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Early Recovery in post Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar: An Emerging Trend Requiring Further Support

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Magnitude of the Crisis and the immediate response.

Cyclone Nargis was by far the country's worst natural disaster in recorded history of Myanmar. On the Second of May 2008, it struck the Ayeyarwady Delta region and Yangon City with devastating consequences. Close to 140,000 people were killed or missing, 33,000 injured, and over 2.4 million people were seriously affected including nearly 800,000 displaced by the disaster. The magnitude of Cyclone Nargis is comparable in scale and size to that of the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004.

The Government's early assessment of the damage and destruction to property and livelihood was close to \$11 billion, while a more conservative estimation by the joint assessment team put it at over \$4 billion. (An estimated 42% of households lost all food-stocks and a further 34% reported having exhausted all remaining stocks within six weeks thereafter.)

Myanmar community organizations, Buddhist monks, Myanmar business organizations and individuals were the first responders. People of the country donated generously. The government led, managed and directed the massive relief and recovery effort, including search and rescue, meeting the basic needs, re-establishing lifelines and basic services. (Refer to the National Response section of the PONJA report for details.)

The UN Agencies and NGOs rapidly provided emergency relief while the international community's immediate response was also quick and generous. All of this contributed to the surprisingly early re-establishment of village life and a semblance of normalcy returning within a few weeks - a testament to the high resilience of the people.

Unfortunately the early days of the relief and early recovery effort was marred by controversy. The Government hesitated to grant access to hundreds of aid workers, a demand made by many in the international community. Concurrently, the US and France dispatched naval ships for search & rescue and relief. But these were refused by the Government, who adamantly maintained that only relief delivered by civilian ships and aircraft would be accepted. Perhaps in an attempt to break the impasse, some powers even broached and raised the specter of forcible humanitarian intervention - an idea that was fortunately dropped.

Foreign media and journalists were denied entry visas and obliged to broadcast news from locations abroad using dubious sources. This resulted in biased and distorted accounts, perpetuating the common perception of an uncaring government rejecting aid from generous nations without itself lifting a finger to help or assist its own citizens. A totally false perception no doubt, but perceptions can be just as important – and just as destructive - as the actual. It

did much damage and a grave disservice to the cause of the cyclone victims. All in all, these events brought about an emerging "credibility gap" between the Government and the international community. In brief, the humanitarian agenda was held hostage by politics.

Following the Secretary General's visit and meetings with the Myanmar leaders on 23 May, an agreement for full access to all aid workers of all nationalities was reached. An International Pledging Conference in Yangon on 25 May 2008 agreed to form a Tripartite Core Group (TCG) to coordinate relief efforts, bringing together the Government of Myanmar, the United Nations and ASEAN. Responding to the Government's presentation of its damage and losses, the donors demanded greater access for humanitarian aid workers, carrying out of a credible assessment, and the formulation of a shared recovery plan.

In term of coordination, the conference recognized the difficulties that a number of UN agencies operating pre-Nargis were under in terms of restrictive mandates that prevented them from meaningfully engaging with the Government. Right from the beginning there was a need to establish strong linkages with appropriate government officials and to ensure that they were involved in the decision making process at every stage. Perhaps one of the most successful experiments from Cyclone Nargis was the setting up of the TCG as a joint response framework designed to oversee the coordination of relief assistance. The TCG operated at a senior level, with the Deputy Foreign Minister of Myanmar as Chair, meeting weekly to deal with specific policy issues impacting on the humanitarian response.

Notwithstanding this, the international community found itself in a quandary, due to the "incredible" scale and magnitude of the damage and losses and recovery requirements presented by the Government on the one hand, and the long standing political issue on the other. In addition, there were no readily available delivery mechanisms. This gave early recovery an unprecedented prominenc. The Post-Nargis Joint Assessment incorporated early recovery alongside relief and medium-term recovery. The subsequent revision of the Humanitarian Appeal also placed early recovery side-by-side with the continuing humanitarian relief.

The state of Early Recovery in Myanmar

A Cluster system had already been established and functioning in Myanmar well before the Cyclone. Post-cyclone, the Early Recovery Cluster and Network were established, augmented by surge personnel deployed from BCPR in Geneva, with UNDP in the lead. At this moment, an Early Recovery Advisor has been put in place at the UNRC office. The Early Recovery Network is an attempt to ensure a coherent programmatic response across all the clusters on early recovery. Early Recovery Focal Points were appointed from each of the Clusters with representatives from a wide range of stakeholders including UN agencies, government ministries, national and international NGOs, community and civil society groups and representatives from the private sector. The Network has five Technical Working Groups - non-agricultural livelihoods, community infrastructure, social recovery and community capacity, environment and disaster risk reduction.

Achievements. Everything is seemingly now in place. Both the Revised Humanitarian Appeal and the PONJA Report include strong early recovery components. Meanwhile UNDP continues to further refine Myanmar's Early Recovery Strategic Framework and Early Recovery Monitoring and Evaluation system. There is a credible assessment, with unfettered access for aid workers and agencies on the ground geared-up to implement their respective sectoral early recovery projects included as part of the Revised Humanitarian Appeal. Strategic planning has been carried out and selection criteria and priorities are set. Yet, inadequate or under-funding remains a major problem. Out of \$54million requested for early recovery projects, only 16% has been funded, despite the fact that such activities do make a difference to people's livelihoods in post disaster situations. Indeed little new money has come in since the launch of the revised Humanitarian Appeal and the PONJA. Clearly, funding for programmes in Myanmar, other than those focused on pure emergency relief continues to be problematic for donors, and unfortunately this extends to early recovery. As time passes, the prospects are not encouraging, particularly as the spotlight shifts to other new and competing requirements elsewhere.

Struggling Early Recovery

Key Challenges

One of key challenges in the case of Cyclone Nargis was the critical need for an alternate scheme to be urgently put in place to fill the void ensuing from the lack of interest on the part of international donors to invest in government-led medium/longer term recovery. There was an agreement among the UN agencies and the World Bank that early recovery should be de-linked from medium and long term recovery and featured prominently in the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment. ASEAN also realized that early recovery was a strategic avenue to engage with the Government. On separate occasions, the ASEAN Secretary General emphasized to the international community that its focus is on humanitarian assistance is concurrent with early recovery.

But what is early recovery and how to go about it?

There have been attempts to define early recovery as efforts that focus on supporting affected communities to start rebuilding their lives and livelihoods, access revitalized basic services and address risk reduction strategies to reduce the impact of future disasters in line with the 'building back better' philosophy. In terms of guidance, there is the IASC Cluster Working Group on Early Recovery (CWGER) Guidance Note on Early Recovery, and the UNDP Corporate Policy on Early Recovery.

Still, there appears to be lack of agreement of what constitute early recovery. All clusters in the IASC included early recovery project proposals in the revision of the Humanitarian Appeal to contain everything except life-saving actions that were strictly categorized as emergency relief. This was particularly problematic. Firstly, because inclusion of such long-term recovery project proposals was difficult in that they can compromise the very purpose of the humanitarian

appeal. Secondly, if early recovery is simply medium and long term recovery efforts to be undertaken during a humanitarian phase, then it does not provide a way out of the deadlock surrounding the reluctance of international donors to support government-led longer-term recovery efforts.

Another challenge is the lack of credible information regarding early recovery. Although pre-Nargis information was not substantial or updated, the baseline data available indicated pervasive poverty in the affected Delta areas. Post-Nargis information on the immediate situation in the Delta area was difficult to come by. The Delta area itself was under-developed with few international or national organisations working there prior to Cyclone Nargis. Initial assessments at the village household level were hampered by the death or injury of many UN national staff members and by the general difficulty in accessing the area when most of the roads were impassable and many bridges destroyed.

Under the guidance of the Tripartite Core Group, together with the World Bank, the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) was conducted through the Village Tract Assessment (VTA) and the Damages and Losses Assessment (DALA). The results provided a clear picture of needs to inform further policy analysis and programme planning. The PONJA also provided an assessment of the national and local level actors, in terms of both state and non-state capabilities to deliver early recovery and longer-term recovery programmes.

Finally as time goes by, The TCG with the backing of ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting is embarking on Post-Nargis Recovery Planning (PONREP). This is an effort to bring the identified needs in the PONJA to life with planning parameters and priorities with regard to resources requirements, division of labour and cost. The time-frame of the PONREP is three years, focusing primarily on community-level recovery as outlined in the PONJA. Now the challenge for early recovery is to establish itself as the foundation for medium-and longer-term recovery, as originally intended. Failing this, early recovery risks fading away into obscurity.

Dilemma

Doing it alone vs doing it with the government: The Government acknowledged the reluctance of the international donors to assist in recovery initiatives. During the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Singapore, the Foreign Minister stated that international assistance is most welcome but if it is not forthcoming, the Government will continue to undertake post-disaster recovery using whatever it has and in the best way it knows how. The government was conscious of the dilemma and specified that what it required is complementary assistance to pressing needs including, for instance, the provision of agricultural inputs and implements to help farmers catch up with the fast approaching end of monsoon planting season; and complementary resources for shelter and housing reconstruction.

At a political level there was no question that early recovery was the way to go but on the ground the difficulties remain a reality. International donors are compelled to help but have no

viable mechanism to work with government and end up delivering through their UN and NGO partners. The net result is a further fragmentation of the early recovery concept and coordination architecture that has been weak in the first place.

Comprehensive vs sectoral approach. As a consequence of not working directly with the government, the international community also had difficulties in dealing with the early recovery agenda, with potential ramifications for longer-term recovery such as in the field of infrastructure, policy, and land use/ownership. The prevailing trend in early recovery in Myanmar sees international donors, through their local counterparts, "cherry-pick" softer sectors such as education, health, and livelihoods. Even UNDP, with its sizeable early recovery portfolio, is inhibited from working directly with government. Ultimately, there is a risk of fragmentation, overlap and gaps.

Integrated vs cluster individual: Despite the presence of the Early Recovery Cluster and Network, and the Draft Strategic Framework for Early Recovery, as a whole, early recovery in Post-Nargis Myanmar still leaves much to be desired. Each cluster independently pursues their early recovery agenda/project if at all. The clock is ticking and the Early Recovery Strategic Framework, that was intended to provide a common platform for early recovery, is still in draft and at risk of losing relevance and missing its short window of opportunity.

C. Gaps

Lack of conceptual clarity. Admittedly early recovery as a concept is a novel proposition to bridge the gap between the often heightened humanitarian operation and the slow picking-up of development programmes as humanitarian relief winds down. This deceptively easy argument has proven to be much more complex. Various definitions and descriptions carry the risk of multiple interpretation by policy makers and implementers.

Lack of clear implementation of global commitment. As it is also true in many other new global initiatives, early recovery also witnesses compacts at the global level including the UN, World Bank, and donors. Some agencies may even have individual policies on early recovery. Notwithstanding, Myanmar was proof that when it comes to early recovery operations in the field, each agency, expert and worker are all struggling with their own interpretations.

Lack of international political consistency. The International Pledging Conference on 25 May reflected a novel convergence of international donors, the UN, and the Government of Myanmar, largely through the bridging provided by the ASEAN. There was some form of "commitment" stated by the international community to assist the people and government of Myanmar, subject to conditions including fuller access to international humanitarian aid workers, conduct of a joint assessment, and formulation of a shared recovery plan. As these conditions were met one-by-one, through the remarkably accommodating gestures of the government, the international community has held on to its original positions.

Lack of a clear funding regime. More needs to be done to give early recovery interventions greater priority, as only 16% of the appealed needs have been funded to date. When early recovery is not adequately funded then not only is relief likely to be extended - running the risk of aid dependency - but later longer-term recovery will also be delayed. Funding that was earmarked for development programmes has generally not been made available for early recovery, although some agencies such as UNDP did establish early recovery projects in the Delta. I myself accompanied the RC on field visits to Delta project sites.

Funding for the Cyclone Nargis response has been problematic with difficulties engaging donors due to a range of issues. A Flash Appeal was launched quickly on 9 May for a six month timeframe. The Revised Flash Appeal looked at a one year-long response plan through to April 2009. Building on various assessments, agencies and partners developed humanitarian response plans through the cluster approach, outlining strategies and actions to address ongoing humanitarian needs but also including opportunities for early recovery that would reduce the affected population's dependence on aid and start to undo the socio-economic setbacks caused by the cyclone. This plan expands the flash appeal into 103 projects in 13 key sectors, submitted by 13 UN agencies and 23 non-governmental organisations to assist the most severely affected by Cyclone Nargis. The total amount requested to address the needs identified amounts to almost \$482 million, of which just over 51% or \$US240 million was pledged by mid-September.

In light of the situation on funding of such activities in Myanmar, a discussion on "gaps" risks becoming abstract and theoretical. It must be said that the concept of early recovery continues to be contentious. In Myanmar for instance, there was considerable discussion with the World Bank, who felt that by virtue of their having a grant facility, they might be better placed to take over early recovery than UN agencies who would have to go out and appeal for funds. They also argued that early involvement with early recovery in Myanmar would put them in a better position with medium and longer term recovery activities later on. Unless the funding situation changes dramatically, perhaps it has to be acknowledged that the WB may well have been correct!

Lack of support to ASEAN as a rising underwriter. Given the awkward engagement between international community and the Government of Myanmar, it has to be generally acknowledged that ASEAN has mounted an outstanding and unprecedented political process which could be mobilized to add substance into the created political space. Without adequate support, however, this political space could not sustain its leadership for too long.

Lack of clarity in Leadership. Unlike humanitarian relief, that has relatively more leverage to operate independently from the government, early recovery is intended to stress government ownership of the process in order to positively impact on longer-term recovery beyond the humanitarian phase. UNDP has the global mandate to lead the Early Recovery Cluster and Network, including in the IASC engagement with the government. In the peculiar circumstance in Myanmar, this has been awkward. There is the UNRC office that has an Early Recovery Advisor overseeing the Early Recovery Cluster/Network. Then there is OCHA who coordinate

activities under the purview of humanitarian operation – including early recovery. Hopefully the problem will be resolved once the RC/HC functions are assumed by the same person once again.

Lack of post-appeal coordination. It is important to note that the Humanitarian Appeal is perhaps the only true coordination instrument to introduce coherence amongst projects proposed for funding across clusters. Donors fund projects at their own choosing and lines of accountability span laterally. Without a tight strategic or result framework, these projects run the risk of disintegration. There is dire need for coordination across early recovery projects.

Lack of clear monitoring and evaluation. Ultimately early recovery will only be meaningful when it indeed provides strategic opportunities for people and communities to lose no time to recover in such a way as to make them more resilient. In the case of Myanmar, the resilience was remarkable. But how can one know that early recovery interventions helped attain this? Monitoring of early recovery activities has only just commenced 20 weeks after the disaster event.

The Early Recovery Cluster and Network is yet to put in place, through the Early Recovery Strategic Framework, a substantial mechanism to measure performance against agreed early recovery objectives. This monitoring and evaluation tool will be community-based, with inclusive local-level consultations, in order to allow communities to provide a direct feed-back on the support that is being provided and adjust priorities according to their actual needs. The IASC is the principal coordination forum for the international community where strategic priorities are set and where implementation monitoring takes place ensuring a coordinated, accountable and coherent response. The IASC is supported by the pre-Nargis Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU) which provides systematic and standardised information, including maps. The Who does What Where (3W) instrument supports the Integrated Monitoring Matrix (IMM), feeding into trend analyses and the mapping of gaps by clusters and the 'accountability indicators provided by the Accountability Working Group to support strategic planning and prioritization of the response. These tools also allow for the collection and evaluation of information to ensure an accurate understanding of progress across the various clusters.

Learning from the Experience

While the Cyclone Nargis response is still on-going there are a number of lessons which may feed into best practices for future interventions.

Concept, framework, and capacities

The existence of IASC guidance notes and the UNDP Corporate Policy on Early Recovery have been useful in complementing the accumulated experience of early recovery through the years. Combined with a political environment that was welcoming to early recovery, the policies

provided the necessary platform for undertaking proper conceptualisation, thorough assessment, and the formulation of a draft strategic framework across clusters.

Coordination and Engagement

Focused and early support by UN leadership early after the Cyclone hit, and the efforts of the Humanitarian Coordinator and the Resident Coordinator in-country, paved the way for the international community to make a real difference in responding to the impacts of the cyclone. Recognizing that medium and longer term recovery and reconstruction are not feasible, the leadership decided to place early recovery in a prominent place on the same footing with humanitarian relief.

The TCG brought together the major in-country stakeholders at the highest levels to address the most pressing policy issues with a real sense of urgency. The direct involvement of ASEAN was vital in bridging the divide between the Government of Myanmar and the international community and building trust and confidence in a meaningful partnership. The TCG articulated a clear policy on early recovery through various avenues to promote a conducive standing of early recovery in the overall humanitarian phase.

The Nargis early recovery response has highlighted the vital role of OCHA and the cluster approach which ensured that all stakeholders were inter-linked through a variety of processes, limiting gaps and overlaps in response initiatives.

Joint Assessment

The Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) was an example of where good coordination leads to extensive cooperation and collaboration to the benefit of the whole operation. This process also supported advocacy for early recovery interventions. With relief and early recovery addressed together, the results were used to support the Humanitarian Appeal Revision which dealt with both relief and early recovery as a package rather than as two separate and distinct phases.

Recommendations

Finalize the early Recovery Strategic Framework. This has taken so long that it is danger of rendering itself irrelevant in a couple of months in view of the emerging Post-Nargis recovery Planning

Promote transparent engagement with the government. The TCG and leadership by ASEAN have jointly provided an effective and strategic coordination mechanism for early recovery policy formulation. There is an opportunity to push this further into promoting transparent engagement with the Government which has made available its individual ministry recovery plans for the view of the international community. Ideally, early recovery support for Myanmar

should be complementary to the government's plan without compromising the international community's basic principles.

The international community should publicly acknowledge the progress that has been made with the government in access and implementation, and should ensure strong continued support for early recovery operations and for capacity building initiatives to strengthen national and local Myanmar organizations.

Hold actors and donors accountable to early recovery commitments. In this sense quickly develop and establish monitoring and evaluation as a means to express accountability to the deliverables as they are stated in the framework and vis-à-vis the Government's recovery plan. Only in this way will early recovery make a difference to the suffering of the disaster-affected people in the Delta.