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MYANMAR FLOODS: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES BUT STILL TIME TO ACT

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Front cover: Powerful flood waters toppled this home in Kalay Township, Sagaing Region.
This page: Children in a flood-affected village in Mrauk U Township, Rakine State that was heavily damaged by the floods.

INTRODUCTION

In July, Myanmar was hit by its worst flooding in decades displacing over one million people. Impacts on agriculture – the backbone of the country’s economy and main source of livelihood for millions of rural poor – were massive. The government’s decision to accept the international community’s offer of assistance presented an unprecedented opportunity to build trust and resilience among affected communities, especially in poor and conflict-ridden areas. Unfortunately, an underwhelming response resulted in missed opportunities. With recent assessments indicating that the disaster’s worst impacts have yet to manifest, a lack of strong support for recovery could have long-lasting impacts on poverty and migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The Myanmar government, with the support of international humanitarian and development agencies and the multi-lateral banks, must provide robust funding to support disaster-affected communities to recover. Programming must target the poorest and most marginalized communities, and should seek to build resilience.
- ❑ The Myanmar government, with the support of the humanitarian country team (HCT) and donors, must immediately put in place plans to address possible secondary emergencies as the disaster’s full impacts on food security, health, protection, and other sectors become manifest.
- ❑ National and international organizations with expertise in protection and/or land reform should advocate for safeguards to protect people facing prolonged displacement, especially those whom the Myanmar government plans to relocate, to ensure that they are protected and their rights respected before, during, and after relocation occurs.
- ❑ The UN and other members of the HCT in Yangon and on a local level should immediately address shortcomings in their disaster preparedness and response procedures, including better adapting coordination structures and assessment tools to natural disaster scenarios.
- ❑ Donors, UN agencies, and multi-lateral banks must increase investments in building the country’s disaster risk reduction (DRR) capacity, especially at the local level; investments should be informed by a review of current DRR programming to determine what worked and did not work in the case of the 2015 floods emergency.

THE WORST DISASTER SINCE CYCLONE NARGIS

In June 2015, unusually heavy rains led to widespread flooding across Myanmar. Things took a turn for the worse on July 30 when Cyclone Komen made landfall in neighboring Bangladesh, bringing more intense rains and high winds to Myanmar and resulting in severe flooding and landslides across 12 of the country's 14 states and regions.

On July 31, the Myanmar government declared a state of emergency and disasters in four of the worst affected areas – Rakhine and Chin States and Magway and Sagaing Regions. Devastation to Rakhine and Chin States was especially acute. A few days later, on August 4, the government accepted the international community's offer of assistance. It is critical to note that the government's openness to partnering with the UN and other international organizations in responding to the emergency represents a marked change from its response to Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the country in 2008. At that time, the government refused to grant access to international aid agencies to provide desperately-needed assistance and hid information from the outside world regarding the extent of the disaster which, according to official figures, killed 84,500¹ people (although numerous sources estimate that the number of deaths was far higher).²

In late September and early October, approximately two months since the height of the disaster, a team from Refugees International (RI) traveled to Myanmar to meet with national and international organizations involved in the disaster response. The team met members of the HCT and other national and international organizations in Yangon, the country's former capital and current capital of Yangon Region, Sittwe in Rakhine State, and Kalay in Sagaing Region. RI also visited heavily-affected villages in Rakhine State and around Kalay Township in Sagaing Region and Chin State.

The 2015 floods were the worst the country had seen in decades and, based on RI interviews with dozens of affected villagers, the worst anyone – including people in their 70s and 80s – had ever seen. Close to 9.5 million people were affected and over 1.6 million people were displaced. Although most of the displaced returned to their home areas within the first few weeks, damage to housing was enormous. According to Myanmar's National Natural Disaster Management Committee (NNDMC), more than 38,000 houses were completely destroyed and close to a million homes were damaged. In addition, approximately 3,000 households in Chin State and 1,600 households in Kalay Township, in Sagaing Region, remain displaced and will need to be relocated to safer areas.³

Damage to the agricultural sector – in particular, the country's staple commodity, rice – was also massive, with over a



million acres of farmland damaged and 873,000 acres totally destroyed.⁴ In addition, more than 240,000 livestock perished in the disaster.⁵ With agriculture accounting for nearly a third of GDP and a quarter of total exports, the floods' severe impact on crops and agriculture recently led the World Bank to revise its economic growth forecast for the country downward.⁶ A Post-Floods and Landslides Needs Assessment (PFLNA) prepared by the national government with the support of the World Bank (yet to be publicly released) estimates that flood-related damages and losses will exceed \$2 billion.

The floods and landslides also destroyed food stocks, along with tools, seeds, fertilizers, and draught animals, thereby severely limiting the ability of the worst affected communities – which were also poor and highly-leveraged to begin with – to survive on their own, let alone to recover.⁷



Unprecedented floods tore away portions of a bridge in Kalay Township, Sagaing Region.

THE GOVERNMENT PARTNERS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO LAUNCH A RESPONSE

Given the international community's loud outcry for humanitarian access following Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the government's decision in the case of the 2015 floods to publicly declare a state of emergency, accept international assistance, and work in partnership with the UN and other members of the humanitarian country team (HCT)⁸ to launch a response was momentous. Nearly every international aid agency with whom RI spoke pointed to the openness by the national, state/regional, and local (township level) governments to work with them in responding to the disaster as a significant and highly welcome development. As one UN official involved in the response put it, "[i]t was a 180 degree turn from Nargis, with the government saying not just 'we need your help,' but 'we want your help.'"

In this respect, the 2015 floods provided an important opportunity for the international community to support the government in putting into place disaster response procedures, protocols, and information management systems. On August 5, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief

"It was a 180 degree turn from Nargis, with the government saying not just 'we need your help,' but 'we want your help.'"

-UN official involved in the disaster response

and Resettlement met with UN agencies, international non-government organizations (INGOs), and donor governments to discuss the activation of an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at the national level to improve coordination and information management with the support of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), and the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS).

Admittedly, coordination, information management, and emergency response procedures did not work perfectly. Nonetheless, international agencies involved in the floods response felt that the most positive outcome of the disaster was the opportunity to work with the government and try out the EOC and other disaster management structures in practice.



A man in Sin Baw Kaing village showed RI this photo (at right) of his home falling into the water. Mrauk U Township, Rakhine State.



In addition, the government put in place expedited procedures for granting access to international aid agencies to provide flood assistance in affected areas. Travel authorizations by state and regional governments – which usually take two to three weeks – were available on an expedited timeline, often within days. Several international agencies reported getting permission to provide emergency humanitarian assistance in communities/areas that prior to the floods had been difficult to access. The government also received high marks in terms of information sharing and transparency. For example, it was the first time the government had regularly issued situation reports.

AN UNDERWHELMING EMERGENCY RESPONSE BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The UN misses important opportunities

In light of the country's high vulnerability to disasters and climate change, combined with the unprecedented access and openness by the government, RI was surprised to find that the response by UN agencies and other members of the

HCT was, by and large, underwhelming. This was especially so as two of the hardest hit states – Rakhine and Chin – are also the country's two poorest and most marginalized, and marred by inter-ethnic violence.⁹

Myanmar is currently ranked 10th out of 191 countries on the Index for Risk Management (INFORM) which assesses the risk of humanitarian crises and disasters that could overwhelm national capacity to respond,¹⁰ and 2nd on the Global Climate Risk Index of countries most affected by extreme weather events from 1994 to 2013.¹¹

At the time the disaster was declared, many high-level UN officials were out of the country on leave. In fairness, in the first few days, information was limited regarding the enormous and evolving scale of the disaster (which, in and of itself, was part of the problem). Nonetheless, it is regrettable that high-level UN staff did not prioritize what – at the very least – presented an opportunity to show support and build trust.

Thereafter, one of the most significant efforts came from the World Food Programme (WFP) which distributed one-month food rations to approximately 455,000 flood-affected people



Displaced children from Hakhalay village face an uncertain future as they await relocation. Tonzang Township, Chin State.

across the country. The Food Security Sector has also been able to assist farmers in nearly half of the affected regions to replant, although it is anticipated that output even in these areas would be far below average. Beyond emergency food distributions and support for replanting in some areas, the international response appeared slow, ad hoc, and directionless.

Unfortunately, the HCT's 2015 Emergency Response and Preparedness Plan (ERPP) did not include a specific contingency plan for a floods scenario, even though floods are the most common type of natural hazards. More importantly, there appeared to be confusion among members of the HCT regarding what role the international community should play in the response, and whether it should be limited to capacity building. Disaster simulation exercises conducted in Myanmar by OCHA prior to the floods had been successful in better defining roles and responsibilities among HCT members and cluster/sector leads. However, government agencies had not been included. This may explain why some agencies seemed to interpret a "government-led response" to mean that international agencies should take a passive approach. Numerous UN-agency representatives with whom RI spoke repeatedly stressed the need to defer to the national government and to avoid "internationalizing" the response. The problem, however, was that despite improvements since Nargis, the government significantly lacked capacity at all levels to assess and respond to what were clearly widespread and significant damage and humanitarian needs. Yet there was no apparent effort by the

UN to immediately negotiate wider access for HCT members to implement flood response activities in flood-affected areas.

Several members of the HCT pointed to Myanmar's substantial wealth and the outpouring of aid by the Myanmar public, national civil society organizations (CSOs), and communities themselves in the immediate aftermath as justification for a circumscribed response. Yet, despite an impressive initial outpouring of aid by national sources, these assumptions appeared misguided and somewhat naïve given the enormous and ongoing needs combined with low coping capacities in the hardest hit areas. Moreover, because the floods occurred in the run up to the elections, there was a risk not only that the government might be distracted and unable to fully focus on the response, but also that political parties could use the floods as an opportunity to curry favor by targeting aid to certain areas and in a discriminatory manner. (There were unconfirmed reports of that occurring.) Had there been greater strategic leadership, staff, and resources early on, it may have been possible to partially offset these risks.

It is true that there were constraints on the ability of the international humanitarian agencies to launch a more robust response. In Chin State, for example, the main challenge was – and continues to be – a lack of access to affected areas due to damage to roads and the state's remote and mountainous terrain. There was also a limited international humanitarian presence in Chin State, Sagaing Region, and other affected

areas prior to the floods and few, if any, agencies deployed significant surge staff to these areas. Even the larger INGOs who were implementing development programs in flood-affected areas prior to the floods were hampered by the lack of humanitarian staff.

As well, several agencies said that while donors had been flexible in allowing them to re-channel existing funds to respond to the floods, there were limited amounts of “new money” available meaning that agencies had to divert money intended for other, ongoing humanitarian needs across the country.¹² What funds were available, for example \$9 million in multi-donor funding made available from OCHA’s Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), were hard to access and slow to be released. Several agencies told RI that by the time they were ready to implement programs like replanting of rice paddy fields or cleaning of water ponds, it was too late as planting season was nearly over and the dry season fast approaching.

In short, the UN’s failure to act quickly and decisively to launch a more robust and strategic response from the outset was a lost opportunity for the UN and, by default, affected communities. As one INGO representative put it, “the UN has a mandate and should have immediately taken it forward.”

Lack of a transition strategy and challenges in assessing needs

While it was obvious from early on that the largest need among communities was to recover, members of the HCT lacked vision as to what the transition strategy would be. This may stem, in part, from the fact that as of early October, the government had yet to complete its Post-Floods and Landslides Needs Assessment (which was being undertaken with support from the World Bank) or a broader recovery strategy that would have provided more in-depth information on ongoing needs. But in this vacuum, it was unfortunate that agencies appeared unable to define a strategy for meeting recovery needs beyond cash-based programs.

According to RI interviews, one of the biggest challenges to launching a more comprehensive response was the lack of comprehensible, reliable, and accurate information regarding the nature and extent of damage and humanitarian needs. Numerous individuals felt that OCHA’s roll out of the Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA), an assessment tool designed to identify strategic humanitarian priorities during the first weeks following an emergency, was highly problematic and woefully slow.

To begin with, the MIRA questionnaire form was not well adapted for a natural disaster scenario. For example, the questions were overly focused on internally displaced persons even

though the vast majority of people had returned home within the first week (which is common in the case of flooding and cyclones), and less helpful in identifying the parallel recovery needs. Agencies that did use the form said they ended up leaving questions out or revising the questions in order to capture more useful and relevant information.

The roll out was further slowed by the fact that the form could not be launched electronically, for example, via smartphone. Lack of trained male and female enumerators meant key protection information was never captured (as was the case with most subsequent assessments). As one aid worker remarked, “We never got a good idea of protection concerns.” This is not entirely surprising since, according to the June ERPP, preparation of guidance on the MIRA process and training on its use – although included in the list of “minimum preparedness actions” (MPAs) – had not yet started.

As a result, the MIRA process was slow and incomplete, requiring numerous subsequent assessments and, in the words of one INGO, “leaving people floundering around for information.” (The Final MIRA report was not published until September 3, more than a month after the disaster hit.¹³) This, in turn, appears to have inhibited the ability of some international aid agencies to quickly raise funds. One major donor expressed frustration that the lack of specific information regarding the scale and nature of humanitarian needs in the first few weeks following the disaster prevented it from releasing more funds.

“The [assessment] process was extremely slow... People were left floundering around for information; good data was hard to come by.”

-INGO Representative

An after-action review conducted in late September by the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) took note of these shortcomings and included recommendations for improving the needs assessment process and information management going forward. However, the fact that it took a large-scale – yet highly foreseeable – disaster to reveal these challenges points to a larger concern regarding the UN’s overall level of preparedness in Myanmar. Moreover, in addition to improving the assessment process and other recommendations of the ICCG after-action review, there is a critical need in Myanmar and elsewhere for better, more finely adapted assessment tools that take into account the evolving humanitarian needs and protection risks which natural disaster-affected communities face. Early assessments must collect relevant information regarding the impacts on livelihoods (which is often the most

significant impact in the case of natural disasters) and the near- and medium-term humanitarian and protection implications, along with the parallel recovery needs that characterize natural disasters.

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD TRUST AND CAPACITY WITH COMMUNITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Trepidation among international agencies in Rakhine State

International humanitarian agencies responding to the floods emergency in Rakhine State faced somewhat unique challenges. Prior to the floods, the UN and INGOs had been responding to the needs of the Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority group denied citizenship by the Myanmar government. More than 140,000 people, primarily Rohingya, were displaced in 2012 following attacks on Rohingya communities. Humanitarian assistance provided by the UN and other INGOs to the Rohingya and other minority Muslims groups led to resentment among some ethnic Rakhine communities who, poor and marginalized by the Bamar-dominated national government, felt their needs had been ignored. Thereafter, the UN and INGOs made

a concerted effort to provide equal amounts of humanitarian aid to Rohingya and impoverished Rakhine communities alike. However, tensions came to a head in early 2014 when violent mobs attacked and ransacked 33 offices of UN agencies and INGOs in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, forcing them to evacuate. With support from the national government, the majority of UN and INGO staff were able to return to Sittwe by the end of September 2014.

In light of this background, the floods opened a window of opportunity – albeit a narrow one – for the UN and other members of the international community to demonstrate their impartiality and potentially build trust with Rakhine communities who had lost homes, belongings, animals, and livelihoods in the floods. This is not to say that international agencies should not have prioritized the needs of the Rohingya, whose horrendous living conditions in camps or ghetto-like neighborhoods were undoubtedly made worse by the floods and who, due to restrictions on their freedom of movement, obviously faced far greater challenges in accessing assistance. Rather, given the fact that many of the hardest hit townships in Rakhine State (e.g., Mrauk U, Minbya) are home to both Rakhine and Rohingya communities, the floods created an opportunity for international agencies to engage in a wider response and to serve the needs of both communities.

Many agencies did just that. According to a staff member of one humanitarian organization, “[t]he floods gave us an opportunity to demonstrate in a tangible way that we respond



A displaced woman stands in front of her former home which was swept away by the floods. Without any money to rebuild, she is staying with neighbors. Hla Ma village, Minbya Township, Rakhine State.

based on needs.” Other international groups who provided flood assistance to both communities felt that, in general, significant progress was made in terms of collaboration with Rakhine State government ministries (although it varied from sector to sector). At the same time, however, there was a noticeable level of trepidation and self-censorship among some international agencies in Sittwe when it came to working in flood-affected Rakhine areas. While some seized the opportunity and made efforts to reach out and even brand their commodities, others felt hesitant to do so and fearful of possible retribution by township administrators.

When RI visited these areas in late September, there was limited evidence that the UN and other international agencies had been successful in reaching out to the wider Rakhine community in the most heavily-affected areas. RI interviewed dozens of Rakhine villagers in Mrauk U, Minbya, and Ponnagyn Townships who lost their homes and all of their belongings in the flood. When asked who had provided them with assistance, not one person identified an international aid agency. Even in the few cases where a tarpaulin or tent bearing an international logo was visible, villagers said they had been purchased in the market or did not associate the logo with an international organization.

It is hard to say whether a better coordinated, more concerted, and well-funded effort by international agencies to reach out to flood-affected Rakhine communities would have won “hearts and minds,” or whether these strategies are even appropriate. Nonetheless, RI did feel that there were limited efforts or

funds available to test this out and show strong support for the Rakhine people that would have at least provided an opportunity to build stronger foundations, and put international agencies in a better position to challenge accusations of partiality.

Missed opportunities to partner with local CSOs

In the case of the 2015 floods, it was widely acknowledged that national and local CSOs played an enormous part in the response, providing food, water, clothing, and other urgently-needed items. In and around Kalay Township in Sagaing Region, RI met with several local CSOs who were being supported by international partners to provide critical assistance to flood-affected and displaced communities with impressive results.

In other areas, however, there was less evidence that UN agencies and INGOs had been successful at partnering with national and local CSOs. As a preliminary matter, it did not appear that systems were in place at the time the disaster hit that would have allowed better coordination, collaboration, and sharing of information among national and international aid organizations. Among the list of “minimum preparedness actions” in the HCT’s ERPP is ensuring coordination with national NGOs on preparedness and at the onset of any emergency. However, according to the ERPP, this activity had not yet been undertaken and that was apparent on the ground.



A destroyed schoolhouse in Ponnagyn Township, Rakhine State.

In Rakhine State, RI spoke to several local CSOs who were openly frustrated by what they perceived as an unwillingness of the UN and other HCT members in Sittwe to partner, share information, or coordinate with them on the floods response. The representative of one of the larger CSOs working in Sittwe said that despite having approached OCHA to express his organization's willingness to collaborate, he was not invited to HCT flood response coordination meetings.

“There was a lot of stumbling [among HCT members] in Sittwe. They didn't have their ducks in a row.”

-Donor government representative

At a time when one of the most significant issues dominating the humanitarian reform agenda is the need to expand support for local organizations,¹⁴ the international community in Rakhine State and elsewhere in Myanmar should take advantage of the opportunity to build resilience by partnering with local CSOs to enhance disaster preparedness and response capacity. International agencies need to be more proactive in identifying local partners with whom to work, and in committing the time and resources to do so.

SIGNIFICANT UNMET HUMANITARIAN NEEDS REMAIN

At the time of RI's visit, the limited and ad hoc nature of the international response – and the fact that the government had yet to release either a post-disaster needs assessment or a comprehensive recovery strategy – was especially worrying in light of the large-scale and increasing level of unmet humanitarian needs. As of mid-October, the initial outpouring of food and other emergency aid from private sources was running low while the longer-term housing, health, water and sanitation, nutritional, and livelihood needs of hundreds of thousands of people had still not been met.

According to the NNDMC's October 5, 2015 Situation Report, “[n]eeds for emergency water and sanitation are severe and evolving.” The report further found that due to compromised water sources and inadequate access to nutritional food, the nutritional status of children in numerous regions – especially Rakhine and Chin States where malnutrition was a concern before the floods – was likely to decline further, resulting in increased mortality risk for children under five. The Myanmar government, with the support of the HCT and donors, must immediately put in place plans to address possible secondary emergencies as the disaster's full impacts on food security,



A family of four lives in a tent left over from Cyclone Nargis. Kalay Township, Sagaing Region.



A displaced man salvages what's left of his former roof to rebuild this hut. Ponnagyn Township, Rakhine State.

health, water and sanitation, protection, and other sectors become manifest.

Of particular concern are the unaddressed protection risks among displaced and heavily-affected households. RI was particularly concerned regarding displaced communities in villages around Kalay Township, where families were living in overcrowded, multi-family temporary shelters along a main road that did not provide any privacy to women or girls. RI spoke with the mother of a teenage girl who explained that she was worried about her daughter living in the camp, but said “I don’t have a choice.”

An assessment of gender-based violence (GBV) conducted by Protection Sector partners in Chin State identified GBV as

a major concern. However, according to protection actors, local CSOs providing food and other emergency assistance lacked capacity and awareness of protection risks. On a broader level, lessons learned from Nargis indicate that trafficking and child labor risks are likely to increase in the coming months in the hardest hit areas. International agencies must support the government and national NGOs to address the ongoing risks that commonly arise from prolonged displacement.

Since most of the rural poor in Myanmar have acquired their land through possession and lack official land ownership

documentation, the floods and landslides served to increase the risk of dispossession in many affected areas. However, there did not appear to be sufficient assistance for those who had lost their land in the disaster and lacked the means to purchase land. In the most heavily-affected areas of Rakhine State including Minbya and Mrauk U Townships, there did not appear to be any efforts by international (or government) agencies to address the needs of families who, in addition to losing their homes, had lost their land when the floodwaters drove new river courses through their villages, subsuming their land.

“If the rice donations end, I don’t know how we will survive. We are very worried.”

-Displaced women in Tonzang Township, Chin State

RI was also concerned at the lack of transparent and inclusive relocation plans for the thousands of households in Chin State and Sagaing Region who were unable or not

permitted to return to their land and in need of relocation. RI visited numerous displaced communities awaiting relocation who lacked information on when, where, and by whom they would be relocated. Some had been promised new homes and land by political parties. Others had been told they would be provided with land on which to build but would have to pay for their house. Still others were told that they would not be relocated at all even though they did not want to return to their former homes because they felt the area was unsafe.

It is widely acknowledged that government-led relocation in the aftermath of disasters raises significant risks of human rights violations, forced evictions, recurrent displacement, and deeper impoverishment.¹⁵ In fact, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has been involved in a project to draft international guidance on post-disaster, government-led relocation designed to address these protection concerns.¹⁶ However, there did not appear to be any projects by UNHCR or other protection actors to ensure that safeguards were in place for those targeted for relocation, many of whom face prolonged displacement. These risks should be addressed.

In addition, members of the Land Core Group¹⁷ should ensure that ongoing advocacy efforts to improve land rights and prevent dispossession include families targeted for relocation to ensure that they are protected and their rights respected before, during, and after relocation occurs. The Peninsula Principles on Climate Displacement within States, developed in 2013 by a diverse group of international experts from around the globe, lay down a comprehensive normative framework for undertaking an inclusive approach to relocation based on principles of international law, human rights obligations, and good practice. The Peninsula Principles could provide useful guidance for government and civil society organizations in Myanmar working to protect displaced persons facing relocation.

DESPITE HIGH VULNERABILITIES, RESILIENCE GETS SHORT SHRIFT

Even where emergency humanitarian needs were being met, one of the most disappointing missed opportunities was to promote the resilience of hard-hit communities to future shocks by targeting the root causes of vulnerability. At the time of RI's visit, none of the projects currently being implemented by international actors with whom RI met was directed at reducing disaster risk (DRR) or building resilience to future natural disasters and other common shocks.

In the shelter sector, for example, there did not appear to be any wide-scale or meaningful effort to provide the materials or training to allow families to rebuild safer housing. Moreover,

neither the government nor international agencies appeared to have a strategy for supporting affected households' longer-term shelter needs despite the rapidly-approaching winter, which will significantly impact communities in northern areas of Myanmar such as Chin State. Since the vast majority of people had received little to no shelter assistance, RI witnessed dozens of cases where poor and vulnerable households had

"built back worse." RI spoke with families who were now living in huts made of bamboo and plastic sheeting whereas they had resided in wooden structures before the floods. Most families who had rebuilt were only able to do so by incurring additional debt.

The lack of a DRR or resilience component to flood response

interventions was especially surprising in light of the fact that the HCT agreed in the Initial Flood Response Plan that the flood emergency would be responded to as part of the 2015 Humanitarian Response Plan, which acknowledges "the importance of enhancing the resilience of communities and preparing for new emergencies, taking into consideration the fact that Myanmar is one of the countries at highest risk of natural disasters in South-East Asia."

Nor did RI see any evidence on the ground of DRR or early warning programming that had proved effective. In fact, in Rakhine State, none of the villages RI visited had received advance warning of the floods from any source and evacuations were last minute and unorganized meaning many people had no time to safeguard their belongings or assets. While there had been radio announcements regarding the cyclone's effects on coastal areas, they did not believe it would affect them since they were not exposed to the coast. And surprisingly, there was no advance warning in Rakhine villages RI visited regarding the fast-rising flood waters coming from the north that in many instances rose above rooftops in a matter of hours

and which caused the greatest devastation. In Sagaing Region around Kalay town, which was devastated by flooding, some villagers told RI they had received advance warning but because they had never seen floods this large before, they

did not believe the reports and failed to take action.

Donors, UN agencies, and multi-lateral banks should undertake a review of current early warning and DRR programming to assess what worked and did not work in the case of the 2015 floods emergency. Based on those findings, they should support DRR capacity, especially at the local level. Donors,

"We didn't have time to take anything with us. The water came up very fast without warning. We've had floods before, but never like this."

-Displaced man in Shwe Taung Ward village,
Mrauk U Township, Rakhine State

"What am I worried about? I'm scared that the floods will come again."

-Displaced woman living in Hla Ma village,
Minbya Township, Rakhine State

UN agencies, and the multi-lateral banks should also seek opportunities to engage with the Myanmar government on strategies to implement the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction¹⁸ and the development of the second national DRR plan (to replace the current Myanmar Action Plan on DRR 2012-2015).

EXPERIENCE FROM CYCLONE NARGIS AND THE FLOODS' LATENT IMPACTS

With many humanitarian activities in response to the flooding winding down, there is a substantial risk that humanitarian and development actors, and donors, will assume that the disaster is “over.” On the contrary, there is substantial evidence that its full effects, and their impacts on the most vulnerable households, are still unfolding or have not yet become manifest.

According to a joint government-UN Agricultural and Livelihood Flood Impact Assessment carried out in September 2015, the floods and landslides had severe and long-lasting impacts on the livelihoods of families that rely on agriculture.¹⁹ Rice, the staple commodity, was particularly hard hit, with an expected reduction in production of up to 89 percent in damaged paddy fields. The report warns that “the anticipated high production losses could expose an already vulnerable population to greater food insecurity and possibly malnutrition.” The report also found that job opportunities, including agricultural casual labor upon which a large sector of the rural population relies, have already diminished, and are likely to decrease further in the upcoming monsoon harvest season. RI interviews in Rakhine and Chin States and in Sagaing Region reflected these concerns. Worse yet is the fact that the loss of seeds, fertilizers, and tools, along with the damage to irrigation systems, means that many farmers risk missing the start of the upcoming winter and summer planting seasons starting in October and January respectively. Impacts on livelihoods are likely to be worse on vulnerable women. (According to the 2013 census, 23 percent of the population of Myanmar lives in female-headed households.)

The report also warns that the substantial impact on livestock will deprive people not only of a critical form of dietary protein but also draught power for the upcoming agricultural season. Damage to fisheries and aquaculture was also severe, particularly in Rakhine and Ayeyardwaddy, significantly diminishing incomes and livelihood sources.

Among the most important findings of the report was that affected households had already started to engage in distress coping mechanisms such as borrowing money and selling

productive assets in order to access food. One woman living in a displacement camp on the outskirts of the town of Kalay told RI that her biggest source of stress was repaying a large loan she had taken out before the floods hit for her store, which she had been running out of the ground floor of her home. “Donors bring us food but they can’t repay my debt.” The mother of another displaced family living in Kalay Township and awaiting relocation by the government told us that her and her husband’s biggest worry was how to repay the money they had borrowed to build their temporary shelter.

“*Donors bring us food but they can’t repay my debt.*”

-Displaced female shop owner in Sagaing Region

Analysis of the impacts of Cyclone Nargis provides important insights into the profound and long-lasting impacts the 2015 floods are likely to have over the long term. Post-Nargis Social Impact Monitoring conducted by the World Bank five years on indicated that the majority of affected villages had lost their livelihoods to such an extent that they had not been able to socio-economically recover.²⁰ Farming had recovered in only a quarter of affected villages and, on average, yields remained below average. The impacts on the fishing sector had been so drastic that in several townships, small scale fishing as a source of income had altogether disappeared.



In flood-affected villages in Rakhine State, poor families like this one have lost their livelihoods.

Overall, levels of indebtedness correlated to the degree of cyclone impact, and over a third of affected villagers were caught in a cycle of debt unable to repay even loans taken before the cyclone. The monitoring revealed that small farmers and laborers had the highest increases in the levels of debt and the least capacity to repay debt. Having depleted their assets in the first few years following the disaster, many poor farmers had resorted to selling their land, leading to even further unequal distribution of land. These lessons from Nargis clearly show that one of the most important problems that must be addressed through recovery in the case of the 2015 floods disaster is the high level of indebtedness among the country's rural poor which, arguably, is the largest driver of their resilience deficit. Treating the symptom through cash-for-work programs alone will not be sufficient.

Monitoring from Nargis also found that over time, outmigration became one of the only viable coping mechanisms and, in some instances, nearly half of village youth had migrated to urban areas. Several representatives of international organizations working in Myanmar with whom RI spoke believe that in places like Rakhine and Chin States, the floods are likely to contribute to the existing push factors like persecution, marginalization, and grinding poverty to further drive both internal and international migration.²¹

Without sufficient and targeted assistance, it is highly likely that the impact of the 2015 floods and landslides on Myanmar's rural poor will be profound and that hundreds of thousands of people may not recover. It is therefore imperative that humanitarian and development actors, donor governments, and multi-lateral development banks provide robust financial support for its implementation. At the same time, they should recognize the opportunity the recovery presents to address the root causes of vulnerability and insecurity in Myanmar, and working in partnership with national partners, implement well-targeted programs that build resilience of impoverished and marginalized communities (in Rakhine and Chin States especially) to withstand future shocks including extreme weather, climate change, and political upheaval.

Alice Thomas traveled with consultant and former RI Fellow Davina Wadley to assess the humanitarian situation in flood- and landslide-affected areas of Myanmar in September and October 2015.

ENDNOTES

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