



# Cyclone Nargis: Lessons for Operational Agencies

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to assist agencies working in the response to Cyclone Nargis by highlighting key lessons that have been learned from other natural disasters, specifically floods, hurricanes and cyclones. The report distils main findings and lessons from evaluations and synthesis reports contained in the ALNAP Evaluative Reports Database (ERD), as well as other learning initiatives concerned with responses to natural disasters. Where possible it provides links to these documents as well as to additional relevant papers and web sites. These are listed in the footnotes and the references.

It is important to state from the outset that the implementation of good practices is going to be very difficult, because of constraints in the operating environment. In this particular emergency, international agencies will know less about what happened and how best to respond. One overriding lesson is that agencies will have to find ways of dealing with this uncertainty and its implications for aid programming, accountability and delivery. They will also have to work to explain these issues and their implications to various stakeholders, including the media and donors.

This report benefited greatly from ideas and inputs from members of operational agencies who provided vital inputs. For finding the time to contribute to this learning process in the midst of an incredibly challenging crisis context, thanks are due.

This report has been based on an earlier report on responding to floods produced by ALNAP and ProVention, which can be found here:

[http://www.alnap.org/publications/pdfs/ALNAP-ProVention\\_flood\\_lessons.pdf](http://www.alnap.org/publications/pdfs/ALNAP-ProVention_flood_lessons.pdf)

## OVERVIEW

The paper outlines lessons in two broad categories - Operational Management and Technical Delivery, as shown below.

### Box 1: Overview of Lessons

Operational Management	Technical Delivery
1. Staffing issues	8. Needs assessment
2. Humanitarian negotiation	9. Targeting
3. Remote management	10. Monitoring & evaluation
4. Coordination of response	11. Water, sanitation & health
5. Logistics & Information Management	12. Shelter and housing
6. Local capacity	13. Food, local economy & markets
7. Working with Affected Populations	14. Livelihoods recovery

## SECTION 1: OPERATIONAL MANAGEMENT

### ■ LESSON 1 – Addressing staff issues is critical

**Surge capacity** is the ability of agencies to scale up their programme in response to needs. The post-tsunami response demonstrates, staff surge capacity can be constrained by a lack of adequate quick funding mechanisms, stand-by capacity, contracting arrangements and effective rosters (TEC, 2006). Restricted access to Myanmar and the affected areas provides severe restrictions on the implementation of agency surge capacity. As a result, **the humanitarian community's capacity to respond to humanitarian needs will be based on their ability to employ those already on the ground** (Arabella, 2008). The ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action reports that the success or failure of relief operations is largely dependent on the quality of staff, and national staff play central, often under-valued roles. This calls for operational adaptations, including strengthening capacities of existing staff members, 'remote management' (see Lesson 3) and working through local partners and indeed, the government. Asian relief organisations have generally found it easier to gain access and have been granted the latitude to operate, especially following the ASEAN discussions, and partnerships with these agencies may prove valuable for international agencies.

Furthermore, those expatriates who are able to obtain a visa may need to stay in the country for a prolonged period of time, because of the uncertainty of future visas. This may mean that staff turnover is less significant in this emergency in comparison to other emergencies. Rapid turnover can be especially damaging to relief efforts - the Tsunami evaluation notes that the frequent turnover of UN staff undermined the essential continuity and trust that lies behind effective humanitarian leadership and coordination. On the other hand, staff on long-term assignments may have greater needs for support, including psycho-social support.

**Given the above mentioned challenges to the humanitarian response in Myanmar, the response could benefit from staff that have had experience in working in similar constrained contexts**, and with innovations such as remote management. It may be especially useful to bring in staff members with experience of working in countries such as North Korea, where the humanitarian space was both limited and uncertain. Furthermore, high rates of staff turnover may be experienced in 'regional nodes', for example, agencies coordinating work in Myanmar from locations such as Bangkok or Delhi. Given the complexity of remote management, and the focus on effective relationships, there should be efforts to address potential issues arising from such turnover.

#### Further reading

- Myanmar Embassies Abroad <http://www.myanmarvisa.com/mynembassylist.htm>
- SaferAccess - useful information on staff safety, security and health in Myanmar [http://www.saferaccess.org/documents/myanmar\\_relief\\_work\\_threats.pdf](http://www.saferaccess.org/documents/myanmar_relief_work_threats.pdf)
- Healthlink360 provides medical and psychological care to global workers and their families. <http://www.healthlink360.org/>
- People In Aid Resource Sheet on Counselling Services has further details <http://www.peopleinaid.org/pool/files/publications/counseling-services-resource-sheet-final.pdf>

### ■ LESSON 2 – Be prepared for essential humanitarian negotiations

**Access and implementation of assistance programmes will rely in part on the ability of agencies to conduct effective negotiations.** The current situation sees a range of negotiations that are taking place at a high strategic level between the government of Myanmar and a variety of actors.

The main objectives of humanitarian negotiations in the Myanmar context should be:

- **Access:** this is a fundamental issue as it enables an impartial assessment of, and response to, people's needs and is the precondition for effective humanitarian action.
- **Assistance programmes:** to provide specific relief items including the provision of nutrition, health, water services etc
- **Protection:** to ensure "full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with

the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law, and refugee law”, and prevent abuses of vulnerable groups, including women and children (Mancini-Griffoli and Picot, 2004).

While the first-best solution to humanitarian impasses is the achievement of a principled agreement where both parties achieve their objectives without having to make concessions, in reality humanitarian negotiations will end up with second-best solutions and significant concessions and compromises. Steps 1 to 4 below outline effective preparations for humanitarian negotiation in more detail.

#### ***Four Key steps in Preparing for Humanitarian Negotiations***

- 1) **Clearly define negotiation objectives** in a way that meets the needs of affected populations, is compatible with the agency’s mandate or mission and complements the aims of other agencies. Negotiation objectives are composed of 3 elements: **Positions**: what you say you want; **Bottom lines**: the least you are willing to accept; **Interests**: why you want what you say. Once objectives are identified they need to be prioritised.
- 2) **Identify the right counterpart.** A counterpart in negotiation is the person most likely to deliver what you want. When identifying a suitable counterpart, agencies should look as much as possible for key actors who not only have the power to implement possible solutions, but who may also be receptive to humanitarian values. In this exercise agencies will want to build on already existing relationships or seek for counterparts with whom they envisage being able to build a good relationship. Stakeholder mapping may be a useful tool to help establishing potential counterparts.
- 3) **Measuring compatibility.** Agencies should assess the counterpart’s interests, positions and objectives to gauge how compatible they are with the agencies own interests, positions and objectives as defined above. Compatibility can lead to a first-best solution, a principled agreement, otherwise trading interests and common goals may be used to reconcile interests.
- 4) **Assessing leverage.** Leverage is the power an agency has to influence the other party. Tools that agencies can use in this regard may be incentives and threats. In the Myanmar context however, threats are not recommended due to the high risk that they increase antagonism, and limit access. Levers can include quiet advocacy, loud advocacy (probably not ideal in the Myanmar context), material assistance, humanitarian expertise, allies, such as other states or multilateral organisations, fallbacks, credibility and timing.

**The identification of a capable and appropriate team to carry out negotiations represents an additional way to maximise leverage.** Best practices recommend the use of a team rather than sole-handed negotiations: this offers significant advantages such as witnesses, broader representation of the organisation, division of tasks and responsibilities according to capacity etc. The team should therefore be diverse in terms of different skills, knowledge, personalities etc. **Given the staffing issues faced, it may be necessary for agencies to form cross-organisational negotiation teams.**

**Effective and robust arguments that will be used in negotiations need to be carefully prepared in order to maximise the impact of those negotiations.** In identifying appropriate arguments agencies will also need to take into account their own organisational mandate or mission; the Myanmar government approach and personality; the larger negotiation context and the affected population. Agencies should develop their arguments by putting together objective and subjective elements – the former relating to international norms, dispassionate calculations of need and agency’ expertise and the latter related to the particular counterpart needs, interests and beliefs. Done effectively, humanitarian negotiation can help to establish a way of working in difficult circumstances, as shown in the international response to floods in North Korea (see Box 2).

## Box 2: The case of DPRK

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is perhaps the most isolated country in the world. Before 1995 very little reliable information was available about the country as "the government viewed all data through a national security prism which considered that even basic micro socio-economic statistics could be useful to its adversaries".

In the mid-1990s a series of natural disasters destroyed food crops and the consequent food shortages further exacerbated an already highly insecure economic situation and threatened the lives of millions. In 1995, after a few attempts to respond to the crisis independently and following a massive flood that destroyed up to three million tons of emergency grain reserves, the DPRK Government called for international humanitarian assistance. Since then, multilateral, bilateral, and resident and non-resident non-governmental humanitarian agencies have been operating in the country. This represented a positive "move from a negligible in-country presence to, relatively speaking, a substantial residential presence" (Smith, 2002)

The working environment of international humanitarian actors was initially fraught with huge challenges: there was no basic information other than that provided by the Government; the reliability and quality of this information was questionable; the Government was regarding requests for standard baseline data as unnecessarily and intrusive; the restricted access to beneficiaries meant that crucial activities such as needs assessments, measuring impact of assistance, and monitoring were severely hampered. The operational environment was therefore seriously constricting humanitarian space and hindering the ability of humanitarian actors to reach the most vulnerable and in need.

In response to those working conditions, and in an "attempt to clarify with the government what the humanitarian agencies viewed as appropriate", humanitarian agencies issued a collective set of 9 "humanitarian principles":

- knowledge about the overall humanitarian situation, according to assessed needs
- assurance that humanitarian assistance reach the population in greatest need
- access for assessment, monitoring, and evaluation
- distribution of assistance only to areas where access is granted
- protection of the humanitarian interests of the population
- support to local capacity building
- beneficiary participation in programme planning and implementation
- adequate capacity in terms of international staff
- meet the health and safety needs of the international humanitarian community

Throughout the years those principles have served as a useful baseline for individual and group agency negotiations with the Government. Those principles are constantly updated and monitored through a set of indicators that OCHA has developed.

The need to engage in continuous negotiations with the Government was seen as a fundamental prerequisite for improving working conditions on the ground and years of negotiations seem to have resulted in noticeable improvements. For example, the quality and level of information has improved: the Government has agreed to carry out a nutritional survey both in 1998 and 2000. Generally speaking there has been a dramatic increase in the knowledge of the country together with a "lessening in mutual suspicion: "[v]ery often the quality of the information correlates directly to the quality of relationship the international officer has developed over the months or years with the Korean counterparts with whom [WFP] are working (8). Similarly access restrictions became much more relaxed and geographical access increased from 163 counties to 206.

Similar to Myanmar, the experience of the agencies suggested that "the provision of assistance is [a] messy business which requires the weighing of options between 'less than ideal' approaches". In the case of DPRK it meant making the best of the local circumstances while "at the same time continuing to negotiate with the government to improve operating conditions".

Source: Smith, 2002

### Further reading

- Humanitarian Negotiation: A handbook for securing access, assistance and protection for civilians in armed conflict, by Deborah Mancini-Roth & André Picot <http://www.hdcentre.org/files/HNN.pdf>
- ALNAP Guide to Humanitarian Protection <http://www.odi.org.uk/alnap/publications/protection/index.htm>
- Smith, H. 2002. Overcoming Humanitarian Dilemmas in the DPRK (North Korea). Special Report 90. United States Institute of Peace <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr90.html>



## LESSON 3 – Utilise ‘remote management’ approaches

*These have been adapted from existing lessons on remote management, which have tended to focus on delivery of aid in insecure environments.*

Strategic approaches developed in highly insecure conflict settings such as remote management may be the most appropriate ways for international agencies to engage, develop and maintain their operations in Myanmar. The aim of remote management is to ensure that aid continues to reach the beneficiary population despite security or access constraints (Stoddard et al, 2006). In practice this approach consists of placing international managers, acting as key decision-makers in the design and implementation of the humanitarian response, at a distance and in some cases outside the country in question. It also involves giving increased responsibility to national staff or in some cases, a shift to close working on a day-to-day basis with local partner organisations, local authorities, private contractors, community-based organisations (Ibid.) or the government.

**The rationale for applying remote management strategies can be adapted to the Myanmar context as follows:**

- **National staff are perceived more favourably and have greater ‘acceptance’ among the host government, and potentially among beneficiary communities, given the low ‘aid awareness’ among much of the population**
- **Lack of barriers to access means that national staff and local partners may be more likely to deliver against programme goals.**
- **Remote management could help to alleviate pressure on staff members in-country, by taking over tasks which do not require an internal presence**

Table 5: Types of remote management and other programming approaches

Approach	Agent	Description	Potential benefits	Potential weaknesses
Remote control*	National staff	Agency senior staff direct programming and manage local employees from a distance	Continuity of leadership Better oversight	Communications problems National staff bear great responsibility but have little authority
Remote support	National staff	Local staff assume decision-making authority	Capacity-building (Individuals) No time lag for decision-making More flexibility	Lack of oversight Dearth of experienced national staff Corruption risk
Sub-contracting arrangements	Local NGOs	Programmes formerly implemented or managed by international agency turned over to local NGO	Capacity-building (organisations) Greater acceptance Better targeting	Partiality Lack of contextual analysis Difficult to identify/screen
Community partnership arrangements	CBOs/community leaders	International agency arranges for community group or leaders to implement some portion of its programme (e.g. aid distribution)	More stable and familiar presence to local population Better targeting of beneficiaries Community ownership More resilient to insecurity	Partiality May not be representative Risk of elite capture
Government partnership arrangements	National or local government authorities	INGO develops programme in consultation with government authorities and/or hands over existing programme as ‘exit strategy’	Promotes long-term development May promote security via increased community acceptance	More suitable for development aims than emergency relief Independence, neutrality suffer Government may not have local support Corruption risk
Outsourcing	Commercial contractors	Fee for service arrangement with private firm (e.g. trucking company) to do basic provision		

Source: Stoddard et al 2006, 39

In considering the option of implementing remote planning options into programme planning agencies should keep in mind the following lessons:

- **Agencies should carefully assess the access to affected populations that can be achieved by national staff, and avoid faulty assumptions regarding the kinds of risks that national staff face in delivering humanitarian assistance**
- **Implementation plans should include contingencies for programming with reduced staff presence or from remote locations. These plans will ideally be shared and rationalised with those of other agencies**

- **Investing in and building local capacity rather than simply investing in project delivery should be seen as an objective, rather than a by-product of the remote management approach (Stoddard et al, 2006)**

#### Useful resources (focusing on insecure environments)

- Stoddard A., Harmer A. and Haver K. 2006. Providing aid in insecure environments: trends in policy and operations. HPG Report 23 <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/hpgreport23.pdf>

## ■ LESSON 4 – Managing nationwide coordination and response

**Coordination activities should aim to support national leadership and efforts in disaster response and recognise the right and responsibility of the state to manage and coordinate response (Houghton, 2005, see also INTRAC, 2000).**

Relatively small investments in coordination have been shown to pay off in previous crises in terms of an overall improved response. **In the initial phase of the response, efforts should be made to build a relationship of trust with the government**, as happened in Aceh (TEC, 2006). While there are examples of relief and recovery efforts benefiting from strong national governments (TEC, 2006), this is not always the case. Often, there are no specific national structures for such a task, or the structures are weak. In Turkey, it was found that the state remained paralysed for several weeks after the disaster (Jalali 2002). Expectations of what local and national governments can do should be realistic.

Lessons also point to the fact that coordination is more effective at a local rather than national level and community response and participation works better through **decentralised structures** (Houghton, 2005). In the case of Myanmar, given the highly centralised institutional system and the rather scant field presence of international agencies, a decentralised response will probably be difficult to implement. Although there is news of the government impounding some aid on the basis that they should deliver it, the scale of their operation is unclear. Engagement with national policy makers regarding response and recovery plans is likely to be problematic, which will cause issues for the coordination instruments that can be applied by the international community. It is important to note that this is a difficult issue even when agencies already have a large presence in the area and agencies enjoy a good relation with the government (see below in Bangladesh). **One useful approach in the Myanmar context may be facilitating the secondment of experienced staff from other governments and trusted sources into the government authorities, which proved effective during the tsunami response.**

#### *Implications for the cluster approach*

Following the UN's 2005 Humanitarian Response Review, reforms were introduced to meet problematic issues in Humanitarian response. One key pillar of the reforms is the Cluster Approach, in which the coordinating agency (cluster lead) takes some responsibility for the performance of specific sectors and not just for coordinating the inputs (Cosgrave and Herson, 2008).

A special emphasis is placed on the crucial role that cluster leads play. Cluster leads need:

- A skilled staff member to take the demanding role of a cluster lead.
- Administrative support for the day to day operation production and circulation of minutes, guidelines and other documents
- Sufficient field staff to provide a field presence both to support cluster coordination in the field, and to ensure that there is a good flow of accurate information to the cluster lead at the capital (IASC, 2007)

There has been long-standing confusion at the global level regarding the applicability of international co-ordination systems like the cluster approach in countries where the government provides strong leadership during a humanitarian crisis (Oxfam, 2008). There have been efforts by WFP to put in place the elements of a logistics cluster and a nutrition cluster, WHO have taken forward the health cluster, and UNICEF is leading the emergency shelter cluster. More work is underway at the time of writing. **All agencies should keep abreast of these developments and engage actively. It will be especially useful if the designated cluster lead has an established**

**position in-country, and effective working relations with regards to the Myanmar government.** Flexibility in applying the cluster the approach will be essential.

#### Further reading

- The Myanmar Coordination Platform: <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/Default.aspx?tabid=614>
- Myanmar Humanitarian Information Centre: <http://myanmar.humanitarianinfo.org/Pages/home.aspx>
- An overview of the organisation of the clusters and the various lead agencies is available at <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/cluster>
- OCHA lessons on humanitarian coordination (pre-cluster): <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/ochacoordination.pdf>

## ■ LESSON 5 – Logistics and Information Management

Agencies in Myanmar have described efforts to get food, water and medicine to remote areas, but also of running into a basic logistical bottleneck due to lack of decent roads and bridges in Myanmar's countryside. According to a WFP staff member, one of the big limiting factors is the fact that most of bridges in the Irrawaddy Delta are only built to withstand five-ton loads, increasing the need for fleets of small trucks.

**A strong and well-equipped national military force can bring important benefits to the logistical aspects of humanitarian response in a natural disaster, as was shown in Pakistan.** One review refers to an 80/20 split between the aid supplied through the Pakistani military and through the international community in the first weeks of the response (Ahmed and MacLeod, 2007, in Cosgrave and Herson, 2008). International military resources, including those of NATO, supported the Pakistan response. In the Myanmar context, **military personnel and equipment provided by ASEAN countries may prove especially valuable as a means to supplement existing logistical capacities.**

In-country communications are proving problematic and have serious implications for needs assessments, monitoring, and accountability of international agencies. Information management can provide a useful tool, and a Myanmar Humanitarian Information Centre has been set up. An evaluation of HICs showed that they have the most proven value at the beginning of large, multi-actor responses to complex emergencies. **Information Management projects are most successful when they are discreet projects meeting a clear demand. Given current knowledge gaps faced by operational agencies, collecting and synthesizing the different types of available information has the potential to make a crucial difference in the humanitarian performance in the context of Myanmar.**

Restrictions on movement are in place in the delta region, with calls for agency staff to be accompanied by government representatives. Checkpoints are in place en route to the affected region. These and other restrictions are leading to calls for aid air drops. However, an **over-reliance on air-drops is unlikely to solve the problem, for two reasons. First, their expense and ineffectiveness.** There has been talk of using air-drops as a means of bypassing the slowness of the Myanmar authorities response. However, the scale of the disaster, climatic conditions and the local terrain in the current affected area offer unique challenges. For example, in Afghanistan a US Government Accountability Office report noted: 'if the United States had donated the \$50.9 million that it spent on approximately 2.5 million daily rations airdropped by the Department of Defense, WFP could have purchased enough regionally produced commodities to provide food assistance for an estimated 1.0 million people for a year' (ALNAP, 2004). There is a counter-argument of airdrops being utilised in Sudan, but this involved extensive operational presence of humanitarian agencies. **Second, the use of air drops may make the Myanmar government react strongly and further limit the types of access that have been negotiated by operational agencies on the ground.**

#### Further reading:

- Myanmar Humanitarian Information Centre <http://myanmar.humanitarianinfo.org/Pages/home.aspx>
- Evaluation of the Humanitarian Information Centres: [http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/hicstakeholder2007/HIC\\_evaluations/HIC\\_Evaluation\\_2004.pdf](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/hicstakeholder2007/HIC_evaluations/HIC_Evaluation_2004.pdf)

## ■ LESSON 6 – Local capacities

**Agencies should aim to recognise, identify, capitalise and strengthen local capacity.** Aside from the government of Myanmar, other important actors are the Myanmar Red Cross Society, local and community-based organisations, religious organisations. Especially in the case of Myanmar, given current restrictions on scaled-up international response, local networks will need to be relied upon for many key humanitarian tasks. Given their local knowledge and existing access, community based organisations may be the best suited entities to deliver services in response to the disaster (Arabella, 2008). It is important for agencies to seek to build and capitalise on existing local networks, to strengthen existing coping strategies and local institutions (TEC, 2006).

The Myanmar Red Cross (MRCS) is a central actor in the current relief efforts, and has experience of working with local communities in the tsunami response and more recently following the floods of 2007. Red Cross National Societies operate as an ancillary to government, while maintaining their independence, and in this way they play a vital role in humanitarian response. Red Cross volunteer networks include people in local communities, and are strongly linked to local knowledge and contexts. **Agencies should work to build on and add to these networks, wherever possible, and without hindering the Red Cross' own response efforts.**

### Further reading:

- More on the work of the Myanmar Red Cross:  
[http://www.ifrc.org/cgi/pdf\\_appeals.pl?04/280463%20SA2%20MM.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/cgi/pdf_appeals.pl?04/280463%20SA2%20MM.pdf)

## ■ LESSON 7 – Working with affected populations

While in the initial relief phase (first days and weeks) the concern with saving lives may be justified and it may be unrealistic (and even counterproductive, given the traumatised state of the survivors) to expect high levels of beneficiary participation, **it is important to ensure that after the initial acute crisis is past (few days), communities are included in the design and implementation of assistance programmes, to ensure greater ownership over the recovery process.** This needs to be done in ways that are sensitive to the local context, and do not place beneficiaries under undue risks, given the political contexts.

This highlights the more general lesson that humanitarian agencies have a responsibility to understand the nature of the risks affected people face, and to consider the positive and negative impacts of their work on these risks. **Wherever possible, agencies should incorporate civilian risk, as well as need, into their analysis and response.** Protection is one of the eleven core areas of humanitarian action coordinated under the cluster approach, and cross-organisational efforts can be especially valuable in this area.

Also of importance **is the need to provide timely and regular access to information about the cyclone response – a crucial part of enabling communities to drive their own recovery** – a lesson from ALNAP which was corroborated in the OXFAM experience in response to Cyclone Sidr (Oxfam, 2008). This is important from the perspective of both ethics and efficiency. One useful approach from the response to the 1998 Afghanistan earthquakes was setting up short-wave radio to broadcast relief objectives to survivors (IFRC, 2000).

### Further reading

- ALNAP (2003). *Guide to Participation by Crisis-Affected Populations in Humanitarian Action: A Handbook for Practitioners*. [http://www.alnap.org/publications/gs\\_handbook/index.htm](http://www.alnap.org/publications/gs_handbook/index.htm)
- ALNAP (2005) Protection - An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies  
<http://www.odi.org.uk/alnap/publications/protection/index.htm>
- HPG (2007) Protective action: incorporating civilian protection into humanitarian response  
<http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/hpgreport26.pdf>



## SECTION 2: TECHNICAL RESPONSE

### ■ LESSON 8 – Needs assessment for relief and rehabilitation

Needs assessment is clearly an issue of concern in Myanmar given the problematic issue of accessing the affected communities in the first place. It is also important to remember that assessment of needs in a post-flood context is usually a very difficult exercise as homes are submerged and families abandon their homes (Young and Associates 2000, 4). The magnitude of the disaster is not based on the floodwater alone, but is also influenced by the pattern of vulnerability in which people live. In Mozambique and the tsunami countries, it was highlighted that it is important to differentiate between different types of needs: those resulting from pre-existing conditions, those truly life-threatening, those that are best met locally, and those perceived as priority by the beneficiaries themselves (TEC, 2006). In the current situation in Myanmar, the risk of further flooding by heavy rains, may call for a renewed relief phase. This highlights the value of agencies analysing flood forecasts and their implications.

**Best practice points to the need to carry out joint need assessments, which may be particularly appropriate in the Myanmar context.** Needs assessments often suffer from a twofold problem: ‘the lack of co-ordination between organisations in assessing needs, which leads to duplications and gaps, and the unwillingness of many organisations to share their assessment results in forms that can easily be used by others’ (Currión, 2006, p 19 in Cosgrave and Herson 2008, 184). Agencies with access should attempt to join forces for needs assessments, working to streamline assessment mechanisms and share results. Uncoordinated competitive needs assessment processes have proved to be unsustainable in previous interventions (such as the Tsunami), where victims were over-assessed and decision makers under-informed. (TEC, 2006).

**Needs assessment should be viewed as a continuous ongoing activity after the initial assessments:** in this sense ‘continuous monitoring’ means renewed assessment for greater contextual understanding (Cosgrave and Herson 2008, 183) Communication with beneficiary groups is essential to adjust relief packages according to the changing needs of affected communities. It is important to allow vulnerable people’s own choices, concerns and priorities to influence agencies response strategies, and to include a gender perspective in doing so, as women’s, men’s, boys’ and girls’ needs may vary. Of special importance is that during the delicate transitioning from relief to recovery, a ‘second’ needs assessment is carried out to prioritise communities’ needs, understand the changing context and existing local livelihood strategies (Houghton, 2005)

**In assessing the needs of communities, agencies should make maximum use of information that is already available from national structures as well as established agencies.** However, this information may not always be available, accessible or reliable.

#### **Suggested further reading**

- ProVention’s Community Risk Assessment (CRA) toolkit. [www.proventionconsortium.org/CRA\\_toolkit](http://www.proventionconsortium.org/CRA_toolkit)
- IFRC *Guidelines for Emergency Assessment*.  
[www.proventionconsortium.org/themes/default/pdfs/71600-Guidelines-for-emergency-en.pdf](http://www.proventionconsortium.org/themes/default/pdfs/71600-Guidelines-for-emergency-en.pdf)
- ActionAid. *Participatory vulnerability analysis: step by step guidelines*. [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)
- UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and World Food Programme. *Joint Assessment Guidelines*. Available from the WFP Emergency Needs Assessment Unit, e-mail: [oen.info@wfp.org](mailto:oen.info@wfp.org)

### ■ Lesson 9 – Targeting

**A targeting strategy that is flexible enough to adapt to different phases and interventions will be the most effective way to reach vulnerable people. Needs assessment is closely connected to targeting:** needs assessments at the community level should inform targeting criteria and, in turn, appropriate programme activities.

Targeting especially during the initial phase of relief in Myanmar will be dependent on several factors including: influence of local government officials, familiarity with local communities, and proximity of the community to road and river transportation (Young and Associates, 2000).

**Previous experiences demonstrate that biases can creep into targeting for a variety of reasons.** First, NGOs delivering assistance can find it difficult to select beneficiaries for relief. This can be particularly challenging where NGOs have previously carried out development work in the affected communities. In addition, when the government and military play a strong role in response and reconstruction activities, effective and impartial targeting may be a problem as institutionalised discrimination may be embedded in relief and reconstruction efforts (Cosgrave and Herson 2008).

The problematic targeting during the Pakistan response to the 2005 earthquake led to households headed by women being discriminated against, and the need of Afghan refugees who lacked Pakistani identity cards, to be largely overlooked (Cosgrave and Herson, 2008). This demonstrates the need for gender-sensitive targeting. During the Bangladesh flood response of 1998 some agencies offset the bias of targeting to beneficiaries who were already part of their regular programming by delivering flood relief by area, and selecting beneficiaries within those areas with the assistance of village leaders, or local relief committees (Young and Associates, 2000).

**Using local knowledge to identify the poor can be a rapid and effective method of targeting** (IMM 2001, 25). This approach proved to be especially useful during the response to the cyclone in **Orissa** (IMM 2001) as well as to the **Hurricane Mitch** (Espacios Consultores SA, 2000).

## ■ LESSON 10 – Monitoring and evaluation

**Monitoring should be an ongoing activity and is especially useful to capture programme progress in relation to the situational context and to adapt programme activities to changing needs of target populations and the changing context. Monitoring and evaluation activities should be considered a crucial element of project management** (DFID 2001, 6).

However, the lack of certainty of access in Myanmar, and how it may continue, challenges the kind of accountability frameworks that can be practically established. It is important for donors to accept the dynamic and highly unpredictable context, and create forms of accountability which are tailored to the specific situations, enabling agents to operate in an adaptive fashion to changing circumstances.

**This highlights the critical dilemma in the international response between delivery and accountability. This is present in every setting, but the constrained and uncertain humanitarian space makes it all the more so in Myanmar. Flexibility should guide donors' expectations around monitoring, as well as agency practices.** Expectations of accountability should be commensurate to situational challenges on the ground and this should be taken into account during any future programme evaluations. Agencies should devise their responses in a flexible and contextual way, given that needs are unique, and the evolving context may require serious adjustments to intervention strategies (DFID 2001, 1). This may mean that there are only a few indicators that can be usefully applied by agencies, and that tracking even those will be highly challenging.

## ■ LESSON 11 – Water, sanitation and health

Water, sanitation and health are major issues after cyclones and floods, and a speedy response is crucial to prevent the spread of diseases. A range of approaches are identified below. Agencies need to pay attention to gender issues when providing support in this area, for example the differential impact of disease on women and men, women's roles in collecting water, safety and gender-based violence considerations when designing WATSAN facilities, and so on.

Past relief and recovery operations have identified a range of approaches, which include:

**General:**

- Incorporating mitigation measures during the rehabilitation of water, sanitation and health systems for future protection (ECHO, 2001).
- Strengthening health volunteer networks to enhance their effectiveness in emergency preparedness and response (WHO, 2000).

**Water:**

- Raising tube-wells and boreholes above flood water level to prevent contamination (ACF, forthcoming).
- Including buckets and water containers in relief packages to reduce secondary contamination.

**Sanitation**

- Planning sanitation and shelter together to ensure completion (World Bank 2005b).
- Attention to placement and arrangement of sanitary facilities to limit impact on groundwater and ensure safety for community members.
- Innovative approaches to sanitation in flooded areas, such as raised latrines, pit liners or rings, sealed pits or tanks, or contained leach fields (WEDC, 2007).
- Extending hygiene education to schools and to community groups (ECHO, 2001).

Source: ALNAP and Provention, 2008

The continued delayed response to Cyclone Nargis necessarily prompts serious concerns regarding the high possibility of disease outbreaks. The major health threats that have been identified in the aftermath of cyclone Nargis are: cholera, dysentery, diarrhoea, malaria, dengue and snake-bite. Information on the health facilities in the affected areas has been established by the World Health Organization. The key at this stage is not to accurately predict the occurrence of each disease, but to deploy a response that combines both preventive and curative interventions against the likely major current and possible threats (HPN, 2008).

**Good understanding of water and sanitation conditions, disease surveillance, speedy response to warning and above all, preparedness of health agencies are the preconditions to reduce the potential spread of diseases and preserve the quality of the environment during and after flooding.** Studies show the risks of disease are greatest where there is overcrowding and where standards of water and sanitation have declined (PAHO, 1981). This often happens in situations of massive population displacement away from the flooded area and prolonged stay in flood shelters without adequate water supply. People themselves, national authorities and relief agencies in many flood-prone areas have had to develop mechanisms and technologies in order to sustain populations living in flooded environments.

Another key health concern relates to psycho-social issues. The IFRC (2004b: 9–10) notes that after the Bam earthquake: 'The psychological impact of the earthquake on survivors was enormous.... some 25,000 people were in need of psychological support... people were traumatised, afraid of [recurrences] and frightened by the dark.' The World Bank (2005) found that providing survivors with income-earning opportunities tied to physical work often helps as much as grief counselling. Participation in post-disaster shelter reconstruction can play a vital role in the personal and collective psychosocial recovery process if there is an active role for disaster survivors.

**Suggested further reading**

- WHO updates on the health situation following Nargis: <http://www.who.int/hac/en/>
- MSF resources on refugee health: [http://www.refbooks.msf.org/msf\\_docs/en/msfdcmenu\\_en.pdf](http://www.refbooks.msf.org/msf_docs/en/msfdcmenu_en.pdf)
- HPN on public health for crisis affected populations: <http://www.odihpn.org/documents/networkpaper061.pdf>
- Oxfam (1999). *Managing Water Supply and Sanitation in Emergencies*. Oxfam guidelines for water treatment. Oxford: Oxfam Publishing. Available at [publications.oxfam.org.uk](http://publications.oxfam.org.uk).
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## ■ LESSON 12 – Shelter and housing

Shelter is always a problem area for a number of reasons, including:

- ♦ Shelter is expensive. A house may represent the largest single investment that many families make, especially for those that don't have large investments in livelihood assets like herds of livestock. Even the most basic mud and thatch house may represent several person-months of work.

- ◆ Shelter needs are uneven. What suits one family will not suit another because of their different livelihood mix. There may also be significant differences in the shelter approaches of different cultural groups.
- ◆ Land rights and property rights are always an issue. In particular title for shelter may traditionally be invested in only men. Agencies should be aware of the difficulties around land ownership and work to support the land rights of the affected people.

Agencies that engage in shelter need to address it seriously and invest in the resources to deal with the complexity of the sector. **The provision of immediate shelter solutions such as distribution of plastic sheets and tarpaulin, corrugated iron is a crucial issue in the relief response to Cyclone Nargis.** Lessons from previous flood and cyclones point to the fact that the government may dictate the type of support to shelter and housing during the reconstruction phase: this may have negative repercussions on key issues such as participation, speed etc. Orissa's government's commitment to build concrete, cyclone-proof houses hampered NGOs efforts to support traditional housing. NGOs felt that the government's decision had a negative impact on key issues such as speed, appropriateness, participation, cost-benefits (INTRAC, 2000(1), 39). **A coordinated response is crucial to ensure that a standardised approach to shelter and housing guides reconstruction programmes in this area.**

The approach to house construction in communities affected by Hurricane Mitch pointed to the **need to involve communities in planning and design of houses (and entire villages) as early as possible in the process to avoid costly mistakes which may cause discomfort, social friction, economic hardship or health dangers in the future (Espacios Consultores SA., 2000, 17). Crucially, housing needs to be reconstructed in a way that supports women's and men's livelihoods. Lessons from Aceh highlighted that shelter provision can also be strengthened though better foresight and strategic thinking.** Moreover, a disproportionate attention was given to permanent housing solutions rather than more immediate assistance to those in temporary dwellings and this issue was neglected until it became a 'crisis'. (TEC, 2006).

**Features of preparedness / risk reduction like cyclone proofing and early warning will become critical as agencies begin to look at recovery more directly. It is also important to already be thinking about other risks to which communities may now be more vulnerable – including other or repeat disaster events.**

In the transition to recovery, there will be need for integrated settlement planning including looking at shelter and watsan needs and programming together; the need to address infrastructure and services and the need to support local recovery plans. Effective and appropriate shelter and settlement planning can reduce damage and build resilience. Some examples are covered in the box following.

Reconstruction:	Settlement Planning:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raised plinths and foundations (DEC, 2000a; Kent et al., 2004).</li> <li>• Combining a strong frame with lighter wall material that can be replaced after floods, which has been used successfully in Vietnam by the Vietnamese Red Cross and IFRC (IFRC, 2001)</li> <li>• Raised shelves to protect valuables.</li> <li>• Using more durable building materials which resist water damage.</li> <li>• Planting water-resistant plants and trees to protect shelters from erosion (ITDG).</li> <li>• Establishing community committees to monitor construction quality and settlement planning (AIDMI, 2005).</li> <li>• Community outreach to promote hazard resistant design approaches in future building.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prohibiting resettlement in the most hazardous areas, if possible.</li> <li>• Improving access to safe land. Many people must choose to live in flood-prone areas to ensure access to shelter or livelihoods (McCluskey, 2001).</li> <li>• Limiting obstruction of natural channels, using absorbent paving materials and roof catchments to reduce runoff, and designing drainage to minimize intensity of water flows.</li> <li>• Community emergency shelters and evacuation routes.</li> <li>• Early warning systems, including rain or river gauges and community monitoring, to alert communities to flood threats.</li> </ul>

Source: *Alnap and Provention, 2008*



**Selected readings:**

- OCHA (2004). *The OCHA guide to tents*. [www.sheltercentre.org/shelterlibrary/publications/201.htm](http://www.sheltercentre.org/shelterlibrary/publications/201.htm)
- Corsellis, T. and Vitale, A. (2005). *Transitional Settlement: Displaced Populations*. Oxford: Oxfam Publications. [www.sheltercentre.org/shelterlibrary/publications/112.htm](http://www.sheltercentre.org/shelterlibrary/publications/112.htm)
- UNESCO (2001). *Guidelines On Non-Structural Measures In Urban Flood Management*. Paris: International Hydrological Programme. [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001240/124004e.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001240/124004e.pdf)

## ■ LESSON 13 – Food, local economy and markets

In the Myanmar context, the UN estimates that 750,000 people will need feeding for three months, which will require 55,000 tonnes of rice, of which only 50 percent can be procured in country. This will require government clearance for the importation of rice. "Plumpy'nut", a high-energy, usually peanut-based paste more commonly used for African famine victims, is now being used to feed malnourished survivors in Myanmar. The UN situation report said that supplies of the highly nutritious food have been sent into Myanmar's main city Yangon and more is being flown in.

**Food aid can save lives (Steering Committee, 2004; WFP, 2006c; C-SAFE, 2007) and support livelihoods. Free food distribution should start early, last long enough, and be reliable and plentiful enough (like other livelihood support) to serve as an income transfer during food crisis (DFID, 2006a).**

There are concerns that food aid can have negative impacts on markets, causing a decline in prices. One result may be to deter farmers who would otherwise sell their crops at a higher price. The private sector may also be affected as it would, without food aid, import, process, trade and sell more food. However, there is not yet enough evidence to settle this debate (Maunder, 2006). Local and regional purchase of food aid reduces the cost and delivery time, and may also help local producers. Coordination reduces the risk that local purchases will drive up prices (REDSO, 2004 WFP, 2003a).

**Any decision to provide food, cash, a combination of both, or other assets such as seeds, tools, or livestock must be based on an objective market assessment and reliable data on actual food availability, as well as a gender analysis.** The cost of living has soared since the disaster (Amda, 2008). In Yangon "The price of rice and oil increased by 60% in just three days and the price of water increased by 500%". It is also important to remember that the rise in prices comes at a time when the current global food crisis is already having a significant impact on the country (Action Against Hunger, 2008). However, because Myanmar maintains open land-trade routes with Thailand and India that allow for importation of supplies, "local markets still have commodities available". Nevertheless there are reports of people crossing the border with Thailand to buy food and construction materials such as nails and zinc sheet to repair their houses damaged by cyclone Nargis, increasing the value of border trade to 50 million baht a day (CWS, 2008b).

**The decision to implement a specific intervention (i.e. free food distribution, food for work, cash for work) should therefore be dependent on a market assessment, the risks involved, and interventions should be appropriately designed and sequenced.** Depending on the local context, agencies are likely to engage in food for work and / or cash for work schemes. In situations where there is surplus labour, food for work might be appropriate. However, if food is available in local markets at reasonable prices cash for work might be more suitable. In fact, cash for work schemes are becoming increasingly common, for many of the reasons listed above. A case study on the use of cash for work in a flood rehabilitation programme in Bangladesh in 2001 can be found in Khogali (2002) and is available on the ALNAP website at [www.alnap.org/pdfs/TLL\\_OxfamCase.pdf](http://www.alnap.org/pdfs/TLL_OxfamCase.pdf)

During Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh, the fact that 95 per cent of local markets were functioning again after the cyclone, and food was available on the market (albeit at high prices), indicates that some cash-based responses may be appropriate within this context (also in terms of contributing to the recovery of local traders and economies). Oxfam and partners' own experience with cash-based emergency programming confirms that cyclone-affected communities perceive cash to be an effective contribution to a dignified self-recovery (Oxfam, 2008).



**Further reading**

- Harvey, P (2008) *Cash-based responses in Emergencies* <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/hpgbrief25.pdf>
- WFP (2003), *Food Aid and Livelihoods in Emergencies* [www.wfp.org/policies/Introduction/policy/](http://www.wfp.org/policies/Introduction/policy/)
- World Bank (2005), *Food Aid and Food Security in the Short- and Long Run: Country experience from Asia and sub-Saharan Africa*. [Siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/SP-Discussion-papers/Safety-Nets-DP/0538.pdf](http://Siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/SP-Discussion-papers/Safety-Nets-DP/0538.pdf)

## ■ LESSON 14 – Livelihoods recovery

Prior to Cyclone Nargis, the Irrawaddy River delta southwest of Rangoon was seen one of the least developed in Southeast Asia. The majority of the population were poor farmers and fisherpeople. Cyclone Nargis hit 5 states (Yangon, Bago, Ayeyawaddy, Kayin and Mon) which are predominantly agricultural societies: it is therefore expected that a significant element of livelihood recovery will focus on agricultural rehabilitation.

The Irrawaddy Delta region obliterated in the disaster is the country's most important rice-growing region, and much of the harvest which had just been gathered is feared to have been lost. With paddy fields now in ruins, there are also fears that the next planting season will be affected. Reviving the agricultural economy will be a crucial aspect of livelihoods recovery especially in the coastal areas of Myanmar. Death of livestock may affect poor women adversely. The restoration of fisheries will also need to be a focus of livelihood recovery interventions as they represent over 55 percent of the country's fish supply.

**Agricultural Rehabilitation:** Successful interventions to rehabilitate agriculture in post-cyclones/post-flooding contexts included the supply of specific varieties of seeds which may differ depending on the relief phase, and the development of key saline embankments. **Once again good practice points to the need to consult with communities especially regarding the varieties of seeds that are most suitable for the local context, especially local practices, and changes in soil as a result of the floodwaters.** This seems to have been overlooked during the cyclone and flood response in Mozambique (ActionAid Mozambique, 2000). In Orissa because of the large amounts of standing water in most areas, particular local varieties of seeds with a longer maturation period of up to 180 days were required. Many communities expressed concern about the damage of saline intrusion in some of the coastal villages and the need to restore key saline embankments to avoid further water intrusion and further damage (INTRAC, 2000).

**It is also important to consider other forms of livelihoods beyond agriculture and fisheries. In the delta region, it is likely that there may be high levels of landless labourers and sharecroppers. Crises responses need to pay sufficient attention to traders, services and small businesses, as well as farmers and fisheries.**

**There is also a need to look at community-based assistance rather than simply individual-based assistance.** This is perhaps becomes more important as recovery progresses. This could include community grants (like the World Bank KDP programme in Aceh) and support to building community capacities to guide recovery.

**In terms of asset protection, the supply of replacement livestock, livestock fodder and health treatment for surviving animals has proved to be an important component of recovery interventions in the aftermath of a cyclone to rehabilitate livelihoods.** Restoring fishing activities is also seen as one intervention that quickly helps livelihood recovery and improves food security. In Orissa the replacement of livestock included the provision of cows, poultry, goats and buffalos as well as livestock fodder. The widespread availability of fallen trees after the cyclone helped boat building activities and the rapid replacement of boats to allow the resumption of fishing. However, limited knowledge of the wider social economic profile of the poor led to a poor targeting of people's particular needs, and some of the most vulnerable people did not appear in the statistic so they were not targeted (IMM, 2001). Agencies should attempt to avoid the same happening in Myanmar, where knowledge of the local context by international agencies may be sketchy.

While the immediate response to Cyclone Nargis will necessarily aim at saving lives and will therefore involve free distribution of food and other necessities, it is important to remember that in

the following rehabilitation and reconstruction phases, **interventions will need to move away from the distribution of free food and items, in order to facilitate recovery processes.** Post-cyclone lessons point to:

- **The idea that vulnerable people should be given various financial and material options so that they can choose what works for them.**
- **The need to make available loan and credit facilities (however micro-finance institutions and micro-finance market are probably underdeveloped in Myanmar (as opposed to Bangladesh for example)**
- **Food aid is not the only – and not always the most appropriate – way to meet urgent food security need**
- **Where possible commodity relief packages should be as varied, locally appropriate and targeted to the needs of beneficiaries**

In the response to Cyclone Sidr of 2007 in Bangladesh an evaluation concluded that the clusters may have missed an opportunity for improving some people's food security by not advocating for more seed distributions in January 2008 for cyclone-affected farmers who may have been in a position to benefit from the current winter cropping season. In Mozambique, even if flood-affected populations valued food as the most important form of assistance, they asked about seeds and tools, which reflected their concern with livelihoods. The cyclone-affected population nominated plastic sheets as the most useful assistance as they lost their roofs, and plastic sheets allowed them to cover their houses, which reflected their concern with shelter.

#### Further reading

- The ProVention CRA toolkit includes livelihoods tools. [www.proventionconsortium.org/CRA\\_toolkit](http://www.proventionconsortium.org/CRA_toolkit)
- Young, H. et al. (2001). *Food Security Assessments in Emergencies: A Livelihoods Approach*. [www.forcedmigration.org/sphere/pdf/food/odi/food-security-and-livelihoods.pdf](http://www.forcedmigration.org/sphere/pdf/food/odi/food-security-and-livelihoods.pdf)

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