Mission Report

An NGO Perspective on the Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar

September 26 – October 7, 2016
I. Background

About 217,000 displaced people, of whom about 80% are women and children, remain in camps or camp-like situations in Kachin, Shan, and Rakhine. This includes 87,000 people in Kachin and 11,000 in Shan who were displaced as a result of the armed conflict that resumed in 2011 and that continues to displace people. It also includes about 120,000 in Rakhine who were displaced as a result of the inter-communal tensions and violence that erupted in 2012. In addition, there are particularly vulnerable non-displaced people who continue to require special attention and/or support as a result of different factors including, amongst others, armed conflict, movement restrictions and severe malnutrition. To address these needs, combinations of different types of support may be needed from a range of actors involved in humanitarian, development, human rights and peace-building activities. Humanitarian action may be one of several components in a comprehensive approach to addressing the short, medium and long-term needs and human rights of vulnerable communities.

In Rakhine, inter-communal tensions, as well as constraints on freedom of movement and restrictive policies and practices, continue to affect both displaced people in camps and people living in surrounding communities, as well as the large population in northern Rakhine State. Many Muslim women and men, girls and boys do not have adequate access to healthcare, education and other basic services due to ongoing restrictions on their freedom of movement. In northern Rakhine, rates of malnutrition are above World Health Organization (WHO) emergency thresholds. Elsewhere in Rakhine, while a government-led project supported the return or relocation of about 25,000 people in 2015-16, some 120,000 IDPs remain confined in camps where they are largely dependent on humanitarian aid. The protracted situation continues to expose people to the dangers of risky migration. In Kachin and Shan, armed conflict has continued, causing pockets of new and secondary displacement and putting many civilians at risk, with allegations of continued human rights violations. As a result, about 98,000 people are still displaced and many people are living in fear. Landmines and explosive remnants of war also continue to pose threat to civilians. Flash floods in some parts of Myanmar in July and August 2016 exacerbated many of these existing vulnerabilities.

Aside of the humanitarian situation, the landmark election of November 2015 ushered in a new chapter in Myanmar’s democratic journey toward political and economical reforms. The peace process is also at an important juncture, with a new process of political dialogue starting up as a result of the nationwide ceasefire agreement that was signed by the government with eight ethnic armed groups in October 2015. As the country continues its democratic transition and its political and economic reforms, the humanitarian and development communities must be ready to adapt their strategies and activities in line with the rapidly evolving situation.

II. Scope of Mission

Upon the invitation of the international NGO (INGO) Forum in Myanmar, InterAction and ICVA - represented by Julien Schopp and Raphael Gorgeu1 - traveled to Myanmar from September 28 through October 7, 2016. The team visited Yangon, as well as Myitkyina and Sittwe, and reviewed humanitarian practice and policy issues, including inter-agency response leadership; NGO coordination structures; humanitarian access and delivery modalities; and as humanitarian and development issues.

Within this report, written by the mission participants, InterAction and ICVA provide observations, key findings and recommendations for Myanmar and the wider Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

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1 Schopp is Director of Humanitarian Practice at InterAction, Raphael Gorgeu Director of Programme and Policy at ICVA.
III. Myanmar Mission Observations and Findings

Humanitarian space

Main Observations

The overarching narrative in Myanmar is about political transition, peace processes and broader opening of the country to development actors. This discourse of optimism is supported by the international community as a whole, but there is a genuine fear that this desire to support the political transformation of the country is intentionally setting aside the very real humanitarian needs of the people of Rakhine and Kachin and the southern eastern region. In this sense, the international community is split between two realities.

From a field perspective, there is a very real concern that the discussion in the commercial capital Yangon is more aspirational than based on realities on the ground. While everyone agrees on the need for more development assistance, humanitarian needs cannot be ignored and will continue to exist for years to come. There is, however, a need for humanitarian actors to better document the situation of the people they serve. Their reality does not seem to be communicated well enough to stakeholders such as the national government, the local authorities, or the international community at large. In Rakhine State, it is difficult to make well-informed programming decisions as the humanitarian community lacks the data and evidence. In Kachin State, it seems the seriousness and scale of the current protracted conflict is not clearly recognized at the capital level. Furthermore, the current military buildup may create further displacement and exacerbate the need for humanitarian assistance. This lack of awareness may, in turn, result in a lack of preparedness and response capacity should the worst-case scenario materialize.

This lack of evidence and insufficient communication with outside stakeholders is also a real issue on the development side. At this point, no one seems to have a clear idea of all development activities that are conducted in Rakhine State, which in turn perpetuates the wrong impression among the local community and government that actors just focus on narrow humanitarian assistance. In this regard, the initiative of the resident coordinator office in Sittwe to create a matrix of all development inputs in the region is welcome, and setting up a new coordination structure may be instrumental.

In this regard, genuine and engaging leadership is absolutely key to focusing the humanitarian and development communities on collective outcomes, while still providing urgent assistance to people affected by the current humanitarian crisis.

Recommendations

- NGOs and the UN alike should develop a communication strategy to better inform and engage with the government at all levels, to document the scope of their development activities and the people they target.
- Similarly, the plight of the people in Kachin, Shan and Rakhine should be evidenced by stronger data on the nature of the conflicts or of the impediments to access to basic services (be they provided by NGOs or the government).

Leadership

The concomitant existence of these two realities (transformational political change and protracted humanitarian needs) has led to the perceived need for more humanitarian leadership in the country. The creation of a deputy humanitarian coordinator (DHC) position in April 2016 was a consequence of this need for more attention to
humanitarian issues. Questions do remain about the actual need of a DHC in a context such as Myanmar, given the scale of the crisis and the strength of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ (OCHA) presence. But, as we arrive at the six-month mark since the creation of this position, there is overwhelming support - both from NGOs and UN colleagues - to keep the position in its current form. All the people that the team interviewed did note the efforts made by the current DHC to better involve the humanitarian community as a whole and to represent its issues. However, two main concerns arose regarding the position going forward:

1) There needs to be more clarity on the respective roles of the humanitarian coordinator (HC) and DHC as some confusion was expressed regarding their responsibilities. Respondents also expressed strong support for a more empowered DHC.

2) The double-hatting of the DHC and country representative of World Food Programme (WFP) has not been a major concern until now, but there are valid concerns going forward given recent developments of WFP’s country strategy, especially in Rakhine.

**Recommendations**

- The deputy humanitarian coordinator position and current arrangement should be extended for another year.
- The deputy humanitarian coordinator should be further empowered with a clearly defined Terms Of Reference, which the humanitarian coordinator has agreed to and the humanitarian country team (HCT) has endorsed.
- Given the double-hatting of the DHC position with the WFP representative, as part of the TOR, clear delineations of representational responsibilities should be defined to avoid real or perceived conflicts of interests between the two roles.

**Humanitarian Country Team**

**Main Observations**

OCHA recently reviewed the HCT’s composition and modes of work. The main changes to underscore include: the presence of four national NGO bodies as full members, the creation of an NGO co-chair role, and the new meeting periodicity of once a quarter. Overall, participants welcomed all of these changes.

The main question revolved first and foremost around the limited amount of HCT meetings going forward. These quarterly meetings are seen as necessary “management” meetings, as the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and other humanitarian products and targets are reviewed, but are not sufficient to collectively tackle issues pertaining to humanitarian action in Myanmar. The fact that collective discussions to get strategic alignment are not happening in an HCT setting has probably indirectly led to the creation of parallel forum such as the “Heads of Mission on Rakhine” or the “Humanitarian Breakfast.” NGOs noted that more open discussions on the issues facing the humanitarian community would garner more participation and stake in the collective process. Conversely, participants noted that the TOR of the HCT defines it as a decision-making body, not simply as an information sharing platform.

The role of the NGO co-chair is seen by all stakeholders as valuable in principle to provide some balance in the different discussions, and should be further supported and empowered. Some aspects of the co-chair’s role still need to be clarified to strengthen the NGO co-chair’s ability to stand up to its task and duties.

Improved reach out to national NGOs to participate in strategic discussion (at the HCT or any other formal or informal forums) would also help tackle some of the issues the humanitarian community faces and better take into account the humanitarian development nexus global discussions as they relate to the specific situation in Myanmar.

The reality of the difficulties encountered at the leadership level to bring the humanitarian community together exacerbates the risk of tensions amongst humanitarian actors (international NGO vs national NGO; NGO vs the UN, etc.). A pragmatic approach is necessary to better address some of these challenges faced.
Recommendations

- The HCT should adapt its current schedule by tabling monthly meetings in between the current quarterly reviews of the HRP and other management tools. These meetings should be co-chaired by the DHC and the NGO co-chair and focus on strategic discussions around the challenges the humanitarian community faces as a whole.
- While additional informal forums are instrumental in bringing some discussion at the strategic level, they must remain light in order to not create additional burden on an already heavy collective processes.
- The role of the NGO co-chair of the HCT should be supported and reviewed after a six-month period.
- Participation of national NGOs in strategic discussions in formal and informal forums should be further promoted.

Coordination

Main Observations

The mission’s visit to Myanmar coincided with discussions around setting up the Rakhine Coordination Group, a new coordination structure in Sittwe that ended up being the main coordination-related subject everyone wanted to talk about. The goal of this structure, led by the resident coordinator’s office representative in Sittwe, was to broaden the scope of the coordination and information to also include development, human rights and peacebuilding. There was overwhelming support for the concept among both UN and NGO actors, but they also expressed real concerns around the future of the Area Humanitarian Country Team (AHCT), the composition of the new coordination body, and the most genuine way to engage the NGO community. The communication between Sittwe and Yangon, between NGOs as well as between UN agencies, internally as well as externally, created much confusion about the nature and future of the new coordination body its composition and objective.

Once the actors reached clarity around the fact that the AHCT would be subsumed into the new Sittwe coordination model, some expressed concerns about the open nature of the forum and the risk of it becoming an information-sharing meeting that would shy away from the more difficult conversations and decisions. One particular concern centered around the reporting lines of the Sittwe coordination structure, as its chair reports directly to the RC/HC, thus bypassing the HCT and the entire non-UN membership of the IASC.

Regarding coordination in Myitkyina, participants noted that its models would need further adaptation to the nature of the response and to the actors delivering the bulk of the response. National organizations and national staff are overwhelmingly responsible for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the current format of the AHCT meetings were not consistently conducive to them taking more responsibilities and stake within the system. Given the capacity and knowledge-base of the national NGO community, it would seem logical to put the “as local as possible as international as necessary” mantra into practice and potentially use it as a blueprint.

Finally, the geographic area of south-east is kept separate from the existing coordination structures, and out of the HRP altogether. The arguments for keeping this location apart from the rest of the humanitarian conversation do not seem to be motivated by very clear rationales, and would benefit from broader engagement, be it still within a framework led by the current leads in both locations.

Recommendations

- The Rakhine Coordination Group should define a way to clearly link back to the HCT as an inter-agency body when focused on humanitarian issues.
- In Rakhine, we encourage NGOs the NGO community to take on some of the burden of the humanitarian coordination if they believe that important issues are not addressed by the broader structures, and directly communicate with government representatives as well when relevant.
In Myitkyina, the coordination structures should be more deliberately centered on national NGOs who implement most of the humanitarian programming, and support should be given to them to better engage in decision-making, including staffing and translation.

Overall, national and field levels should develop stronger links for better support to field operations and stronger advocacy at the national level, as communication between Yangon-based staff and Kachin-based staff is perceived as less than optimal for many NGOs and clusters alike.

Civil/military engagement and coordination is lacking and should be the object of a clear HCT-supported strategy that is led by the HC or DHC, especially as it relates to humanitarian programming and access in Kachin and Shan states.

While the overall functioning of the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) seems rather effective, we would recommend selectively widening its membership on an ad-hoc basis to include the major sectoral operational NGOs when relevant.

### Humanitarian Development Nexus

**Main Observations**

While preparing for the mission, NGOs suggested that we look at the relationship between humanitarian and development actors and programs. The issue was most often presented in terms of a transition from one - humanitarian action - to another - development investments.

While we believe that this wording is often shorthand and does necessarily represent the extent of thought put into these issues, such a framing is not helpful to defining the right strategies and gaining a reality-based analysis of the context. Myanmar is quite far from a transition from humanitarian action to development, but rather in a situation where much more development programming must be implemented in the conflict-affected regions of the country, while **concomitantly** providing humanitarian assistance and protection to the most vulnerable populations and those that fall under the purview of the international community because of their circumstance (displacement, statelessness, freedom of movement and access to basic services).

Rather than framing the question around a transition, it should probably revolve around how to do better humanitarian programming and look at adapting strategies to be more attuned to a humanitarian situation that will, in all likelihood, be protracted.

**Recommendations**

- Humanitarian organizations and NGOs should continue to invest further in the humanitarian development nexus in Myanmar, both at collective and individual levels. They should also move away from a narrative highlighting transition between humanitarian and development.
- The HCT could set up a task team made up of a smaller group of its members to lead the discussion and planning toward the definition of a relevant humanitarian development nexus that will serve collective outcomes and respond to urgent needs of populations affected by current humanitarian crisis.
- Additional advocacy and communication campaigns by NGOs and humanitarian actors should i) raise further awareness on the humanitarian situation, and ii) highlight the positive effect that investing further in humanitarian response would have on political and democratic transition/stability.
NGO Forum / NGO Voice

Main Observations

All of the members of the Myanmar community that we met recognized and appreciated The NGO Forum. The community noted the competence of the staff, steady progress in building capacity, and willingness to engage with different issues related to NGO operations in Myanmar. It also seems clear to the team that the Myanmar international NGO Forum (INGO) was reaching a turning point and that its steering committee, membership and staff would need to together define the best path forward. The indirect consequence of its success has led its members - as well as outside stakeholders such as the UN or donors - to rely on the Forum more and to multiply the asks. Without a clear common strategy, this situation may very well become untenable, as the Forum, trying to be everything to everyone, risks becoming too little for all and flailing under the weight of unrealistic expectations. In this sense, the Forum must have a discussion with its members about the extent of the work that is expected in coordinating members on the development side, and in engaging with the Government of Myanmar or with the UN.

Conversely, the mode of operation of the INGO Forum, as a quasi-clandestine operation without a clear hosting agreement and limited staff policies and support, is unsustainable if it is to maintain and strengthen its current areas of work.

Recommendations

- The INGO Forum and its staff need further support and institutionalized by the NGO community it serves. One of its members should host and administratively support it.
- The INGO Forum Steering Committee has to define a realistic set of priorities for the Forum, especially as it relates to expectations of government engagement and the full breadth of the development agenda.
- The INGO members should support Forum staff travel to the field sites on at least a quarterly basis to ensure a better understanding of field realities and benefit from insights from members’ field staff.
- Funding of the Forum should be as diversified as possible to strengthen its independence and value to the community at large.
- Stronger links with National NGO Fora could be instrumental in regards to the specific situation of Myanmar.
VI. Annex

A. List of Bilateral Meetings

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Organization/Agency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action Against Hunger (Country Director)</td>
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<td>Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator / WFP Representative</td>
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<td>International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Representative)</td>
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<td>International Rescue Committee (Acting Country Director; Sittwe Humanitarian Director)</td>
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<td>Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Holland Head of Mission)</td>
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<td>Mercy Corps (Country Director)</td>
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<td>META (Field Coordinator, Myitkyina)</td>
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<td>NGO Forum (multiple)</td>
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<td>Norwegian Refugee Council (Country Director)</td>
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<td>Oxfam, (Country Director, Sittwe Field Coordinator)</td>
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<td>Local Resource Centre (LRC, Executive Director)</td>
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<td>Plan International (Country Director)</td>
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<td>Save the Children (Humanitarian Director)</td>
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<td>Solidarité (Country Director)</td>
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<td>Trocaire (Country Director)</td>
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<td>UN OCHA (Head of Office, Deputy Head of Office, Sittwe Coordinator, Myitkyina Coordinator)</td>
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<td>UNDP (Country Director)</td>
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<td>UN Senior Advisor, Rakhine State</td>
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<td>UNHCR (Deputy Representative; Protection Cluster Coordinator Sittwe)</td>
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B. List of Multilateral Meetings

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<th>Organization/Agency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian Country Team (IOM, Japanese Embassy, DHC, UNICEF, OCHA, MIMU, LRC, CARE, UNHCR)</td>
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<td>Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG)</td>
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<td>Humanitarian Breakfast (ECHO, DFID, USAID, Australian Embassy, )</td>
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<td>Donor Breakfast (ECHO, SDC, DFAT, Canadian Embassy, USAID, Japanese Embassy, Deputy HC, OCHA, IRC, Plan, Save the Children, Trocaire, Oxfam, ACTED, ACF, NRC, DRC, Helpage, Medair INGO Forum, MSF-Holland, ICRC.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGOs in Sittwe (ACF, Oxfam, IRC, MSF-H, ACTED, Solidarités, DRC, MercyCorps, NRC, Save the Children).</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGOs in Myitkyina (DRC, Plan, Trocaire, Oxfam)</td>
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