



Disaster preparedness: lessons from cyclone Nargis

The reluctance of the military junta to allow aid into Burma slowed down the response of aid agencies, and showed that without local capacity, humanitarian assistance is often too late

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It has been five years since the worst natural disaster in Burma's history, cyclone Nargis, which affected the lives of 2.4 million people. I was part of UNFPA's emergency response team that travelled to Burma from Europe and United States and since the floods, I've been reflecting on my experience there and lessons learnt. How would the humanitarian response need to change if the same happened again?

As a result of the cyclone, 75% of Burma's health facilities in the affected areas were destroyed or severely damaged. UNFPA were to provide essential reproductive health supplies. Speed was critical. If emergency obstetric care was not made available, a pregnancy could be fatal for a mother and child.

In co-ordination with country office staff, we procured and shipped life-saving supplies which were handed over to UNFPA's implementing partners for distribution via mobile clinics that could reach thousands displaced in hard hit areas.

At the same time, well-meant gifts-in-kind from other governments began arriving without content descriptions. Most of it did not match the needs of the beneficiaries, and instead just

caused congestion in the warehouse. I saw supplies sitting in the stores when they should have been in the field where they were in desperate need of them.

Initially, experienced western humanitarian aid workers were refused entry to Burma by the military junta which would not waive visa requirements for relief agencies. Some agencies relied on local staff who lacked humanitarian experience of dealing with such a tragedy as it was the first time that Burma had experienced a natural disaster of this magnitude.

Delays in the international humanitarian supply chain sent aid workers scrambling for essential supplies at local markets, carrying large sums of money, and buying essential supplies outside the usual procurement procedures. As a result, prices were inflated, making goods more expensive for the Burmese people too. This situation persisted for two to three weeks until supplies started to arrive from outside the country and the humanitarian response stepped up a gear.

When I think back to that, I am struck by a few things that seem evident but were in short supply then. Being prepared is a much preferred option than having to depend on improvisation in the heat of the moment. Half the battle is won when an organisation has a preparedness plan and relevant information at their fingertips to deal with the particular details of the country in crisis. But for Burma, there was no plan in place.

Linked to preparedness is ensuring that national staff are trained in advance and have the right skills and knowledge necessary to participate effectively in emergencies. This can be done by exposing them to various emerging emergencies through secondment, job shadowing, and leading on an emergency response. It is important to build 'managing emergencies' in personal development plans for local staff in disaster prone areas.

This means building innovative ways to link partners in country and sharing to equip them with the necessary emergency response skills to reduce reliance on expatriate staff. This could include humanitarian logistics structured capacity building and mentoring of national and local staff who are on the ground. It should go without saying that local staff understand the context and culture of their people and should be relied on to kick start any logistics and supply operation when disaster strikes.

There will be other cyclones and other disasters both man-made and natural. To be prepared for them humanitarian organisations should explore the opportunity of using their supply chains to support local production or improve access to markets. Appropriate solutions to disaster relief should embrace local technologies and enable local ownership.

It is equally important that humanitarian organisations to work through their government partners to invest in disaster risk reduction so that high risk countries have country-specific contingency plans which are regularly reviewed, practical, and in place for the most likely emergency scenarios.

In all, humanitarian organisations should appreciate that the key factors to responding quickly to meet disaster survivors' expectations are: local permanent relief logistics facilities; transportation; preparedness of human resource and co-ordination between different parties. Without it, essential supplies and relief will take much longer to reach the people who need it most at the time they need it most.

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