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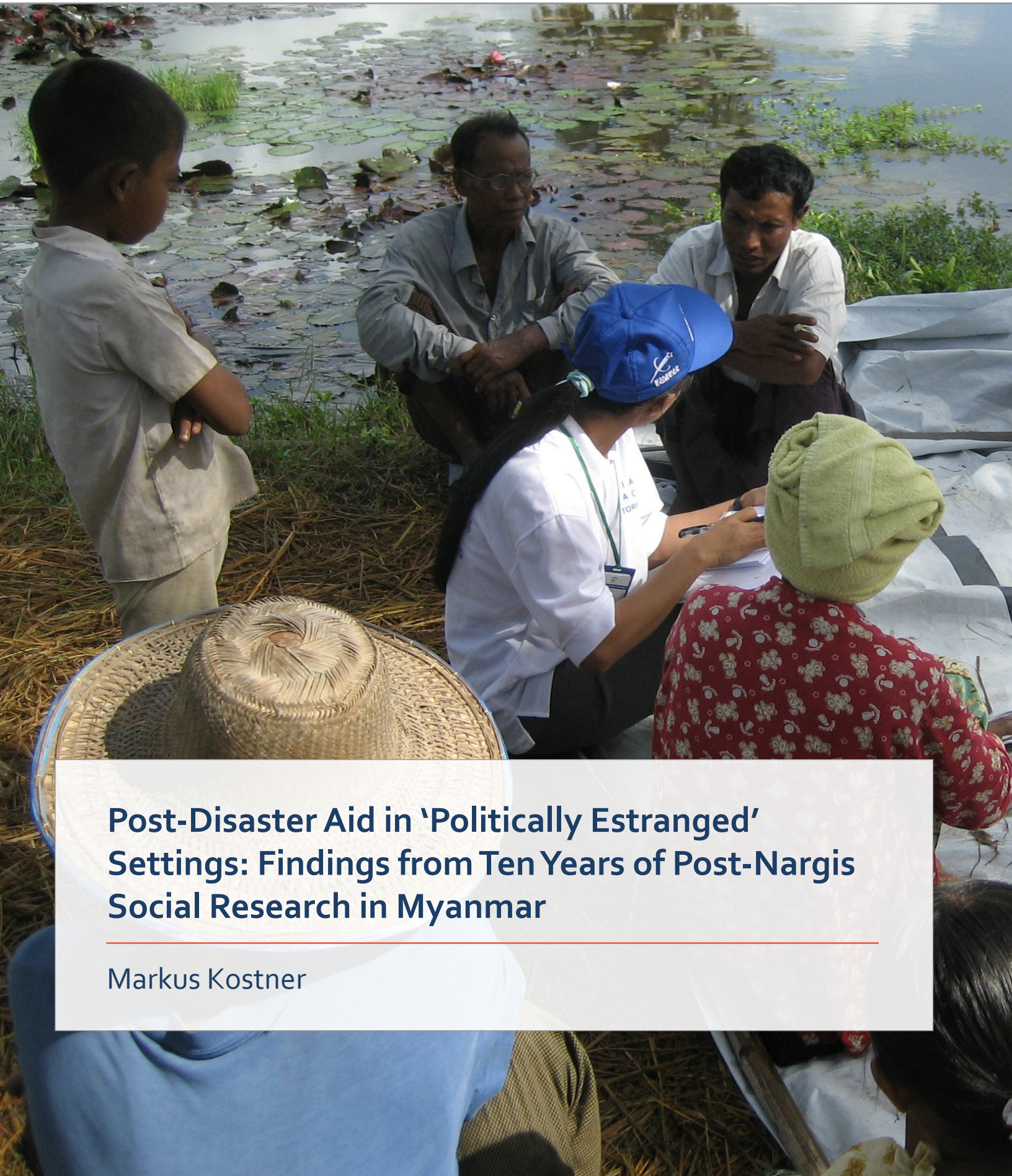

Post-Disaster Aid in 'Politically Estranged' Settings: Findings from Ten Years of Post-Nargis Social Research in Myanmar

Markus Kostner

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Markus Kostner has worked for over 30 years on fragility and conflict, violence prevention, crisis response, and social development in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Among others, he was the World Bank team leader for several community-driven development projects and demobilization and reintegration projects, participated in various (post-) crisis assessments and responses, and led research into the social impacts of natural disasters. Dr. Kostner was a core team member for the World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development, and the World Bank's Global Lead on Stability, Peace, and Security. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation, New York University.

Cover Photo: Myanmar: post-Nargis social impacts monitoring in a highly affected village in Dedaye township © 2008 World Bank (Photographer: Markus Kostner).

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Executive Summary

This paper aims to inform post-disaster relief and recovery efforts in situations where relations between major development donors and national authorities are estranged.[1] It reflects on the "what" and the "how" of aid as well as on the challenges encountered, and created, by aid providers following the 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. It thereby demonstrates the importance of giving agency to communities for both aid delivery and oversight in these settings.

Myanmar: post-Nargis aid delivery in a highly affected village in Bogale township. © 2008 World Bank (Photographer: Markus Kostner)

Key Messages

Longitudinal social impacts monitoring (SIM) in a panel of 40 villages following the 2008 Cyclone Nargis identified three interrelated, yet often neglected principles that help to determine the effectiveness of post-disaster aid:

1. **empowerment**—communities not only participate in, but own decision-making throughout the project cycle;
2. **transparency**—communities know what aid a provider intends to deliver, and how; and
3. **accountability**—communities can seek redress for aid that risks harming them in some way.

Had these principles been applied consistently during the post-Nargis period, the aid effort could have identified critical challenges and opportunities more easily, such as:

- the fact that communities are readily able to identify what they need, and to prioritize the types of assistance they wish to receive (particularly regarding livelihood recovery);
- the importance of anticipating longer-term, direct and indirect economic, social, and mental health impacts;
- the value of building flexibility into the aid effort as needs change throughout the recovery process;
- the need to differentiate between livelihood groups, consider their interdependence, and target aid accordingly and consistent with village social norms;
- the importance of including local formal and informal leaders in the decision-making process from the outset;
- the imperative of providing aid irrespective of identity markers such as ethnicity or religion; and
- the need to avoid overburdening or harming communities through the way aid is administered.

The post-Nargis aid effort faced numerous political and logistical complexities of operating in a country that was facing international sanctions. These challenges notwithstanding, several aid providers demonstrated that adherence to the three principles was possible. The SIM series thus confirmed that, for aid in "politically estranged" post-disaster settings, community-driven approaches can be an effective delivery modality and community-based, participatory social research can be a powerful oversight mechanism.

1. Introduction

"Within a few weeks of the disaster, the tents, half a dozen of them, were lined up along a creek where houses with bamboo walls and nipa roofs had once stood. They were brand new … and empty. They had been provided to survivors of Nargis, the cyclone that killed an estimated 140,000 people in the Ayeyarwady Delta of Myanmar in one night in 2008.

However, despite these provisions, the cyclone survivors preferred to stay in makeshift huts they had built on the other side of the village path with any materials they could find. The tents were too flimsy, they said, and could fly away if another storm kicked up.
Sometime thereafter, they packed the tents neatly and stored them with other items they had also received and never used: sleeping bags much too warm for the monsoon climate, and gasoline stoves where no gasoline was sold.

Stories about well-intentioned yet unsuitable post-disaster aid were not new on May 2, 2008, the night Nargis struck. So why is it that aid providers kept, and keep, making the same mistakes?

The immediate relief effort after Cyclone Nargis, complicated as it was in a country under international sanctions then, provided much needed and highly valued assistance to a traumatized population. And yet, there were signs from the outset that aid could be more effective—if it only involved communities in the process."

Thus began a blog to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Cyclone Nargis; it reflected on ten years of social research into the impacts of Myanmar's most devastating natural disaster.[2] Between 2008 and 2017, the World Bank and Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMReF) undertook five rounds of post-Nargis social impacts monitoring (SIM) in a panel of 40 villages in the eight most affected townships in the Ayeyarwady Delta.[3]

The aims of SIM were to understand both social impacts of and dynamics after a natural disaster in order to deliver post-disaster aid effectively and how the aid effort looked from the perspective of affected communities. As such, the research focused on villagers' perceptions of aid,[4] which were triangulated where possible with objectively-verifiable data and criteria.

Post-Nargis aid providers had to operate in the challenging environment of a "politically estranged" setting, with no access to the cyclone-affected communities for several weeks following the disaster. While access thereafter improved over time due to facilitation by the Tripartite Core Group which consisted of the government of the Union of Myanmar, ASEAN, and the United Nations—the operating environment remained restricted overall. Even with these constraints, however, aid providers implemented projects with the more than USD 450 million in humanitarian aid that was disbursed between 2008 and 2010—a significant increase in aid over the previous years.[5]

Despite many notable achievements aid providers also created challenges for themselves and the communities they aimed to serve

These challenges are the focus of this paper. This is not to say that all aid providers created these problems in all their interventions. Indeed, as SIM covered only 40 villages, this paper is not assessing the overall aid effort. Rather, it presents aid-related issues that occurred in different villages at different times, some during the relief phase and others during the recovery phase, and by different aid providers using different methods. These issues are sufficiently generic, however, and largely independent of the specific political context, such that they may occur during any post-disaster aid effort—and are worth reflecting on.

The paper is not intended as a blueprint for post-disaster engagement and aid delivery in "politically estranged" settings. It thus purposefully does not offer recommendations beyond those included in the SIM reports.[6] It also does not assess the effectiveness of the post-Nargis aid architecture at-large and how improvements in this architecture[7] could have led to improvements in the interventions carried out by individual aid providers.

Instead, by reflecting on the findings of a comprehensive field assessment on where post-Nargis aid efforts could have been more effective, the paper seeks to motivate aid providers to search for modalities that can avoid preventable pitfalls. What follows are the main findings from the SIM series with regard to the "what" and the "how" of post-Nargis aid. The paper concludes with reflections on the applicability of these findings in other "politically estranged" settings. Readers who are interested in more detail about post-Nargis aid and recovery are encouraged to consult the SIM reports.

2. The "What" of Aid

A needs-aid mismatch

"It may seem obvious, but it is worth stating that aid should be targeted according to the needs of disaster-affected populations. SIM showed that the aid provided was highly valued by the villagers. However, it was not always what the villagers needed most, and it did not adjust to changing needs during the recovery period."[8] This fact is best summarized in Figure 1. By far the greatest need was for working capital (as cash or credit) to restart livelihoods, yet cash/credit was only the sixth most important type of aid provided.

Needs that are ostensibly observable may not be perceived as important by communities. As Figure 1 shows on page 6, aid providers financed noticeably more water and sanitation as well as education infrastructure than people perceived necessary. To a somewhat lesser extent, this also applied to housing and health infrastructure. For example, aid providers observed that villagers lived in makeshift houses. Indeed, within the first six months of the cyclone, most villagers had taken the initiative to repair or rebuild their houses. Even though these were generally of a lower standard than before, they assigned far greater importance to livelihood recovery than to a higher quality house. Had the views of villagers been considered, livelihoods would likely have recovered faster.

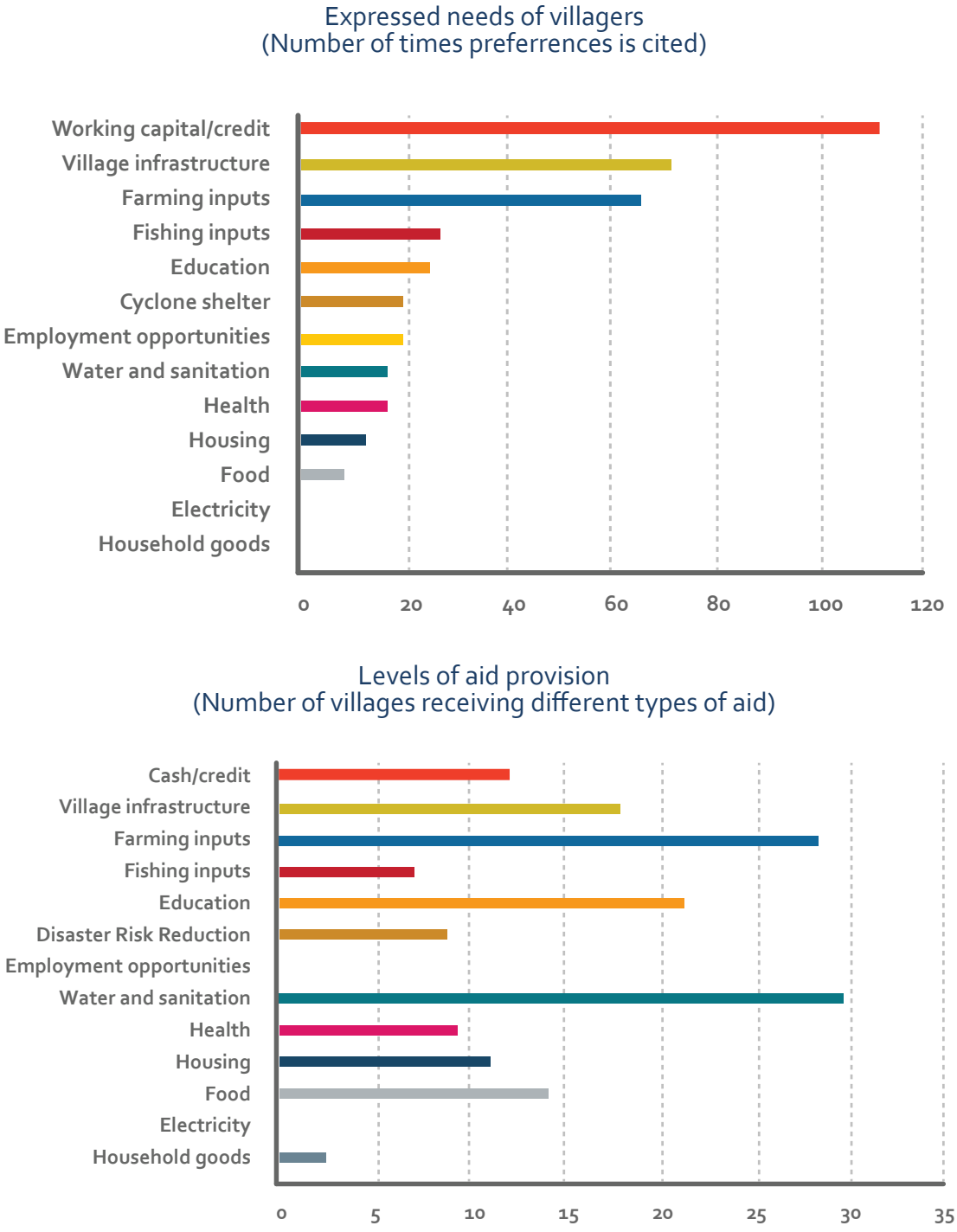
Time and again, villagers appreciated cash transfers the most since they could use the money to cover the needs that were most important to them for both livelihood recovery and as targeted safety nets. Only in a few instances did households prefer in-kind assistance because it enabled them to avoid social pressure to repay debt to creditors. Nevertheless, cash assistance was provided in rather few instances; most aid was provided in kind. When cash was provided, in some cases, transfers were conditional upon households identifying and proving how they would spend the money; in other cases, transfers were unconditional.

The needs of different occupational groups can vary considerably within villages; a group's needs may also complement, or depend on, those of others. In particular, food remained a longer-term need for vulnerable groups such as female-headed households, disabled or injured people, and the elderly as compared to farmers or fishers. Furthermore, employment opportunities for laborers depended critically on livelihood recovery among farmers. And yet, many laborers temporarily withdrew from the labor market as long as they received food aid. Facing a shortage of laborers, farmers who could afford it invested in labor-saving technology, such as tractors, which in turn lowered labor demand at a time when food aid ended and laborers wanted to return to work. This experience calls for

efforts to avoid aid dependency, support alternative employment opportunities, and develop targeted safety nets.

Figure 1: Post-Nargis recovery needs and aid[9]

(Needs and aid within the second year after Cyclone Nargis)



The right aid done wrongly

To replace the many draught animals that had perished during Nargis, draught cattle and buffalo were brought to the Ayeyarwady Delta from different agro-climatic zones in Myanmar. In a number of SIM villages, some of these animals died a few days after arrival due to excessive travel, lack of pasture, or problems adapting to the local weather. Similarly, the seeds that were brought from other areas were often not compatible with the local agro-ecology and were of mixed varieties, unsuitable for the Delta, of poor germination, or arrived too late for planting. Many farmers had to broadcast their fields at least three times to get adequate seedlings per acre.

The post-Nargis relief effort was marred by instances of aid providers addressing the real needs of villagers but delivering the wrong goods

In order to replace the draught animals lost during Nargis, various aid providers gave tractors.

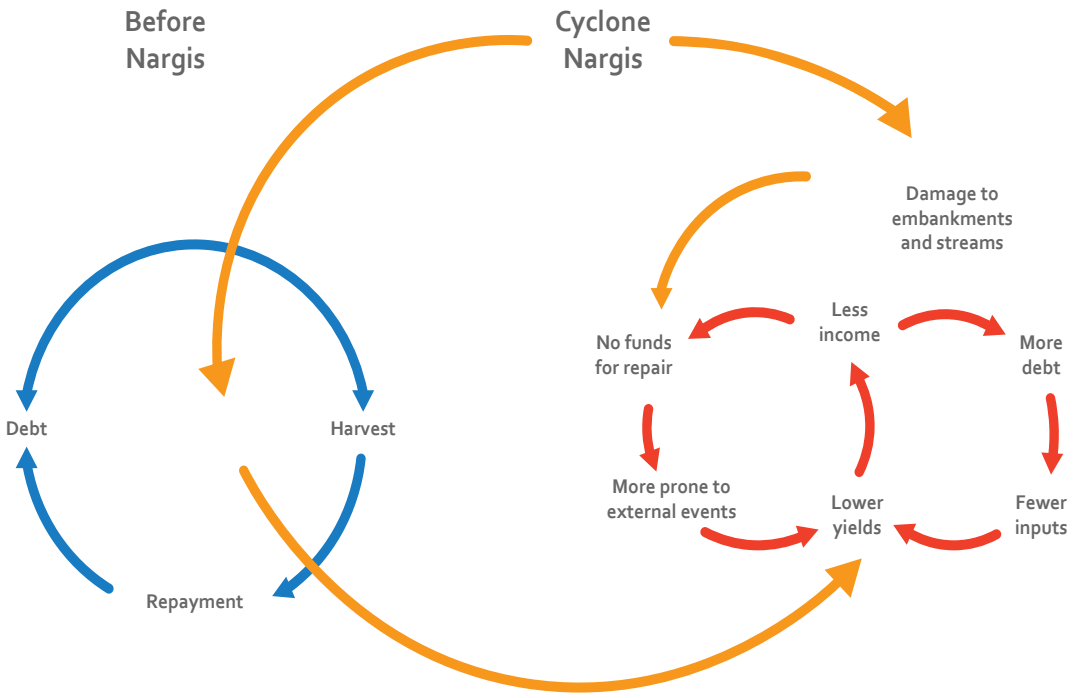
"In many cases the tractors' wheels were not compatible with local soil types, and farmers had to pay to replace them, costing MMK 200,000 (USD 95.22) per set of wheels. Government tractors were provided on installment with loan repayments to be made in three tranches over three years. Farmers were unclear about the exact repayment schedules and whether they would have to pay interest. Some tractors were provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to farmer groups. However, the research found that often farmers' groups had problems working out systems for allocating the resource across group members. Better-off farmers, or those connected to or in the village administration, often were able to use tractors first, while poorer farmers had to wait their turn."[10]

Similar concerns were raised for support to fishers. To begin with, very few households received the complete set of equipment they needed to fully resume fishing. As a result, fishers needed to share their equipment with others to get a complete set. This meant that they had to take turns in going fishing. In addition, the size of the boats and the capacity of the engines in many cases reportedly did not meet local requirements. Nor did the types of nets provided, which were too tight and not considered suitable to catch the local fish. This contributed to overfishing and the longer-term decline of fishing as a viable livelihood option in many villages.

Overlooked needs

Certain post-disaster needs did not fit into the policies and practices of aid providers. SIM identified three important cases: repair of embankments; understanding the roles of different actors within the value chain; and psychosocial support. Cyclone Nargis damaged numerous embankments and streams central to the ecology of farming villages. Repairing embankments and de-silting streams were not, however, a priority for aid providers. "With few funds available for repair either during the post-Nargis aid effort or thereafter, the farmlands became more prone to flooding, salinity, and pest infestations,"[11] which reduced yields and income and in turn aggravated the impact of the rupture of the debt-harvest-repayment cycle, a defining feature of farming in the Delta (see Figure 2). The case of damaged embankments highlights the importance of taking longer-term, indirect effects of a natural disaster into account when devising post-disaster aid strategies.

Figure 2: Why highly affected farming villages failed to recover[12]



Among the disaster-affected population, and beyond the immediate relief phase, aid providers focused on the poorer and more vulnerable segment. The underlying assumption likely was that the better-off would be able to cope with Nargis' aftermath on their own. This strategy overlooked important occupations in the value chain and the interconnectedness of livelihoods. Larger farmers and fish collectors had traditionally been among the most important providers of income, work, and credit in the Ayeyarwady Delta. Equally affected but largely unaided, many were not in a position to support their own recovery. In turn, this reduced not only the amount of credit to smaller farmer and fishers, but also job opportunities in the farming and fishing sectors.

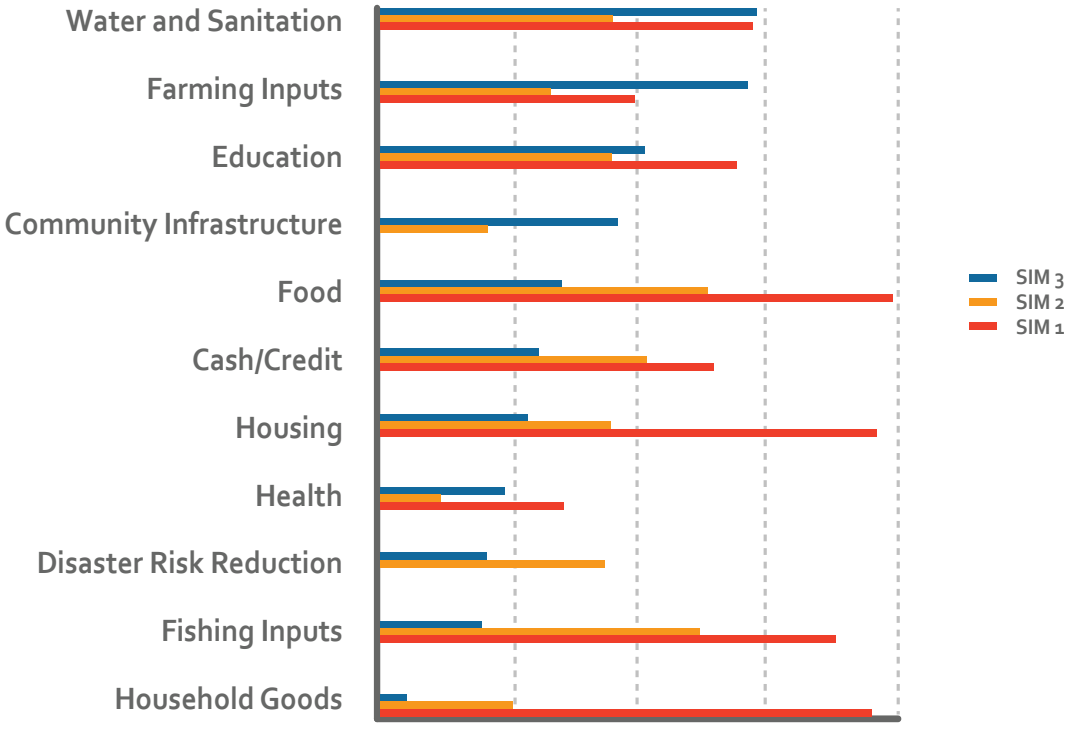
Nargis seriously affected villagers' mental health. Psychological stress manifested itself in various ways. Villagers looked for shelter whenever they saw a cloud in the sky or a chance of rain, fearing another cyclone; this affected their work in the fields. Others lost confidence in their ability to rebuild their lives. Yet others reported a fear of water which, in an economy where subsistence fishing is a mainstay for many poorer households, likely had a negative livelihood impact. There was also widespread depression in villages, which made many less capable of working than in the past.[13] Dealing with trauma was thus a clear priority in the cyclone's aftermath. And yet, in none of the SIM villages did villagers receive psychological or psychosocial support. Over time, stress emanating from livelihood worries aggravated the mental health situation especially in villages that had been highly affected and were recovering slowly. Such stress also led to instances of gender-based violence although the SIM research could not determine its full extent.[14]

Missing a longer-term perspective

Once lifesaving, relief aid was no longer the primary concern, aid providers shifted their focus to livelihoods (in kind) and infrastructure. Figure 3 shows this shift in types of aid from six months after Nargis (SIM 1) to one year and two years after Nargis (SIM 2 and SIM 3, respectively), a shift that occurs in post-disaster assistance generally.

Figure 3: Changing levels of aid provision[15]

(Number of villages receiving different types of aid)



This shift obscured two challenges of the Delta's longer-term recovery. Firstly, villagers across all occupational groups expressed their gratitude for the aid they had received but felt that the aid was insufficient to properly restart their livelihoods. In this sense, the Delta economy found itself in a new equilibrium that was lower in welfare terms than before Nargis. Indeed, SIM 5 reported that 15 of the 40 panel villages had not yet recovered to pre-Nargis levels nine years after the cyclone, by which time communities still did not have enough infrastructure capacity to withstand another disaster.[16] Secondly, the structure of the Delta economy shifted as a result of both the cyclone's impact and broader developments in the country.

Anticipating longer-term, direct and indirect impacts is difficult, but critical for post-disaster aid to be relevant. In the case of post-Nargis recovery, two developments were of particular importance:

1. environmental and broader climate changes, especially regarding the frequency and intensity of seasonal rains;[17] and
2. the rapidly increasing migration to new jobs in Yangon that accompanied the transition to a market-oriented economy in the early 2010s.

Aid that aimed to rebuild an economy and society that were changing ignored the trajectory, and thus sustainability, of the Delta's predominant livelihoods. It should be recognized, however, that the specific circumstances of post-Nargis aid—where access remained restricted and policy dialogue unfeasible—severely limited the ability of aid providers to take a "systems-"or sector-level approach.

SIM provided a longitudinal perspective on the factors that helped households and communities to recover from the cyclone. While the importance of the factors shifted over time, SIM 5 identified several patterns.[18] Livelihood-related factors determined household recovery, especially the availability of local jobs, remittances, good management of resources, and the number of family members fit and able to work. For community recovery, economic diversity, social networks, local leadership, and good quality infrastructure were the critical factors. Greater attention to these factors, through adapting aid to evolving community and households needs in the months and years after Nargis, would have strengthened the Delta's longer-term recovery.

Dealing with livelihoods recovery after a natural disaster effectively demands dealing with indebtedness in parallel

A caution on credit

This is especially true for Myanmar's rural economy where credit is a ubiquitous lubricant. Debt complicated the post-Nargis recovery in several ways. Firstly, the cyclone struck around harvest season and many farmers lost their crop either in the fields or in storage. As a result, they were unable to repay the debts they had incurred at the beginning of the agricultural season. Secondly, part of the aid was provided on a credit basis, which added to the pressure to restart livelihoods to repay the debt. Thirdly, with the overall level of aid limited, villagers who had lost their assets to the cyclone had to take on additional, mostly informal, and often usurious

debt for both investment and consumption purposes. As a result, many survivors fell into a vicious debt trap.

The political environment did not allow for any dialogue on credit and debt to emerge. Developing the capacity of borrowers and credit institutions to ensure that terms were affordable and that credit flows were sustainable and were linked to productive investments, would have been critical for recovery and future resilience.

Myanmar: where homes once stood in a highly affected village in Labutta township. © 2008 World Bank (Photographer: Markus Kostner)

3. The "How" of Aid

Giving villagers little say

A major part of the mismatch between post-disaster needs and aid can be explained by a single fact: communities were all too often treated as passive recipients of aid. Even though communities were universally able to identify what they needed, and to prioritize the types of assistance they wished to receive, throughout the relief and recovery phases, aid providers were the main decision makers when it came to determining the type of aid, the process of implementation, and the intended beneficiaries. There were, however, exceptions, even during the relief phase: "Individual, private providers of aid were more likely to consult with villagers and village committees on needs and priorities, and also to provide aid directly to villagers."[19]

SIM also demonstrated that the views of an influential minority can be misaligned with the preferences of other groups in the village. In reference to Figure 1, the types of aid provided were more closely aligned with the priorities expressed by leaders than with those expressed by farmers, fishers, casual laborers, and women.[20]

(Mis)identifying beneficiaries

In many instances aid providers used pre-conceived criteria for targeting even if these were not consistent with village social norms or the post-disaster reality. Numerous problems arose as a result. In particular, notions of poverty by aid providers did not always correspond to whom villagers themselves considered poor, which often led to assistance not supporting the most marginalized and poorest households. For example, laborers, who made up the majority of the population in over half of the SIM villages, had relatively little livelihoods support. Furthermore, the final beneficiary selection normally took place outside the village based on the information provided in the village. Unsurprisingly, many community members, especially the worse-off who perceived themselves to be excluded from aid, deemed the aid distribution unfair. In other instances, villagers refused to become involved in aid distribution unless the targeting mechanism changed.

Across the SIM villages, a clear pattern emerged: where villagers felt that they had a say in selecting aid recipients they were more likely to accept some groups receiving more than others, even when they "lost out" themselves. Furthermore, the "lucky draw system" for identifying beneficiaries was generally deemed to be fair. In many other villages, villagers redistributed assistance amongst themselves once the aid provider had left to limit inequities and the problems they felt it might cause.

There were also various cases where villages received aid even though they had been barely affected by the cyclone. In fact, some lightly affected villages received more

aid than heavily affected ones. It turned out that a number of villages that had been less affected by Nargis received high levels of aid because they were located close to urban centers and were thus more easily accessible.

Distributing aid and the bane of committees

A multitude of mechanisms was used to deliver aid to the identified beneficiaries. Table 1 presents the dominant patterns of aid distribution in SIM villages in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.[21] SIM 3 estimated that four out of five aid projects were delivered, at least partially, in conjunction with a village level organization.[22] In this way, aid providers offered an avenue for communities to gain some project management capacity.

Table 1: Dominant patterns of aid distribution[23]

Main Delivery Mechanism	Number of Villages
1. Aid provider to committee and then to villagers	11
2. Aid provider to committee via village leader and then to villagers	10
3. Aid provider to village leader and then to villagers	6
4. Aid provider to village elders and religious leaders and then to villagers	4
5. Aid provider to committee via village tract leader and then to villagers	2
6. Aid provider to religious leaders and then to villagers	2
7. Aid provider to committee via religious leaders and then to villagers	1
8. Patterns 1 and 4	3
9. Not applicable (village not affected)	1

However, aid providers set up village committees to distribute their aid oftentimes regardless of local committees that already existed, including those that other aid providers had already established. Such cases contributed to confusion among community members as to what their role was for a particular aid delivery. What is more, on various occasions different aid providers distributed the same types of aid (for example, food) in different ways within villages, sometimes during the same time period. Indeed, SIM "found no evidence of coordination between aid providers who had delivered aid in the same village during the last year."[24]

SIM research indicated that aid was delivered most effectively when local formal leaders were part of the decision-making process. Given the specific political context at the time of the disaster—the Village Peace and Development Committees were an extension of the state at the lowest level—external aid providers found it difficult to involve

local formal leaders. Local committees were set up to circumvent this problem. However, these committees tended to affect relations between villagers and their leaders negatively, sometimes even far beyond the period of aid delivery.[25]

Aid lacking transparency and accountability

Villagers were generally not informed about who was eligible to receive assistance, how beneficiaries were selected, and the type and amount of aid received. While meetings were held to share information about aid projects in a little over half of the villages during the relief and early recovery phases, often the information provided was vague, and few local committees kept meeting minutes, kept some records on the assistance that was distributed, or displayed aid information publicly. In very few instances were follow-up meetings held to discuss (monitor) progress or lessons learned. Such a lack of information about aid led to cases of perceptions of misuse of funds or to conflict about aid.

The potential withdrawal of support by aid providers was a disincentive for demanding transparency. The general tendency for villagers was to wait for the arrival of aid providers, and to accept any assistance that was being offered. When villagers considered complaining about the aid provided, the threat of withdrawal was real. SIM observed cases where staff of an aid provider told villagers during aid distribution in the relief phase that they had no time to settle complaints. They threatened that if villagers complained, they would be dropped from the beneficiary list. As such, villagers chose not to complain.[26] Village leaders were also aware that providers were likely to withdraw aid if they did not conform to the demands that were placed on them, for instance for beneficiary selection.

Villagers were not aware of project-related complaints mechanisms in any of the SIM villages.

> "While there were some allegations of misuse of funds by village leaders, most of which related to beneficiary selection, formal complaints were rarely lodged. Indeed, in the small number of cases where issues were raised publicly, these tended to result in grievances being lodged outside the village, either to the head office of the aid provider or the township level authorities, rather than being resolved through village level processes. Where these 'extraordinary' demands for transparency were used, the accused leaders tended to withdraw from active involvement in aid management rather than leading to improved aid delivery."[27]

Undue demands on communities

The aid provider-driven approach placed an undue burden on communities in different forms. In a number of cases, villagers were willing to mobilize labor for community infrastructure projects, but the aid providers did not consult them on the timing. SIM documented several instances where the works coincided with peak demand for agricultural labor, which made it difficult for villagers to meet the delivery milestone that the

aid provider had set. In one extreme case, the aid provider delivered material to a village to build a bridge during peak agricultural season. With no labor available to contribute to the project, the aid provider took the material away.

Communities were often asked to provide unpaid labor services for the rehabilitation of infrastructure. Villagers were involved in renovating or reconstructing houses, schools, ponds, paths, and other community infrastructure. On the whole, villagers welcomed the aid provided and did not view the labor services as burdensome. They accepted this arrangement "because the personal and community needs they faced after Nargis were immense. However, the lack of remuneration did cause difficulties for many who needed money to cover basic household needs."[28]

Sometimes, an overemphasis on participation also created problems for communities. In several instances, the number of community meetings required by aid providers was viewed by villagers as excessive. In at least one case, "women chose not to continue as members of a micro-credit scheme because the meetings were too frequent and took up too much time."[29]

Aid doing harm

Frequently, the primary cause of complaints against village leaders was perceived unfairness in aid distribution. In several cases, what was perceived as exclusive aid targeting or a lack of transparency about aid decisions led to social tensions. In a few instances, this led to villagers splitting into groups (for example, wealthier vs. poorer community members, or between different ethnic groups) whose leaders did not, or were not able to, collaborate well with each other. Two years after Nargis, signs of tension between villagers and their leaders were reported in 21 SIM villages; three years later, tension was still encountered in 16 villages.[30]

Post-Nargis aid created different types of conflict, and conflicts could last for years after the aid effort had ended

Some aid deliveries worsened relations between religious groups and led to splits in heterogenous villages (Buddhist/Christian, Buddhist/Muslim) that were felt even nine years after Nargis. Especially in the early period after the cyclone, some aid by monasteries and church groups was only provided to adherents of that faith. This undercut trust in the other religious groups. With that mistrust strengthened during the 2010s by broader forces around religious nationalist and ethnic identity across Myanmar, these divides remained.

Aid also affected inter-village relations. In the aftermath of the cyclone, most villages felt that they had received less assistance than neighboring villages. Where this reflected reality, inter-village cooperation suffered. Often, however, those who felt that they had received less help than others actually appeared to have received more than neighboring villages. A lack of information about cross-village aid distribution drove such misperceptions of reality.

4. Concluding Reflections

Aid providers are faced with difficult choices in any post-disaster situation. *Should they provide aid as quickly as possible even without fully understanding the specific local context? Should they provide items that are readily available in their warehouses regardless of how adequate these may be? Should they anticipate people's needs beyond the purely life-saving or take the time to seek their views as to what is needed the most? How should they collaborate with national authorities?* These are just a few of the many questions that aid providers need to continuously seek answers to; participatory social research can help them to find the

On post-Nargis aid

History suggests that the post-Nargis aid effort could have been carried out differently. At the eve of the cyclone's landfall, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) issued a lessons paper "to assist agencies working in the response to Cyclone Nargis by highlighting key lessons that have been learned from other natural disasters, specifically floods, hurricanes and cyclones."[31] "Lesson 7—Working with affected populations," states that "… it is important to ensure that after the initial acute crisis is past (few days), communities are included in the design and implementation of assistance programmes, to ensure greater ownership over the recovery process. This needs to be done in ways that are sensitive to the local context, and do not place beneficiaries under undue risks, given the political contexts."[32]

Mindful of the enormous complexity of the task, this paper does not second-guess the choices that post-Nargis aid providers made. That said, SIM showed that this lesson was not learnt. SIM highlighted—based on the experience of several aid providers (private donors and NGOs)—that speed and community participation are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they can reinforce each other and in so doing enhance aid effectiveness. As SIM 2, observed, "aid was most effective—and perceived by community members to be most effective—when it fit with the priorities of villagers, was targeted and distributed according to principles agreed to with the participation of villagers, and where effective accountability measures were in place."[33]

On new trends in post-disaster response

The global landscape of post-disaster aid has changed since Nargis. Firstly, the number of states cut off from regular international political and development cooperation has been increasing, and many of these countries face major natural disaster risks.[34] At the same time, humanitarian aid has not been able to keep up with increasing needs.[35] Secondly, private actors (individuals and local grassroots organizations) and affected communities themselves have become more active, leaving traditional humanitarian actors less dominant than before. The rise in technology and social media has opened up access to new sources

of funding—for instance, through GoFundMe and other crowdsourcing campaigns—while also facilitating direct communication between communities and private donors both in-country and abroad.

Atomizing the relationship between aid providers and recipients in this manner can be a double-edged sword

On the one hand, it creates the opportunity of introducing novel modalities that are unburdened by past practice or institutional pressure. This has a particular bearing on aid in politically estranged situations where, by definition, "business as usual" does not work. The private, courageous aid effort in the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha which struck western Myanmar in May 2023 is an example of how new forms of aid delivery can overcome—at least to some extent—the harsh constraints imposed by an oppressive government. On the other hand, it poses the risk of unequal treatment within and between communities that are affected by the same event, which in turn can lead to intra- and intercommunal tensions. This calls for: a minimum degree of harmonization of aid modalities beyond—often elusive—coordination; attendant community capacity; and the frequent reassessment of both the "what" and the "how" of aid.

And yet, familiar challenges persist. In a blog on lessons for the 2022 Pakistan flood response, Doherty and Alexander present five takeaways from past flood responses that are still considered germane in the 2020s, and thus validate the continued relevance of the SIM findings.[36] Among them are the importance of: local (including community) knowledge and leadership; early and long-term recovery considerations from the outset; inclusive, contextually appropriate and responsive accountability mechanisms; and cash programming (although it may not fulfill all needs). As Doherty and Alexander put it: "The ability to respond effectively to community inputs and to enable meaningful participation remains a perennial challenge for the humanitarian community."[37]

On post-disaster response in "politically estranged" settings

Guggenheim and Petrie highlight ten lessons for donors on how they can incorporate community-driven approaches for aid in sanctioned and fragile states.[38] The findings from SIM affirm their validity in "politically estranged" post-disaster situations, notably the importance of: supporting aid that is locally driven and owned; committing to longer-term predictable support; fostering social inclusion, particularly of women; and reinforcing local resilience and coping. Equally pertinent are the three core elements of "the basic model for a community development program: (1) identifying the right local social cooperating unit to work with; (2) adapting financing modalities to enable them to directly receive funds; and (3) mobilizing facilitators who work with groups using a participatory approach to identify and deliver on local priorities."[39]

"In politically estranged situations, mechanisms for oversight and redress are key for mitigating concerns in donor countries and navigating fraught relations with authorities."[40] SIM demonstrated how through social research, communities can also play a vital oversight function in post-disaster contexts. It helps aid providers "understand (1) cross-cutting issues, such as governance and social accountability, which transcend the boundaries of sectors such as agriculture and education; (2) community perceptions,

including on aid effectiveness, vulnerability, and social exclusion, which are critical for the success of the aid effort; and (3) process tracing, such as on the social dynamics within communities or on how aid plays out at the village level. It can also help serve as early warning for issues that emerge as the aid effort evolves, such as on conflict or elite capture."[41] The SIM series is thus a practical example of an effective oversight mechanism in situations where donors assess the risk of being perceived to support sanctioned authorities as high and national authorities grant sufficient space for community-based, participatory social research.

It stands to reason that by bringing together different aid providers—their creativity, commitment, experience, and willingness to learn—ways can finally be found to make communities empowered actors for genuinely demand-driven post-disaster aid in 'politically estranged' (and other) settings. The aid community owes them nothing less.

"[A]s for the tents, some were eventually used years later, providing protection to farmers and laborers out in the rice paddies from the blistering sun."[42]

Endnotes

1 For the types of situations where relations are estranged, see Sarah Cliffe, Renata Diwan, Betty Wainaina, and Leah Zamore, "Aid strategies in 'politically estranged' settings. How donors can stay and deliver in fragile and conflict-affected states," Chatham House and NYU Center on International Cooperation, April 2023, https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/aid-strategies-in-politically-estranged-settings, 6.

2 Markus Kostner, "Tackling a known unknown. How post-disaster aid can provide what people really need," World Bank blog, 2018, https://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/tackling-known-unknown-how-post-disaster-aid-can-provide-what-people-really-need.

3 The SIM series was funded by the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) (rounds 1, 2, 4, and 5) and the UK Department for International Development (round 3).

4 "For the purposes of the report, 'aid' refers to all types of aid received, both cash and in-kind and across multiple sectors. All types of aid providers from outside villages, such as government, local and international NGOs, UN agencies, private sector aid providers and religious groups, are referred to in this report as 'aid providers', as villagers themselves did not tend to distinguish among different kinds of sources of assistance." Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: November 2008" [SIM 1], 2009a, https://emref.org/sites/emref.org/files/publication-docs/sim_1_english_version.pdf, 5. In practical terms, however, "[v]illagers tended not to include government-financed activities when discussing aid, possibly because the main thrust of government support has been at the township or area (rather than the village) level where it financed larger infrastructure works …" Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010" [SIM 3], 2010, https://emref.org/sites/emref.org/files/publication-docs/sim_3_english_version.pdf, 12.

5 OECD, "Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Developing Countries 2012: Disbursements, Commitments, Country Indicators," 2012, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/geographical-distribution-of-financial-flows-to-developing-countries-2012_fin_flows_dev-2012-en-fr#page189,189.

6 For example, see the summaries in Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010," 55ff and World Bank, Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation, and Andaman Research & Advisory, "Meandering to Recovery: Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring Ten Years After" [SIM 5], 2018, https://emref.org/sites/emref.org/files/publication-docs/post-nargis_social_impact_monitoring_10_year_aftersim_5_eng_version.pdf, 61ff.

7 Impossible as these were to achieve absent a cooperative government.

8 Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, World Bank and Enlightened Myanmar Research, "Another Nargis Strikes Every Day: Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring Five Years On" [SIM 4], 2014, https://emref.org/sites/emref.org/files/publication-docs/2015.06.05-nargis-web_singles_rev.1.1.pdf, 67, emphasis added.

9 Adapted from Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010," 6 and 9.

10 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: November 2008," 11.

11 Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, World Bank and Enlightened Myanmar Research, "Another Nargis Strikes Every Day," 29.

12 Ibid, 31.

13 "This is not only the case for human survivors. The social impacts team heard reports that a large number of cattle that survived cannot now be used for ploughing. They are scared of working if there is rain or wind," Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: November 2008," 10.

14 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010," 45f.

15 Ibid, 6, "Cyclone shelters have been included under community infrastructure, as in many cases these are multi-purpose structures."

16 World Bank, Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation, and Andaman Research & Advisory, "Meandering to Recovery," 53 and 56. Prior to Nargis, the Ayeyarwady Delta not only was one of the poorest areas of the country despite being Myanmar's rice bowl, but also had a significant infrastructure deficit (71).

17 Ibid, 57.

18 Ibid, 53ff.

19 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: November 2008," 14. Private donors included family

members and villagers who had migrated as well as concerned citizens from Yangon and other parts of Myanmar.

20 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010," 11. See also Figure 1.

21 "It should be noted that while dominant patterns can be identified for most villages, often within a village some projects/ forms of aid used different mechanisms. It is difficult to quantify this, but the analysis above gives a picture of the diversity," Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: November 2008, 16.

22 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010," 14.

23 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2008," 16.

24 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010," 13.

25 At the same time, however, the committees established by external aid providers commonly included women and youth in deviation from customary rules. "For women, this involvement … was also an important driver toward greater gender equality, even if traditional norms were frequently reasserted once the aid effort had ceased," Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, World Bank and Enlightened Myanmar Research, "Another Nargis Strikes Every Day," 69, "Involving women … both gave them the tools and confidence to put themselves forward and helped socialize men to the idea of formal female leadership and women's voices being heard in social affairs, previously a rare occurrence in Myanmar village life," World Bank, Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation, and Andaman Research & Advisory, "Meandering to Recovery," 61.

26 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2008," 18.

27 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2010," 17.

28 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: April 2008," 12f.

29 Ibid, 13.

30 Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, World Bank and Enlightened Myanmar Research, "Another Nargis Strikes Every Day," 64.

31 B. Ramalingam and S. Pavanello, "Cyclone Nargis: Lessons for operational agencies," Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), 2008, https://www.alnap.org/help-library/cyclone-nargis-lessons-for-operational-agencies, 1.

32 Ibid, 8.

33 Tripartite Core Group, "Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring: June 2009," 5.

34 Cliffe et al., "Aid strategies," 5f.

35 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Global Humanitarian Overview 2023, Mid-Year Update," 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2023-mid-year-update-snapshot-18-june-2023, 5.

36 Jennifer Doherty and Jessica Alexander, "Lessons for the 2022 Pakistan flood response: past reflections and new considerations," ALNAP, October 19, 2022, https://www.alnap.org/blogs/lessons-for-the-2022-pakistan-flood-response-past-reflections-and-new-considerations.

37 Ibid.

38 Scott Guggenheim and Charles Petrie, "Alternative Aid Modalities: Community Development," NYU Center on International Cooperation, October 2022, https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/alternative-aid-modalities-community-development, 21f.

39 Ibid, 7.

40 Cliffe et al., "Aid strategies," 62ff.

41 Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, World Bank and Enlightened Myanmar Research, "Another Nargis Strikes Every Day," 70f.

42 Kostner, "Tackling a known unknown.

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