Humanitarian Effectiveness Field Visit Report
Myanmar
February 2014 Visit

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CDA Collaborative Learning Projects
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Introduction

CDA’s mission is to facilitate collaborative learning promoting effective and accountable international engagements. By listening to nearly 6,000 people in over 20 countries who have received, participated in or observed international assistance, CDA’s Listening Project gathered evidence on the cumulative effects of aid efforts and ideas to make international aid more effective. *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid* summarizes this evidence and shares the experiences and feedback from local people on how to more meaningfully engage them in aid efforts with a wide range of policy-makers and practitioners.

With this in mind, this report summarizes a single field visit that focused on hearing a broad-range of local perspectives on humanitarian effectiveness. This visit was part of an action-research project funded by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Policy Development and Studies Branch (UNOCHA) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Field visits were conducted in Myanmar, Philippines, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti and Ethiopia and supplemented with desk-based research on diaspora and their perspective on effectiveness of humanitarian action. The goal of the overall project, was to better understand local perspectives on the effectiveness of humanitarian action. This report and others in the series aims to feed into the larger conversation and recommendations for the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

This report does not represent a final product of the project. While this report may be cited, it remains a working document. This report represents a snapshot of the context, at the time it was written, and represents the viewpoints of those who participated in the study. Broad generalizations cannot be made from a single report. Instead, this report is meant to contribute to the larger learning on what constitutes humanitarian effectiveness and how to improve it.
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Section I – Background on CDA’s visit to Myanmar

Myanmar was chosen as a case for gathering local perspectives on humanitarian effectiveness because of its protracted conflicts, sudden on-set natural disasters (such as Cyclones Nargis and Giri), political and economic reform process, and the significant support and attention from the international community. Myanmar is rich in natural resources and is also affected by several global trends, such as: climate change, urbanization, the rapid spread of mobile phones and technology, and shifts in the global balance of power – which are also fueling a contest for influence over the economic and political development of the country. The findings in this report reflect desk research and individual and focus group discussions with a range of people who are affected by and engaged in humanitarian responses in Myanmar.

The CDA team included Dayna Brown, Sarah Cechvala, and Nicole Goddard. While in country, the team spent five days in Rakhine State (predominately in Sittwe), four days in Kachin State (predominately in Myitkyina), and six days in Yangon. During this time, they focused on gathering the views of people affected by internal conflicts, local civil society organizations (CSOs), UN agencies, and international NGOs (INGOs). Additionally, the team met with a few local and national government officials, donors, and business leaders. A breakdown of conversations by constituency is displayed in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Constituency Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IDPs</td>
<td>Host Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Individual Interviews</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Focus Groups</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure 1: Breakdown of Interviews & Focus Groups by Constituency

The team used CDA’s listening methodology, which includes semi-structured interviews with key informants and focus groups Through approximately 120 individual interviews and 17 focus group discussions (which ranged between five and 15 people), the CDA team listened to as many voices and perspectives as possible from those directly affected by the conflicts and actively involved in humanitarian responses. The team asked each individual or focus group a series of open-ended questions that were developed for each constituency and prioritized given the knowledge, experience, and openness of the person being interviewed.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Yangon, Sittwe (Rakhine State), and Myitkyina (Kachin State) hosted the CDA team.
UNOCHA supported the team by providing translators (in some cases, local UNOCHA staff), transportation, and assistance with arranging meetings with regional government authorities, civil society organizations, and international aid agencies. The CDA team was also supported by the Shalom Foundation, Lutheran World Federation, Save the Children, Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and other aid agencies that helped the team reach people in IDP camps and affected communities.

Due to the limited time in country, the context in Myanmar, and the unique nature of the humanitarian responses there, the team experienced the following constraints:

- The team’s access to people from the different constituencies varied in each State; however, the team was still able to reach a diverse set of stakeholders.
- The team had limited access to government officials, and was able to interview only one township-level official in Rakhine and a state-level official in Kachin. The team did not go to the capital Nay Pyi Taw and was not able to interview any national-level government officials.
- Representatives from host communities (for IDPs) were also difficult to reach. In Rakhine, the team met with people in urban Sittwe, though not with representatives from villages immediately adjacent to any of the IDP camps. In Kachin, the team met with a small number of individuals living in villages near IDP camps.
- Interviews with IDPs and other people affected by the crises, host communities, and government officials in Rakhine and Kachin were done with translation — sometimes twice (local language to Burmese to English) — provided by professional translators, UNOCHA staff, and representatives of international and local non-governmental organizations. In sensitive contexts, there is potential for professional, ethnic, and/or political biases, on the part of the translators and the ethnic identities of translators could also have affected how interviewees responded.

Finally, interviews and the in-country travel were planned within a short timeframe and coincided with the first month of a new UNOCHA Head of Offices’ tenure, whose support was truly appreciated by the CDA team. The CDA team also extends a sincere thank you to those who were willing to be interviewed as well as all the organizations that provided logistical and technical support. This report reflects the issues and themes that emerged from the range of conversations but does not represent all perspectives on the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance in Myanmar.
Section II – Background on the Humanitarian Context in Myanmar

Myanmar has received significant international attention after recently ending 49 years of rule by a military junta and is beginning to establish democratic norms and structures.\(^1\)

Much of the country’s strife and humanitarian needs are directly related to the central government’s\(^1\) tight grip on resources, the power of the military, and the vast inequalities among different regions and ethnic groups. One report from the International Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) estimates that there are as many as 643,000 IDPs in Myanmar who have been displaced due to violent conflict.\(^2\) While Myanmar has several states affected by conflict, the CDA team focused on the two regions where there are current international humanitarian appeals. Figure 2 further provides a breakdown of the number of people assisted by humanitarian efforts between 2011 and 2013, by state.

The northern part of the country, particularly in Kachin and Shan States, has experienced an ongoing separatist movement and peace process, and non-state actors control an entire region of Kachin State. Roughly 98,000 people have been displaced in this region since the violence erupted in 2011, and roughly two-thirds of this population is living in regions outside of governmental control.\(^3\) Rakhine State, in the west, is home to around 800,000 people who are considered stateless.\(^4\) Since 2012, there have been violent clashes between Muslims and Buddhists throughout the state. In 2014, tensions rose significantly between the local Buddhist population and international aid agencies due to perceptions of inequality in the delivery of assistance to different groups (discussed further below). Currently there are approximately 140,000 displaced persons living in Rakhine State.\(^5\)

The history of conflicts in Myanmar has led to significant humanitarian needs, which have been further exacerbated by the country’s susceptibility to rapid, onset natural disasters,

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1. The Myanmar central government has long been controlled by ethnic Bamar elites, which has historically politically marginalized Myanmar’s other ethnic groups.  
2. IDMC 2014.  
3. Ibid.  
4. ECHO Factsheet Myanmar/Burma 2014. This number may be in dispute due to a lack of up-to-date national census data.  
5. Ibid.
such as cyclones (Giri and Nargis in recent years). Between 2008 and 2012, Myanmar had roughly two million people displaced by disasters, and from 2003 to 2012, 139,186 people were killed by disasters, the third highest number of deaths by natural disaster after Indonesia and Haiti.

The immense growth in international investment and the presence of a range of international actors creates a rapidly changing environment in which to examine humanitarian effectiveness. International actors, and an expanding number of civil society actors, have to operate closely with a government that has been closed off from outsiders for decades. Engagement with the government has often lead to different expectations and perspectives on their respective roles and responsibilities. From 2002 to 2011, Myanmar received $1.1 billion dollars in humanitarian assistance, making it the nineteenth largest recipient of humanitarian aid globally. In 2012, Myanmar ranked eighth in UN Central Emergency Response Funding (CERF) at $17 million dollars. This vast influx of money and actors has made Myanmar a key site in the international contest for greater economic and political influence at both the regional and global level. China has had a predominate role in Myanmar’s corporate investment and has acted as a mediator during several of the peace negations between the Myanmar Government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO).

The shift in the global balance of power and influence from Western governments to emerging powers such as India and China has distinctly played out in Myanmar. At the end of 2013, for example, humanitarian, development, and military aid from Japan and India to Myanmar was seen as an attempt to “counterbalance” China’s growing influence in the region. Similarly, recent Western efforts to engage with Myanmar, particularly those of the United States, have been read as part of a containment strategy and a manifestation of its anxiety over China’s emergence as a global power.

These new pressures and actors have also led to strengthened relationships and partnerships. Myanmar has experienced higher levels of regional solidarity particularly from members of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A report from the Humanitarian Policy Group suggests that, “Following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, ASEAN defined the humanitarian mission in Myanmar as a double challenge ‘to build back better

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6 GHA Report 2013:83.
7 GHA Report 2013:76.
8 GHA Report 2013:41.
10 ICG 2013(a).
11 See: Mahtani 2013; Pandit 2013.
12 See: Zarni 2013.
for both of us, for Myanmar and for ASEAN,’ to restore the country to ‘its traditional role as the rice bowl not only of Myanmar but of Southeast Asia’ and at the same time ‘show that ASEAN is relevant’ and that cooperation between ASEAN and the United Nations during the Nargis recovery effort would help forge ‘a new model of humanitarian partnership’ for Southeast Asia.”

ASEAN’s leadership and involvement in the Cyclone Nargis response was credited with opening up an “unprecedented level of humanitarian space” in Myanmar, which has largely remained intact post-Nargis response. Additionally, the ASEAN-UN partnership has continued with Regional Humanitarian Partnerships Forums of which Myanmar is a member. In 2011, UNOCHA published a Disaster Response in Asia and the Pacific: a Guide to International Tools and Services which is intended to “empower Member States as requesters, rather than receivers, of external assistance by providing a concise reference to the international tools and services available to support disaster preparedness and response and thereby facilitating decision-making.” This increased support from regional organizations has dramatic impacts on the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts, particularly with the emergence of new donors and power brokers in the region who have more access to and influence over the government than traditional humanitarian actors.

Climate change has also fostered new pressures that will impact humanitarian needs in the future as Myanmar ranks tenth in the world on the 2011 Vulnerability Index. An increase in extreme weather is expected to lead to more intense and frequent natural disasters, such as monsoons and cyclones. These natural disasters will increase flooding and may destroy fragile ecosystems and infrastructure and thus hinder the country’s growing economy and societal well being. Between 1990 and 2008, Myanmar was ranked second globally (after Bangladesh) in terms of countries most affected by extreme weather events. Expected sea level rises of one to five meters, caused by global warming, may also affect roughly ten percent of the country. Losses in agricultural productivity due to climate change further poses a great risk to a country where approximately seventy percent of the population is reliant on farming as a primary

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13 Fan 2013.
14 Creach and Fan 2008.
15 OCHA 2013(b).
17 Aye Sapay Phyu 2012.
18 Marks 2011:240.
19 DVB 2012.
One study suggests that Myanmar ranks second out of all countries in terms of threat posed by agricultural productivity loss due to changing climate.\textsuperscript{21}

Rapid and unplanned urbanization also has the potential to make preparing for and responding to humanitarian crises more challenging in the future. While currently the vast majority of Myanmar’s population lives in rural areas, some experts estimate that, “the share of the population in large cities could double, from just 13 percent today to around 25 percent in 2030 — an additional ten million people, or two cities the size of Yangon.”\textsuperscript{22} This anticipated population influx to Yangon and other cities could further exacerbate the challenges associated with urban disaster responses.\textsuperscript{23}

Section III – Perceptions of Humanitarian Effectiveness

This section discusses the roles that different actors play in responding to humanitarian crises in Myanmar and the expectations and perceptions of those actors’ effectiveness. Each section first details the role the actor plays in humanitarian responses, and then considers the varying perspectives of the actor’s effectiveness in fulfilling this role, and finally examines the perceptions other stakeholders have regarding the effectiveness of the actor. None of the views represented in this report are homogenous; and therefore, comments made by a single person should not be used to make broad generalizations about the effectiveness of particular actors, agencies, or entire groups. Rather, these perspectives provide a snapshot of the views on how to understand humanitarian effectiveness in a complex context such as Myanmar.

3.1. People Affected by Humanitarian Crises

3.1.1. Role in Humanitarian Response

The first place many people who are affected by crises turn is to neighbors and others in their community. When the most urgent needs such as food and shelter are not met, local community members (both within IDP communities and in the host communities) will often help one another. In some places, however, where there are high levels of distrust and fear between IDPs and the host community and/or even between different families within IDP communities, people may not help one another as much.

\textsuperscript{20}DVB 2012.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22}Chhor 2013.
In some places, people are doing all that they can to meet their own needs and to foster more sustainable livelihoods. In Rakhine, several IDPs established small informal businesses, such as charging cellular telephones with solar panels. In Muslim IDP camps, because of strict travel restrictions, there were very limited opportunities for livelihood development, though several IDPs talked about how they had helped one another when their families did not have enough food. In Buddhist camps, some IDPs were able to establish small marketplaces to sell items they purchased in town, or non-food items that other IDPs had bartered. In one camp, the CDA team noted that there were over 50 hygiene kits stacked against the wall of one shop and the shopkeeper said that he was reselling them to other IDPs. In the same camp, another IDP re-established her previous livelihood by building a small teashop.

People affected by the crises suggested that their own initiatives could be supported by INGOs or CSOs, either through workshops, training, or seed funding. NGOs and UN agencies, however, said they were only able to provide limited support to livelihood initiatives because donor strategies and funding had not changed to reflect the protracted nature of the conflicts. Many international humanitarian actors explained that while they were still providing life-saving programs, the context has now called for long-term solutions, particularly in the form of livelihoods programming. Several INGO representatives suggested that humanitarians’ should not just focus on saving lives, but also on saving livelihoods. In order to do this, there needs to be a clear exit or transition strategy to recovery and development efforts.

3.1.2. Perceptions of Effectiveness

People who have been affected by the conflicts in Rakhine and Kachin appreciate the humanitarian support they have received, but suggested that their need for livelihood support is not being effectively met by the government or humanitarian agencies. Given the protracted nature of the conflicts, there is a clear disconnect in the priorities and perceptions of effectiveness by international humanitarian actors and affected populations. Several INGO representatives explained that it is the inflexible nature of humanitarian funding and programming that is hindering humanitarians’ ability to address the current needs and realities on the ground.

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In other studies, crisis-affected communities have suggested that effective humanitarian action required better communication and engagement between their communities, humanitarian agencies (international and local), and the government (local and national).\textsuperscript{25} In Myanmar, lack of communication and engagement between the humanitarian community and other stakeholders appeared to be an impediment to effectiveness and had decreased the levels of trust with the international humanitarian community. Local people explained that they did not feel listened to or heard by governmental officials or international agencies. This communication gap has engendered challenges for several agencies in effectively meeting communal needs and identifying local capacities that could contribute to lasting solutions. While many INGO and UN agency representatives mentioned the importance of participation and an inclusive process, many either did not know how to operationalize this or felt that this type of approach was not within their capacities given their mandates, access, and funding constraints.

Trust is also inherently linked to communication and the sharing of accurate information. The lack of communication in Myanmar has contributed to a situation where the local population perceives the international humanitarian community to be unresponsive to its needs. This perception shapes the context in which many internationals are operating (particularly in Rakhine State), and has created a dramatic effect on their ability to operate effectively.

### 3.1.3. Perceptions of Other Stakeholders and their Roles

Affected communities overall suggested that it is the role of the government to provide long-term structural support such as education, infrastructure, job opportunities etc. IDPs both in Rakhine and Kachin, explained that the UN and other international agencies could play a more effective role in applying pressure on the government to find concrete and lasting solutions to the issues at the root of many of the humanitarian crises in the country. Many said that they expected a return and resettlement plan to be implemented with the assistance of local and international INGOs and the UN, but led by the government. At the time of this visit, many affected communities felt that the emergency was over (in Rakhine and Kachin), and that once their safety could be guaranteed, they were ready to return home.

\textsuperscript{25} See: Anderson et al. 2012; Bonino et al 2014.
3.2. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

3.2.1. Roles in Humanitarian Response

Local organizations play a leading role in responding to crises in Myanmar due to their understanding of the context and access to affected communities. In Kachin State, for instance, local CSOs have largely led the response. Travel restrictions imposed by the government on INGOs and UN agencies prior to the 2011 violence have limited access to non-government controlled areas (NGCAs) in Kachin for the international communities. At present, most international organizations work through their local partners or UN convoys in order to access affected communities in NGCAs. Access to NGCAs is also risky and time consuming for local CSOs, whose staff often must travel through China to reach camps in the NGCAs.

Many of the IDP camps are located on the grounds of churches and monasteries, and often draw IDPs from their respective denominations. These local religious institutions continue to provide space for IDP camps and support IDPs, as they are able, in some cases motivating their members to organize prepared meals or walk children to school. In Rakhine State, many Buddhist monasteries took in, protected, and fed Buddhist IDPs in the immediate aftermath of the violence before those IDPs returned to their homes or settled in camps that were managed primarily by international aid agencies.

Local organizations want to be seen as partners of INGOs and UN agencies, and not as contractors or solely implementing agencies. Recognition for their capacities was a primary concern that was articulated by local CSOs, particularly in Yangon and in Kachin State. Specifically, many explained that they wanted to be treated, by the international community, as independent, self-sustaining entities.

3.2.2. Perceptions of Effectiveness

Local and national civil society organizations’ (CSOs) and others note that their effectiveness rests on their contextual knowledge, the longevity of their relationships working with local communities, government officials, and other key local stakeholders, and their smaller, more flexible structures. Local organizations explained that their close relationships with affected populations (and the trust that comes from with that) and their profound understanding of the context are a priority and key to their effectiveness. In both Rakhine and Kachin,
civil society actors explained that this understanding allows CSOs to be highly effective in their response. They are also able to act quickly due to their existing relationships and operations. One CSO explained, “LNGOs are responsive. They were already here before international agencies arrived. Internationals should recognize local capacities, knowledge, and accessibility and think about mechanisms for supporting them.” Acting as a conduit between affected populations and the government, INGOs, and UN agencies allows CSOs to play a key role, particularly in directly providing assistance, particularly in Kachin and NGCAs where they have more access than the government or internationals.26

More flexible funding from international donors further enhances some CSOs’ smaller and nimbler structures and permits them to operate more quickly and effectively. The CDA team noted one CSO’s ability to source materials from local markets and to distribute them more efficiently than international agencies. In this case, the CSO’s deep knowledge of the context and ability to work with those on both sides of the conflict, allowed for a quick and effective response. INGOs and UN agencies acknowledged that their own effectiveness was highly dependent on local CSOs’ expertise and ease of access to those affected by crises.

Yet, the same features that enable local organizations to be more effective in developing relations with communities, identifying gaps in a response, and accessing difficult areas, also concurrently raise challenges for CSOs to operate effectively within the international humanitarian system. CSO representatives that met with the CDA team explained, for example, that their relationships with communities affected by crises (from which many CSO staff are also from) leads internationals to question their ability to be impartial in the conflict and/or in the humanitarian response. This fosters a conundrum between a feature that makes them CSOs highly effective, but which may affect perceptions of their effectiveness.27 It should be noted that in both Kachin and Rakhine, the CDA team did not hear any stories of CSOs supporting only their ethnic or religious groups. Even in Rakhine State, where this is a highly contentious issue, the CDA team noted that a CSO was specifically attempting to support both the Buddhist and Muslim communities. This question of CSO impartiality, however, was noted in discussions with INGOs in Yangon. The crux of the discussion commonly related to this perceived inability

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27 See: Stoddard et al. 2010:27.
for CSOs to abide by the humanitarian standards and principles, and how this can obstruct effective partnerships between INGOs/UN agencies and CSOs.  

Uniquely, Myanmar has also experienced CSOs joining together to respond and coordinate in order to address gaps in humanitarian responses, often with little to no international or governmental support, coordination, or funding. With the recent influx of international agencies in Kachin State, for example, seven local organizations established a unique mechanism called the Joint Strategy Committee (JSC). The JSC has been used to broker the relationship between the international community and the CSOs in Kachin. Several CSOs in the Kachin region also explained that the JSC has been effective in assisting CSOs to better coordinate their efforts to avoid overlaps and in their advocacy efforts to address the conflict in Kachin. Working to also influence the larger humanitarian response agenda and ensure that local civil society voices are heard in the decision-making processes, the JSC put out a humanitarian response strategy for Kachin State. The plan is intended to, “facilitate a process of shared vision and effective coordination among National NGOs so that overlapping of activities is reduced and gaps minimized. This strategy will seek to promote more cooperation and sharing of information, knowledge, and facilities among other resources as appropriate.”

**BOX 1: LOCAL RESOURCE CENTER**

Following the Nargis response, the LRC shifted its focus from disaster response to the holistic development of indigenous CSOs, and became an officially registered NGO in 2012.

**Vision:** An empowered and accountable civil society in Myanmar that is respectful of diversity, socially inclusive, and actively promotes civic responsibility.

**Objectives:**
1. To empower individual actors in Myanmar civil society by providing information that can be translated into knowledge and skills.
2. To shape the organizational culture of CSOs as responsive, responsible and accountable.
3. To facilitate the realization of CSO-related policies that are comprehensive, pro-poor and reflect the needs of the people.


The Local Resource Center (LRC) in Yangon (see Box 1), provides another example of the type of joint planning and collaboration which was discussed by many actors as an effective strategy for CSOs. The LRC was established in 2008 following Cyclone Nargis in

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29 JSC 2013.
order, “to enable better coordination between local and international implementers, advocate on behalf of local groups, ensure access to capacity development services and ultimately strengthen the collaborative response to Cyclone Nargis between local and international organizations.” The LRC has since expanded, with several working groups, trainings, and support services to local and international NGOs, and it engages with the international community and the government on policy issues related to the operations and effectiveness of civil society actors.

3.2.3. Perceptions of Other Stakeholders and their Roles

CSOs, particularly in Kachin State, highlighted that the entrance of INGOs and UN actors has weakened their role and ability to operate. Several CSO representatives noted that the increased international presence has brought an increase in resource competition and a new set of standards for their operations. INGOs and UN agencies explained that it can be challenging to work to build the capacity of staff of local organizations while in the midst of responses where CSOs are already leading efforts or have access that internationals do not. This primarily has to do with the time and effort that goes into cultivating, training, and strengthening the technical knowledge of LNGO staff. One UN representative explained, “We [international humanitarians] are not used to ‘long-term’ in our field, we like immediate results. But here we will have to be patient.” Furthermore, several UN and INGO agency staff mentioned that once time had been put into developing relationships and supporting the training of LNGOs, the staff were often then hired by international agencies (which helps the international organizations, but provides little benefit to the local organizations). At the same time, many CSO representatives asked the CDA team, “What is the added value of INGOs when local NGOs can perfectly implement projects? Why are INGOs involved?”

Several INGO representatives in Kachin explained that sometimes CSOs’ saw the role of internationals as donors and not necessarily as implementing partners. INGO representatives explained that this perception of roles has caused problems because INGO staff are unable to dictate the direction and flow of money for which they are accountable to their donors. As one INGO representative said, “We cannot directly implement anything. We always go through a local NGO. They know the context; they

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30 LRC 2014.
were there before. They see themselves as the implementers and us as the donors, so it’s not a partnership, it’s like a contractor.”

Many CSO representatives also expressed concerns regarding the limited capacities of the government. Specifically, several CSO representatives explained that they took issue with the government’s limited ability to address the root problems, to move the response from a humanitarian response to a long-term development approach, and put forth an agenda for the future. CSOs further discussed the role of the government as one that should facilitate partnerships. To this end, many CSO representatives explained that it is hard for unregistered CSOs that want to work with the UN and NGOs because they must partner with registered CSOs. In Myanmar, it is common for CSOs to either not have the appropriate credentials or to feel uncomfortable registering/working with the government when they are from groups or areas opposed to the government.

3.3. The Government of Myanmar

3.3.1. Roles in Humanitarian Response

While the Government of Myanmar plays a role in directly providing services to people affected by emergencies, its efforts are often seen as complementary to international and local aid efforts. People outside of the government suggested that the government’s responses often fall short of meeting the real needs on the ground, particularly in areas affected by conflicts between ethnic groups and the government. Some suggested that this gap is due to the government’s centralized decision-making structures and processes, as well as its lack of capacity, will, and coordinated planning.

In 2011, the national government established a Disaster Preparedness Agency – part of the Relief and Resettlement Department in the Ministry of Social Welfare – mostly to build on the lessons learned from the Cyclone Nargis response.31 This agency released a 2012 plan that suggested options to make Myanmar safer and more resilient to natural

31 Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2012.
disasters in order to protect the country’s valuable development gains.\textsuperscript{32} It should be noted, however, that the Disaster Preparedness Agency solely focuses on natural disaster response (listing cyclones, storm surge, floods, landslides, earthquakes, tsunami, dry zone/drought, fire, and forest fires), but makes no mention of the role of the government in humanitarian response related to issues of conflict, as seen in both Rakhine and Kachin.

In Rakhine, the local government is providing health services through the Ministry of Health to IDPs in both Muslim and Buddhist communities. That said, many stakeholders (including international aid agencies, civil society actors, private sector, and local communities) suggest that the response is not sufficiently addressing the needs of all affected communities (especially among the Rakhine Muslim population, who are not recognized as citizens by the government).\textsuperscript{33} A local government official explained to the CDA team that both the local, state and national government budgets for humanitarian responses are limited, which has affected their ability to fully respond to local needs. Planning for the long-term response through fundraising to support local communities was also mentioned as a role that the Kachin State Government saw for itself. Many people explained that convening and working directly with affected communities is critical to the government’s effectiveness in fulfilling its responsibilities.

Additionally, the central government’s actions (and at times, the local government’s actions) are often complicit in creating (or further exploiting) the humanitarian emergency, or not intervening quickly enough to thwart the crisis, which also has an impact on its ability to provide direct and swift assistance to its people.\textsuperscript{34} Shortly after the 2012 violence in Rakhine State, for example, the central and local government played a role in the relocation and resettlement of the roughly 3,000 displaced Buddhists. The Government, however, did not provide similar assistance to the displaced Rakhine Muslim population, whose rights it does not recognize.\textsuperscript{35} Similarly in Kachin, the central government’s direct conflict with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) has left roughly half of the 96,000 IDPs who are in the NGCAs with little assistance.\textsuperscript{36}

3.3.2. Perceptions of Effectiveness

Many humanitarian agencies (local and international) see the government as a necessary interlocutor to effective humanitarian action. Despite the country’s

\textsuperscript{32} Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2012:9.
\textsuperscript{33} OCHA 2014.
\textsuperscript{34} See: Harvey, 2009.
\textsuperscript{35} MacLean 2013.
\textsuperscript{36} IRIN 2014.
initial steps to “open up” to outside influences and democratic reforms, control from the center over the periphery (in terms of regions and minority groups) remains a critical factor affecting relationships and dynamics within the country.\textsuperscript{37} The internal dynamics, particularly the monolithic power of the central government, have a pervasive influence on the ability of those operating in the country to be effective (both internationals and nationals). The central government’s unilateral control over movement, access, regulatory policies, and information has positioned it as the de facto lynchpin to effective humanitarian action.

Restricting access, movement, and information has allowed the government to maintain control over who can and cannot respond to crises as well as when, where, and sometimes how they can respond. Many decisions are still made at the national level and many civil servants are appointed by the central government, but have dual responsibilities to the state government and ministries. This often creates confusion and delays for humanitarian actors who need to build relationships at multiple levels while also responding to immediate needs. The national and state governments tightly regulate access for international agencies and their staff, which dramatically hinders rapid mobilization during a crisis and inherently dictates which populations international actors can access, provide assistance to, and work with. The government continues to require international staff of aid agencies to obtain travel permits (often only short-term) well in advance of visits to certain states. Additionally, each agency reports to a separate line minister\textsuperscript{38} and their access and effectiveness is often dependent on the personality of that minister, as well as the relative power of their position in the government.

Several INGO and CSO representatives said that the government plays a major role in managing information, in some cases restricting information flows to communities and local leaders with whom humanitarian agencies are trying to work. This management of information and data has had an impact on the situation and on humanitarian actors’ ability to be effective in the context. As one UN staff member explained, “All information is kept at the state level. It doesn’t trickle down to the township level, where there’s the least information and the most potential for conflict.”

While the CDA team was only able to interview a limited number of local government officials, they discussed coordination and collaboration between the government and

\begin{flushright}
We need more strategy and an anchoring process and more investment on working with the government. - INGO Representative
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{37} See: Roos: 2013.
\textsuperscript{38} E.g. WHO reports to the Minister of Health, but WFP reports to the Border Affairs and National Races Development Department.
humanitarian agencies (both local and international) as the main priority for an effective response. When discussing the importance of coordination as key to the government’s effectiveness, one representative explained, “Everyone involved including the government and the beneficiaries should know how people are responding and with what they are responding and for whom they are responding. Coordination and information are key for effectiveness, and are still not clear here.”

Determining entry points for collaboration with the government at local, state, and national levels and fostering those relationships remains critical for humanitarian actors in the Myanmar context. Agencies seen to be most effective were those that had spent time cultivating and establishing a strong relationship with their respective ministries, and in some cases, with the local police forces. Trust building and increased transparency between international actors and the government remains essential for effective collaboration. Nurturing relationships with the various levels of government, however, can also pose challenges for international actors. Some felt that relying too much on the government could affect their neutrality. Others said it could slow their ability to respond, particularly to the needs of people who may be in opposition to the government or not recognized by it.

Even when there is increased trust between international/national agencies and the government, the government’s resolute control over operations within the country perpetuates a sense of disempowerment among other actors, as they must wait for government decisions before they are able to take effective action. Many international and local agencies, for example, said that the government has the power to shift the current interventions from a humanitarian response mode to a long-term development approach. To this end, INGO and CSO representatives also suggested that it is the government’s role to focus on addressing long-term challenges (including infrastructure, health, education, and economic development), and especially in articulating a vision for transitioning from humanitarian responses through political solutions and addressing poverty, inequality, and other underlying causes of the conflicts. The lack of an articulated government national development agenda has effectively placed international and national agencies in, as one INGO representative said, a “humanitarian holding pattern” preventing them from developing an effective transition

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strategy to address the long-term national development challenges (which are often key drivers of the conflicts).

3.3.3. Perceptions of Other Stakeholders and their Roles

The government expects INGOs and the UN to support the government’s plans and response efforts. Several of the government representatives that spoke to the CDA team, however, stressed that INGO and UN plans must occur within the confines of the memorandums of understanding (MoUs) that agencies signed with the government. This assertion that INGOs need to operate within their mandates, illuminates the government’s perception that INGOs and the UN agencies sometimes operate outside their agreements. At the same time, particularly in Kachin, a government official suggested that local CSOs’ capacities need to be strengthened so that they can operate more effectively. He explained that since many local actors were originally operating as religious organizations, engaged in development initiatives, shifting their focus to humanitarian emergencies would require enhanced technical expertise and abilities.

3.4. International NGOs and UN Agencies

3.4.1. Role in Humanitarian Response

In Rakhine State, the number of international aid agencies and international staff significantly increased after the 2012 surge of violence, and there are few local organizations involved in the response (particularly in the Muslim communities). Prior to June 2012, only a few international aid organizations, such as UNHCR and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), were operating in the northern region of the state assisting the most vulnerable population, which is largely Muslim. In Kachin, the humanitarian response has been principally led by local organizations and only recently have international agencies been granted access to the NGCAs.  

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40 Bacchin 2012
INGOs, UN staff, and the local government officials that the CDA team spoke with almost universally said that the UN has the responsibility for coordinating the international humanitarian response. In general, many INGO and UN representatives felt that more strategic collaboration is, or at least could be, helpful in making humanitarian responses more effective. Many said that coordination is more than simply information sharing and should really focus on more coordinated and collective action. Government officials echoed that the lack of collaboration acts as a hindrance to their effectiveness, particularly in situations when officials are not included in the coordination process between local and international agencies.

In Myanmar, many INGO and CSO actors explained that they are expecting and waiting for a government plan to align with and to support. In its absence, however, they feel the UN needs to take a stronger leadership role in bringing the various actors together. Several representatives also suggested that they expect the UN to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian operations by working with the range of actors to bridge the humanitarian and development divide. Furthermore, they expected the UN to also identify ways to address the underlying causes of the conflicts, and to work with the government to better prepare for natural disasters.

3.4.2. Perceptions of Effectiveness

INGO and UN agency staff explained that over time they have seen their role in humanitarian responses change, not only in how they work, but also with whom they work. Several international staff discussed this shift by explaining that in the past their role was to immediately respond to the situation by working directly with local populations through local structures. Now, however, many internationals have little to no interaction with affected populations, and they do most of their work through partners or from behind a desk, remotely. One UN staff member explained, “We used to spend 90% of our time in the camps talking to refugees, and now it’s the complete opposite. We can’t advocate for anything if we don’t go and talk to the people themselves.”

Government officials also echoed this concern, and commented that international actors often intervene in the context and respond as if humanitarian action was occurring in a vacuum. Furthermore, several CSO and government representatives felt that the
international response to humanitarian needs should be contextualized and that international agencies do not understand or consider the other actors (government, local civil society, and even affected populations) who are already responding to the crisis. The CDA team noted that commonly this behavior excludes key actors from critical conversations and decisions, which can reduce the level of effectiveness in the response.

Many international actors discussed how donor-, headquarters- and mandate-driven decisions did not align with the realities in the field and stifle their flexibility and creative problem solving. Several went on to suggest that this disconnect is often not only reflected in programming, but also seen in funding streams and personnel structures and policies. Such gaps between realities in the field and HQ-driven principles and mandates can hinder the response (See: Box 2). Studies by other researchers suggest that while speed and helping those most in need are essential when responding to an emergency in the short-term, the international humanitarian system is not well structured to address the long-term engagement in situations of protracted crises.41

![Box 2: Example in Rakhine State](image)

In both Rakhine and Kachin States, humanitarian actors have been involved well beyond the anticipated response timeline. This has led to discussions about when humanitarian efforts should end and where development begins. Many INGO and UN representatives said that clearer exit strategies are a priority in making this shift a reality on the ground. As one UN staff noted, “We have reached a saturation point. It is time to think about the exit strategy...exit strategies have implications for donors too.” The different humanitarian and development donor funding sources, timeframes, and processes incentivize aid agencies to spend money on short-term and limited efforts, and not to develop a clear exit or transition strategy.”42

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41 See: Teff 2013.
42 The 2013 World Humanitarian Data and Trends reinforces this: “In particular, the model of short-term responses to recurrent crises has not led to long term improvements for affected people. Moving to an approach where humanitarian and development sectors work together to provide better-targeted aid that can build the resilience of vulnerable communities to climate and other shocks is a promising alternative.” For more see OCHA 2013(c).
Due to short-term funding and programming, international humanitarian agencies tend to have regular turnover of staff and leadership in field offices. This turnover makes it hard to maintain institutional memory, technical capacity, understanding of the context, and relationships.\textsuperscript{43} Foreign staff of INGOs and UN agencies explained that they have a profound recognition for the essential role that national staff can play in analyzing conflict dynamics and determining the appropriateness of project details. Given sensitivities in the Myanmar context, however, some were concerned about the potential biases of national and local staff and have found it difficult to ensure that a range of perspectives are included in analysis and planning of humanitarian activities.

Representatives of local organizations, affected populations, and even some private sector actors suggested that the role of the UN should be more focused on advocating with the government for more durable solutions. IDPs in both Kachin and Rakhine, for example, suggested that it is the role of the UN to push the government to make changes, whether those changes include coming to the table for peace talks or identifying solutions for structural issues driving the conflicts. Many also urged the UN to take a larger role as an advocate for improving conditions in the camps, changing the rules and regulations (such as the CSO registration requirements), and working with donors to change their strategies to reflect realities on the ground. Many UN representatives did not disagree with this perspective of their roles, and their strength in the context. Several UN staff, however, suggested that taking on such a role is quite challenging due to the volatile nature of the UN’s relationship with the Myanmar Government. One representative explained that the UN and donors have to walk a fine line, on the one hand to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those most in need, and on the other to push the government to make significant changes in the ways in which it operates.

3.4.3. Perceptions of Other Stakeholders and their Roles

Similar to CSOs, many INGO representatives said that it is the role of the government to set the long-term agenda. As previously mentioned, many indicated that their programming was in a “stand still” until the government could articulate a vision for the future.

INGOs, UN agencies, and CSO representatives all explained that the role of local organizations could be enhanced through larger funding streams and greater technical

\textsuperscript{43} See: Lange and Quinn 2003; Loquercio, et al. 2006.
knowledge, which could have a dramatic impact on the effectiveness of the response. As one UN agency staff noted, “They [CSOs] are not meeting SPHERE Standards, but they also have limited capacity and resources. I’m one of those people who appreciates them, but I can only advise.” The CDA team noted that the need to strengthen local civil society was acutely apparent in Kachin. Several representatives from INGOs and UN agencies, along with civil society actors themselves, suggested that a more robust civil society could influence policies affecting other humanitarian actors (such as their access and ability to work in and with affected communities). As one CSO representative explained, “We have individual relationships with the ministers. We are able to deal with them informally, when others deal with them in formal ways. We have a good understanding with the Myanmar government.”

3.5. Private Sector

3.5.1. Roles in Humanitarian Responses

Companies have played a larger role in responses to natural disasters than in areas affected by conflicts, which are more politically sensitive. Some of the multi-national companies, for instance, gave directly to the government’s response efforts or supported the rebuilding of local infrastructure after Cyclone Nargis, while others provided helicopters, fuel, and other support to international NGOs. Local architecture and construction companies were involved in rebuilding efforts, while other companies supported the reconstruction of schools and hospitals through their foundations or through international and local NGOs. This follows the global trend of increasing numbers and types of partnerships between companies and local and International NGOs.

While many local, national and international businesses assisted with the responses to Cyclones Nargis and Giri, they are not currently playing a role in the responses in Kachin or Rakhine. One international company representative explained, “The UN responses are well coordinated on the ground and I can’t see in a conflict area us (private sector) doing a better job than them.” Many of the company representatives said that they did not feel as if they could provide assistance any better than those currently doing it and that they had no desire to become involved in politically sensitive contexts such as Rakhine and Kachin.

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44 See: Zyck and Kent 2014.
A desire to remain neutral by avoiding intervention in humanitarian responses related to conflict is common among private sector actors, and frequently heard by CDA. CDA’s work on responsible business practice suggests that there are several reasons for private sector actors to play a role in humanitarian responses to natural disasters as opposed to conflicts:

- Stakeholders – A company will more likely respond to a crisis when its’ stakeholders are directly impacted by the situation, in order to maintain stakeholder confidence.
- Direct Risk to Operation – A company is more likely to be involved in a humanitarian response if the emergency directly affects their ability to operate. In the case of Cyclone Nargis, many companies had to shut down their operations due to the crisis, and therefore their participation in the direct response was necessary.
- Reputational Risk – Due to the highly politicized nature of the conflicts, many companies are concerned about the perception that they might be taking sides in a conflict environment, which not only inhibits their ability to operate, but can also foster larger challenges for the companies’ shareholders.
- Lack of Capacity – Companies are not experts in responding to humanitarian emergencies, and therefore, do not have the spare human resources, equipment, or expertise to best to respond.

3.5.2. Perceptions of Effectiveness

There are several key factors that enable companies to be effective in responding to humanitarian crises in Myanmar. There is a strong tradition of giving in Myanmar and local business people often contribute to efforts in the areas where they work or where they have a connection (i.e. through the local monasteries or their own charitable foundations/organizations).

Company representatives (both national and international) explained that their effectiveness was due to their longstanding presence and relationships in the communities, and the connections they already had in place with the government. As one multinational company representative explained, “We are part of the local community. We have to be. We spend a lot of time with the community and building systems. When you listen to people and build relationships over time, it makes it easier to respond to issues... We focus on the long-term process, and once a crisis happens we’re already in
place and it’s easier to respond.” While the CDA team was unable to reach a large sample of private sector actors, the company representatives interviewed suggested that humanitarian responses are often made more effective through the cultivation and maintenance of relationships with local populations. These relationships often afford private sector actors with immediate and better access to those affected by the crises. Such relationships can also provide corporate actors with a strong understanding of the local context, capacities, and needs, which can position them to provide a quick and effective response during crises.

Company representatives also discussed the flexibility and ease with which they can make decisions and shift funding and assets as factors that contribute to their overall effectiveness when they choose to engage. The CDA team noted that government and several of the INGO representatives had expectations that the private sector would engage in logistical support during a crisis. These expectations, however, generally had to do with rebuilding post-disaster or logistical support during the crisis, and did not typically seem to extend to supporting local populations during conflict related crises.

3.5.3. Perceptions of Other Stakeholders and their Roles

In terms of collaborating with the international humanitarian system, some private sector representatives noted that humanitarian agencies are seen to be competing with each other to be the first on the ground and that there are a lot of different organizations with different agendas. Others thought that INGOs have high overheads and are “process heavy.” Several explained that companies prefer to donate directly and immediately to those in need when disasters occur through their established relationships with local institutions and communities.

Section IV – Contextual Issues Affecting Humanitarian Effectiveness

4.1. Context and Conflict Sensitivity Are Essential to Effectiveness

Universally, people engaged in humanitarian work in Myanmar talked about the complexity and rapidly changing nature of the national and local contexts and how this affects their roles and understanding of what it means to be effective. The general “opening up” of Myanmar to the global economy and the dramatic shift from a military junta to a more democratic structure plays a significant role in the operational realities of humanitarian organizations and their ability to be effective. With the large influx of foreign capital and the presence of more international actors, the country faces tensions and pressures that were largely unaddressed during decades of military rule. This includes the history of marginalization of and conflicts with minority groups by the central
government and the Bamar elite. Practitioners and research on Myanmar further suggest that given that the government has been an actor in these conflicts and that its role and capacities are significantly different at the national and local levels, there is a greater need for political economy analysis and conflict sensitive approaches by humanitarian actors.45

While most international aid agencies noted that using a conflict-sensitive approach would lead to a more effective humanitarian response, many suggested that they struggle with how to do this effectively in Myanmar. Many INGO and UN representatives said that they understand the importance of conflict sensitivity tools, particularly in assessing at how their programming can strengthen relationships or exacerbate existing tensions.46 A number of INGO and UN representatives, however, suggested that conflict sensitivity has remained a big challenge for the humanitarian community. One INGO representative said, “Conflict sensitivity is essential for effectiveness but is scary for humanitarians.” Another explained that, “Conflict sensitivity blurs the lines of the purity of [humanitarian] principles.” Many INGO and UN representatives said that using conflict sensitivity tools can pose challenges as it is a different way to engage with the actors, deal with the underlying issues, and requires a good understanding of the context. To this end, conflict sensitivity is also seen to be a technical specialty by many humanitarians, rather than a core competency. This sentiment may cause some humanitarian actors to view conflict sensitivity as more of a political tool.

In Rakhine State the international community has become a flashpoint for tension, largely because of the non-conflict sensitive approaches taken by both humanitarian and development actors.47 Moreover, the UN-supported census process has made it more challenging for international humanitarian organizations to be seen as neutral and effective in both Rakhine and Kachin States. The census, which requires people to identify by ethnicity, is also likely to exacerbate existing tensions in areas where conflicts continue over rights and governance.48

4.2. The Effects of an Authoritative Government on Humanitarian Actors

Even as Myanmar is “opening” to the outside and instituting more democratic reforms, the central government still maintains control, which has implications on humanitarian

46 Anderson 1999.
47 See: Roos 2013; OCHA 2013(a); ICG(b)
48 See: ICG 2014.
access and on the different roles that humanitarian actors are able to play. In Kachin, for example, international agencies are forced to depend heavily on local CSOs for access to the non-governmental controlled regions. This is primarily a result of the unresolved conflict between the Myanmar government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). Due to CSOs’ long-standing relationships with the community and their local knowledge, they are able to operate and reach remote areas that internationals find hard to access or need permissions from the central government to visit. In this context, locally-based organizations are seen to be more effective in meeting the needs of those affected by the crises, though the scope and scale of their efforts is limited.

The high level of control by the central government has fostered a situation where humanitarian actors have little access to the government. Based in Nay Pyi Taw, the central government can be hard to reach and work with, and this has created an expectation that the UN, and UNOCHA in particular, would be the link between the central government and other humanitarian agencies, enabling more engagement at the local level where crises are occurring. Positioning the UN as the central link between agencies and the government, however, raises questions about the appropriate role of donors and diplomats vis-à-vis the UN when addressing political problems (such as the crisis in Rakhine and the INGO/UN role in that conflict, as well as the emerging issues with the census). Additionally, questions regarding how donors and the UN can be more effective in strengthening the relationship with the government, to ensure humanitarian access and principles are upheld, were raised by a number of international actors.

4.3. Media Coverage Affects Donor Funding Priorities

Media coverage of humanitarian emergencies and the nature of donor funding cycles also have implications for the humanitarian system and how it sets priorities. Many INGO and UN representatives noted that the amount of media attention received by any particular emergency affects the degree to which donors fund the response. As media attention shifts, funding often moves with it. An INGO representative explained the perverse effects of the need for media attention to instigate support, “If you want funding you will be tempted to exaggerate the needs. Donors could be the ones to correct this situation.”

Issues surrounding media attention and funding were raised by INGO and UN representatives in Kachin State. Several representatives suggested that they were
struggling to meet their funding goals due to increased attention to and funding for the crisis in Rakhine State. As an INGO representative explained, “Donors can create problems and solve them. They have a big role.” Indeed, quantitative surveys of press coverage of humanitarian crises has shown that, “in terms of column inches, acute disasters attract significantly more attention in proportion to their actual severity than long-term crises, with a strong correlation with the amount of money donated by the public.”

Section V – Conclusions and Implications for Conceptualizing Humanitarian Effectiveness in the Future

5.1. Contextualize Humanitarian Principles and Mandates

The universality of humanitarian principles will continue to be challenged in the future as humanitarians engage in politically sensitive contexts where larger geopolitical and economic interests are continuously at play. CDA’s experience in Myanmar and research from the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) stress the crucial importance of context in relation to humanitarian principles. Research notes that implementing an effective and principled approach is highly dependent on the context and the humanitarian system in the country, and that this will change significantly over time. HPN’s study argues that, “...a principled approach has profound implications for the way an organisation works and explicit conceptual and organisational links need to be made between principles and practice.”

Another study furthers this idea and suggests that, “...in an operational context, neutrality means that humanitarian workers must stand apart from the political issues at stake in a conflict. Yet, the expansion of the sphere of humanitarian work to include conflict resolution, peacebuilding and peace enforcement gives rise to ambiguities and necessitates the abandonment of neutrality.”

Contextualization is of particular importance in Rakhine State, where the focus on those most in need of assistance and whose rights are not recognized led to the perception that international actors were not impartial. International humanitarian actors in contexts like that of Rakhine might consider the ramifications of taking only a principled approach,

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49 Matthews, 2009.
50 Leader 2011.
51 Ibid.
particularly in an environment where there are large numbers of people who are unfamiliar with humanitarian principles and standards and who may be suspicious of the increasing number of organizations engaged in humanitarian and development efforts.

While all UN agencies and INGOs suggested that humanitarian principles are the foundation of their work and essential to their response, there was a discernable tension between the need for a rapid response and upholding and maintaining these principles given the context in Myanmar. The CDA team noted that in several cases this friction created some clear disconnects, and in others it made doing the work harder or impossible. This divide between humanitarian principles and humanitarian practice has only become worse with the increased politicization of humanitarian aid. Upholding the principles in complex and highly political contexts, such as Myanmar where bigger interests exist has therefore become more challenging for INGOs and UN agencies. INGO and UN representatives that met with the CDA team suggested that the shifting nature of humanitarian action, combined with the rapid growth of different actors with varying interests in the humanitarian system, has led them to question whether the universal application of the principles will be realistic in the future. Several questioned if what constitutes “principled humanitarian action” will need to be defined in each context by those working in it, as opposed to upholding a strict set of universal principles.

5.2. Focus on the “How” as much as the “What”

While the international humanitarian system has improved technical aspects of effectiveness (such as setting up IDP camps according to SPHERE standards), in general it still has a long way to go on some of the “softer” aspects of the work (such as communication, using conflict-sensitive approaches, listening to and meaningfully engaging with affected communities and a range of local actors, building trust, and working in a strategic and collaborative way). In Myanmar, the CDA team noted that many of the local actors, particularly local organizations and some private sector actors, have the relationships with, and the trust of local communities, but they may not operate in the same way or by the same principles as international humanitarian actors expect. Local actors acknowledge that they have a lot to learn, but also note that those coming in from the outside have a lot to learn about the context and how to work in it effectively. This suggests that local and international humanitarians must find better ways to work
together and to tailor their roles and activities to the rapidly evolving local context and realities.

The experience in Myanmar suggests that international humanitarian actors should consider more conflict-sensitive approaches to their work. This may include performing more thorough context analyses to ensure that they fully understand the dynamics, stakeholders, and interests that may affect their operations and principles. Humanitarian actors should consider changing not only their approach to partnerships, but also their operating procedures and in some cases their principles to match the context in which they are operating. International humanitarian organizations may need to modify their internal structures (such as staffing, reporting, and funding structures) and traditional modes of operating to incorporate the strengths of emerging or non-traditional actors in order to play the most effective role they can (which in some cases may be more of a facilitative and brokering role rather than an implementing one).

Finding more creative and sustainable ways to identify and support local initiatives and existing capacities, on which to build humanitarian structures, may help the international community to respond to local needs more effectively. The JSC in Kachin, for example, should be seen as an organic humanitarian structure that has helped to improve effectiveness of CSOs in meeting humanitarian needs. Examples like this may provide internationals a better avenue to engage local structures and build on existing strengths to improve the effectiveness of all humanitarian actors. Traditional and new humanitarian actors need to explore new ways of working together to strengthen local capacities and structures in order to improve the overall response and enhance the role and effectiveness of local actors in the future.

Limited communication and lack of trust between international humanitarian actors and affected communities was discussed by many of the actors as an impediment to effectiveness in Myanmar. This was a key message that emerged from affected populations in both contexts, but was particularly emphasized in Rakhine State. All actors engaged in humanitarian responses emphasized the importance and the need for greater relationship and trust building between all those involved in the contexts. IDPs said that relationships can be developed by simply listening to those most closely connected to and affected by the conflict. While many INGO and UN agency representatives know that participation and accountability are core humanitarian principles and standards, many either did not know how to facilitate it or felt that time pressures, access, and funding constraints limited their abilities to effectively engage with those affected by the crises.
Trust was also inherently linked to communication and the sharing of accurate information. While many people commented on its importance, a focus on improving communication and dialogue seemed to the CDA team to be a missing element between the international community and the local populations in both contexts. Many affected communities in Rakhine (both Muslim and Buddhist communities) felt as if the international community did not adequately hear their voices, needs, and concerns. This lack of communication has contributed to a situation where the local population perceives the humanitarian community as unresponsive to their needs, reducing the effectiveness of the response, and weakening the foundation for future collaboration.

The basic architecture of the international humanitarian system, including staffing, leadership, the cluster system, funding mechanisms and timelines, and (often perverse) incentives generated lively conversations among many of the INGO, UN, and even local CSO representatives. Short-term planning and funding timelines combined with the frequent turnover of staff and leadership has made it difficult for many international humanitarian actors to maintain institutional memory, technical capacity, and a thorough understanding of the context. Leadership and personalities were also raised as critical, yet intangible, factors in an effective humanitarian response.

5.3. Explicitly Link Short-Term Relief with Long-Term Development Efforts

While humanitarian agencies must act quickly in the short-term, challenges tend to arise when they lose sight of or ignore the long-term needs and underlying causes of the crises they are responding to. When needs persist longer than expected, “[it] may result in a protracted, ‘long-term’ humanitarian presence with additional confusion and uncertainty about triggers for international humanitarian response and poorly defined exit strategies.” Given the long-term and structural causes of the conflicts in Myanmar, humanitarian agencies should engage more strategically with development actors including the government, local organizations, the private sector, development counterparts in their own agencies, and especially with affected communities, to address the underlying vulnerabilities. While it is important to respond quickly to immediate needs, more flexible and better aligned funding, improved planning and coordination, and strengthening of local capacities will

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54 Gelsdorf 2010:10.
enable stronger linkages and a smoother transition between humanitarian and development efforts. One donor representative stated this clearly saying, "We need to link relief to development planning and strategies in order to be more effective."
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