

Humanitarian Partnerships following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar – Prepared by Mercy Malaysia with Input from Partners in Myanmar

Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar on 2-3 May, 2008. Initially, the Government of the Union of Myanmar (GoUM) was unwilling to accept international assistance, especially that coming from Western nations, the UN system, and many international NGOs.

Through dialogue with the Government of Myanmar and with the support of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the UN created operational space for UN and non-UN partners. The negotiations led to the 25 May agreement by the Government of Myanmar, to improved delivery of food and non-food items. In addition, a Tripartite Core Group was created, bringing together the GoUM, ASEAN, and the UN, for coordination purposes.

This paper aims to highlight the partnership challenges in responding to the humanitarian needs arising from Cyclone Nargis. The description is not comprehensive and simply aims at stimulating discussion on opportunities and constraints to partnership. In particular, the paper tries to identify lessons learned, including best practices, constraints, and future priorities when it comes to partnership. The information contained in this document is derived from feedback from several colleagues who have been actively involved in the humanitarian response from the onset, as well as the observations of the author.¹

Partnership in Myanmar

The humanitarian community in Myanmar prior to Cyclone Nargis was already working under conditions of restricted access due to the permit system imposed by the government. In part due to these restrictions, the need for coordination between organizations was established and understood. Approximately 40 international NGOs (INGOs) and 70 national (Myanmar) NGOs (MNGOs) were registered and working in Myanmar before the cyclone. The need for partnership was addressed even before the Cyclone with the completion of a contingency planning exercise by led by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) with the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT).

When the Cyclone hit Myanmar, the humanitarian community in Yangon, as well as in Bangkok, and at the international level needed to work closely in partnership to exert pressure on the government and to ensure that resources available were used as efficiently as possible.

For at least the first two to three weeks of the disaster, *external* help was not able to reach those worse hit by the disaster. Working in partnership and supporting local organizations, who were in the frontline of the response, was crucial. This way of working was especially needed in the worst hit areas in the Delta, where only four INGO were present,

and where many of the local partners were hit by the disaster themselves and staff had lost family members.

Coordination and Cluster Roll out

The already active HCT was able to very quickly activate the cluster roll-out in response to the disaster. Weaknesses in the cluster roll-out evolved mainly because of a lack of leadership demonstrated by several cluster leads. In the first two weeks, clusters were run by UN cluster leads that had little experience in the cluster approach. By week three, UN agencies were able to get additional capacity from outside Myanmar and the clusters started to function better. NGOs were also given more responsibility to assist in cluster management, which led to a greater involvement of NGOs in the clusters.²

Unfortunately, many of the clusters are not yet fully operational and/or their main focus is on information exchange and technical guidance, instead of gaps' analysis. High turnover of staff in charge of leading the cluster has been another factor hampering the clusters' effectiveness. The participation of MNGOs continues to be problematic as language, cultural and other barriers have impeded their involvement. Some of these local groups have not been registered and, therefore, do not want to be at meetings with government officials. A local set-up, known as the "Local Resource Center," has provided an effective institutional home for MNGOs and some of the clusters have had special meetings with MNGOs in this center.

Coordination with the Tripartite Core Group

NGOs have had little, if any, access to the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) and a significant gap exists between this coordination level and the local (township) level. NGO engagement with the TCG continues to be an issue. There a strong attempt to keep TCG membership limited and the suggestion of having one NGO representative as a part of the three person team from the UN was resisted by the UNCT. As MNGOs have expressed frustration with the "discrimination" they have felt by UN offices in general, they still hope that ASEAN can be an interlocutor for them. At the same time, MNGOs also consider INGOs to have a responsibility to advocate on issues of concern on their behalf.

Flash Appeals and CERF

The initial UN Flash Appeal was done in 24 hours with very little consultation. A review of this appeal for projects carried out in partnership with NGOs reveals that, with the exception of WFP, most UN agencies simply put "international NGOs" as implementing partners, as these implementing partners had yet to be 'chosen'. The allocation of CERF funds was equally vague. In all but one instance was the decision on priorities and allocations of CERF funds discussed publicly in the cluster. In one case, unilateral decisions were made in terms of requesting INGOs to implement certain activities on behalf of the specific UN agency. These activities were not the ones proposed by the INGO, but were the priority of the UN agency.

Funding to the Flash Appeal was not always made known or discussed in the cluster. Even the cluster co-leads were not aware of an ‘un-earmarked contribution’ until one month after it was made, which resulted in confusion and lack of trust.

INGO/MNGO Relations

In an effort to improve coordination between the UN, INGOs, and MNGOs, as well as to advocate for greater MNGO and civil society involvement in the relief response, the Local Resource Centre (LRC) was established by a concerned group of donors, INGOs and MNGOs. The LRC has made a significant contribution to providing support to local capacity both in terms of funding and technical aspects. Weekly coordination meetings for MNGOs have been ongoing with occasional combined meetings of MNGOs/INGOs/UN. A NGO Liaison Officer (LO) has also been deployed to support NGO work and relations. A seven member consortium established a small grants and mentoring program for local civil society organisations (prior to the cyclone). An accountability and learning group has also been established.

Lessons Learned

- Having a functioning HCT and close coordination and mapping, especially of local partners, assisted the response significantly;
- The creation of the Local Resource Centre and deployment of the NGO LO have helped the coordination environment enormously;
- An MNGO/INGO/UN networking day was organized by the LRC and the LO in order to improve the links, especially also in the light of the revision of the flash appeal. This day started with a presentation on “Principles of Partnership” (PoP) and a “good partners’ checklist” that has been developed from a combination of the PoP, the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, and the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement / NGO Code of Conduct;
- Networking sessions were also useful to identify partner organizations; and
- Meeting MNGOs ‘where they are’ (e.g. in the LRC) and providing translated documents and/or translation at meetings demonstrates a genuine desire from the UN (and INGOs) to engage with these NGOs.

Constraints

- Coordination between the UN, INGOs, and MNGOs remains unsatisfactory due to language and cultural barriers. Barriers to effective information sharing also remain as not all MNGOs have internet access. Within limitations, the LRC is a place where these NGOs can get information;
- Many MNGOs did not come to coordination meetings because they were afraid of the session being too ‘high profile’ with risks involved.
- Human resources within MNGOs and community-based organizations were very scarce. Many of them lost staff, while INGOs have carried out massive hiring exercises; and
- A number of INGOs favor a direct-implementation approach, instead of working with MNGOs. Some new INGOs do not understand the constraints of local NGOs, which may have to keep a low profile with regard to how they operate.

Future Partnership Priorities

In addition to finding answers that address the constraints, the following issues need to be considered:

Advocacy

- NGO representation on the TCG: how can (I)NGO concerns be made known at this level? Is representation through the HCT an option? Should NGOs push for the replication of the TCG structure at township or sub-operational centre?;
- Relations between INGOs and MNGOs should be strengthened so that information sharing and advocacy become more joint and strategic; and
- Advocacy using tools such as the “good partner’s checklist” based on the PoP should be promoted with donors so that they support INGOs partnering with local groups.

Operations

- There is a need to ensure that local partners are strengthened and not disempowered now that international humanitarian organizations now have more access;
- Emphasis should be placed on more focused networking between INGOs and MNGOs in Yangon and the Delta. This networking can also be facilitated by placing LRC staff at sub-operational hubs; and
- INGOs should commit to implementing programs in such a way that they enable civil society organizations to maximize their contribution to immediate relief and recovery interventions; and leave behind a strengthened civil society, better able to respond to longer term recovery and developmental needs and to future disasters.

Capacity Building

- Training, including a training of trainers, should be developed for MNGOs in Sphere and other quality and accountability tools, building on existing or similar trainings at the Local Resource Centre.

Feedback Mechanisms

- Consideration should be given to setting up a mechanism that reinforces the role of MNGOs as facilitators of communication between communities and UN/INGOs, including feedback mechanisms.

¹ This paper, written by Jemilah Mahmood, benefited from input from members of RC/HC’s office in particular Julie Belanger, Andrew Kirkwood (Save the Children in Myanmar), Kerren Hedlun (NGO Liaison Officer) and Justin Corbett (*Paung Ku* Project Coordinator, Myanmar) and Markus Werne (UN OCHA ROAP)

² Save the Children (protection and education), Merlin (health), Oxfam (water and sanitation), Care (shelter), Mercy Corps (early recovery) and ACF (food).