

# THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE INDEX 2009



Whose Crisis? Clarifying Donor's Priorities

**DARA**



# **The Humanitarian Response Index 2009**

*Whose Crisis?*

*Clarifying Donor Priorities*



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DARA – Development Assistance Research Associates – is an independent, international, non-profit organisation, which works to improve the quality and impact of development and humanitarian interventions. We do this through research, evaluations, promoting learning and knowledge sharing.

DARA aims to enhance global efforts to reduce human suffering and inequity and encourage prevention. Our focus is on the improvement of humanitarian action, the promotion of international stability and development, and the reduction of disaster risk.

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*Crisis Reports*

# Myanmar





## Myanmar at a Glance

### Country data

- ▶ Population (2007): 49 million
- ▶ Under five mortality rate (2006): 104 per 1,000
- ▶ Human Development Index Ranking (2008): 135
- ▶ Life expectancy (2006): 61 years
- ▶ Official Development Assistance (2007): US\$197 million

### The crisis

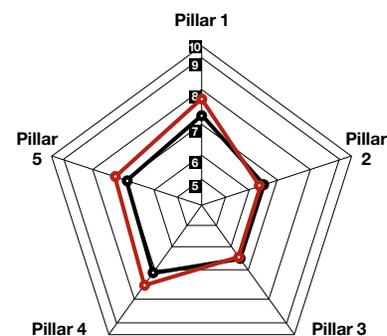
- ▶ Cyclone Nargis hit southern Irrawaddy Delta and triggered a storm surge of 3.5m that flooded low-lying delta;
- ▶ Approximately 140,000 people left dead or missing;
- ▶ Myanmar Government initially refused international humanitarian assistance for almost a month;
- ▶ Sensitive political relations between Myanmar and several western governments was a factor, but concerted diplomacy from ASEAN countries helped ease tensions with Myanmar authorities and opened the door for international assistance.

### The response

- ▶ US\$447 million called for in UN Flash Appeal; donors covered 67 percent;
- ▶ Myanmar Flash Appeal by far the largest of 2008, more than double the size of second-largest Flash Appeal;
- ▶ Donors nearly covered needs for coordination and food – yet significant gaps remain for agriculture, safety of staff and operations, and economic recovery and infrastructure;
- ▶ Delays in international aid, together with minimal national experience managing large-scale disasters, slowed response and interfered with needs-based geographic coverage.

### Donor performance

- ▶ Overall, donor response in Myanmar rated highest in Responding to needs (Pillar 1) and Protection and International Law (Pillar 4), and lowest in Working with humanitarian partners (Pillar 3);
- ▶ Donors rated highly in survey questions related to providing impartial assistance, but poorly in supporting governments and local authorities' capacity to coordinate with humanitarian actors;
- ▶ Donors criticised for not making greater efforts to support national capacity and provide funding for recovery.



### HRI 2009 scores by pillar

- Pillar 1** Responding to needs
- Pillar 2** Prevention, risk reduction and recovery
- Pillar 3** Working with humanitarian partners
- Pillar 4** Protection and International Law
- Pillar 5** Learning and accountability

- Myanmar
- All crisis average

## Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Continue After Humanitarian Funding Ends<sup>1</sup>

John Cosgrave

**T**he response to Cyclone Nargis demonstrated that, despite all the progress the humanitarian aid system has made since the end of the Cold War, disaster survivors may still be denied assistance for political reasons.

In Myanmar, the affected population got little assistance from their own government in the acute emergency phase. The government also restricted access of international aid workers and prohibited the use of foreign military assets, provoking condemnation from some donor governments.

Now in the recovery phase, survivors are again being denied effective assistance, this time by the international donor community. This is because many donors have taken the position that humanitarian funding is only for the immediate aftermath of a disaster, rather than for reconstruction efforts – in a distinct departure from *GHD Principles*.

### Unprepared for the cyclone

Cyclone Nargis swept across the southern end of the Irrawaddy Delta on the night of 2 May and the morning of 3 May 2008. It triggered a storm surge of at least 3.5m, inundating the low-lying delta and leaving nearly 140,000 dead and missing. The population was unprepared for Nargis, the first tropical cyclone to make landfall in Myanmar in 40 years (World Meteorological Organisation 2008).

Myanmar, classified as a least developed country (LDC) by the UN, is something of an international pariah. It is of little strategic interest to the West. Regionally, its main strategic importance stems from competition between India and China, both of which border Myanmar.

The military has ruled Myanmar since 1962, when the government of what was then Burma was toppled in a coup. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won parliamentary elections in 1990, but the junta refused to allow the new parliament to convene and arrested many activists, including Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

Sins that might be overlooked in the Middle East are considered unforgivable in the case of Myanmar. International concern about the suppression of the elections has led to sanctions against the country. Furthermore, Myanmar is not popular among donors, attracting less official development assistance per capita than other LDCs. Annually, it averaged only US\$3.15 per capita from 2000 to 2007 – less than one tenth the average per-capita support for all LDCs over this period.

Almost everything about Myanmar is disputed, even the name. The United States and United Kingdom continue to use the colonial name of Burma, arguing that the junta is not a legitimate government and has no authority to change the country's name.<sup>2</sup>

There is a strong international grouping – the Burma lobby – ranged against the junta. This campaigns against any easing of sanctions and discourages tourism or economic links with the country. However, some parts of the lobby have campaigned for increased aid to Myanmar (The Burma Campaign UK 2006) leading to support from MPs (International Development Committee 2007) and an eventual increase in UK assistance (The Burma Campaign UK 2008).

In the immediate aftermath of the cyclone, the Myanmar Government seemed to consider its planned referendum on a new constitution a greater priority than the needs of survivors. It limited the entry of international staff, of humanitarian organisations that did not already have a national presence, and of international humanitarian response staff. Some international aid workers entered as tourists under the 'visa on arrival' procedure,<sup>3</sup> but the government soon stopped issuing such visas as well as halting the issuing of tourist visas from most of its consulates overseas.

### The responsibility to protect

Such constraints were met by international condemnation and bluster from Western leaders, tactics which many interviewees considered only stiffened the government's resolve. The French Foreign Minister proposed that the UN Security Council pass a resolution which "authorises the delivery [of aid] and imposes this on the Burmese Government" under the principle of the 'responsibility to protect'. This proposal was immediately rejected by China and Russia, while the UK and others argued that such a stance would alienate Myanmar's generals.

The 'responsibility to protect' principle derives from a 2001 report from the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (Sahnoun et al. 2001). It stemmed from debate as to whether sovereignty could be used by sovereign states to prevent international action within their borders in the case of genocide and similar crimes. However, the principle was conceived as a response to complex emergencies rather than natural ones, although it could be argued that the failure by the government to respond more vigorously after Nargis did constitute grounds for intervention (Evans 2008).

The major obstacles to aid were effectively only loosened after the formation of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG), which provided a way for the government to yield to international pressure without losing face. The TCG was formed after discussions between the government, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the UN. It is a unique body which sets a possible precedent for other situations where there are difficult relations between a national government and the donor community. Having now adopted a humanitarian role, ASEAN can be expected to play an increased part in future humanitarian response in the region.

The TCG started by conducting a post-Nargis joint needs assessment (PONJA). This was an example of good practice, with a thorough and methodologically-sound needs assessment. The PONJA delivered its preliminary findings in late June (Tripartite Core Group 2008a), followed by a full report on 21 July (Tripartite Core Group 2008b). The joint needs assessment was followed by the post-Nargis periodic review in late 2008, which examined progress against the needs identified in the assessment (Tripartite Core Group 2008c). This review of progress against earlier assessed needs is a further example of good practice that could be used in other humanitarian responses.

### **No longer in the media spotlight**

The barriers erected before the TCG's formation significantly limited the response. Myanmar was no longer in the media spotlight and without the 'oxygen of publicity' fewer agencies established programmes than might otherwise have done so.<sup>4</sup>

Such barriers were a particular problem because there was little national experience of managing large-scale disasters. It was not possible to send experienced international humanitarian staff into the delta area in the initial critical period and agencies' national staff resources were limited. While agencies on the ground did a good job within the very real constraints on logistics, materials and access, "assistance was not as timely as it should have been" and "geographic coverage was not always consistent with needs," (Turner et al. 2008 p1).

### **The effects of delay on mortality rates**

No reliable information is available on the impact of delayed or limited assistance on mortality rates but conclusions can be drawn from the ratio of killed-to-injured. This can vary greatly for storm surges and similar flooding events, and is influenced by both the severity of the event and the speed of assistance.

The severity of the event can lead to lower ratios of injuries per fatality. In the case of the tsunami, the TEC Synthesis report cites (inverted) ratios of dead to injured of 1:0.395 for Aceh, 1:654 for Sri Lanka and 1:3.571 for Tamil Nadu, showing how the ratio of injuries to deaths increased as the run-up height reduced (Telford et al. 2006, p36).

Injured people who are not evacuated quickly may die of their injuries, therefore inadequate assistance is likely to lead to a low ratio of injuries per death. The cyclone destroyed many boats, and fallen trees made navigation of small creeks difficult, severely hampering survivors' ability to rescue and support each other. The destruction of local health facilities also meant there were no obvious places to take the injured.

Helicopters are invaluable in such circumstances. However, while the government made some available, it did not permit the operation of foreign military helicopters, despite their ready availability on ships in the Bay of Bengal.

The ratio of dead to injured for Cyclone Nargis was 1:0.140 (Tripartite Core Group 2008b, p1), similar to Aceh in the tsunami. The storm surge height for Nargis was only 3.5m whereas the tsunami run-up was over 30m in parts of Sumatra (USGS 2005). While the tsunami and the storm surge are not directly comparable, the low ratio of injured survivors for Cyclone Nargis suggests that many of the injured may have died through a lack of timely assistance or evacuation. There were no serious epidemics after the cyclone, but past experience shows that such outbreaks are rare after sudden-impact natural disasters (Toole and Waldman 1997).

Although we do know there were deaths after Cyclone Nargis (Turner et al. 2008), presumably of the injured, the exact number is unknown.

It must be concluded that the constraints on the response did cost lives, but a mortality study<sup>5</sup> will probably be needed to determine just how many.

### Funding of the response

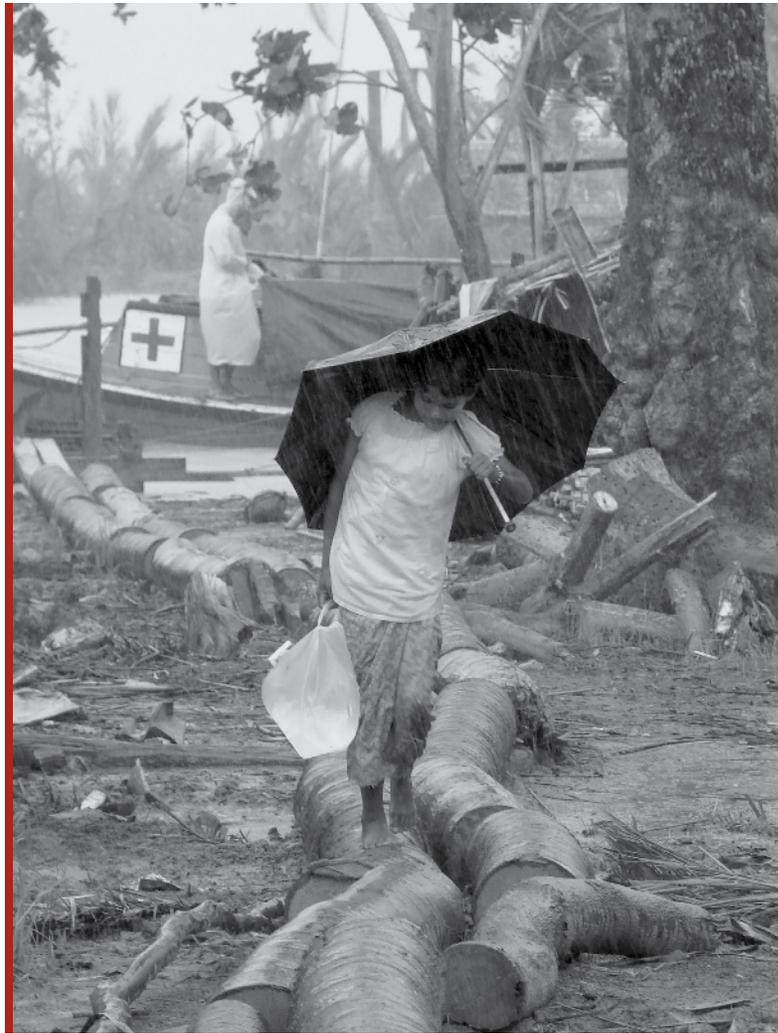
Interviewees generally rated donor performance quite highly. However, some noted that the access difficulties during the initial response caused a time lag, so that there was no real pressure on donors to act quickly.

The limited scale of the response also meant agencies' demands for resources were constrained by what they could do in the initial period. Even so, the UN Flash Appeal was only 67 percent funded. This is less than that for the 2004 Tsunami (88 percent) but is comparable to the 2005 Pakistan earthquake appeal (66 percent) (OCHA 2009).

However, there were very large amounts of private donations for the tsunami response and several tsunami-affected countries had very significant internal resources (e.g. Thailand, India and Indonesia). In the case of the 2005 earthquake, Pakistan deployed a significant internal capacity, and made extensive use of World Bank and other international finance for its response.

As noted below in the discussion on the application of the *GHD Principles*, the main problem with donor performance in Nargis has been the lack of funding for recovery. At the time of the fieldwork only two donors, the UK and Australia, had committed to significant funding for recovery. The lack of recovery funding means that many of those affected by the cyclone are living in far worse conditions than before the cyclone, and are hampered by both inadequate shelter and large debts.

*“Now in a recovery phase, survivors are again being denied effective assistance, this time by the international donor community.”*



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## Recovery is part of humanitarian action

Nargis highlighted the contrast between the GHD definitions of humanitarian action and the distinctions made by aid administrations between acute humanitarian response and other types of assistance.

The *GHD Principles* (Good Humanitarian Donorship 2003) list the objectives and definition of humanitarian action. Principle three's reference to facilitating the return to 'normal lives and livelihoods' suggests that humanitarian action includes what is often called 'recovery' – helping affected communities to return to their former level of livelihood.

In sudden-onset disasters, recovery is usually the whole issue. The acute phase lasts a relatively short time. After the disaster, the critical need is often to re-establish livelihoods so populations can maintain their dignity, without being reliant on continuing relief. This was clearly understood by the Chinese Government after the Sichuan earthquake, with its pledge to provide approximately US\$150 billion of funding for recovery.

However, in the case of Nargis, many donors took the position that humanitarian funding is only for the immediate aftermath of the disaster. This has led to a situation where the majority of those who lost their houses in the cyclone are still without adequate shelter, and without the restoration of their livelihoods.

## Shelter and livelihoods

Shelter was an area of poor performance, contrasting hugely with performance after the tsunami and the Pakistan and Sichuan earthquakes.<sup>6</sup> The first periodic review found that only 10 percent of communities had adequate shelter comparable to their situation prior to the cyclone. In five percent of the surveyed communities, more than half of the population were still living under plastic, and at least five percent of the population were still living under plastic in 45 percent of the communities surveyed at the time of the first post-Nargis periodic review in late 2008 (Tripartite Core Group 2008c, pp1,36).

In the area of livelihoods, another telling contrast with the tsunami response is that three-quarters of households that lost boats in Cyclone Nargis have not been able to replace them, either from their own means or from donations (Tripartite Core Group 2008c, p1). In the tsunami response, more boats were 'replaced' than were originally lost (Balachandran and Sowmya 2006, p10; de Ville de Goyet and Morinière 2006, p109; Marulanda and Rizal 2006, p16).

A further complication for many families is the extent to which credit is used for agriculture in Myanmar. Farmers borrow to plant, and repay after harvest. However, Nargis destroyed the crops in the fields, leaving many unable to pay their debts. The debt burden was further increased as people borrowed to rebuild their houses in the face of limited international assistance. All this now leaves many families with a crushing debt burden (Oxfam 2009).

## Good – and bad – practice

Interviewees cited a number of good practices, including the provision of funding for cluster coordination and funding for an accountability initiative.

Putting personnel on the ground was seen as good practice by interviewees, who argued that donor personnel in Yangon were far better placed to understand the complexities and realities of working in Myanmar.

The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) was the highest-rated donor of those surveyed in Myanmar. A reason often given for this was what one interviewee referred to as its "committed and well-informed staff on the ground". The strong local team in Yangon was also cited as the reason for the positive ratings for AusAID, the second highest-rated donor.

However, presence on the ground is not enough to guarantee a good rating. The second lowest-rated donor, the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO), has a team on the ground but was often rated as the worst donor. While ECHO was said to be great in terms of funding, it was criticised because of its inflexibility, arrogance and the high numbers of people involved in proposal review. However, these opinions were not universal, with some interviewees citing ECHO as a flexible donor.

As Nargis predominantly involved a national response, our examples of good and bad operational practice largely relate to the government. Good examples include the joint needs assessment and the periodic review, both of which the government took full part in. These processes were a radical departure from the normally secretive style of the state regarding information on its citizens.

However, the government was also responsible for examples of bad practice. Policy inconsistency is always a problem and this was the case in the Nargis response. The destruction of the standing crop and of stored food meant there was a large food deficit in the affected area. The government bans the import of rice (because Myanmar is normally a net exporter of rice). The World Food Programme (WFP) bought rice on the local market until the government, concerned about the market impact, banned WFP from making such purchases – while maintaining the rice import ban. WFP got around the problem in part by providing funds to NGOs to purchase rice on the local market, thereby passing the risk of breaching the spirit of the government’s ban onto them.

### Lessons learnt and recommendations for the future

The main lessons from Nargis are the need for donors to sustain funding long enough for people to recover their livelihoods and the need for countries at risk to develop their disaster response capacity.

**1** The Nargis response highlights the critical importance of investment in, and development of, national capacity in all contexts. Local and national capacities are always the first line of response to emergencies. The response was even more reliant on these capacities in the case of Cyclone Nargis, as assistance during the first three weeks depended on national structures and on the staff of NGOs working within Myanmar. This highlights the need for such staff to have the skills to meet humanitarian needs and for donors to support the development of such capacity.

- 2** Developing national response capacity can create a more disaster-aware national culture, in turn leading to more investment in risk reduction. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Myanmar, where there is relatively little attention to reducing the risks from future cyclones. Flooding and windstorms are the most rapidly growing type of disaster (Parker et al. 2007) and Myanmar is vulnerable to these.
- 3** The Tripartite Core Group provides a model for humanitarian response in such complex environments as Nargis. It demonstrates that where a national government is distrustful of the broader international community, the international community should extend every effort to find an ‘honest broker’ acceptable to the government so that humanitarian action can occur.
- 4** The tailing-off of funding after the initial phase in Myanmar illustrates the difference between the narrow definition of humanitarian action that donors use for allocation of humanitarian assistance, and the definition contained in the GHD initiative. Donors need to align their humanitarian aid allocation processes behind the GHD initiative, and not just concentrate on the more ‘publicity-oxygenated’ acute phase. Donors often treat recovery funding like development funding. While decisions about levels of Overseas Development Assistance may be politically motivated, decisions about humanitarian assistance should not be. Unless donors honour Principle two of the *GHD* by providing recovery funding regardless of their political objections to the Myanmar regime, those affected by the cyclone will continue to suffer. Many still live far worse lives than they did before the cyclone, as they huddle in inadequate temporary housing under mountains of debt.

## About the Author

### John Cosgrave

*Independent Consultant*

John Cosgrave is an independent consultant with more than 30 years' experience of humanitarian action and development in nearly 60 countries. He has worked as an independent consultant in the humanitarian sector since 1997, having spent most of his previous professional life managing NGO projects and programmes in complex emergencies or in the aftermath of natural disasters. His work for NGOs, governments and the UN is focused on humanitarian action, evaluation, training and operations. He combines broad experience with theoretical concepts to produce a coherent world-view of humanitarian action which he communicates through writing and training. Trained initially as a problem-solver (in civil, military, mechanical and agricultural engineering), and later as a manager and social scientist, he holds two Master's degrees, and is currently studying for his third. His current interest is in social research methods and epistemology.

## Notes

- 1** Information based on field interviews with key humanitarian agencies in Myanmar from 2 May 2009 to 14 May 2009, and 181 questionnaires on donor performance (including 134 OECD-DAC donors).  
  
The HRI team, composed of John Cosgrave, Lucía Fernández, Dolores Sánchez, Nicolai Steen, expresses its gratitude to all those interviewed in Myanmar. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DARA.
- 2** The use of the name Myanmar in this report follows the UN usage rather than taking a particular position.
- 3** It should be noted that several agencies decided against using this procedure to bring in staff, because of concern about the potential long-term consequences for their programme if they were seen to be abusing the immigration law.
- 4** A few interviewees commented that the government's restrictions led to the avoidance of the chaos that was seen in, for example, the tsunami response, where hundreds of agencies and thousands of personnel descended on the affected areas in the initial stages. However, it should be clear that the limited resources available for the response had a real cost in terms of the speed and extent of assistance delivered.
- 5** Two examples of such studies are the controversial estimates of the mortality from the Iraq Conflict (Roberts et al. 2004, Burnham 2006 #3085) and the uncontroversial estimate of mortality in the 1970 Bay of Bengal (Sommer and Mosley 1972).
- 6** While there were performance issues with shelter after the tsunami, the quality of temporary shelter was superior to that provided after Nargis (typically tents after the tsunami as opposed to just a plastic tarpaulin after Nargis), and a higher proportion of the population was in transitional or even permanent shelter at the same stage of the response.

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