

## Two more publications on life after Nargis

Two groups last month released new assessments of relief efforts in Myanmar after Nargis. In contrast to the two reports [previously reviewed](#) for New Mandala, people directly involved in the work there wrote for these publications. One is the first official periodic review conducted since the cyclone struck on May 2. The other consists of a set of articles offering the views of United Nations staff, humanitarian aid officials and emergency response consultants on what's been done so far. While both documents are orthodox in style and circumspect in analysis, each contains a scattering of useful figures and insights and anyone concerned to follow what has happened since Nargis and get a sense of the cyclone's long-term consequences should take the time to read them.

The [first periodic report](#) of the Tripartite Core Group—which comprises representatives of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the government of Myanmar and the UN—has the hallmark branding of an international development project, with a cover image of smiling children juxtaposed alongside pictures of reconstructed dwellings. But in spite of its uplifting exterior and its bearing the signature of the deputy foreign affairs minister, it contains quite a lot of details on shortfalls in food, housing, health and schooling among people who were in the cyclone's path, and does give a sense of just how much remains to be done if hundreds of thousands of people are to have even a bare minimum standard of living.

The 118-page report is the first in a series to be published over a year, and it doesn't, its authors hasten to add, set out to evaluate in detail how things are going but just to present the findings of a survey covering 2376 households consisting of 13,546 members conducted last October and November.

For a government-endorsed public document the data contain some unusually plain facts about the decrepit shape of the national health system, such as it is, with only a third of respondents reporting that medicine was available in local clinics (no mention of how much it costs them where available). The report tentatively points to a lack of nutritious food for kids around Yangon as a chronic problem rather than a consequence specific to the cyclone, implying that it is not peculiar to the disaster-hit towns and villages but indicative of the much larger malaise afflicting the lives of millions across the country. And the authors also admit from the figures that assistance is still not getting through to many parts and that very large numbers of people continue to live under plastic or canvas, remarking that, "In only around 10 per cent of communities surveyed did every household report adequate living conditions."

The report casts some light on the lasting damage to agricultural land, and on the lives of thousands of small farmers and their seasonal labourers. According to its findings, 215 of the households surveyed had "owned" paddy prior to the cyclone: a misuse of the term, given that in Myanmar the state still legally owns all land (along with other resources) and farmers are its tenants. Of these households, whereas before the cyclone the median productive holding was 10 acres, six months after it was a mere three, while 26 per cent of families had lost everything. This

data contrast sharply with the rosy picture of a quick recovery that the government and some international experts painted some time back last year, and do not also take into account many other factors, such as the likelihood of far lower yields from those areas being planted. The report adds that the losses for owners of orchards were even greater than those for paddy and will require a much longer period to recover, given the time and expense of planting and growing trees before there is a product. And of those households that had home gardens, more than two thirds now have none.

Similarly, the data on livestock indicate that around half of the households had a median of 20 chickens and ducks but that figure is now a solitary bird per family, with 43 per cent left with nothing. Likewise, 44 per cent of those who had had buffalo or other cattle now have none, and of the 449 families among those surveyed that had pigs before May, 68 per cent either lost them in the cyclone or in a few cases sold them after. Among fisherfolk, around three-quarters are yet to replace lost boats and nets. They probably account for some of the increase in the number of casual laborers cited elsewhere in the findings.

The report contains annexes that include a copy of the questionnaire used and, as an afterthought, some stories of affected persons from which a few quotes are sprinkled throughout the document. The stories are typical. Thawtar Khin's family is still living under tarpaulin nearby stinking water. Her younger brother and sister are not attending school. They had to wait three months to get some assistance. Daw Mya Sein's family have gone into debt to try to plant paddy and regain lost income. They have planted betel nut but insects are eating the seedlings. They are relying on other people for food. Only one of Daw The The Swe's five kids is in school. Her husband is working someone else's fields for a small share of the crop. They are broke and unable to rebuild their house. U Khin Moe had been on the verge of getting electricity into his village when the cyclone swept everything away. Much of his paddy land was destroyed. He suffered a breakdown and walked the streets, talking to himself; with the support of concerned villagers he was able to recover. These are just a few of the real lives behind the statistics that make up the tripartite group's report.

The [December volume](#) of *Humanitarian Exchange* contains a variety of articles examining different aspects of international relief in Myanmar after Nargis, including the problems of negotiating access, the role of Asean and other parties from abroad, the response of people in the country to the disaster, and the hands-on work of different agencies in affected areas. Some of the writing here is burdened with too much development jargon for readers from outside the aid business to comprehend (what does it mean that Myanmar's population was "not previously exposed to the plethora of quality and accountability initiatives currently available"?), or perhaps stomach, while other articles come off sounding self-congratulatory. But most of the pieces are readable and relatively forthright.

The authors of the first item are Julie Belanger and Richard Horsey. Belanger was with the UN in Yangon throughout the cyclone and up to October, while Horsey was stationed in Bangkok but

earlier had the difficult job of representing the International Labour Organisation in Myanmar. In a carefully worded piece they examine the reasons for the government's obstinate response to international offers of assistance in the days and weeks immediately after the disaster, and ask whether or not anything more could have been done.

Belanger and Horsey point to four causes for the delay in granting access, namely the 'self-reliance' doctrine of the ruling regime, its limited familiarity with international disaster response, the domestic political circumstances in the lead-up to the staged referendum on a new constitution, and international political relations in which a junta that is cast in the role of the baddie treats any overseas agenda as suspect. Although the authors don't rank the four, the last two were probably most telling. Unfamiliarity with the work of international agencies during crises of this sort as well as with tragedies in the order of Nargis would have contributed to the delay too, but the self-reliance doctrine is a red herring. The only doctrine of real importance to the generals in Naypyitaw is that of self-survival, which when coupled with an outward disdain for the general public and corresponding disregard for the role and responsibilities of government ends up in things like the 'let them eat frog' editorial that appeared in state-run dailies after the cyclone. This is not self-reliance, just plain contempt for others.

Kerren Hedlund and Daw Myint Su offer a view from what they describe as the fringe of the relief effort, among local self-help groups and concerned individuals who fought to get and use a small amount of the money flowing in from abroad for the recovery. While government officials resorted to various methods to obstruct, direct and control private donors and local groups trying to assist affected people, they suggest that (as in many other operations of this sort around the world) the big donors and aid delivery agencies in Myanmar had the same effect. "Participation by local NGOs was severely limited given the language, location and attitudes of main players in the international response," they write, which was "particularly disappointing given that... the early response was largely by national actors". They give as examples that in the weeks after the cyclone only a handful of local groups' representatives were issued with the ID cards necessary for access to the UN coordinating offices, and that nearly all documents were produced in English, with few ever translated. A call at a meeting in June for funding of some 30 new groups that local people had set up after the cyclone was met with silence. Hedlund and Myint Su admit that such funding would have entailed risk, but wonder if under the circumstances it wouldn't have been worth it.

Strangely, in neither of these publications is there any significant reference to the psychological consequences of the cyclone. The tripartite group report, for instance, describes the main barrier to school attendance in affected areas as the costs associated with getting students into the classrooms, such as for a school uniform (to say nothing of the extra fees that teachers demand and mandatory tuition to supplement their meager incomes). It omits any reference to the mental health of kids who may have lost parents and siblings, who may have seen them washed away, as a barrier of an altogether different sort. It makes only passing comments on psychological health at all (on page 65), citing the very conservative finding of an earlier assessment that 23 per cent of

households had reported “psychosocial distress” and adding that interviewees in October and November regularly exhibited post-traumatic stress, such as by crying “when answering even simple questions” and laughing out of place. In *Humanitarian Exchange* a program manager for MSF Switzerland remarks that, “Mental health needs were evident, and psychological interventions were found to be highly pertinent,” but offers no more than that. Which mental health needs were evident and what psychological interventions were found to be highly pertinent? We don’t find out. Myanmar is a country full of people already psychologically disturbed by 50 years of repressive government and increasingly strained economic and social life. Add to that the consequences of this cyclone, and if these publications make clear that efforts at material rebuilding are far behind what they should be, then by comparison the immense job of psychological rebuilding seems to have barely even been begun.