



CASE STUDY NO. 4

Supporting community-based emergency response at scale: innovations in the wake of Cyclone Nargis

Case Study Summary

This case study describes how appropriate support for local civil-society interventions following a rapid-onset emergency can enable very fast and responsive relief at a scale commensurate with needs. After the impact of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, local civil-society efforts were found to have greater penetration and much lower costs than conventional direct implementation by international agencies.

A brief period of what might be described as ‘creative chaos’ after the cyclone eased the normal organisational constraints to risk taking, enabling a number of innovations in the process of aid delivery. In particular, field teams:

- 1) developed new methodologies for rapid funding and monitoring of proposals submitted by local civil-society organisations (CSOs), at scale
- 2) designed and delivered options for capacity development relevant to disaster response and subsequent recovery
- 3) introduced ‘do-less-harm’ initiatives, to try to minimise the negative side-effects of rapid grant disbursement
- 4) established mechanisms and structures for communication and linkages between mainstream international responses and local civil-society initiatives.

ALNAP Innovations Case Studies showcase innovative solutions to the problems and opportunities faced in international humanitarian response. Each case study focuses on a specific innovation, and outlines the process through which the innovation was developed, from the initial recognition of a problem, through development to practical implementation and scale-up. The Innovations Case Study series is designed to act as a key mechanism to improve dissemination and take up of innovations across the humanitarian sector.

Implementing agency
A consortium of NGOs working in Myanmar

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Location of programme
Myanmar

Time period
May 2008 onwards

Estimated expenditure
Over \$2 million

Estimated Beneficiaries
550,000



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Although the local ownership of humanitarian response appears to be increasingly considered essential for improving humanitarian performance, there are few practical examples of how to go about it rapidly and at scale while also being mindful and honest about the potential for inadvertently doing harm. This case study describes how real-time, on-the-job innovation which navigated the risks inherent in such work was essential to allow working methodologies to be developed and implemented.

While there is great potential within international strategies to mainstream mechanisms to facilitate such local relief responses, exact replication is not feasible or desirable. Instead, similar processes of innovation would be needed for each new emergency context, building on the core principles of finding flexible and responsible ways of supporting local actors. Given that prevailing norms among many aid agencies tend to impede risk-taking, experimentation and learning, a shift in organisational culture may be necessary to allow successful dissemination of these core principles.

Background Information and Rationale for Innovation: Paung Ku and Cyclone Nargis

Towards the end of 2007, a loose consortium of six international and national NGOs in Yangon initiated a low-profile, three-year pilot for providing long-term capacity support to Myanmar civil society. Known by its Burmese name of Paung Ku (meaning 'bridging'), it aimed to explore what could be achieved within the restrictive operating environment of Myanmar by providing grants and mentoring services to a range of different civil society organisations (CSOs). With its somewhat ambiguous institutional position (governed and steered by a consortium board and programme committee) and the sensitive nature of its work, Paung Ku was perceived as somewhat removed from mainstream international NGO operations. It had only just become operational in early 2008, with a core staff of four people, and no intention or mandate to provide relief services, when disaster struck.

On 3 May 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit the Ayeyarwady Delta, southwest of Yangon. This was the worst natural disaster in Myanmar's recorded history, and among the deadliest storms ever recorded. The Delta is home to about 7.35 million people, and more than 150,000 were killed by the direct effects of the cyclone with around a third of the overall population (2.4 million) severely affected.

It took some days for the scale of the disaster to become known to those in Yangon, given low levels of knowledge of the Ayeyarwady region, very poor communications and restricted access. However, as the level of destruction became apparent, the conventional emergency

processes of 'surging' and directly implementing relief was initiated. Within weeks, the numbers of expatriate aid workers in Myanmar had risen dramatically (from five to over 60 in one international NGO alone), and relief materials were flown in from all over the world. Despite the considerable delays in importing supplies and becoming fully operational - not least due to political constraints - the direct aid provided by humanitarian agencies played a crucial role in reducing potential mortality and suffering. On-going support continues to help hundreds of thousands of people to rebuild their homes and livelihoods.

While immediate media coverage of the cyclone focused on political and diplomatic barriers to international aid efforts, subsequent analysis has shown that a rapid and autonomous local response to the disaster was instrumental in preventing far greater losses (Turner et al, 2008; Hedlund et al, 2008).

Within hours of the storm, thousands of self-help initiatives within the Delta were spontaneously providing life-saving assistance. This was soon matched by a second wave of support from formally organised civil-society actors (school-based, faith-based, developmental, and private-sector) and the wider public of Yangon and other cities and towns. With a far greater knowledge of the local context, and of how to overcome operational constraints (logistical, social or political), this local response was in many ways better equipped to respond to the disaster than was a more typical, centralised international aid response.

Through a number of real-time process innovations, the Paung Ku consortium was able to support and enhance the spontaneous efforts of these local actors in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

Description of the Innovation Process

Recognition of the problem and an opportunity

Paung Ku is an inter-agency pilot scheme focusing on national civil-society capacity. When Cyclone Nargis struck, those involved were able to see possibilities for response which contrasted with the top-down surge approach usually favoured by international agencies following to sudden-onset emergencies. In particular, members of Paung Ku saw the opportunity to respond through supporting local groups, primarily with grants, rather than through the prevailing international standard operating procedures which focused on direct implementation and distribution of commodities.

At the same time, many of the normal constraints on risk-taking, creativity and non-conformism were temporarily dispelled by the impact of the storm, as board members and

line-managers became inundated with their own organisational responses. This permitted a level of creative thinking and experimentation among the Paung Ku members that would not normally have been possible.

A rapid trip to the affected delta area led to immediate piloting of procedures for emergency grant disbursement, and engagement with a small number of existing CSOs (secular and faith-based) and emerging self-help groups formed by survivors. The familiarity of these groups with the local environment and with local needs meant that they could overcome the significant constraints hampering international aid agencies. They knew which local markets and supply chains were still operating – all they lacked was the money to buy food, medicines, clothes and shelter, and later to fund the restoration of livelihoods.

Initial intervention

Extra staff members were rapidly recruited and trained as grant managers and field monitors, allowing the deployment of four teams to different parts of the Delta. Each team consisted of three to five people and worked either in low-profile temporary 'branch offices' or from vehicles and boats. Their role was to find and meet civil society organisations, read and screen proposals, process applications, sign contracts, disburse grants, receive reports, monitor achievements, and send back emerging lessons and data to a small management unit in Yangon. A flexible set of operational procedures was formulated, including a simple four-page, emergency application format and contract that would allow grants to be disbursed within two hours of receiving a proposal. Mechanisms for rapid and regular cash transfer to the branch offices (initially in the absence of banks) were devised, and a database was set up to record information on applicants and interventions. Simple monitoring protocols were also established. All known local NGOs and networks were informed of the scheme, which was named the Paung Ku Nargis Response (PKNR).

Explanatory flyers were also initially circulated, but it was soon apparent that word of mouth proved the most effective channel for communicating the availability of grant funding, and teams were soon inundated with proposals.

At the same time, significant gaps were becoming evident in the institutional mechanisms being established by international agencies for coordination and information-sharing. (Turner et al, 2008; Hedlund et al, 2008) Networking and communication between existing and emerging local civil society organisations was all but non-existent, compounded by the lack of channels for dialogue with the large agencies shaping much of the international response.

This disconnect led in turn to a parallel process of innovation to establish what came to be called the Local Resource Centre. Again hurriedly initiated by the small group of Paung Ku consortium members, the Local Resource Centre's objective was to provide appropriate information and networking services for civil-society actors, as well as a clearinghouse to connect interested international NGOs and donors with local groups. The Local Resource Centre also took responsibility for identifying and organising relevant training for local groups, including on needs assessments, project planning, book-keeping, participation and accountability, dealing with psycho-social trauma, handling dead bodies, water treatment, and emergency shelter. The training sessions were separate half-day courses, held daily according to a fixed weekly schedule. The Local Resource Centre was based in rapidly borrowed office space in Yangon and had its own management, staff and funding.

Development and implementation

Proposals were received from the full range of civil-society actors. These included: established NGOs already working in social welfare throughout the country; Buddhist, Christian and Muslim organisations; existing community-based organisations, both faith-based and activity-focused (including youth groups, school groups and small informal fishing cooperatives); newly formed volunteer groups, often with personal contacts in the Delta and seeking to help particular villages; and employees from the private sector who had rapidly formed groups and elicited support from their companies.

The newly formed village-based self-help groups created by the Nargis survivors soon emerged as the largest majority of fund requesting bodies. Too unstructured to be considered formal organisations (and so not community-based organisations in the usual sense), they were initiated and headed by individuals or groups of friends or neighbours. Often, they had taken the lead the morning after the storm to mobilise the able-bodied to search for survivors and dead in the village, look after the wounded and orphans, put up make-shift shelter, and to collect and share out any remnants of food (not least the coconuts which provided the crucial source of drinking water in some villages for weeks after the storm). Having done all they could with sparse local resources, they made the often long and arduous boat journeys to a town to seek more help. They often heard about Paung Ku Nargis Response from other villages, or through monasteries or churches, and sometimes came across the branch offices by chance.

During the first fifty days, some 350 grants worth over \$1 million were disbursed to 320 different entities, most of which were spontaneously formed self-help groups. These organisations provided life-saving relief to at least 350,000 survivors, for many of whom this represented the first assistance they received. The Paung Ku Nargis Response and Local

Resource Centre teams worked round the clock, seven days a week for the first month. They were inexperienced, overwhelmed, making mistakes and learning by doing, but enormously inspired by those who were leading this domestic relief effort.

Processing an application took anything from 30 minutes to four hours, the new self-help groups needing more time than the established local NGOs to help them turn their first efforts at an action plan and budget into something that could be justifiably funded. The interviews between applicants and the Paung Ku Nargis Response teams also provided an important means for applicants to express their genuineness, and for grant managers to get a feeling of the legitimacy of the applicant. About 10 per cent of proposals were rejected.

Most grants disbursed during the first two months were around \$3,000 each, with a range of \$100 to \$10,000. Initially they were used to meet specific food and household/shelter needs – all through local purchase. Within a month of the cyclone, an increasing number of proposals were also seeking livelihood support, such as through the purchase of seeds, tools, diesel, boats and fishing equipment. However, despite this partial shift to recovery, Paung Ku Nargis Response still had to provide basic survival grants four months after the cyclone. In this way, proposals submitted to Paung Ku Nargis Response served as a means of cross-checking (and at times preceding) formal needs-assessment missions, as well as fulfilling a monitoring function of the international response, with the LRC feeding back the information through mainstream coordination mechanisms.

As the predominant focus of civil society organisations proposals moved from saving lives to recovery, grant disbursement slowed down. After the initial six months, there was greater space and time to begin to look in detail at issues of civil society organisations' governance, targeting and learning. At this stage, Paung Ku Nargis Response also shifted its strategic focus to prioritise capacity development with self-help groups and community-based organisations having the potential and determination to be involved in longer-term recovery and development. An important addition at this stage was the introduction of specific training for self-help groups and community-based organisations to design and implement their own village-based strategies for disaster-risk reduction (DRR).

Communication and diffusion

The Local Resource Centres was designed to communicate information about engagement with local capacities, opening channels between local, national and international actors. With their combined knowledge of over 600 CSOs operating in the Delta, the Local Resource Centre and Paung Ku Nargis Response teams were able to link international agencies to local groups where there were grounds for collaboration. Lobbying and facilitation by the Local Resource

Centre raised awareness among larger organisations, and agencies increased their efforts to collaborate and coordinate. However, some international agencies retained the view that ‘these groups are in our programme area’ rather than ‘we want to move into their working areas’.

This reluctance by international agencies to embrace new ways of working that had been demonstrated by Paung Ku Nargis Response and the Local Resource Centre is one obvious impediment to the wider application of this innovative approach. However, and as explored in more detail below, this case study is highly context specific. The wider diffusion of Paung Ku Nargis Response should be seen in terms of the potential to create mechanisms assisting local relief responses, ideally mainstreamed within International NGO strategies. Beyond this, building successfully on the core approach of supporting local actors would involve adaptations specific to each different context. As we shall see, more profound shifts in the outlook of the international aid system may also be needed.

Risks and challenges: ‘do less harm’

One of the biggest programming challenges in the Paung Ku Nargis Response was to ensure that rapid grant disbursement at scale did not lead to inappropriate funding and the misuse of resources. The risk of doing harm by slowing down grants was clear – people were dangerously vulnerable for months after the storm – but so were the risks of distributing grants too freely, possibly weakening the very attributes of the spontaneous local response that made it so effective. Inappropriate funding risks undermining autonomy and self-reliance, solidarity and trust, local legitimacy and local fit. The challenge for the team was how to maximise dispersal rates while minimising potential damage to the core strengths and capacities of local civil society.

The PKNR took a pragmatic approach: some mistakes and misuse were viewed as an inevitable consequence of providing grants in a crisis situation. A ‘do-less-harm’ strategy was therefore seen as a more honest and realistic approach than claiming to ‘do no harm’. To this end, the operation included:

- a formal application process involving an interview and any cross-checking possible
- helping applicants to consider the risks involved in receiving a grant (such as internal conflict, jealousy, temptation, dependency, and problems with authorities) and to think through possible mitigation measures

- promoting simple measures for transparency and downward accountability, such as the public posting of proposals and budgets
- monitoring visits after all first grants, to check for levels of downward accountability
- providing rapid training on relevant technical, programming and leadership capacities.

The success of these efforts in 'capacity protection' is currently being explored by a process of on-going review. Of the 539 groups supported, however, there are initial indicators that around 50 may have either misused grant money or in some other way been negatively affected (such as through erosion of local solidarity, splits within a community-based organisation reinforcement of self-interested chiefs, or dependency on grants). However, almost all such incidences occurred more than six months after the disaster. It appears that during the period of greatest humanitarian need, the level of misuse was very rare and the risks from rapid grant disbursal at their lowest.

Lessons Learned

Paung Ku Nargis Response and the Local Resource Centre are perhaps best seen as parts of an on-going action research effort, and there is much still to learn. However, tentative conclusions can be drawn around their contribution to the response of a rapid-onset emergency. By the close of 2009, the teams had enabled 530 civil society organisations to implement almost 800 of their own proposals to provide 550,000 victims of the cyclone with life-saving and livelihood-recovery assistance using grants worth over \$2 million. The Local Resource Centre had enabled hundreds of different civil-society actors to become informed and networked, as well as significantly increasing awareness among international NGOs and UN organisations of the potential benefits of working with existing and emergent civil-society structures.

This case highlights several features of national civil- society-led emergency response, as follows, indicating that such an approach can make a significant contribution to rapid-onset strategies for disaster response.

High responsiveness – especially for proposals coming directly from local self-help groups, the approach allowed survivors to specify exactly what they wanted to prioritise. Paung Ku Nargis Response was able to support hundreds of qualitatively different proposals, each one tailored to the particular needs and opportunities of a particular village at a particular time. Indeed, just by looking at the changing nature of the proposals submitted, it was possible to observe changing priorities over space and time even without carrying out elaborate and resource-intensive needs assessments.

Speed – without having to spend time mobilising and supporting large operational teams, aid can start to reach distant communities in a matter of days. By contrast, the ‘surging’ of international NGOs, despite heroic efforts, took in many cases over two months.

Cost-efficiency and minimal logistic requirements – with total running/administration costs of about \$30,000 a month, this approach enabled half a million people to receive highly responsive aid worth \$2 million in about six weeks. During the first six months, 87 per cent of all donor funds went directly to civil society organisations.

Longer-term self-reliance and resilience – the process of grant application and management (with its focus on capacity protection and downward accountability), and the additional services provided alongside grants (mentoring, training, networking, access to information) demonstrate that even when responding to an emergency it is possible to invest in capacity development. The initial engagement with large numbers of civil society organisations (many of which were the self-help groups spontaneously forming post-Nargis) has also allowed longer-term relationships to develop, contributing to disaster-risk reduction and longer-term recovery and development.

Wider economic recovery – while this is not yet confirmed by empirical evidence, there are several other effects attributed to Paung Ku Nargis Response. These include: a contribution to the recovery of local market chains (as a result of locally purchased relief goods), a stimulus to private-sector involvement, and the establishment of links that could be used if access becomes more difficult in future.

‘Do less harm’ – as in all aid interventions, there are inevitably some negative side-effects. The explicit recognition of these risks, and the implementation of a set of mechanisms both to minimise and to seek out manifestations of them has been shown to be a realistic and relevant part of the emergency response. Transparent and proactive efforts to reveal and discuss all cases of ‘damage’ are not frightening away donors and are contributing to greater understanding of how to ensure capacity protection and ‘do less harm’ in practice.

Wider Sectoral Implications

Replication requires more innovation...

The Nargis experience highlights the enormous contribution that civil-society action can make in responding to rapid-onset emergencies, a finding in line with the conclusions of Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (Scheper et al, 2006). With appropriate support, a response that places local action at its centre can achieve levels of speed, quality, scale and outreach to equal or

better the direct implementation of the largest international agencies, while also contributing to local capacity development for longer-term resilience.

The approach for supporting civil society described in this case study came about by chance, with no pre-prepared operational systems or team capacities in place. Many avoidable mistakes were made during its hasty and chaotic development; effectiveness, speed and coverage would undoubtedly have been greater if the supporting international NGOs (and donors) had already designed basic mechanisms for supporting a local emergency response. Building on practical lessons generated by experiences such as this, agencies have a great opportunity to enrich their existing emergency strategies if they choose to prepare accordingly.

...and more innovation requires organisational change

The development of Paung Ku Nargis Response and the Local Resource Centre is not a blueprint that can be directly transferred to another context. Attempts at replication would require additional innovation to generate context-specific methodologies. This represents a problem, since it seems that current organisational norms in many humanitarian agencies impede these required processes of innovation.

- Learning from and through mistakes and failures is not encouraged – the dominant ethos is still ‘we can’t ever be seen as responsible for things going wrong’. The challenge in humanitarian settings is to innovate in the face of complex and ambiguous rules, multiple conflicting interests of diverse stakeholders, and a variety of resource, operational and ethical constraints.
- Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, upward accountability (to senior managers, boards and donors) is given more importance than downward accountability (to target groups). If projects are delivered as planned, there is little organisational incentive to change or innovate. Some of the most radical humanitarian innovations relate to wholesale changes in the sector. As found in the tsunami response, it can be far more effective to build on and support local capacities. The paradigm of aid as predicated on international response arguably limits the kinds of innovations that are possible (Ramalingam et al, 2009).
- Field and operational staff are rarely encouraged to challenge existing ways of doing things – the organisational norm is to preserve to the status quo.

- Programming continues to be dominated by conventional planning paradigms of predictable cause and effect. There is still little mainstream exposure to ideas of complexity, emergence, embracing uncertainty or spontaneity.

If agencies are interested in disseminating and building on innovative aid delivery processes such as Paung Ku Nargis Response and the Local Resource Centre, they will have to strengthen their own capacity to keep innovating – and proactively strengthen innovation processes. To do this, it seems that they need to adjust their own organisational cultures to give greater incentives for learning, creativity and risk-taking, and the willingness to challenge – especially by field staff.

In a growing sector, innovations focused on doing things better may challenge organisational stability, and there may currently be too few inducements to innovate or adopt humanitarian innovations. A shift in this respect is unlikely to happen without greater institutional incentives – donors have a key role to play by demanding and supporting greater innovation. But while the organisational cultures of humanitarian agencies continue to prioritise (and legitimise) self-congratulation and growth, then the implicit message to field staff is to avoid the critical analysis and risk-taking that are needed for innovative programming such as demonstrated by Paung Ku Nargis Response. Unless there is a change in cultural, the sector will struggle to build a humanitarian system capable of meeting the challenges of a complex and volatile future.

Key Contacts

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Relevant Publications

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Please Note: The views expressed in this case study are the author's, and do not necessarily reflect the views of ALNAP, Paung Ku or any of its partners.

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