay Pyi Daw, then it is not worth launching a complaint" – i.e. to get satisfaction, it is necessary to go to the top – to appeal to the 'king'.

## 2.19 Religion and religious leaders

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the important roles played by monks and pastors as community leaders – at the time of Nargis, and in the immediate aftermath (see Section 1), as well as more recently (including in relation to authorities and NGOs: see Section 21). Good religious and other community leaders can ensure 'village unity', foster positive relations with government authorities and aid agencies, and encourage effective use of resources and aid. Furthermore, religious leaders and communities provide great emotional and spiritual support and fellowship for people, especially in times of hardship and difficulty. Although interviewees did not use the language of social sciences, most agreed that building local capacities can help to strengthen 'social (or human) capital'.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Putnam uses the term 'social capital' to refer "to features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions": *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1993: 167). He says that "virtuous circles result in ... high levels of cooperation, trusts, reciprocity, civic engagement ... Conversely, the absence of these traits in the *uncivic* community is also self-reinforcing. Defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorder, and stagnation intensify one another in a suffocating miasma of vicious circles" (177).

Many recipients understood the aid they received in terms of Buddhist notions of 'donation'. They were very grateful for the assistance, and also understood this to confer spiritual benefits on donors. In this context, they sometimes feel uncomfortable criticising the specifics of what was given, or how.

Interviewees occasionally talked about inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations. Some suggested the possibility of aid agency 'access bias', wherein Christian-oriented agencies (for example) were perceived to have sometimes provided assistance exclusively through church networks, thus aiding co-religionists ahead of Buddhist communities. However, such concerns were not widespread.

**A male fisherman (42 years-old) lost his wife and children in Nargis said:**

As the head monk is good, we can say the villagers are united. [...] Since the monk has arrived in the village, he took the initiative in village affairs. Everyone agreed with his authority.

**Mother with baby:**

[A local businessman and a well-known monk] Took the lead in our village. The blankets the monk gave us we did not even use, but kept them in the showcase. He also cleared the [village water] pond for us with the people he brought with him. After that an NGO continued to do it and labelled their name by the pond. [...] The monk also recited the payeik (religious text) for those who died in Nargis.

**Group of nine men (Christian and Buddhist, Karen and Burman):**

In the village all is well between Christians and Buddhists, and between Karen and Myanmar. They share each others religious festivals. There have been a few marriages between different religions. Formerly the village leader used to be a Christian but now he is a Buddhist.

**2.20 'Superstition' and traditional beliefs/practices; faith and survival; rumours**

Interviewees shared local beliefs, which provided novel perspectives on some issues, such as the rat plague. Local beliefs in spirits influenced immediate and more recent post-cyclone responses (Section 1).

**Housewife who runs a grocery:**

When I regained my consciousness, I was on the other side of M-K- [river], without my longyi on me. If we have to travel to this place from our village it would take over three hours. I could not get up. I heard someone was making a noise like a dog, and I also made dog noises. In our area, we believe we should not call someone's name, when in the jungle, but rather make a noise like dog. We heard that if you called someone's name in the jungle, that name could be repeated by an unseen thing [spirit or demon], so the person might die. The man came to get me and both of us were naked, but we did not feel shame at that time. We walked together and met a girl on the way and become three.

**Talking about how to get rid of the plague of rats, a group of men said:**

We heard that if you offer the chief [nat – spirit] of the rats some food, Savory and snacks [like an offering] then the rats will go away. We did that and it seemed to work, as the rat numbers declined following this. [...] We request to the rats, please don't eat anymore of our field – we offered the food and said 'please eat only this, not the field.'

#### Village man (40 years–old) with one son:

Some people assumed that the dead people from Nargis have returned in the form of rats.

#### Rumours

Some people said that the Myanmar Army (see Section 6) would shoot those who disobeyed instructions, and failed to move to resettlement sites. Such perceptions demonstrate the fear which the military instils in ordinary people. Rumours of physical attacks on survivors, and the possibility of post–cyclone theft and looting, are testimony to villagers' insecurity, and help to explain why some people stayed behind in many villages when the majority of residents temporarily evacuated after Nargis.

#### A fisherman, a farmer and a labourer explained why some villages stayed behind after the cyclone:

In the village, some strong people, and village elders and leaders, state behind. If no one remained in the village we worried that the village would be lost or strangers might come in. We also heard rumours that if the villagers did not leave the village within 15 days, there would be bomb attack. At one point, 10 strangers came to the village, carrying knives. They took some materials and whatever else they wanted. But they did not harm people.

#### Bout man:

I stayed behind and asked my wife and children to go to Pathein. They stayed there for one month and 5 days. During that time, we heard rumours that everyone should go to town, otherwise they would be shot. Some even said that we would have to stay in town for three years. I have never considered moving because this village is my native place and my parents also left farms for me. My children also died here so I don't want to move.

## 2. 21 Women and children; orphans; (re–)marrying; the elderly

Women were vulnerable to a number of particular threats, during and after Cyclone Nargis. Children also had special problems and needs – especially orphans. Both women and children were particularly vulnerable to human trafficking.

In terms of livelihoods, some types of work are considered inappropriate for women. However, women are often involved actively in commercial businesses, such as running shops and larger–scale trading. Women can in exceptional cases be informal village leaders but this is relatively uncommon.

Women in particular reported feeling lonely after Cyclone Nargis, often due to the loss of their spouses and other loved ones. Many people chose to re–marry after the cyclone, including some relatively elderly people. Often, newly married couples consisted of widows and widowers who had known each other, in the village or wider locality, for some time before – and decided to pool their resources, in order to better recover from the physical and psychological devastation of this natural disaster.

The L2GP project has undertaken limited gender analysis. In part, this is because partner groups and local communities in the delta did not highlight this as a major

issue of concern. However, this report does indicate that there are many different interests, identities and positions within a community (e.g. farmers and the bauk), who have different understandings of what should be protected, and how. It is therefore not sufficient to talk about 'local voice' – but rather 'voices'. The Karen Area Study likewise demonstrates that stakeholders have different understandings and activities in relation to protection, depending on their interests and identities, geographic locations and relationships with power-holders. According to the Tripartite Core Group (2008: viii):

“Villagers thought that gender relations had either remained the same or strengthened. In some cases the gender balance has changed, which has affected the gender division of labour. Widows and widowers have had to take on new tasks... Youth in affected villages have played an important role in cyclone relief and recovery. In some instances, this has increased their overall role in community affairs. In most cases, villagers reported being satisfied with this.”<sup>54</sup>

#### Widow (51 years-old) with one daughter:

Although crab traps were distributed, I didn't take one, because this wasn't appropriate for gentle sex [as a woman, she cannot acquire the skills required]. But I did receive a casting net, and learn to cast it myself.

#### Group of five women:

Daughters [young women] aren't allowed to go around without being accompanied. [...] They are also forbidden to go to the video-house. The 100 household-head isn't a good man. He seems to be pleased with staring at girls walking past alone – although he has a wife and children. When he failed to court a girl, he nudged his followers to do so persuading them with a reward. Now he is found mingled with the married women.

#### Elderly man:

I am 60 year old but as I lost all my family members, so I had to marry a widower. It was not like when you married young. We did so just to help out each other out. To tell you the truth, there is no lust involved. I feel shy to say this.

#### Group of nine women:

Women and men work almost the same amount. There is no shop selling alcohol in the village, and violence against women and girls is not an issue in this village. They may have quarrels within families, particularly about economic problems – but not with violence. T...] After Nargis, a mother could not discriminate between her own children and another orphaned or needy child. They shared food and drinking water.

#### Bout man:

During Nargis women and children were the most vulnerable one, because they are weak and could not hold on to the tree any longer. Children could not swim. You can see some women died hugging their babies.

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<sup>54</sup> In Humanitarian Practice Network (Overseas Development Institute), *Humanitarian Exchange* (No. 26, March 2010), Yvonne Ageng'o, Nicolau dos Reis and Louise Searle ask what local communities in Kenya and Timor-Leste understand by 'protection'. They note the difficulties and ambiguities of translating this concept into local languages, and examine the different understandings and rankings of risk, and priorities for protection, of men and women. This article shows how important gender differences can be in differentiating community understandings of protection.

### Widow (45 years–old):

As a widow, I got two piglets. One got a broken leg and the other pig got one blind eye. I had to heal them. [Myanmar NGO] gave me a boat and 12 crab traps. However I didn't know what to do with these, because I am a widow, and so I sold them. When I went to stay with my son I was no longer the head of the household, so I missed all the entitlements a widow is supposed to have. I catch prawns, and do planting and reaping on the farm. I work as a daily odd job worker. I make myself as busy as possible, because when I stay at home I used to think about my daughter and cried.

### The elderly

Elderly people were also particularly vulnerable, before and during Cyclone Nargis, due to their physical frailty and difficulties with mobility. In general, elderly people are cared for and treasured by the community. A few interviewees reported their perceptions of elderly people being sometimes overlooked by aid agencies.

### Elderly couple:

(M): During Nargis, I lost ten members of my family but the donors listed us as a rich family, and we have received nothing since. After Nargis, I was hospitalized at Bogale for 16 days.

(W): The distribution didn't reach to us because we were listed in the category of rich families. It doesn't mean we are not happy for the people who received the assistance. But I don't understand why the assistance doesn't go to the people who try to manage to survive with the things they have left after Nargis. Now we are getting older and older, we need money.

### Couple aged 60:

We are worried about the food as we are old and we could not work much.

## 2.22 Roles (and vulnerabilities) of Myanmar national staff

Most international organisations in the Delta (UN agencies and INGOs) are predominantly staffed by Myanmar nationals, with a few expatriate staff in management positions. This was particularly the case in the early stages after Cyclone Nargis, due to government restriction on access to affected areas, for most international agencies.

The Myanmar national staff of international organisations play very important roles in terms of local agency – and are exposed to particular vulnerabilities. National staff working for international agencies – and particularly those with protection mandates (e.g. UNHCR and UNICEF) – can find themselves in a position of unique value. Often they are the only people able to advise the international agency regarding local realities, and in particular which government or other authorities to approach and how, regarding which specific issues, and at what level – and whether to do so formally or through informal networks. Thus, national staff are key resources, not least for advocacy purposes. As expatriates often lack understanding of the local political, social and economic context, national staff are often asked to engage with authorities on sensitive issues, in pursuit of their agencies' mandates and programs. National staff therefore play very important – but generally under-appreciated – roles in promoting international agencies' agendas. In the areas researched, national staff of international organisations had achieved a number of

positive results for local communities, although this was not widely publicised, and sometimes not well understood by their expatriate superiors.

In undertaking this sensitive work, national can be exposed to dangers, including sometimes the anger of authorities, who may perceive them as threatening local or national power-holders' interests and/or authority. The various types of pressure which national staff can be exposed to, including direct and indirect threats, are not always well-understood by their superiors. While international staff will eventually leave Myanmar, and – at worst – face the theoretical threat of expulsion, if they displeased the authorities, national staff must stay in Myanmar beyond the end of the emergency, together with their families. In this context, it is difficult for international staff to appreciate the dangers and other problems faced by their national counterparts.

International staff, who almost always occupy the senior positions in agencies, may not appreciate the significance of information and analysis presented by their national subordinates. Therefore, national staff may feel under-appreciated by internationals – especially as they sometimes prefer to deal with sensitive issues locally and informally, without fully informing or involving their superiors. National staff are sometimes particularly reluctant to discuss sensitive cases – for example, in relation to 'protection' – in writing, especially when submitting formal documents to their superiors in Yangon. They sometimes worry if their superiors will respond in more direct ways with the authorities than they prefer. Other times, they prefer that a 'foreigner' intervenes in negotiations with higher officials including the township strategic (military) commander as 'the foreigners' are met with higher respect by the authorities (and thus the chances of resolving a problem is higher) and it also lowers the risk of the local staff facing potential repercussions from the authorities.

### **2.23 Local histories (the '1991 incident')**

Several Karen informants mentioned that villagers in eastern Labuta Township, and across much of Bogale Township, were trying to recover from two traumas: Cyclone Nargis, and the '1991 incident'. This refers to the attempt by the Karen National Union (KNU: historically, the country's most significant ethnic insurgent organisation) to infiltrate troops and weapons into the Delta in October 1991, in order to re-ignite armed conflict in the area.<sup>55</sup> (From the 1950s through to the early 1970s, the Delta was one of the main battlegrounds in Myanmar's protracted civil war, which drags on to this day in the southeastern borderlands; see the Karen Area Study.)

The KNU was betrayed by local informants, and this effort to spread armed conflict back into the Delta was unsuccessful. In response, the (then) Burma Army and government launched a large-scale retaliatory campaign, which saw the total destruction of at least nine villages, and the killing and abuse of large numbers of

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<sup>55</sup> The Delta had been a stronghold of Karen nationalist insurgency from the late 1940s through to the mid-1970s: Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: states of conflict* (Routledge 2008).

Karen civilians, including many who were not involved in the original incident.<sup>56</sup> Many people were arrested, of whom several remain in jail; some of those who have been released are reportedly still traumatised.

Continuing sensitivities regarding these events partly explain the government's reluctance to allow international agencies access to these areas – which were among the most badly affected – in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. In this context, international calls to mobilise the 'R2P' doctrine may inadvertently have caused harm to intended beneficiaries, inasmuch as they provoked government paranoia, causing the authorities to restrict humanitarian access to vulnerable communities (see Part 1). Therefore, the Myanmar Army was involved in reinforcing troops and enhancing militarisation in this storm-damaged area, during a period when resources would have been better devoted to rescue and recovery efforts.

Karen sources suggest that this incident is not just a historical memory, but continues to impact on vulnerability in some areas. This was revealed when international NGOs attempted to use participatory methods to devise village 'timelines' in some Karen villages, as part of efforts to promote community rehabilitation. The exercise encountered a 'black hole' in local memories, regarding the years 1991–92, with villagers refusing to discuss this period in their local history.

When questioned during the present research, the staff of international agencies working in the Delta were almost completely unaware of the '1991 incident' and its implications – as were their Burman national staff. Only by talking to Karen villagers and CBOs did these stories emerge. Among other things, this finding demonstrates a lack of communication between Burman staff from elsewhere in Myanmar, and local Karen populations. It also indicates the importance of aid agencies undertaking comprehensive socio-economic and political analysis of the contexts in which they intervene. Furthermore, such sensitivities illustrate the importance of seeking out and appreciating local histories.

UN International staff member reported asking a Myanmar Army officer why there was no institute of higher education in Bogale, as a consequence of which, international organisations were challenged to find suitably qualified local staff. The officer reportedly replied that "of course there is no university here – because there are far too many Karen people around."

#### Karen villager:

We don't want to move [after the cyclone]. We can live and work in our area only, not other areas. It is not easy to move to another place. In 1991 seven households were burnt down, but at that time we did not move. Now we don't want to move either. Don't talk about the '91 affair'.

#### Karen villager:

Pre-Nargis, this was a 'black area' because of incursion and fighting with government forces back in 1992. 22 villagers were taken prisoner at that time and

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<sup>56</sup> See Amnesty International, *Myanmar: "No law at all": human rights violations under military rule* (September 1992): <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA16/005/1991/en/fd6acd65-ee42-11dd-99b6-630c5239b672/asa160051991en.pdf>.

10 were executed, being suspected of being sympathisers. Those killed were told to dig their own graves before they were shot.

### **2.24 Hopes, expressed needs and aspiration for the future**

Interviewees expressed many poignant hopes, aspirations – and fears – for the future. Very many people wanted to return to ‘normality’ – i.e. the situation before Cyclone Nargis. People often said that they could never have imagined living like this, before the cyclone. Their houses, livelihoods and relationships were so much better then.

When looking to the future, many informants emphasised the importance of improving livelihoods and business opportunities, access to education and food security. Many people also expressed fears of what will happen after aid is withdrawn. Understandably, several interviewees – particularly those who had lost large numbers of relatives in the storm – seemed still to be psychologically preoccupied with Cyclone Nargis and its impacts.

#### **100 household–head (34 years–old):**

I would like to see the village economic situation improved. The main thing is business. If any storm comes again we would like to have a shelter here in the village. It happened twice here and we had to run. [...] Something like a ‘life saving hill’ [would be useful, but ] we could not do it ourselves with our village strength. We need help from outside organisations.

#### **100 household–head (34 years–old), together with a fisherman, a farmer and a labourer:**

After Nargis, the system has changed. Now we have more ‘listening from the bottom’, not ‘top–down’ where the person in authority would say do this or do that. Now they listen from the bottom, so there are fewer mistakes. Before they do anything, they openly discuss it so they could avoid mistakes. What I would like to see next year is unity among villagers and active participation of youth in the village affairs, without drinking alcohol.

In terms of the village, I want to see business get to normal condition. If business becomes normal, we can have enough food. If there is lack of food people become frustrated.

#### **Village woman:**

We would like to see unity and listen to each other and respect each other. I don't want to see drinking alcohol and I would like to see this bad habit disappear.

## 3.0 Conclusions

Up to 200,000 people lost their lives, while several million saved themselves, in the hours, days and weeks after Cyclone Nargis devastated the Ayeyarwady Delta, Myanmar, in early May 2008. Due to their courage and resilience, individuals and communities who survived the storm are still seeking to rebuild their lives, livelihoods and communities. While outside assistance from the private sector, the government and the international community has contributed to recovery, the main source of survival, support and protection has come from local communities themselves, their leaders and local civil society.

This report has detailed the threats faced by, and responses undertaken, by local communities in the worst-affected area during the disaster, its immediate aftermath and in the months following it. It also outlines the political and humanitarian environment, and the interventions of external entities (Myanmar and international agencies).

Overall, local communities interviewed demonstrated a precise and detailed understanding of the nature and magnitude of the threats and challenges facing them following the cyclone, and have well developed ideas how to address many – but not all of – these problems.

The overwhelming ferocity of the cyclone itself, and the sheer inability to save loved ones in the face of it, is the abiding impression for many people who survived. In the days and weeks after, survivors were exhausted and traumatised, in many cases having lost their entire extended families and their belongings, houses, boats (the only mean of transportation) and in some areas entire villages. Many people were injured and all were hungry and thirsty. However, few waited passively for outside assistance to arrive. Within hours of the cyclone passing, and in the weeks that followed, survivors collectively scavenged for potable water and salvageable food, improvised shelters, repaired boats, shared any other valuable resources and established first communication with the world beyond the village (by boat or foot). Those identified locally as the most vulnerable were usually the first to benefit from available food, shelter and transport to safer places. During these first days and weeks organisation and local leadership in the affected communities tended to emerge spontaneously. Assistance from outside was very limited and communities affected were themselves the first to respond to their survival and protection needs.

In the months after the cyclone, the threats and needs for protection changed. As the focus shifted from immediate survival to recovery, and the interventions by private donors, local civil society organisations and the international humanitarian community were scaled up, a more complex pattern emerged. Threats and concerns expressed by the communities during this period included trauma and psychological shock, involuntary return from displacement and other patterns of non-voluntary migration or risk of loss of access to housing, farm land or fishing

sites, lack of inputs for reconstruction of homes and livelihoods, lack of access to affordable credit or education, lack of support from the state, inadequate management by local authorities of insufficient resources and assistance, and delivery of inappropriate aid items, together with local perceptions of unfair food aid targeting. In general, interviewees made little distinction between immediate threats related to physical safety and security, and longer-term issues of livelihoods security. Moreover, varying perceptions of who are most deserving and/or most in need of assistance, within communities as well as in communications between communities and aid providers, had profound implications for the manner in which affected communities perceived outside assistance, and engaged with aid agencies.

People's responses to perceived threats and concerns varied considerably. As such, a rigid classification does not capture the lived experience of the affected populations. However, an attempt to group the responses does highlight key strategies deployed by the affected population. The response often depended on an on-going informal assessment of the likely success and risks involved. This would often take into account access to physical resources such as cash, assets and access to transport; relationships with power-holders or others in positions of influence; local leaders' perceived influence and stature to negotiate for different outcomes; reliance on support from the collective such as from groups of fellow villagers; understanding of laws or rights, and how to make use of these; knowledge and strengths/weaknesses of alternative options; and previous experiences, responses and rates of failure/success and perceived risks. Local responses to threats varied from avoiding or ignoring, containing or mitigating, managing or negotiating problems, to more directly confronting the threat/concern. In most cases, communities sought to manage the concerns/threats in an indirect, non-confrontational manner. If faced with overwhelming power (e.g. of the Myanmar Army or others such as powerful business people or township authorities) or for example the perceived threat that assistance would be stopped if they voiced their concerns, villagers often stayed quiet or managed the threat/concerns internally and out of sight of the authorities or aid agencies. Alternatively, they would try to mitigate the threat by withholding or providing inaccurate information to the authorities and the aid providers. In cases involving direct threats to livelihoods, or access to services such as education for example, respondents tended to first rely on their own resources and partly ignoring the threat/concern. If unsuccessful (if the threat/concern did not 'go away'), they would often resort to more collective and direct responses, such as appealing to or negotiating with authorities or aid providers.

Communities were relatively successful in managing, negotiating and confronting the threats/concerns, in situations where they had strong local leaders, good existing relationships with authorities or others in positions of power and the financial resources needed to respond. In the absence of these resources, many communities were unable to solve internal conflict or would refrain from seeking to solve externally imposed threats. Likewise, a number of issues, particularly when related to individuals' well-being – rather than collective concerns – were not resolved by negotiation with the authorities. The fact that local leaders were faced with management of resources exceeding their previous experiences, and that the communities did not have any experience of engaging with aid agencies, also

limited their response. Some self-protection strategies involved trade-offs – and risked exposing individuals, families and communities to new threats.

It is noteworthy, that respondents rarely referred to legal or rights-based aspects of protection, either as articulated under Myanmar domestic or international law or conventions. Villagers seem to have only very limited expectations of protection or assistance being provided by local or national government – or by the humanitarian community. Although some villagers (particularly elites within communities) did engage with the state for various purposes, few of the self-protection strategies reported related to the activities or responsibilities of the state (e.g. affected communities did not seek to mobilise legal or ethical claims on state authorities). However, informants did place considerable importance on the ability of community leaders to negotiate with both government and aid agencies, in order to gain access to assistance.

While most of this report, focus on the threats and responses faced by disaster-affected communities, it also outlines the main elements of assistance and protection provided to the affected communities, by the state and the international community. The findings document that – as reflected in communities' perceptions – the international community and the government were far from the most important entities, particularly in the first weeks. On the contrary, the response of local communities themselves, private efforts from Myanmar citizens and local civil society (CBOs and local NGOs) were prominent and vibrant. Much of this was initially spontaneous but quickly became more formalised and reached vast areas of the Delta in ingenious, flexible and often effective ways relying on local initiative and resources. As recovery was up-scaled after the first month or so, the role of international organisations increased and their support became more comprehensive.

Based on an overview of interviews with hundreds of community members in the worst-affected areas, the immediate response can be categorised in three phases: First and foremost in importance were the self-protection activities of affected people themselves – the ways in which individuals, families and communities gathered together to help each other, and protected the most vulnerable. The next phase of assistance came from within Myanmar itself – ordinary citizens, including businesspeople who collected donations and purchased supplies to send to affected areas, as well as more formally organised faith-based and secular CBOs and local NGOs. The lack of an effective state response and initial international aid, made the efforts of ordinary citizens and civil society actors all the more evident – and crucial. In some instances, the Myanmar armed forces were also among the first to provide limited assistance, particularly in the most remote areas where troops had been deployed for security reasons. Finally, with some important exceptions, international agencies were not present on the ground in the most remote areas in a major way until around one month after the natural disaster. In part at least, this was due to restrictions on access on the part of the government – but also due to the sheer scale of the disaster.

The role of the Myanmar government in responding to the cyclone has attracted much international scrutiny. The government's inadequate response and restrictions on access to affected areas, during the first month after the cyclone,

hindered the humanitarian response. This should not be ignored. It caused suffering, resulted in low levels of funding for humanitarian assistance and left the survivors in a precarious and unacceptable situation. Likewise, the relatively unhindered way in which the authorities have let assistance be delivered in the affected area since then should not be overlooked. While criticism is certainly due, it is however also important to critically assess how such a situation can best be overcome – as lack of humanitarian access is sadly not an anomaly in disaster and conflict-affected areas around the world. While international intervention and assistance can be of great importance in disaster and conflict-affected situations – saving lives, offering external protection and providing resources to re-establish livelihoods – it remains inadequate at best and ineffective or even counter-productive at worst, as documented by this report. In such scenarios, the affected population are not only those who bear the suffering, but often also those who are aware of the best and most effective ways to mitigate it in the local context. While often lacking financial resources, they generally deploy a myriad of protection strategies, the most effective of which could and should be supported by (or at least not undermined) by those with resources to do so i.e. the State (if not a protection threat itself) and national and international agencies.

While far from adequate nor comprehensive, acknowledging and strengthening these efforts by the people who are closest to the disaster must be at the forefront of any effective protection mechanisms, whether in situations of natural disaster or conflict. This does not absolve the responsibility of the state to protect its people, nor the responsibility of the international community to intervene when the state fails. However, it places the people – their strengths, strategies and priorities – at the heart of any humanitarian intervention.

## Recommendations

### General

- Particularly in the first days and weeks after Cyclone Nargis, disaster-affected people contributed more to their own survival and protection than did any outside actor. Donors and aid agency staff (and state officials) should recognise and appreciate this fact, and accept that their own contributions are often of secondary importance. This would involve a major shift in the culture of humanitarianism, and changes in how mainstream aid agencies conduct themselves. There is a need to educate donors, in order to provide the right incentive structures for humanitarian agencies and staff.
- Aid efforts should be better geared towards supporting communities' efforts to protect and assist themselves – i.e. preparedness training, strengthening social capital, promoting networking and social organisation opportunities, creating more resilient livelihoods options. This is important both in anticipation of and subsequent to a major disaster. Humanitarian needs assessments should identify local potential as well as requirements for capacity building small cash grants is often the most appropriate way of supporting local initiatives, allowing for rapid, context-sensitive responses.

- From the onset of emergencies, local actors should be asked to participate in national and international aid agencies' needs assessments and response and coordination structures. Regional diplomatic actors should also strengthen their ties with a range of civil society actors.
- International aid agencies should develop appropriate, respectful and safe ways for national staff to fully utilise their contextual understanding and advocacy networks and contacts. Local and international organisations should also ensure that their staff have a basic understanding of protection issues, and establish systems to record, refer or respond to protection concerns.
- The humanitarian system should properly account for domestic contributions to assistance (including in-kind donations, and aspects of protection which are not easily measured quantitatively).
- Agencies involved in emergency response should wherever possible implement aid programs in a developmental manner, empowering local communities and national agencies. The first step would be to enquire regarding the needs of CBOs and local NGOs, in order to be able to participate in needs assessments and coordination mechanisms.

### **Advocacy & Rights Issues**

- Different forms of advocacy should be seen as complementary. While some humanitarian actors may engage in public advocacy (documenting and denouncing abuses), others work more quietly behind-the-scenes in 'persuasive' mode, in order to protect vulnerable populations.
- Advocacy and rights campaigns should reflect the reality that – while international action may be important – local and regional initiatives are often the primary form of assistance and protection for vulnerable communities.
- Human rights and campaigning groups should ensure that their actions (including public advocacy) do not compromise, discredit or hamper local, national or regional protection efforts. This sensitivity should include an awareness of the manner in which politicised advocacy campaigns may be perceived by state authorities, with possible negative consequences for affected communities. Advocacy efforts should be based on an assessment of the situation on the ground, rather than sometimes politicised assumptions made from a distance.

### **Early warning, disaster preparedness, training**

- Establish simple emergency early warning systems at the community-level based on existing community structures, which can be effective in cases where national-level systems do not function. Ensure that families and communities have working radios (in order to access news), reliable (renewable) energy sources and – where possible – access to mobile phone networks or other communication tools.

- Work with relevant state and independent, local and international (radio) media to ensure that vulnerable communities have access to reliable information about threatening disasters, as early as possible.
- Conduct basic emergency preparedness training at the individual, family and village levels, involving different sections of society and both formal and informal community leaders. Implement regular refresher trainings, including inspecting storages, checking on survival equipment, early evacuation plans for particularly vulnerable people, safeguarding key assets etc.
- The government should further expand its a disaster contingency plan, in partnership with national and international agencies and ensure that it builds on and links to local response mechanisms (including timely dissemination of weather forecasts). The Myanmar Army – being the prime agency with the resources to mobilise following a major emergency – needs training regarding natural disaster response.
- Regional Planning: international organisations should facilitate broad-based participation in development decisions, before disaster strikes, in order to inculcate habits of community participation in planning and decision-making. Ultimately however, only so much can be done in terms of Disaster Risk Production, without substantial resources.

### Assistance

- Networks and community structures identified and maintained during emergency preparedness training should be mobilised for rapid assessments, early distributions and other forms of assistance.
- It is necessary to 'unpack' the variety of different (and sometimes competing) interests and identities, types and levels of resource, and opportunities for action at the local level. This requires careful analysis of the situation on the ground, to ensure that relatively powerful local voices do not obscure the perspectives of potentially marginalised sub-groups. Protection concerns and possible interventions must be analysed at the level of the individual (age and gender-segregated), family (ethnic, social and economic status, resources and options) and communities.
- Agencies should ensure that targeting builds rather than undermines social capital and that beneficiaries are closely involved in establishing criteria and mechanisms. Although targeting of assistance may be necessary if aid agencies have limited resources, UN agencies, INGOs and LNGOs should be aware that this may go against local preferences, can exacerbate community tensions, and can often be circumvented by local initiatives (i.e. informal redistributions). If targeting of food aid and other forms of assistance is to achieve its intended purposes, the criteria and mechanisms applied need to be closely examined in the specific cultural and historical context, in consultation with beneficiaries.
- Whenever possible, donors and aid agencies should give beneficiaries options and choices regarding the type of assistance to be distributed.

Likewise, communities should be consulted regarding distribution methods (including questions of timing).

- Direct assistance (cash, tools, building materials) to communities' own recovery activities are useful alternatives to working exclusively on agendas set by outsiders.
- Cash grants (including micro-grants and micro-credit) should be considered as early in the response phase as possible. Cash grants or affordable credits remain crucial long into the rehabilitation phase.
- Agencies and donors should adopt a more holistic and flexible approach to assisting communities rather than focusing narrowly on separate sectors, which often do not reflect local realities and priorities. This can be done through involving communities in prioritising how funds should best be used – rather than the agency deciding and distributing aid materials.
- As early as possible, adopt a local empowerment approach to assistance and recovery including strengthening the capacity of local authorities and communities. This could include addressing structural issues exacerbated by the disaster, important for recovery and prioritised by the beneficiaries.
- As protection is linked closely with improved livelihood options, supporting livelihoods is one way of promoting local self-protection efforts.
- Aid agencies should undertake conflict sensitive assessments before deciding whether and how to intervene in relation to housing, land and property issues which remain very sensitive issues within communities and in terms of relations between communities and authorities.

## APPENDICES

1. L2GP Project Rationale
2. Interview Format
3. TABLE: Summary of Threats and Responses

### 1. L2GP project rationale

The aim of the Local to Global Protection Project is to focus on 'local agency' in the field of protection ('agency' meaning the ability to make choices and take action). In recent years, international humanitarian agencies have developed an enhanced rhetoric regarding the need to support local protection capacities. The Global Protection Cluster Working Group has stated that we must “strengthen local coping strategies and protection mechanisms.”<sup>57</sup> The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) concurs, arguing for the necessity of finding, “local mechanisms and strategies for provisioning and protection ... when our access for protection and assistance is difficult.”<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, the Overseas Development Institute agrees that, “aid organizations can ... build on the strategies that communities employ” in order to “maintain their assets, escape violence, and mitigate threats.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Mary Anderson has famously argued that, we can support local capacities even “under conditions of social and political upheaval, and in countries where the regime in power imposes limits on NGO work. It is even possible... where the situation is extremely volatile and polarized.”<sup>60</sup>

Such approaches remain top-down, and international agency-centred. Aid agencies are orientated towards improving the ways in which they (the global 'protector') can help to protect vulnerable civilians (the local 'victim'). Although humanitarian organisations are concerned to elicit beneficiaries' participation in protection and other elements of programming, they still tend to focus on how local populations can be encouraged to

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<sup>57</sup> Global Protection Cluster Working Group, *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons* (provisional release; Geneva, December 2007): 10-13.

<sup>58</sup> UNOCHA IDP Unit, *No Refuge: The Challenge of Internal Displacement* (June 2003): 70.

<sup>59</sup> Sorcha O'Callaghan and Sara Pantuliano, *Protective Action: Incorporating Civilian Protection into Humanitarian Response* (Report No. 26, ODI Humanitarian Policy Group, London, December 2007): 4 & 35.

<sup>60</sup> Mary B. Anderson and Peter J. Woodrow, *Rising From the Ashes* (Westview Press, Boulder and San Francisco, 1989): 33.

contribute towards projects which are essentially conceived and implemented by the International agency.<sup>61</sup>

International organisations, with their sophisticated – but ultimately top-down – assessments of need and definitions of 'vulnerability' and 'protection', are not necessarily talking the same language as affected populations. Do 'we' (international actors) value, and desire to protect, the same thing as 'them' (vulnerable populations)? Is it appropriate for external actors to come into situations of armed conflict and natural disaster with a pre-formed idea of what is to be protected and how? There is a deep-rooted assumption in the 'aid industry'<sup>62</sup> that the values encoded in international humanitarian and human rights law are necessarily the same as those held by communities living in areas affected by armed conflict and natural disaster. However, this assumption is not necessarily well-founded.

Aid organizations must ensure that at a minimum they 'Do No Harm'<sup>63</sup>. In particular, it would be unfortunate if international humanitarian interventions inadvertently undermined affected communities' existing self-protection mechanisms. Rather, humanitarian agencies should endeavour to understand local realities, by undertaking assessments of the political-social-economic context (including Peace and Conflict Impact Assessments) at the earliest opportunity. Such assessments should elicit the participation of affected populations, in a locally significant manner. Such 'facipulation' should be 'mainstreamed' into project design – rather than being just an added extra.

These issues are particularly relevant in situations (such as Burma/Myanmar, and the other L2GP Project case studies) where the international humanitarian unity does not have full access. In these circumstances, it is particularly important to focus on local approaches to protection – and try to understand how affected communities and other stakeholders view their situation, and the activities they undertake, as well as their perceptions of external stakeholders.

Examples to illustrate this (from Sudan) could be the international 'slavery retrieval' campaign of the 1990s, which (apart from its other short comings) completely ignored and ultimately blocked appropriate and effective local actions. Another example could be the 'send in the blue helmets' protection campaigning over Darfur from 2004 and onwards.

It is therefore necessary to ask how local populations perceive the threats they face, and to investigate the actions they undertake, as well as the roles of NSAs, CBOs and other (including international) organisations – as agents of threat, and/or protection. The project seeks to work with partner groups, and populations living in conflict and disaster-affected areas, to investigate their understandings of 'protection' (and related concepts), and how they work to improve the protection of individuals, families and communities. The research

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<sup>61</sup> This prioritisation of the agency of the state - and secondarily, of international actors - is reflected in the latest iteration of the SPHERE Standards. The 2008 (Field Testing Version) of the *Minimum Standards for Incorporating Protection into Humanitarian* requires that "disaster-affected populations are intentionally engaged as informed partners in responding to protection concerns" (Common Standard 4). However - and unsurprisingly - "agencies recognise the State as the primary actor responsible for protection" (Common Standard 5). Furthermore, most of the Common Standards describe ways in which beneficiary populations can be incorporated into agencies' protection activities - rather than vice versa.

<sup>62</sup> This phrase is coined by Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (Zed Books, London 2001).

<sup>63</sup> According to the influential 'Do No Harm' doctrine (Anderson 1996), humanitarian agencies should seek to minimise the negative impacts that can arise from the provision of assistance - for example, the empowerment of conflict actors or distortion of local markets.

examines how local people and organisations view the roles of outside actors (including national and local authorities, armed groups and humanitarian/international organisations), as threats to the security and/or or as protection actors.

The project aims to represent local realities in the areas studied to national and international actors, in order that humanitarian and other interventions do not harm community-based self-protection mechanisms, but rather understand, support and build on these – where appropriate. Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that some protection strategies are very negative and it might be very hard for outsiders to support these.

Further case studies will be conducted in conflict-affected parts of Africa (DRC, Sudan and Zimbabwe). It is hoped the synthesis paper can be produced, combining the four country studies.

The 'local to global protection project' aims to respect the views and agency of local populations and partner groups. It is hoped that the project will be experienced as a process of empowerment.

**L2GP Project Objectives:**

- Improve the ability of humanitarian and human rights agencies to protect civilians at risk in protection crises by documenting and analysing affected populations' own perceptions of the concept of protection, protection needs, strategies and priorities;
- Promoting international commitments to apply the norm of Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) and other protection tools support and strengthen local protection efforts;
- Transform the relationship between local and national and international protection efforts by fostering linkages between them in 4 specific countries, and developing a methodology to analyse protection dynamics and foster interaction between local and global efforts.

## 2. Interview Format<sup>64</sup>

### How do local people survive, protect and rebuild their lives?

1. What is (/was) the situation like here for you and your family and community?
2. What concerns, risks and threats are you and your family and community facing?
3. Who in the community is most at risk – why?
4. What things have you or others done to try to ways to deal with these concerns, risks and threats?
- 5.
6. How effective have these been for you / the community and have they caused other problems for you?
7. How these ways changed over time?
8. What people, who are not from your own village, have helped you and your community?
9. What kinds of help have been most useful?
10. What else could they do better?
11. Did you move or considered moving? What and who affected your decisions and opportunities to move or to stay?
12. Who do you think is responsible for your safety and wellbeing?
13. What are your priorities and worries now and for the coming year? What changes would you like to see in your situation?

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<sup>64</sup> As described in the Methodology section (Part 1), research questions were devised by the L2GP project, while specific interview questions were developed during the Yangon workshop. This interview format was translated into Burmese for use in the field.

**3. TABLE: Summary of Threats and Responses**

THEME	THREAT/CONCERN	RESPONSE
<b>Immediate aftermath</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drowning</li> <li>• Lack of food &amp; water</li> <li>• No shelter and other crucial supplies</li> <li>• Lack of medical care</li> <li>• Lack of protection from theft</li> <li>• Lack of means of transportation (boats)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climbing and holding on to trees or rooftops, staying in more solid structures, clinging on to floating trees/debris</li> <li>• Hold on to weaker family members</li> <li>• Scavenging for food &amp; collecting rain water</li> <li>• Sharing among survivors</li> <li>• Priority to most vulnerable</li> <li>• Organisation among survivors</li> <li>• Departure/movement</li> <li>• Staying &amp; rebuilding</li> <li>• Reaching out for help</li> </ul>
<b>Disaster preparedness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk of another storm or flood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observing changes in weather</li> <li>• Listening to radio weather forecasts</li> <li>• Keeping watch men</li> <li>• Wish for stronger and higher placed (Cyclone) shelter</li> <li>• Temporary movement to safer areas/bigger towns</li> <li>• Storing essential food and water ready and secured</li> <li>• Keeping floatable/inflatable objects ready</li> <li>• Participation in recovery efforts</li> </ul>
<b>Psychological issues; trauma</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trauma/psychological shock after exposure to threats, loss of family members and assets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing stories and experiences</li> <li>• Material support to most traumatised</li> <li>• Re-marriage</li> <li>• Moving to another location</li> <li>• Religious ceremonies and togetherness</li> </ul>
<b>Disposal of the dead</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to identify the deceased and provide a decent burial</li> <li>• Theft and other violations against dignity of the deceased, and property</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual Burial or in mass graves - the latter often organised/ordered by the military</li> <li>• Leaving bodies to decompose in open areas</li> <li>• Local organising to protect against theft</li> </ul>

THEME	THREAT/CONCERN	RESPONSE
<b>Flight, short-term migration or relocation - and returns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involuntary movement</li> <li>• Involuntary return</li> <li>• Survival in camp/site</li> <li>• Protection en route and in camps and temporary locations/sites</li> <li>• Inadequate supplies for return trip and survival/recovery upon return home</li> <li>• Aid induced (empty promises) return</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited and low key local advocacy/ negotiating/pleading with authorities</li> <li>• Advocacy with authorities by NGOs/ UN</li> <li>• Community cohesion</li> <li>• Assistance from surrounding community, family, aid organisations and authorities</li> <li>• Spontaneous return or resettlement</li> <li>• Quiet acceptance</li> </ul>
<b>Civil society aid response</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited/delayed access to disaster affected areas</li> <li>• Distant donors with little local knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People surviving by helping each other</li> <li>• Local leaders or groups help organising the community</li> <li>• Sharing of scarce resources</li> <li>• Organising aid distributions informally</li> <li>• Trading of aid</li> </ul>
<b>AID Vulnerability &amp; targeting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal distribution of aid</li> <li>• Corruption among authorities</li> <li>• Targeting not perceived as fair</li> <li>• Inappropriate aid</li> <li>• Concerns regarding timeliness of aid</li> <li>• Village unity and social balance at risk</li> <li>• Hunger and poverty due to lack of livelihood and food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Playing along with aid agency</li> <li>• Redistribute aid after official distribution</li> <li>• Referral systems in the community</li> <li>• Complaining to donor (rare)</li> <li>• Sharing with villagers and relatives</li> <li>• Silence - afraid agencies/donors will leave or that villagers will get into trouble with authorities</li> <li>• Complaints to local authorities, in cases of perceived unfair distribution</li> </ul>

THEME	THREAT/CONCERN	RESPONSE
<b>AID</b> <b>Appropriateness &amp; quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inappropriate aid</li> <li>• Timeliness of aid</li> <li>• Low quality or wrong kind of assist stance (seeds, nets etc)</li> <li>• Vouchers tied to wrong dealer or product</li> <li>• Lack of food or livelihoods due to lack of assistance</li> <li>• Cultural concerns</li> <li>• Aid dependency where livelihoods is not prioritised</li> <li>• Hand-to-mouth-living</li> <li>• Conflicts over scarce resources &amp; perceived unequal aid distribution</li> <li>• Confusion regarding distribution and selection criteria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cope with the situation somehow</li> <li>• Sell off the donation /change vouchers for cash</li> <li>• Exchange for another item</li> <li>• Sharing among villagers and relatives</li> <li>• Only a few complaints to agencies/ donors reported</li> </ul>
<b>AID</b> <b>Dealing with aid migration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties with distributing (or not) aid to people migrating to the village from outside</li> <li>• Concerns regarding how to look after relatives that live in a different village</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coping by staying quiet about aid migrants who receive aid</li> <li>• Share resources with new comers that seem reliable</li> <li>• Limited sharing of aid with suspected aid migrants</li> <li>• Move to relatives in the delta area to help out</li> <li>• Move to area where you expect greater opportunities &amp; more aid</li> </ul>

THEME	THREAT/CONCERN	RESPONSE
<b>Livelihoods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decline in rice cultivation and fishing, and associated employment opportunities</li> <li>• Slow recovery in worst-affected areas</li> <li>• Lack of sufficient and timely funding for livelihoods support</li> <li>• Limited government response</li> <li>• Risk of land confiscation due to 'under-cultivation'</li> <li>• Inadequate data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking to survive on reduced income</li> <li>• Change and/or diversification of occupation</li> <li>• Incorrect reporting of data on cultivation and yields</li> </ul>
<b>Loans, credit and asset depletion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Destruction, depletion and lack of replacement of livelihood assets</li> <li>• High interest rates</li> <li>• Inability to pay money lenders</li> <li>• Lack of rural credit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Borrowing money from money lenders, relatives or employers</li> <li>• Selling assets</li> <li>• Selling agriculture/fishing products at reduced prices</li> <li>• Providing labour at reduced salaries</li> <li>• 'Mortgaging' expected harvest/catch in advance</li> <li>• Sharing and pooling resources</li> <li>• Buying on credit</li> <li>• Negotiation with money lenders</li> </ul>
<b>The fishing licence system</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High fishing licence fees</li> <li>• Confiscation of fishing assets and imprisonment</li> <li>• Forced to sell catch at lower than market rates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Borrowing to pay for fishing licence fees</li> <li>• Avoiding paying fishing licence fees</li> <li>• Negotiation with and appealing to fishing licence owners or their representatives</li> <li>• Paying fines or going to prison</li> <li>• Fishing illegally and at night</li> </ul>

THEME	THREAT/CONCERN	RESPONSE
<b>Ecological instability and issues of environmental sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decrease in fish stock</li> <li>• Environmentally damaging fishing practices</li> <li>• Rat infestation destroying most of the paddy crop</li> <li>• Depletion of mangrove forests</li> <li>• Lack of drinking water</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trying to get by with reduced catch</li> <li>• Police and licence owners catching those who use damaging fishing practices</li> <li>• Catching rats using various methods</li> <li>• Some replanting of mangrove forests</li> <li>• Buying water from outside, sharing scarce water resources, restoring water sources, using less water</li> </ul>
<b>Shelter, housing and land</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of shelter/ houses</li> <li>• Lack of resources to rebuild</li> <li>• Involuntary relocation</li> <li>• Tension within and between communities in relation to shelter/ housing, and authorities' attempts to enforce relocation plans</li> <li>• Villagers forced to live further away from sources of livelihood</li> <li>• Confiscation of land</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconstruction based on individuals' own resources</li> <li>• Complying with instructions</li> <li>• Indirect or direct resistance to relocation</li> <li>• Appealing to and negotiation with local authorities and/or INGO field staff</li> <li>• Maintaining a presence in two locations</li> <li>• Ignoring (at least for a while) orders to relocate</li> <li>• Providing false information to authorities</li> </ul>
<b>Access to education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of access to education</li> <li>• Risk of (I)NGOs contributing to forced relocation</li> <li>• Forcing people to choose between education and livelihood</li> <li>• Creating conflicts between and within villages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communities compensate for inadequate government spending/ salaries/buildings, out of local resources</li> <li>• Sharing within community allow children from poorer homes to attend school</li> <li>• Low key advocacy by communities with authorities</li> </ul>