

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE DISASTER RESPONSES AT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL**

#### **3.1.Introduction**

This chapter discusses the different post-Nargis responses of aid agencies and relief groups. I review the processes occurring in the pre-disaster and post-disaster phases and offer background information about the overall relief and recovery operations. This chapter will also highlight issues which emerged in village level discussions and observations in Tha-Gyar-Hin-O village.

#### **3.2. The Emergency Responses**

The international community criticized the Myanmar government for its ineffective cyclone warning system. It is said that the Myanmar government did not declare any warning before the cyclone hit even though the government had received the news 24 hours earlier, from the Indian Meteorological Agency, which monitors cyclones in the Indian Ocean (BBC News, May 6, 2008). The government had established the national Natural Disaster Preparedness Central Committee (NDPCC) in 2005. The NDPCC was chaired by the Prime Minister and several other ministers. Unfortunately, the existing disaster management framework of the government lacked legislation to uphold significant aspects of disaster management structure including accountability of institutions for both governmental and non-governmental organizations concerned and the role of communities in disaster management (Win Pe, 2006).

Even though, the villagers in my study site did not receive information about the cyclone from the village management committee or from official warning alerts, some villagers heard the weather forecast and warning announcement from the state radio and television. However, the villagers couldn't predict the severity of the storm.

They thought it will be similar to the stormsthat they regularly face in the beginning of the raining season. Unfortunately, most communities are not prepared for the hazards they face and often lack the reflexes to take effective action when disaster strikes. This is one of the reasons for the severity of the impact of Cyclone Nargis in the lower basin of the Ayeyarwaddy Delta. Yet, proper planning can dramatically reduce loss of life and property (Thomalla,et al,2008).

As mentioned before, the Government of Myanmar has already established a National Natural Disaster Preparedness Central Committee (NDPCC) in 2005, as a result of the Asian tsunami experiences. The NDPCC held a meeting on the morning of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, to formulate an implementation plan for an immediate response to Cyclone Nargis. Under NDPCC, they established the National Disaster Management Operation Committee (NDMOC) as a body responsible for the disaster response. Under this committee, ten Emergency Disaster Response Sub-committees were formed. Each sub-committeewere mandated to give immediate attention to relief, recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. “The ten sub-committees formed dealt with:

- (1) News and Information,
- (2) Emergency Communication,
- (3) Search and Rescue,
- (4) Assessment and Emergency Relief,
- (5) Confirmation of Loss and Damage,
- (6) Transportation and Route Clearance,
- (7) Natural Disaster Reduction and Emergency Shelter Provision,
- (8) Healthcare,
- (9) Rehabilitation and Re-construction, and
- (10)Security.”(TCG, 2008a).

The multi-committee framework meant that responses from thiscentralized management system were delayed while individual committees had to wait for commands from the top in order to carry out any action. Thus, actorsfrom the public sectors took time to decide on how to respond to the disaster. In addition, a few days after the cyclone, the military government held a referendum, in the remainder of the

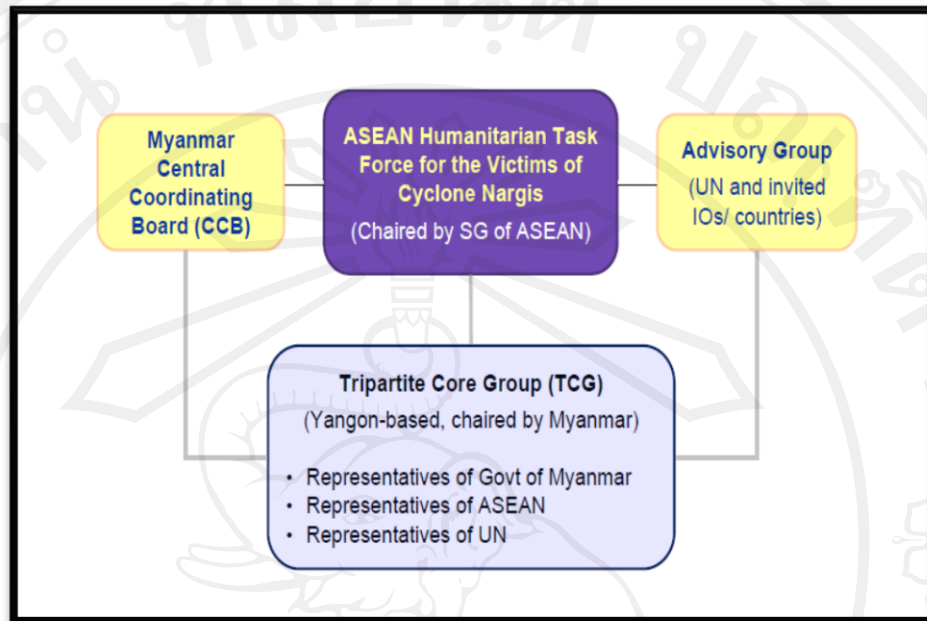
country. International observers condemned this move saying that it took away important resources from the emergency relief process.

After the cyclone hit, the Myanmar government hesitated receive assistance from other countries, particularly western countries. The country's leaders refused entrance for foreign personnel from various aid and UN agencies, and blocked military shipments of aid from the US, French and British governments. They asserted that the disaster was an internal affair and that the government could handle the relief and recovery efforts. It is now clear that the Myanmar government underestimated the impact of the cyclone. Thus, in the absence of emergency assistance immediately after the cyclone, local communities stepped in as first responders. Led by religious and community leaders, they helped each other recover. Many Myanmar civil society groups travelled through the delta trying to reach the needy population to offer emergency relief.

The international community criticized the Myanmar government for the slow response and strong restriction on international organizations. Eventually, a week later, the government recognized the massive impact of the cyclone and called for international help on May 6<sup>th</sup> the government representation formally asked for the United Nations' assistance. But the government remained resistant to the most basic assistance, thus international organizations faced challenges obtaining visas into the country. On May 7<sup>th</sup>, but the government stated that it was willing to accept international assistance. However, it preferred bilateral, government-to-government assistance.

It was later that international aid was allowed to enter the effected regions. ASEAN facilitated communication between the international humanitarian community and the Myanmar government. The Tripartite Core Group (TCG) was formed on May 31st 2008 in response to the devastation from the cyclone. The TCG comprised of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Government of the Union of Myanmar and the United Nations (UN). This represents an ASEAN-led mechanism that aims to cultivate the trust, confidence and understanding necessary to facilitate relief and recovery efforts in Myanmar (TCG 2008b).

The ASEAN-led coordination mechanism is shown in Figure 3.1



**Figure 3.1 ASEAN- led coordination mechanism**

**Source: PONJA Report, 2008**

Cyclone Nargis was one of the turning points for Myanmar. Myanmar has been considered a “closed country” since 1988, when the military regime took power in the country. Cyclone Nargis revived the country’s international relations and began to open the country up to the rest of the world. ASEAN Secretary General Dr. Surin Pitsuwan said in an interview that:

“In working with Myanmar’s leaders to deal with the tragedy, we opened up the country and rallied the world to come and help. You may remember that at the pledging conference in Yangon, even senior officials from countries that had been extremely antagonistic to Myanmar came. And that reassured Myanmar that the world was not altogether hostile and was willing to make exceptions.” (The Myanmar Times, Volume 31, 2012).

### 3.3. Response to Recovery

After the emergency response, the task of rehabilitation and reconstruction for the effected population needed to follow. The damage and destruction of towns, villages, business enterprises, schools, hospitals, monasteries and places of worship, placed a great strain on affected communities. There was also a need to rebuild livelihoods for the local people, beyond infrastructure, and economic needs, survivors of the cyclone also had significant psycho-social needs. According to the TCG 2008 report, the government's approach and priorities can be summarized as follows:

- The rebuilding of houses by the townspeople
- The reconstruction of hospitals, schools and markets
- The repairing of roads and bridges
- The reconstruction of communications
- The restoration of electricity supplies
- The reconstruction of villages washed away by the storm surge
- The construction of damaged houses in village tracts
- The rehabilitation of drinking water sources
- The resuscitation of business enterprises, factories and workplaces  
foremployment generation
- The revival of agriculture and rural industries in order to restore the  
basiclivelihoods of the villagers
- The revival of the fishery industry - to restore employment and income  
earningopportunities for the villagers
- The rehabilitation of rice mills
- The restoration of salt production facilities and
- Restoration of the means of production for fruit, vegetables and livestock by  
therural population (TCG, 2008a).

The key partners of the TCG and the various aid agencies responded in coordination with Myanmar government. Integral to this response was also civil society organizations from Myanmar, many of which had been working with villages on community development issues even before Cyclone Nargis arrived.



Following the cyclone, several new local organizations were created. Some organizations were started to help the needy using member's own funds and later on, these organizations continued their recovery projects with support from international donors. There were also many local initiatives by people in the disaster area itself, often on a voluntary basis, sometimes in cooperation with other actors including local NGOs, international NGOs and UN agencies. While private initiatives were often uncoordinated and focused on the initial emergency phase responses, the activities by local NGOs were much better coordinated and structured, and many continued, focusing on recovery (TNI, 2011).

The TCG 2008 report also lauded local citizen and private sector efforts.

“In the days following the storm, the roads leading out of Yangon and other big towns to the affected townships were filled with motorcades of the people carrying with them cash, food and household supplies. Many of them ventured further afield by boats to difficult-to-access villages, spurred on by a humanitarian urge to help. Similarly, many Buddhist monks from all over the country also went to the affected difficult-to-access areas and disbursed substantial quantities of cash and relief materials to the villages using the local monastery as base. Likewise, religious leaders and members of all other faiths in the country contributed substantially to the relief efforts” (TCG, 2008a)

I interviewed one of the local volunteer groups which went to the delta region to provide aid in the aftermath of the disaster. Myanmar Blogger Society is a group that promotes friendship and cooperation among Myanmar (Burmese) bloggers worldwide. It was formed in 2007. One volunteer from that group explained that right after the cyclone he and his colleagues collected money from among the group's members. They bought dry food, rice, medicine and household supplies. Their group went to the delta by boat. They tried to reach as far as possible into the remote area, because they knew it was important to offer help to villages that had not yet been reached by other aid groups. Even with this intention, they found it difficult to find remote communities as there are few proper maps of the delta area which clearly show the location of the villages. This lack of useable data on the region created a significant imbalance in the distribution of aid. The villages which were easier to

reach received significantly more aid than the more remote villages. This trend was noticed by many groups working on the relief effort.

Another issue for local groups looking to distribute aid was the lack of coordination between the many groups trying to quickly help the needy populations. Volunteers went to the delta with their own plan and there was no coordinating authority or communication mechanism. This made it difficult for groups operating on-the-ground to know which villages had received what kind of aid and which ones had not. When the Myanmar Bloggers Society ran into this problem, they realized that they needed to increase their communication with other groups and tried to share as much information as possible.

### **3.4. Summary**

The need to coordinate responses to Cyclone Nargis offered ASEAN, the UN and the Myanmar government an opportunity to work together. It also dictated that the Myanmar government improve its international relations. At the same time, local organizations, such as LNGOs, CBOs and informal groups had a chance to enhance their own networks and to better collaborate on activities. Without community participation and the volunteers' efforts, the relief and recovery process couldn't be successful. The community capacity to respond effectively to natural disaster is the most important aspect for the disaster response at every stage.