

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I went to Ayeyarwaddy Delta in February 2011, for my study. It was three years after a very severe cyclonic storm called “Nargis” devastated the Ayeyarwaddy Delta in Myanmar. I hired a boat in order to travel to the village. We left Pyapon for Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village in the early morning and traveled along the Pyapon River. On the way to the village, I could see rice mills, farms and shops of fish dealers along the river bank. I could also see wet lands and mangrove trees. The river was alive with the ferry boats, fishing boats, rice transporter boats, and fisher people. I was sitting in the front of the boat and enjoying the beautiful landscape around me. Yet, at the same time, I was also thinking about Cyclone Nargis and the nightmare that had engulfed the Ayeyarwaddy Delta only a few years ago. Now that it is three years on, has this area truly awakened from their nightmare?

1.1. The Storm

Tropical Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar on May 2-3, 2008. It hit five regions of the country: Yangon, Ayeyarwaddy, Bago Divisions and Mon and Kayin States. There were 37 townships in Ayeyarwaddy and Yangon affected. It was the worst disaster in Myanmar history. With wind speeds of up to 200 kilometers per hour and a 3.6 meter storm surge, the storm swept through the Ayeyarwaddy Delta region, before hitting the former capital city of Yangon and other southern parts of Myanmar. The storm was not only the biggest natural disaster ever for Myanmar, but also the most destructive cyclone in the Eastern India Ocean region since 1991. The hurricane killed tens of thousands of people, and displaced many more. It destroyed entire villages along its trajectory. Survivors were highly vulnerable to diseases and hunger (TCG, 2008a).

Cyclone Nargis: Affected Areas and Cyclone Path

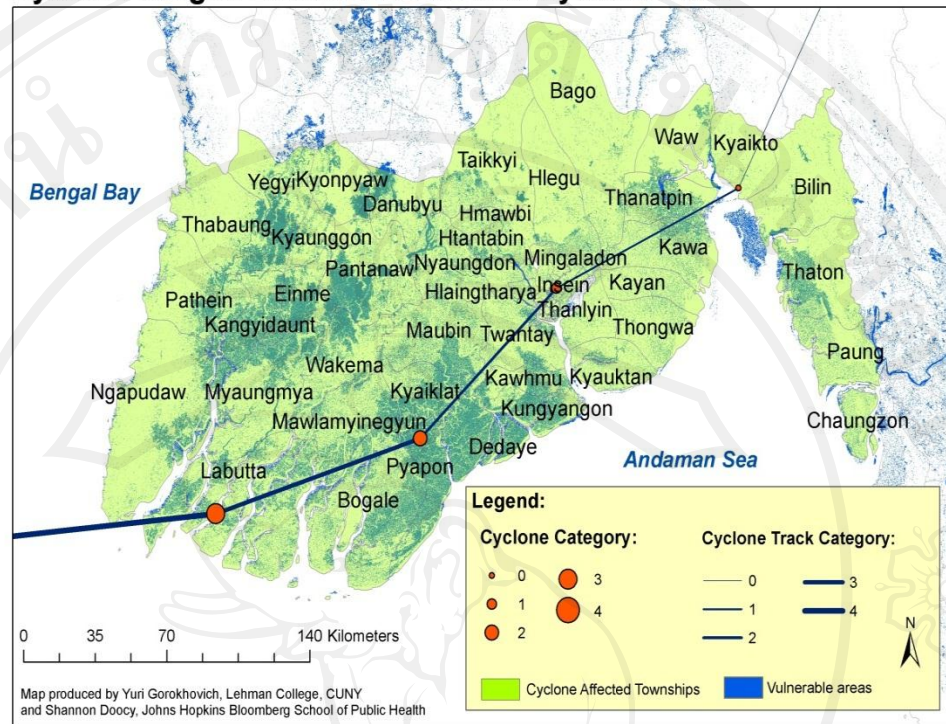
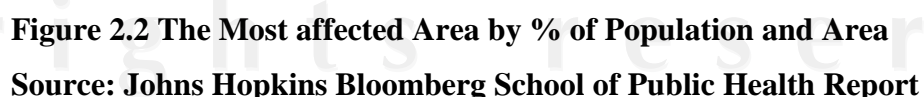


Figure 1.1 The Path Way of Cyclone Nargis

Source: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Report

Immediately after the cyclone, according to Myanmar government figures, the death toll was 84,537 people, with 53,836 people missing and 19,359 people injured (Relief Web, 2008). Later on the UN estimated 2.4 million people were affected by Cyclone Nargis. It was estimated that 1.4 million were located in the most severely affected townships of the delta region (OCHA, 2008). Although there is no comprehensive set of data of the death and loss statistics on a village by village basis, the Tripartite Core Group, including the Government of the Union of Myanmar, finally estimated the death toll to have reached 140,000 people.

The International Recovery Platform (IRP) Secretariat report documented the overall desperation of the state of recovery within multiple sectors. According to the 2011 report, 450,000 homes were completely destroyed and about 530,000 homes were partially destroyed. In the health sector, 75% of the health facilities in the affected area were destroyed. Of the drinking water ponds available before the cyclone, 13%



1.2. The Ayeyarwaddy Delta and the Impact of Nargis

The **Ayeyarwaddy Delta** lies in Ayeyarwaddy Division and is the lowest expanse of land in Myanmar. The delta fans out at MyanAung and its network of rivers and streams end in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, 290 km to the south, at the mouth of the Ayeyarwaddy River. In the delta, the Ayeyarwaddy River's main tributaries are the Patheingyi River, Pyapon River, Bogale River, and Toe River. Mawtin Point, formerly Cape Negrais, is a famous landmark in Ayeyarwaddy Division, and it also marks the most southwesternmost point of Myanmar (ARCB, 2008).

The livelihoods of "the people of the delta area are primarily farmers, fishermen, home gardeners, and labourers, with a smaller proportion engaged in service industries and working as traders for their livelihoods.[.....]The rural populations live in small villages along the banks of the southern delta area and are accessible only by river, making boats an important means of transport. The Ayeyarwaddy delta is one of the most densely populated regions in the country." (Michael Adas, 1974).

The Ayeyarwaddy Delta is exposed to low frequency, high impact events of natural disaster such as tsunamis and seasonal cyclones. In 2006, Cyclone Mala hit the Ayeyarwaddy Delta. Nargis followed shortly after in 2008 and was the most deadly cyclone in history of the country. As the delta area has a large number of rivers and streams that flow into the Bay of Bengal, the area is vulnerable not only to cyclones but also to other natural disasters such as tsunamis and flooding. The region receives more than 400cm of rainfall annually. In the monsoon season, high rainfall causes floods in the Ayeyarwaddy river basin. Additionally, some coastal areas of the delta, experienced the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 (UNORC, 2005). In fact, the Ayeyarwaddy Delta has a long history of severe tropical storms and recurring seasonal floods. However, Cyclone Nargis was the strongest and most destructive tropical cyclone of all the natural disasters in the recorded history of Myanmar.

The devastation of the cyclone to the region has brought hardship to the delta communities. The communities are still struggling with many problems with their livelihoods, even many years after the event. An international news agency, the IPS Correspondents News published an article entitled "BURMA: Two Years after

Nargis, Life Is Far from Normal”. The article pointed out those local farmers from the Ayeyarwaddy delta had not yet recovered. According to that article, “complicating matters is the changing weather that has had farmers at a loss over what they can do to save their harvests and earn some money for their families. ‘We have not recovered yet because farm yield is in decline,’ says Kyaw Moe, who with his siblings works on a 11.33-hectare collective farmland. He points to other factors that have hindered their progress: ‘This year, rats destroyed about two to three acres (.81 to 1.21 hectares) and farming cost has increased.’”(IPS,2010). The farmers lost their yields during the cyclone. Then the first year after the cyclone, many offarmers could harvest but the productivity was low due to the change in the environment. For the second year, mice destroyed the farm crops and the yields were lost again. Fisherfolk are facing the decline of the fish population after Cyclone Nargis. The problems of the farming and fishing communities also affected the casual labours as these people depend on the jobs from the farm land owners and fishing boats for their livelihood.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

The fundamental issues to be explored in this thesis are how the local community coped with the post-disaster situation and how they participated in the disaster relief and recovery. Since Nargis struck in May 2008, various organizations, such as international and local NGOs, have given assistance to the cyclone affected area. The Myanmar government has also provided support.

The Tripartite Core Group (TCG) served as a collaborative mechanism established between the Myanmar government, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations (UN). This body worked with international humanitarian agencies in the country to facilitate the distribution of international aid into Myanmar. Most of the humanitarian organizations followed the “Post Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan” (PONREPP) prepared by the TCG as the framework under which to work when giving assistance to cyclone-affected communities. International organizations like Action Aid, CARE international, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Save the Children, World Vision and many other international organizations were

involved with the relief and reconstruction efforts after Nargis. Many local organizations and local community groups also helped the cyclone affected communities.

I went to the Ayeyarwaddy Delta to observe the post-Nargis situation on May 2010 for the first time. In Pyapon, the hub city of the delta, I visited Nargis Action Group and some other NGOs working in the area. I joined a field visit conducted by Nargis Action Group. We visited around 10 villages from the Pyapon area. During that trip, I learned about the myriad current issues, problems, conflicts and difficulties that local communities and NGOs were facing.

This was also the first time that I visited this study's target site, the Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village. In the village, I saw that most of infrastructure such as the bridge, school, and jetty were already rebuilt. The village had a new cyclone shelter in preparation for the next cyclone. There were positive signs of improvement. This village would become the case for this study. Three years after Nargis cyclone, we can analyze how the community responded to the disaster, and what the characteristics of the community were that gave them resilience.

This village peaked my interest because even though there was terrible devastation after Cyclone Nargis, this particular village seems to have better mitigated the negative effects of the cyclone, most of the houses, school, main street and jetty were already rebuilt, the village got cyclone shelter as the preparation for the next storm, the drinking pond was built, the livelihoods projects and the capacity building projects are going on to support villagers' livelihoods. The early days after the cyclone, people from the entire village suffered without any help from outside and they had to rely on themselves for survival. In this situation, the monastery became the shelter for survivors. Monks from monasteries and local people helped each other, offering emergency relief. When NGOs and local aid groups finally reached the affected area to help with the community reconstruction process, these organizations implemented their activities by working with the local people and monks. I wanted to find out what causes may have helped this village to fair far better than other similar villages. To do so, I looked into how local people from my target community had coped and responded to the relief and recovery situation. I also explore the ways in which local people participated in the reconstruction projects in their

village that were implemented by NGOs. Lastly, I analysed how these responses were able to sustain the long-term development and sustainable development of the community.

1.4. Research Questions

- How did the local people in the target community cope with the disaster relief and recovery situation?
- How did local organizations (formal and informal), local community leaders such as monks, and local people helped each other in the aftermath of the disaster?
- How did the local people participate in the redevelopment of their community or village?

1.5. Objectives of the Study

1. To explain the characteristics of the local community in the disaster affected area and what characterized the process of reconstructed communities.
2. To understand how local people from the study site coped with the post-disaster situation.
3. To examine the activities and participation of local people in the community reconstruction process.

1.6. Research Methodology

1.6.1. Study Site Selection

My research site is Tha- Gyar-Hin-O village in the Cyclone Nargis-affected delta area of Myanmar. It is located in Dedaye Township, Pyapon District in the Ayeyarwady Division. Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village is one of eight villages included in the Kan Sint Daing Nal village group. Currently, the village has 160 households and 632 residents. The village has one monastery and one primary school. The population of the village increased after the cyclone because villagers took in relatives and friends who had to migrate from their own cyclone-affected villages.

The majority of the villagers are from the Burmese and Karen ethnic groups. Most are Buddhist, but some are Christian. For their livelihoods, villagers work mostly as farmers, fisherman, casual laborers (*boutin* Burmese language), and informal laborers such as street stall vendors and paddy field workers. In Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village, twenty-eight people died in the cyclone and every household sustained damages. Yet the recovery process of this village was unique because they were able to rebuild their village more quickly than other affected villages. The village head-monk and the villagers group worked together for the revival of the village community. They also contacted outside organizations and corporations for aid in development projects for their village.

I decided to study this village as a model village to see resilience of the local community, as well as the participation, empowerment and practices of the local people. First, I would like to know why this village can recover more quickly than the other villages. Second, I will explore how people from that village participated in the recovery projects in the village and how villagers tried to meet their needs. Third, I will look into how the local people cope with the post-disaster situation and how they solve their social and economic problems.

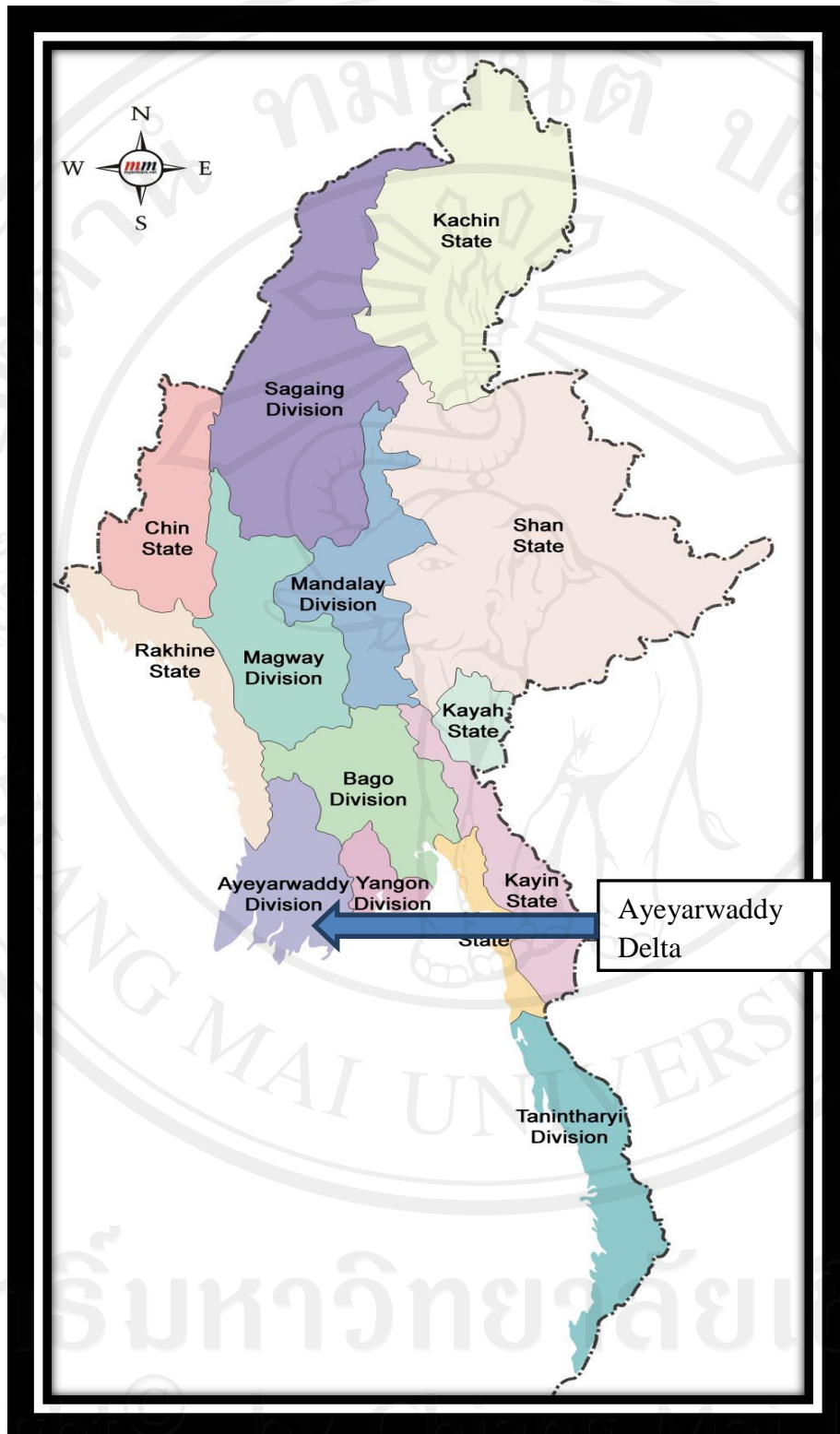


Figure1.3 Map of Myanmar

Source: www.myanmar.net

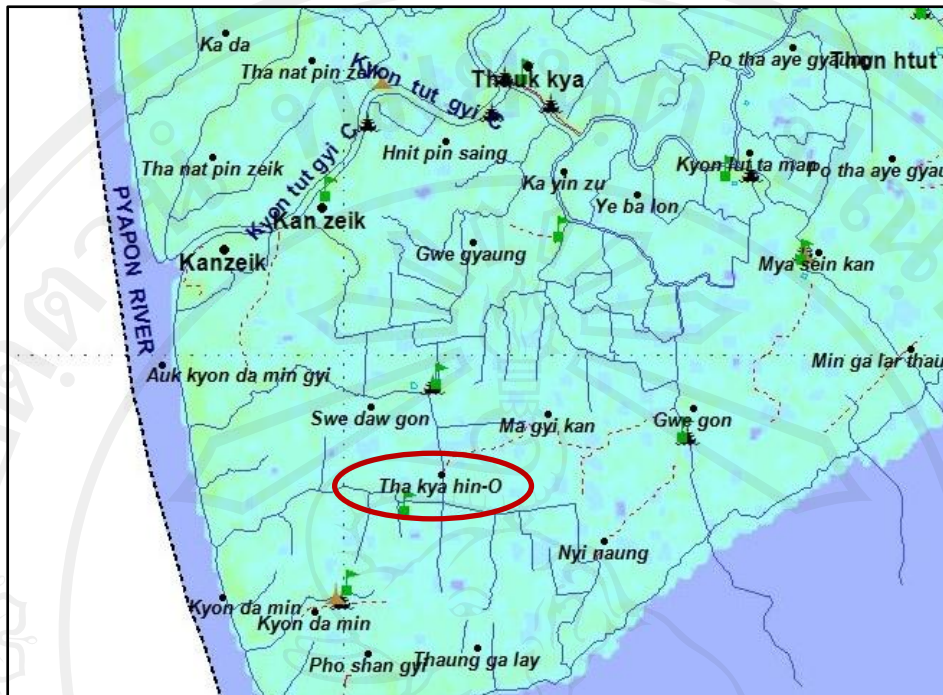


Figure 1.4 Research Site “Tha-Gyar-Hin-O”¹ Village

Source: Provided by the a NGO worker during the data collection period

1.6.2. Data Collection Method

I did my data collection from December 2011- June 2012. Field research methodologies were used to collect the socio-economic characteristics of the village and secondary data was collected from NGO reports, news and internet sources. For field data collection, I met with many different people including villagers and NGO workers from the recovery projects in Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village. I conducted several interviews with multiple stakeholders. In order to gather the stories of villagers’ experiences, I carried out interviews and focus group discussions. My questions focused on their lives before the cyclone, their experiences after the cyclone, and the current situation of the village at that time. I also carried out in-depth interviews with the village head, community leader, local officers, villagers and NGO workers.

¹ In the map, my study village is named “Thakyahin-O”. I will spell the village name “Thar-Gyar-Hin-O” in this thesis as it is more close to the original Burmese pronunciation.

Table 1.1 Brief Profile of the Researched Village

Households	160
Population	632
Land	Farmland and some small scale plantation land
Occupation (# of Households)	Farming 55, Fishing 34, Casual labor 48, Others (Small enterprise, Video Showing house, Tailoring , Carpentry) 33

Source: Provided by the village head during the data collection period

Through participant observation, I investigated the first-hand reality of the on-the-ground situation including the relationships between the major actors in the village and their problems. The major actors include state officials, NGO workers, the community leader and other villagers.

In the village, I stayed at my family friend's house. Their family is made up of a father, mother, daughter and son. Participant observation method allowed me to witness and experience the daily life of the local people. I was able to see their habits and participate in their activities. I joined different activities such as meditation on the sabbath day, an ordination ceremony, the rice planting season, fishing and local ferry boat trips to Pyapon to purchase goods. I made many new contacts in the village and these people became my informants through casual conversation. As a result, I obtained my field data from a full range of social interaction activities like watching movies together at night, having traditional tea, cooking together and conversations with the daughter of my host family before falling asleep.

Sometimes I had informal group conversations with villagers too. I travelled with a group of women to Pyapon by taking the local ferry boat. It took a whole day. On the trip, we were together very informally. Through that kind of informal group conversation, I got to know a lot of insider stories about what was happening in their village and the neighboring areas.

After I spent time in the field, the villagers became familiar with me. As their comfort level rose, they wanted to talk with me more and more and share their stories

with me. Some people would seek out the opportunities to tell me what had happened in their lives and what kind of problems they were facing. They would also tell me about their worries for the future. They opened their hearts up to me as a friend.

Nevertheless, my field research was not always smooth and it was not always easy to get data. Accessing data about the NGO projects in the village was difficult. Even though there are many NGO projects in the village, most of the field workers for these projects come to village once in a month for a short time to hold meetings and do their monitoring activities. When I requested information from one field worker, he replied that he merely came to the village for monitoring and reporting. He couldn't explain very well about the project since he was a new staff so he suggested that I meet the project staff in the Yangon and Bogalae offices so I had to travel to those offices for interviews too. Every day in the field I also wrote my research journal. Using this kind of documentation, I could trace the day by day activities during my field work in that particular contextual environment. It was very useful for me to keep up my own records.

1.6.3. Data Analysis

I collected both primary and secondary data from the field research, key informants, household and individual interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations. The data related to the socioeconomic characteristics that were generated from the research questions and research objectives of my study. I recorded all the interviews, using notes and a diary. This data was then analyzed qualitatively according to the conceptual framework of my study.

1.7. Thesis Organization

My study analyzes the community participation of the target village during the reconstruction process after Cyclone Nargis. It also inquires about the sustainability of the ongoing reconstruction activities in that village. Based on the findings, I will suggest strategic policy guidelines and disaster management instruments to reduce the vulnerability to similar phenomena in the future. This paper's main goal is to serve as an input to enhancing efforts of coordination and

cooperation between development agencies and local peoples within the region, with further aims to decrease future vulnerability.

In order to make it easier for the readers to follow this thesis, arguments and presentation about the thesis will be briefly demonstrated. The overall picture of the research will be presented through the following framework.

Chapter I explains the background of the study and field work, the location of my research site. It also describes Cyclone Nargis and the situation after the disaster. Furthermore, it includes the research problem, the questions and objectives of the study, the conceptual framework and the features of the study site. Lastly, the research methodologies are also presented.

Chapter II reviews relevant previous studies in terms of practices of everyday life, social capital in the village's networks as well as participation of community in the post disaster reconstruction.

Chapter III explains the regional and national responses to the Cyclone Nargis with the analysis. Based on the field research I have carried out during my study, Chapter IV, V, VI, VII are the arguments and findings about the peoples' participation in the post-disaster reconstruction process and post-disaster development. More specifically, Chapter IV is an over view of Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village. It provides an in-depth look into my field work in Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village, Pyapon Township, in the Ayeyarwaddy delta area of Myanmar.

In Chapter V and VI, the role of the social capital in the post-disaster development is explored and I look into the great importance that the empowerment of local community has been given in the post-disaster reconstruction process.

In Chapter VII provides the conclusion for my thesis including a brief summary of the research findings. This chapter reinforces the interconnection between post-disaster community reconstruction and sustainable development.