



**LOCAL  
RESOURCE  
CENTRE**

**STUDY REPORT ON COMMITTEES:  
EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-BASED  
RESPONSES TO CYCLONE NARGIS**

**AUGUST 2009**

## **Executive Summary**

In most committees under study, influential members planned and implemented activities following the guidelines of their funding agency. To meet these demands, the committee usually made decisions among its own members to make the process more efficient and less time-consuming. Communities were informed of the decisions of their committees only after the funding agency had approved of the committee's plans. Information was not shared regularly, meaning that there were many misunderstandings and misinterpretations during the entire process. Committees usually shared information with donors in order to get assistance, although community involvement in the decisions behind that process was not clearly seen. Committees seemed more concerned with upward rather than downward accountability. Committees and communities were not aware of their rights to complain, as for example when they perceived unfairness in how aid was distributed. This mentality is culturally and psychologically bound up with a fear of retaliation.

Neither donors nor village committees were especially strong in assessing the vulnerabilities of their communities, or in targeting appropriate beneficiaries. In the early phases of the response to the cyclone, the participation of women in committees was very low, although with time it became more apparent. Their place on committees has been gradually acknowledged and encouraged by the community. There is no doubt that communities and committees want to participate in the process of rebuilding after the cyclone, although they are hampered by a lack of competency in communication skills, knowledge of information-sharing, book-keeping, and reporting. Although the committees under study thought of themselves as able to build their own communities, there had no clear plans for the future.

**Preface:****Background of the Study and Goals of This Study**

Committees have emerged throughout the affected areas of the Ayeyarwaddy Delta of Lower Myanmar and Yangon Division in order to participate in and arrange relief assistance and recovery efforts after Cyclone Nargis. While some of these committees<sup>1</sup> have been organised spontaneously, or are reorganisations of committees that already existed, most have been set up in response to specific requests to perform a specific task or work on a project at the request of an outside organization, such as an NGO. Among these committees, there are differences in their nature, effectiveness, and the sustainability, as assessments and the observations of agencies working in the area confirm<sup>2</sup>. There is variation in their capacity to represent their communities, to effectively design recovery plans that involve the entire community, and to implement projects while remaining accountable to donors, agencies, and their communities. Many committees have capacity and competency limitations, while many others ceased to exist after the life of their project.

Nevertheless, many committees are able to act in the best interests of their communities and may continue to exist after the humanitarian response ends. Agencies working with communities recognize that capacity-building and monitoring are necessary to enable committees to work more effectively, although what shape that capacity building or implementation of monitoring should take may not always be clear. External factors, such as donor or agency attitudes and practices towards committees, have an impact on the ultimate efficacy and success of these committees.

In planning their humanitarian responses in the affected areas of Lower Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, many agencies indicated that it is essential to understand local committees that have worked in the response to Nargis. In response to this need and in the interests of the partners of the Accountability and Learning Working Group (ALWG), the Local Resource Centre has studied these committees through its “Action Research” program. What follows, the results of this research, may be used to inform partners’ programming by identifying what has and has not been effective, what has had positive and negative impacts, and what has been missing. This research has been designed not only to answer the question, “what makes a good committee?,” but also to investigate the factors that contribute to a committee working well; what relationship there is between the nature of the establishment of the committee and its success or failure; and to make recommendations on the best practices for outside agencies to set up and work with committees.

**Methodology:**

This research was carried out with the participation and consultation of ALWG Partners, who reviewed the Terms of Reference of this research program and helped the LRC research team identify relevant villages to visit. Members of the ALWG Partner organisations<sup>3</sup> accompanied the research teams into villages. The research was conducted by a team of six LRC researchers under the direction of a senior qualitative and quantitative research analyst. The research team identified six villages in Nargis-affected areas, both in the Delta and in Yangon division. The team selected the villages based in part on the recommendations of ALWG members, which was done in order to ensure the participation of, support from, and usefulness to, those members. Following the nature of this research, meant to provide a snapshot of the situation, no further attempt was made to locate “representative” villages, including those in areas that are remote or difficult of access.

The researchers were divided into two groups, with one woman per group, who went to three villages each. In these six villages, the researchers conducted twelve Focus-Group Discussions (two per village), thirty-five Key Informant Interviews (at least two per village), and twenty Individual In-depth Interviews (at three per village). In the Focus-Group Discussions, the researchers also elicited the participation of the group to create together a “community timeline.” Covering the period before and after the Cyclone, this

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<sup>1</sup> Committee is here defined as a group of people set up, either by the community themselves, by government or by an NGO to address the needs of the people in the community. There may be an inherent overlap between “committees” and community-based organizations (CBOs), some of which may behave like committees. While our focus will be on committees as defined above, we must recognize that this distinction may not always be clear in practice or in people’s conceptions

<sup>2</sup> For example, the PONJA, Social Impacts Monitoring, Real Time Evaluation, and others.

<sup>3</sup> Four member organisations participated in this research in various ways, and the LRC wishes to thank them for all their help and their openness. One organisation even lent a staff member to participate in the research team. The names of the participating agencies have been withheld here to protect the identities of the villagers, and not to shield those agencies from criticism.

timeline was a way to elicit concrete information on the existence and establishment of committees both before and after the storm.

## 1 FINDINGS

### 1.1 Formation of Committees - Existing Social Networks

The majority of the villages in the study already had informal social groups in their communities before the Cyclone. These formed the basis, or at least a precursor, for the formation of later committees. The role of the social networks varied from helping in religious activities, to assisting in traditional ceremonial occasions such as marriage, funerals and *shinpyi* (entering the monkhood). These groups are also known as *thayèi nayèi ahpwé*, groups for “social occasions of joy or grief.” Members of these groups were the main basis upon which communities worked to rebuild themselves immediately after Nargis. In villages with high levels of devastation and large numbers of casualties, the survivors worked to rebuild their communities, showing the strength of the social fabric in most of the villages under study.

During the early phase of recovery, informal groups were formed to assist in distributing food and clothing donated by individual groups and organisations. Outside organisations and individuals came to the affected communities with various projects in mind and with differing ways of distributing their goods and services. Villagers had to cope with all these offers for assistance, but worked their best to get assistance for the people of their villages. Most of the villages under study had more than one group or committee.

### 1.2 Village Committees and Groups

Four or five months after the cyclone, informal groups that had been organised to distribute emergency clothing and relief became aware of the need to have more formal committees for long-term recovery, especially as NGOs came into the area. Learning from others’ experiences, villagers realised that they must form groups to deal with the organisations and donors coming. The earliest village committees were formed by the villagers themselves, while others were guided by specific organisations, both international NGOs and UN organisations. There were two types of village committee formations found in this study – self-initiated and NGO-initiated. Two village committees were self-initiated and four were NGO-initiated. The timing and formation of committees varied—aside from one village, all were formed during July and August 2008.

Although some earlier informal emergency groups transformed themselves into formal village committees, the members in these groups were often the same in the self-initiated committees. NGO-initiated committees, in contrast, tended to be more structured, with designated leaders, secretaries, and members. In the Myanmar language, the names of these pre-existing committees had different titles, such as *ahpwé* “group”, *athin* “association”, or *kawmati* “committee”. The subsequent committees formed tended, however, to have similar names along the lines of *kyèjywa pyanle htubtaung-yèi bnin hpunhpyò tòtet-yèi kawmati*, meaning “Village Recovery and Development Committee”. It should be noted that there is a formal governmental committee in every village, called the Village Peace and Development Council, mostly composed of men, which undertakes various duties including registering guests and visitors. As indicated in 1.4, members of this committee were often present on the committees under consideration here.

### 1.3 Aims of the Committees

The aim of all the committees was to rebuild the livelihoods and socio-economic well-being of their villages in some way, although their tasks and functions varied depending on who or what organisation was backing them. Activities included sanitation and hygiene promotion projects, livelihoods grants, and “Disaster Risk Reduction” programs.

### 1.4 Composition of Committees

In the study villages, where people tended to be related to one another, committee members ranged both in size and in age, though men tended to dominate numerically. There were a number of parameters along which committee composition varied, although overall men tended to dominate numerically and most members tended to be related to each other in some way. Committee sizes ranged from 7 to 26 members. The ages of the committee members ranged from 15 to 72 years, but most of the members were in their thirties and forties. Apart from one, at least initially all committees were predominantly made of men. Most of the self-initiated committees consisted only of male leaders and members at the time of formation, with a simple structure of leader versus members. A leader, together with three to four main members, usually shaped the committee. There were strong social ties between members in most villages – within any one village, members tended to be related to each other. Villagers reported that people most involved with the

committees had a strong spirit of volunteerism, or had the necessary free time to participate in community activities. Overall, committees included people from all socio-economic levels of the villages.

In all the committees under study, village-level government officials (*yáyáká*) and security forces were always included. Villagers widely acknowledged that the authorities must grant permission or be involved in order for them to carry out any activities in the village successfully. The inclusion of village-level officials thus smoothed the way to success. Committees functioned better in villages where village authorities had good relationships with higher-level authorities. This reflects the importance in the local cultural context of personal connections, which foster trust and understanding.

### 1.5 Leadership

Leadership played a crucial role in the formation and active functioning of village committees. The efforts and effectiveness of any given committee depended on the identity of the leader and the extent of his influence in the community. The majority of these leaders were influential members of their communities, from above-average socio-economic backgrounds, and having administrative experience, often in village-level government positions. Almost all leaders were in middle aged, 35 to 55 years old. All committee leaders in the villages under study did not, however, have a high-ranking official administrative leadership post, although some were functionaries in village administration. The *yáyáká* chairman had an oversight role in some villages. Self-initiated committees were established based on the individual leader's network and ideas.

In one village, an influential monk was an informal leader not only for that one village, but also for the whole village tract consisting of eight villages. The committee leader there, however, was not the monk but another villager.

### 1.6 Gender

In the villages under study, women tended to have traditional roles and identities, although this did not ultimately bar them from participating in the committees. Villagers, including women themselves, generally thought of the role of women in community affairs to be in the background. Women viewed themselves as not able to do much for their villages, and unable to spare as much time as men. Women made up from one-third to one-half of the members in the NGO-initiated committees. Members of these committees were more aware of their female membership. Yet although some respondents claimed that men and women were equal, in practice women's participation tended to be limited, for example because many Myanmar people consider it inappropriate or unsafe for women to travel alone for long distances.

There was at least one startling exception: in one village, women took much more initiative, which might have been due to their experiences working in a self-help group set up under a UN program in 2005. After the storm, these women set up a committee with all the necessary members – head, secretary, treasurer, accountant, and others – all according to guidelines that they had learned in their previous experience. These women were also influential in organising other women in the village, such as health workers, teachers, and market sellers.

Under the influence of NGOs, women joined committees, although often with little understanding of why they were asked to join. In NGO-initiated committees, for example, the composition of membership was set out beforehand, with an equal number of male and female in some committees. NGOs often required that committee roles be distributed evenly across gender, so that for example where the leader was a man, the second leader had to be a woman. In the committees that one international NGO started, committee membership had to include mothers and adolescents.

They told us that to get assistance, women needed to be in the group. I come when they have a meeting, but I don't say anything because I don't know much. Men are more suitable for this because it's their job.

-A woman committee member

Aside from the NGO-initiated ones, all other committees were initially formed without any women, though later women came to be included on nearly all committees. However, NGOs that set up committees insisted that women be included from the beginning. The majority of these women were influential in their villages either from their wealth or through their jobs. In some villages, women relatives of women who were already members also became members themselves. As time passed and people learned about the experiences of other villages, women came to be included in almost all the committees under study. The research team noticed that the compositions of committees changed whenever a problem arose (perhaps reflecting a local

pattern of changing the people in charge after a crisis has arisen) or when the NGOs insisted on a change in the composition.

### **1.7 Membership Overlap Between Committees**

Almost all the villages had more than one committee at the time of study, in which the research team observed frequent overlapping membership. Any influential or dominant figure in a village tended to be involved in more than one committee. Villagers reported that an influential and decisive person should be on every committee in order for them to get things done. In a village conducting a Disaster Risk Reduction program, however, the village formed many smaller committees, which in turn were put under a central “Disaster Management Committee”. Many villagers were on these smaller committees and followed village elders’ decisions on who should be a member of which committee.

## **2 Committee Activities**

The activities of the committees varied depending on agreements made with funding agencies or NGOs, and also on the nature of the project. Most activities were driven by the aid provider and not the villagers themselves. Committees carried out projects relating to health, such as water and sanitation, latrine construction, and providing a safe food supply. Committees that received funding from an INGO used their funding for livelihoods, largely for fishing and farming. The distribution and use of funds similarly varied, with most committees aiming to distribute livelihood funds equally. Yet villagers’ perceptions of fairness, justice, and equity tended to vary, with occasional misunderstandings between the community, its committees, and funding agencies:

When [the INGO] asked us to distribute their goods, they told us to group our villagers into three classes because they had only limited supplies. We gathered, decided, and gave them a list of three groups. The INGO told us they would give the first group priority, and if they still had enough supplies, they would move to the second group. But in another village, they only formed two groups. We don’t understand how they categorised their people, but fully one half of their village got aid, whereas only a third did in our village. We did the right thing, but the other villagers here blamed us. The INGO should have made [the process] clear from the beginning, and should have abided by the rules they said were the same in every village. When villagers start complaining, the NGOs blame us.

-A village committee leader

Although committees were working for the good of their communities, there were still problems because the committees did not give complete information on the benefits and risks involved with the aid given. In one village that received livelihoods assistance, the committee decided to use the money to create a program to provide “soft” loans, so that the money would come in and out on a revolving basis. The rules for the loans were meant to ensure that the person taking out a loan would definitely repay it, and two people should co-sign, acting as guarantors. Many people living on daily wages had a hard time finding someone to co-sign for them. This highlights the need for committees and funders to plan and implement their activities in such a way that as many people can benefit from them as possible.

In some committees, there was more direct NGO oversight and involvement in how programs were implemented. Various kinds of community workers and program-specific participants guided and monitored the activities on two committees. In a village where Disaster Risk Reduction activities have been done with villagers’ participation, there was a two-week training course involving most of the villagers. These villagers acknowledged that they learned a lot through this process. Other community activities, such as rebuilding schools, bridges, health-care centres, and monasteries were organized together by the committee and village officials. Villagers were active in these projects by donating their labour.

## **3 ACCOUNTABILITY**

### **3.1 Information Sharing and Transparency**

Information appeared to be shared mainly within committees and not outside of them. Generally, a few leading members decided what information was to be told to the wider community. Every household in the community would be invited to a meeting and the villagers would be informed of the committee’s activities and decisions. At least one member of a family was supposed to attend these meetings. Since villagers were often not told ahead of time what was going to be discussed, many households sent non-decision making members. The research team observed that most committees did not share detailed information with their host communities, suggesting that committees did not fully understand the importance of this process.

For example, in one village, only the people who attended a meeting about the distribution of fishing boats had their names put on a list of beneficiaries, which was then sent to the donor agency. Because of how information had – or had not – been given, the committee later had to devise a new way to meet actual needs, which were very different from what was originally determined.

It appeared that committees were more concerned with pleasing or fulfilling the directives of donor agencies rather than with being accountable towards the beneficiaries or their communities. Many committees placed a priority on fulfilling the goals of their donors in the belief that this would ensure continued funding.

### **3.2 Community Participation**

Community members were willing to participate in village reconstruction projects and also attended community-wide meetings that their committees called. The participation of the villagers in these meetings, however, was minimal. At the same time, some villagers said that they did not necessarily have anything to say when they were asked for their opinions or inputs. Overall, community participation seemed to be in an initial stage, with committees informing and consulting with the community, while taking decisions on the activities for the village as a whole.

### **3.3 Complaints-Handling**

It appeared that committees and communities were not aware of their rights to complain. They were concerned about seeming ungrateful or causing the funding agency or donor to cease funding. Committees or influential villagers handled most complaints informally. In some cases, these solutions may have undermined the effectiveness of the aid that was received, as for example when a small amount of aid intended for a few people was redistributed among a larger number:

We only got enough aid for 26 households, but we have over 60 households in our village. We called in all the daily-wage earners [i.e., the poorest community members] and let them know the situation. They agreed to divide the aid so that all 60 households could have some. But the INGO told us to give the aid only to the 26 on their list. They didn't like us doing it our way. But we live on the same land and drink the same water, we have to work together.

-A committee member

Nevertheless, one village did have a complaints-handling process through a suggestion box that was put in place through an NGO. The villagers did not understand the complaints mechanism process, nor did they get any responses to what they had complained about.

### **3.4 The Abilities, Qualifications, Experiences, and Capacities of Committee Members**

Good leadership and having members with experience working with larger organisations or NGOs had a positive impact on the overall abilities and competence of the committees. Out of all the committees studied, only a few had members that had the necessary qualifications and experiences to carry out projects without further training or guidance. For example, in a village where some of the women had had experience participating in an NGO-led community credit group, the committees knew how to find funding agencies. These women also understood how to keep records.

Even though all the committees in the study kept some kind of documentation of their projects, the research team found NGO-initiated committees to be better at systematic reporting and record-keeping. Only a few committee members in the study had received any kind of formal training, which ranged from hygiene awareness, brick-making, and Disaster Risk Reduction, to project cycle management. Members themselves identified several areas in which they would like to increase their competencies, including how to form a committee systematically, basic book-keeping, and communication strategies with the world outside the village.

### **3.5 Lessons Learned**

The majority of the committee members told the research team that they had learned a lot working as committee members. For example, many had learned the importance of establishing a good relationship between the community and the committee. Others found that at times, they had to insist on their position between the community and funders, because as locals they understand the relationships between local individuals. Therefore, they had to insist on their decisions in the face of objections from higher-level

organisations, although some committee members reflected that they did not know effective ways to do this. Village committee members also learned about communicating outside of their villages by going to larger towns and cities and seeking assistance. The importance of having a basic level of education for working with NGOs also became apparent – most committees included young educated people. Even though there were some cultural practices that tended to discourage the participation of women, many members did acknowledge the usefulness of having women on their committees. Some members spoke of the unique benefits of having women, in that they are good at organising, cooking, and discussing, and young educated women in particular were seen as meticulous and thorough.

## **4 DECISION-MAKING**

### **4.1 Decision-making within the Committee**

In almost all committees, the leader or coterie of influential members conducted the main decision-making. Many committees included members who act as supporters without a voice. There was little delegation of power. This may be because of the personalities of the individual leaders, or may reflect larger cultural patterns, in which few people are willing to take responsibility. Village affairs were usually discussed in the committee first, and if necessary, other formal authorities were called in to make major decisions. According to one focus-group discussion conducted with a committee, their leader took 90% of the responsibility and members just 10%.

### **4.2 Decision-making and community involvement**

Decision-making was not always an easy task for leaders or committees with limited experience. A common requirement that NGOs imposed was that their aid was to be given to the poorest and neediest members of the community, although in practice, the line between the poorest and slightly higher groups was hard to draw. For example, in villages where most people lived on daily wages, everyone wanted equal distribution of the aid. These situations again highlight the position of the committees between the rules of the NGO and the desires of the community. Despite NGO objections, many committees opted for long-term peace by dividing the aid equally. In one case, the NGO overruled the committee's decision and distributed their aid directly to the lowest-income farmers, which led to misunderstandings and negative feelings between the committee and the villagers. The committee blamed the NGO for discrediting them and making the villagers lose trust in them. Such scenarios highlight the need for NGO workers in the field to conduct thorough needs-based assessments utilising local knowledge of the local context before implementing any activities.

Even though communities could identify what their needs were, their involvement in decision-making was weak. Almost all providers had already decided what aid in what quantity they would provide before arriving in the village. Some donors had even already developed a beneficiary-targeting process, which upset some villagers and communities. Villagers were usually informed about beneficiary selection and the distribution process for aid, but this information was not always timely or clear, creating problems in some villages. Most decision-making processes seemed to leave out the majority of villagers' voices.

## **5 Committee Relationships with the Community, Donors, and Others**

### **5.1 Committee Relationships with their Communities**

The relationship between committees and their community was positive in most of the villages under study. Villagers relied on the committee to help them rebuild their communities. Even though there were some misunderstandings, communities perceived committees as doing their best for the village. Committees often served to explain and clarify projects to the villagers, or launch the projects in ceremonies. In addition to their project-related tasks, committees often explained the finances after a project was concluded, found solutions to conflicts arising over distributions, and acted as agents between funders and the village.

All of the [committee members] had to work hard. Some of them couldn't even do their regular jobs. We thank them all.

-A villager

### **5.2 Relationships with Funding Agencies and NGOs**

Most funding agencies and NGOs had a top-down hierarchical relationship with individual committees. The NGO came up with the project, gave instructions and regulations, and required record-keeping and monitoring processes, while making little effort to listen to the voices of the committee or the community.



Some of the NGOs even gave directions on the composition of the committees, specifying required representation from cohorts such as men, women, youth, and children. The struggle to comply with these regulations, as well as chafing under some of these directives, caused difficulties and misunderstandings in some of the communities under study. For example, in one township where an organization was providing funding, many local NGOs understood that they had to build sanitary latrines, and that they must be completed within ten days. All of the latrines were finished, but villagers did not yet even have houses to return to. Some committees felt that the NGO above them ignored their difficulties and forced them to meet the NGO's objectives.

In-depth interviews with committee leaders revealed in turn that their relationship with NGOs was "bottom-up." Committees requested NGOs or funders for assistance but were not necessarily concerned with, or aware of, being accountable to those below them, whether other committee leaders or beneficiaries. Following standard procedures, the committees had to account for funds, document their activities, and report back to the NGO.

### 5.3 Relationships with Authorities and other Committees

Committees had to report regularly to formal local authorities on their activities. The *yáyáká* authorities were on many committees, making it easier to work. Most committees had good relations with the authorities. Similarly, relations between village committees from nearby villages were also friendly, which provided opportunities for villagers between nearby villages to learn from each others' experiences in finding aid and setting up committees. Village committees shared their experiences in dealing with NGOs. Although there was some envy when one village received more aid than another, when the situation or level of adversity between villages was similar, the overall relationship between them seemed satisfactory.

## 6. Aid and Support

Many organisations from both inside and outside the country gave support to the communities soon after the Nargis. Support varied from food and clothing to building shelters and giving support for livelihoods, and was mainly in cash or kind and with very modest capacity support. Donors mainly decided how aid and support was to be distributed. Almost all donors aimed to give support to the poorest or people identified as the most vulnerable.

Many villagers thought, however, that it was also appropriate to consider what kind of aid or support that could be given to so-called "big farmers," some of whom lost the most during the cyclone. Big farmers who own land have had trouble borrowing money and getting people to work in the farms. According to interviews and discussions, daily-wage earners were depending too heavily upon aid and were therefore not inclined to work. A major problem stressed in one village was that farmers were having trouble finding manual labourers to work in the fields, which in turn starts a cycle of debt: if big farmers cannot hire manual labours, or cannot locate credit to hire manual labourers, then small farmers and daily-wage earners also become more vulnerable.

Everyone thinks that the poor are the neediest, but we also lost everything and no one pays us any attention. We don't mind, but how can things go back to normal if we can't grow rice as usual. It's been really hard for us - our land is destroyed, we have no money, and the [day labourers] don't want to do farm work because we can't pay them very much

-A "big farmer"

Committee members also raised the issue of how aid was to be distributed in their communities. During the early phases after the cyclone, villagers tended to accept more how aid, which mainly consisted of food and household goods, was being distributed. Over time, both the type of aid and the way it was distributed came to change. One NGO asked many villages to form a committee to identify people to be eligible for livelihood assistance.

Community participation in the search for sources of funding, aid, and other kinds of support was weak in all villages. In focus discussion groups, members told the research team that it was committee members who decided what kind of assistance to ask of their NGO. A committee called a meeting and informed the villagers what was to be done, and then the main members submitted a proposal. Committee members from

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<sup>4</sup> In regional usage in Lower Myanmar, farmers are divided into "big" and "small" depending on the size of their holdings. Generally speaking, a "big farmer" owns more than 5 acres, and a "small farmer" less than that.

villages receiving assistance from that NGO spoke of some of the complications they faced, such as having no community assessment and inadequate information-sharing between the committee and community.

Another committee decided to create a livelihoods loan system with funds from the same NGO as above, for people to buy pigs, ducks, and betel plants. But this system created some inequalities among the villagers because of some of the regulations associated with the loans. Even though the aim of this project was to create revolving funds, the poorest people were excluded by the regulations, as described above.

## **7 Sustainability**

The majority of committees relied on NGOs and did not have a clear plan on how to keep operating into the future. Even though most committees had no such plans, almost all said they were working as best as they could for their communities, so that if even no assistance were to come, they would try their best to continue to function on their own.

In villages with strong social networks and strong religious leadership, the villagers took the initiative to rebuild community infrastructure, such as bridges and roads. Reconstruction is largely in the hands of the villagers themselves in any case.

## **8 Conclusions and Recommendations**

It has now been over a year since Cyclone Nargis hit parts of the delta of Lower Myanmar. Working with the capacities of village committees, various implementers have successfully accomplished many relief and recovery projects for cyclone-affected communities, demonstrating the solidity upon which every more appropriate and effective programming can be based. It is clear, for example, that with effective communication from outside implementers, villagers can accept and understand the need for including people other than middle-aged men on committees. Implementing processes that will foster the sharing of responsibilities among committee members, however, may require much more time. Nor should the focus solely be on having committees do what outside agencies think best or appropriate – NGOs and other organisations must recognise how their own demands and insensitivities may create problems in the name of providing assistance.

Most pressingly, the creation of these many committees presents a unique opportunity for local villages to work together in the interests of their own community. Whether through training, capacity building, or even program design, outside agencies can work to promote the long-term sustainability of some of the committees that they have been helping to instigate.

Good leadership, understanding of one's own community and needs, good relations between members, past experience with community development, good social networks, and the encouragement of women's participation have all been found to be factors crucial to the success of the committees under study.

The following are some concrete recommendations on specific areas of action and intervention.

### **8.1 Planning and Implementation**

In most committees under study, influential members planned and implemented most activities and projects following guidelines of the funding agencies. To meet the demands of the funders, the committee usually made decisions among its own members to make the process more efficient and less time-consuming. Communities were informed of these decisions only after the funding agency had approved the committee's plans. Information was not shared regularly, meaning that there were many misunderstandings and misinterpretations during the entire process.

**Proper planning and implementation should include the active participation of the committee, the funding agency, and the community so that beneficiaries have a direct say in how projects are to be carried out.**

### **8.2 Vulnerability Assessments and Targeting**

Neither donors nor village committees were especially strong in assessing the vulnerabilities of the community, or in targeting appropriate beneficiaries. As the emergency phase has ended and livelihood support has begun, targeting should take into account any shifts in vulnerability that has occurred, such as populations that have fallen between program gaps, or that have been exposed because of a shift in economic or other circumstances.

**Targeting must be readily adaptable to the local context rather than follow standardised practices.**

### 8.3 Accountability

Committees usually shared information with donors in order to get funds or other assistance, although community involvement in the decisions behind that process was not clearly seen. Committees seemed more concerned with upward rather than downward accountability, with the idea of pleasing donors so that the community could receive further funding. Further, planning and decision-making tended to be the province of the most powerful committee members, while communities tended to be only informed after the fact, not consulted beforehand. This may reflect a deep cultural tendency and therefore may require long-term, repeated encouragement. Nevertheless, **community involvement should be enhanced by promoting their participation at every stage of a project.**

Committees and communities were not aware of their rights to complain. This mentality is culturally and psychologically bound up with a fear of retaliation. **Imparting correct information on the right to complain, and on what are appropriate problems to complain about, and how the complaints will be addressed, should be encouraged during accountability training.**

### 8.4 Leadership and Decision-Making

This study has pointed out the striking role of individuals in committee's decision-making. These leaders must be made aware of their responsibility to share power among other members of the committee and the larger community, as well as being taught greater management skills. **Committee formation should include training on leadership forms which promote consensus, consultation, and the management skills.**

### 8.5 Gender

In the early phases of the response to the cyclone, the participation of women in committees was very low, although with time it became more apparent. Despite the traditional gender roles assigned to women, their place on committees has been gradually acknowledged by the community. **The participation of women in community activities should be continually encouraged and maintained.**

### 8.6 Capacity and Sustainability

There is no doubt that communities and committees want to participate in the process of rebuilding, though they are hampered by the lack of competency in communication skills, knowledge of information-sharing, and book-keeping and reporting.

Although the committees under study thought of themselves as able to build their own communities, there had no clear plans for the future. **Creating a vision for the future which includes serving the needs of the community after the life of the project should be promoted through participatory learning approaches.**

## **Appendix 1: Research Guidelines**

## **Focus Group Discussion Guide (Community Members)**

### **Introduction**

Introduce yourself briefly and explain the purpose of your visit. The main purpose of my visit is to learn from you about the organizational activities of your village committee and to understand how they have built up their own community after Cyclone Nargis. Ensure for confidentiality and anonymity and free for participation.

1. Background characteristics of the participants
  - ◆ Age
  - ◆ Sex
  - ◆ Education
  - ◆ Occupation
  - ◆ Marital status
  - ◆ Involvement in any community organization
2. Can you tell me about how the villagers coped with their lives after the Nargis?
  - ◆ What did you do immediately after Nargis
  - ◆ Who were the main persons started the activities
  - ◆ How was it organized
3. When did other organization(s)/ individual help for aid started?
  - ◆ Who initiated
  - ◆ How was it organized
  - ◆ Which organizations was to come in first
  - ◆ How did the villagers formed groups to help out the organization(s)/ individuals
  - ◆ What type of activities were done
4. How many groups/ organizations still exist in your village?
  - ◆ Name of organizations
  - ◆ Structure
  - ◆ What are their main activities
5. Does a village have its own village group or a committee?
  - ◆ Who are the members (male/ female, age, etc)?
  - ◆ How were they formed
  - ◆ What functions do they do
  - ◆ What do you think of the committee's activities
6. Villages' involvement in committee's activities
  - ◆ What are the main activities that villages perform together with village committees
  - ◆ Do you all think the village committee is functioning well why/ why not
  - ◆ Involvement of women/ youth
7. Do you all think that committee is a necessity for your village?
  - ◆ Why/ why not
8. For the development of your own community what are the major needs.
  - ◆ Livelihood
  - ◆ Health
  - ◆ Mother and children

Appreciate their participation.

## **Focus Group Discussion Guide (Committee Members)**

### **Introduction**

Introduce yourself briefly and explain the purpose of your visit. The main purpose of your visit is to learn from them about the organizational activities of their village committee and to understand how they have built up their own community after Nargis Cyclone. Ensure for confidentiality and anonymity and free for participation.

1. Background characteristics of the participants
  - ◆ Age
  - ◆ Sex
  - ◆ Education
  - ◆ Occupation
  - ◆ Marital status
  - ◆ Involvement in any community organization
  - ◆ Role and responsibility in the committee(s)
2. Formation of committees
  - ◆ How/ why
  - ◆ When
  - ◆ Who mainly initiated
3. Organizational structure
  - ◆ Leadership
  - ◆ Member composition
  - ◆ Male/female
  - ◆ Age
  - ◆ Socioeconomic group
  - ◆ Village level (village tract or village)
4. Main functions of the committee
  - ◆ Main functions
  - ◆ Extra functions
5. Collaboration and relationship
  - ◆ Within committee members
  - ◆ With other committees
  - ◆ With other organizations (government/ non-government)
  - ◆ With administrative organization
  - ◆ With village community
6. Village level participation
  - ◆ How do you inform your activities to community
  - ◆ How are the decisions made
  - ◆ Involvement of villagers (Male, Female, Youth, Mother)
7. Decision making
  - ◆ How are the decisions made
  - ◆ Mainly by whom
  - ◆ Involvement of community in decision making
  - ◆ Explain with example
8. Job description
  - ◆ How are the jobs divided
  - ◆ Decision on division of labour

- ♦ Who is the main actor
  - ♦ Job division between Male and Female
  - ♦ How do you monitor your activity
9. Can you all tell me the strengths and weaknesses of your committee?
- ♦ How did you overcome the difficulties
10. How are the committee functions and activities maintained?
- ♦ Funding
  - ♦ Structure
  - ♦ Villagers' commitment and involvement
  - ♦ Feedback
11. Do you think that your committee can stand by its own?
- ♦ Why/ why not
  - ♦ What are the major barriers
  - ♦ What are the major strengths

Appreciate their participation.

## Key Informant Interview Guide

### Introduction

Introduce yourself briefly and explain the purpose of your visit. The main purpose of my visit is to learn from you about the organizational activities of your village committee and to understand how they have build up their own community after Cyclone Nargis. Ensure for confidentiality and anonymity and free for participation.

1. Background Characteristics
  - ◆ Age
  - ◆ Sex
  - ◆ Marital status
  - ◆ Race
  - ◆ Religion
  - ◆ Education
  - ◆ Occupation
  - ◆ Native or not
2. Please tell me about the changes after the Nargis in your village.  
(Probe: Social, economical . . . . . and try to carry on to formation of groups)
3. Tell me about the groups that were formed after Nargis.  
(Probe: Who were the main actors, what type of organization, members' activities)
4. How about any other groups/ organizations?  
(Probe: incoming, existing, dissolved etc.)  
What are/were their activities?
5. Existing committees at present  
(Members, activities, funding, composition, etc.)
6. How is the committee functioning?
  - ◆ Leadership
  - ◆ Villagers' involvement
  - ◆ Activities
  - ◆ Youth/ Women involvement
7. How do the villagers involve in the committee's activities?
  - ◆ Information sharing
  - ◆ Participation
  - ◆ Feedback(Probe: how/ what)
8. What is your own opinion towards the committee and its members. Do you think that committee is needed to carry out those activities?
9. In order to improve the status of your own community, what are the major factors to be considered?
10. If there were no more support from outside, do you think your village will be able to stand on its own (How, why, why not)  
Appreciate their participation.



## Individual Depth Interview Guide

### Introduction

Introduce yourself briefly and explain the purpose of your visit. The main purpose of my visit is to learn from you about the organizational activities of your village committee and to understand how they have build up their own community after Cyclone Nargis. Ensure for confidentiality and anonymity and free for participation.

1. Background characteristics of the participants
  - ◆ Age
  - ◆ Sex
  - ◆ Education
  - ◆ Occupation
  - ◆ Marital status
  - ◆ Involvement in any community organization
2. Formation of committee
  - ◆ How/ why
  - ◆ When
  - ◆ Who mainly initiated
3. Structure
  - ◆ Leadership
  - ◆ Member composition
  - ◆ Male/female
  - ◆ Age
  - ◆ Socioeconomic group
  - ◆ Village level (village tract or village)
  - ◆ Composition
  - ◆ Youth
4. Leadership in the committee
5. What is your role/ position in the committee?
6. How did the committee choose its member?
  - ◆ Male/ Female
  - ◆ Youth
  - ◆ Nominated by whom
7. Do you think that the ratio of female to male committee members are adequate?  
Yes - why  
No - why not
8. Collaboration and relationship of the committee
  - ◆ Within committee members
  - ◆ With other committees
  - ◆ With other organizations (government/ non-government)
  - ◆ With administrative organization
  - ◆ With village community
9. Village level participation
  - ◆ How do you inform your activities
  - ◆ How are the decisions made
  - ◆ Involvement of villagers (Male, Female, Youth, Mother)

10. Decision making
  - ♦ How are the decisions made
  - ♦ Mainly by whom
  - ♦ Involvement of villagers in decision making
  - ♦ Explain with example
11. Job description
  - ♦ How are the jobs divided
  - ♦ Decision on division of labour
  - ♦ Who is the main actor
  - ♦ Job division between Male and Female members
12. Can you tell me the strengths and weaknesses of your committee?
  - ♦ How did you overcome the difficulties
13. How are the committee functions and activities maintained?
  - ♦ Funding
  - ♦ Structure
  - ♦ Villagers' commitment and involvement
  - ♦ Feedback
14. Do you think that your committee can stand by its own?
  - ♦ Why/ why not
  - ♦ What are the major barriers
  - ♦ What are the major strengths

Appreciate their participation.

