CDA COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROJECTS

LISTENING
PROJECT

FIELD VISIT REPORT
MYANMAR/BURMA

August - December 2009

This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

These documents do not represent a final product of the project. While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

Table of Contents

INDIA

BANGLADESH

CHINA

KACHIN STATE

• Myitkyina

SAGAING DIVISION

Hakha •

CHIN STATE

Lashio •
SHAN STATE (NORTH)

• Monywa   Mandalay •

MANDALAY DIVISION

SHAN STATE (SOUTH)
• Taunggyi

• Kengtung
SHAN STATE (EAST)

LAO
P.D.R

Sittwe •

MAGWAY DIVISION
Magway •

RAKHINE STATE

Nay Pyi Taw •

• Loikaw

KAYAH STATE

Pyay •
BAGO DIVISION
(WEST)

BAGO DIVISION
(EAST)

Bago •

MON
STATE

KAYIN STATE
• Hpa-An
Mawlamyine •

THAILAND

AYEYARWADY
DIVISION

Pathein •

Yangon •
YANGON DIVISION

Myeik •

TANINTHARYI
DIVISION

Background on the Listening Project

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), with a number of colleagues in international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has established the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts. The Listening Project seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by various international actors. Those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, peace-building efforts, environmental conservation and human rights work can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such efforts.

The Listening Teams are made up of staff from international and local organizations, with facilitators from CDA. The teams do not use pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, we tell people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, we are interested to hear from them how they perceive these efforts. Teams ask people if they would be willing to spend some time with us, and to share their opinions and ideas. In this way, we converse about their issues of concern, without pre-determining specific topics.

Many conversations are held with one or two individuals, but in some cases, larger groups form and what begins as small-group dialogues becomes, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. In most cases, conversations are not pre-arranged (except for appointments with government officials and other key stakeholders). A Listening Team goes to a community and strikes up a conversation with whomever is

available and willing to talk, speaking both to people who have and have not received international assistance.

Over a period of four years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty locations around the world, with Myanmar/Burma being the 19th Listening Exercise so far. The Listening Project will gather what we hear from people in all of these locations in order to integrate these insights into future aid work and, thereby to improve its effectiveness.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the people who took time to share their thoughts with the Listening Teams, and on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those staff and community members who were involved in Myanmar/Burma deserve great appreciation for their generous support, insights and dedication to the effort.

Note on Terminology

This report uses the name "Myanmar" to refer to the geographical location historically known as "Burma." Its usage is meant to reflect the terminology of the locals, whose perspectives are profiled herein. The term "conflict"—a relationship between two or more parties (individuals or groups) who have, or think they have, incompatible goals[1]—is often employed throughout this paper, which is distinct from "violence."

The Listening Project in Myanmar/Burma

The Nyein/Shalom Foundation of Myanmar and the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies in Cambodia CPSC, organized the Listening Exercise with CDA in two phases, in August/September and in December 2009.

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[1] Chris Mitchell, *The Structure of International Conflict* (London: Macmillan, 1981). Quoted in Simon Fisher, Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, Jawed Ludin, Richard Smith, Steve Williams, and Sue Williams, *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action* (London: Zed Books and Responding to Conflict, 2000).

In the first phase, there were 17 Listening Team members with 2 facilitators provided by CDA and CPCS, while in the second phase there were 13 Listening Team members and 1 facilitator. Most of the team members were nationals of Myanmar/Burma, many of them staff of partner organizations of the Nyein Foundation. Some were staff members of local NGOs, churches, or other organizations, and 2 were Cambodian. The facilitators were Cambodian and American.

Listening Teams listened to a wide variety of people, ranging from local authorities, Christian and Buddhist priests, villagers/farmers, and NGO staff. Most people expressed some knowledge about aid efforts or international assistance in their area, except for some people in central Myanmar who were unfamiliar with international aid or assistance. Among people who were aware of international aid, a large number of them were recipients of these assistance efforts. In some places people receive assistance directly, but most assistance was provided through NGOs and INGOs' development projects.

Listening Teams were flexible on how and where conversations were held and they talked with both individuals and with people in groups. Government regulations restricted group size to a maximum of ten people; nonetheless people were willing to talk to the Listening Teams and they managed to listen to people in groups more than in individual conversations.

Myanmar/Burma is divided into 14 administrative subdivisions,[2] which include 7 states (*pyi-ne*) and 7 divisions (*tyne*). The names of divisions (except for Ayeyarwady Division and Tanintharyi Division) are also the names of the capital cities. In addition, divisions are Barma-dominant, while states are ethnic minority-dominant. Given the situation in the country, the decision was taken to prioritize reaching the widest range of ethnic groups. The Listening Teams were able to speak with some
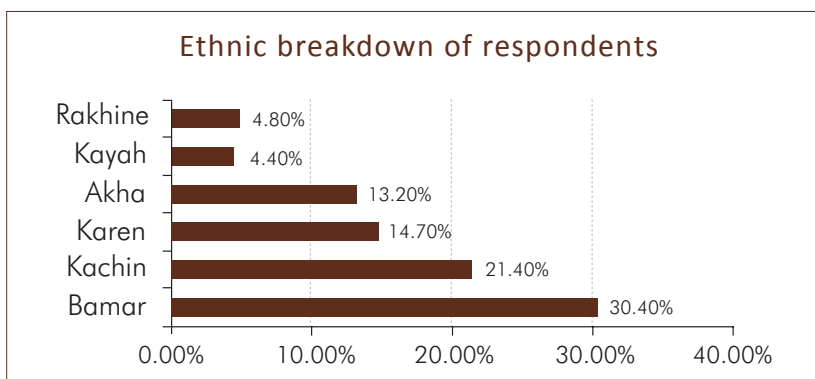
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[2] U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Burma" http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35910.htm (accessed April 27, 2010).

550 people representing 23 different ethnic backgrounds in 15 districts and townships of 4 divisions (Magway, Mandalay, Irrawaddy/Delta and Yangon) and 6 states (Kachin, Kayah, Shan, Mon, Kayin/Karen, Rakhine).

At district and township level, Listening Teams covered: Myitkyina, Mogaung, Laiza, Loikaw, Magwe, Mandalay, Lashio, Taunggyi, Hpa-an, Mawlamyaing, Yangon, Irrawaddy/Delta, Rahkine, Tasche Lake and the Total pipeline area. Due to constraints in time and staff availability, one state and three divisions, Chin State, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Bago divisions, were not covered.
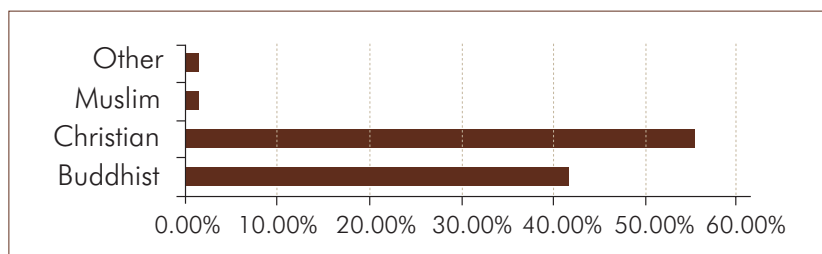
Ethnic diversity and religious identity has been an important issue in many aspects of life in Myanmar/Burma, including aid and assistance. The perception of the general population about international aid is very much influenced by how it has been managed in relation to participation and accessibility of different ethnic groups. As a consequence of the limitations of the Listening Team members, some groups are over-represented relative to their proportion of the population, and some are under-represented, but there are respondents from all the major ethnic and religious groups and many geographic areas.

The following bar charts show the proportion of respondents among the major groups.

Ethnic breakdown of respondents

Ethnic group	Percentage
Rakhine	4.80%
Kayah	4.40%
Akha	13.20%
Karen	14.70%
Kachin	21.40%
Bamar	30.40%

Religious breakdown of participants:

Listening Teams of two people, with at least one from the local area being visited, facilitated the conversations. The approach aimed at collaborative reflection using open-ended questions. People who participated in conversations were assured of confidentiality and that nothing they said would be attributed, or in any way traceable to them or their village. In most cases, people were interested and very open to talking with the Listening Teams. As one person said, "This Listening Project is the first time anyone has come to ask us about our experience. I am very happy about it."

Logistics and conditions for the Listening Teams were very challenging. Many of the teams travelled to distant sites by bus, with journeys of 15 to 22 hours in each direction. They stayed in small hotels or guest houses, and often spent long days on the road to remote villages, meeting with people until nightfall, and then returning to write up notes. The organizers wish to thank the team members and the communities for their commitment to this process, and for their interest in discussing international assistance to Myanmar/Burma and how to improve it.

Following the field visits, the Listening Teams came together and shared what people said in the different locations, drew out common themes, patterns, and divergences, and engaged in preliminary analysis of the evidence. Final analysis and report-writing rested primarily with the lead co-facilitators and the lead organizations, with input from the team members.

Despite our efforts to reach a broad range of individuals, we acknowledge what we heard represents only a small fraction of the opinions and ideas of the people of Myanmar/Burma. We therefore do not draw broad conclusions from this effort, but hope that we have captured the pulse and tapped into the experiences of a range of people on the receiving end of international assistance efforts.

A Brief History of International Assistance to Myanmar/Burma

People have experienced various forms of international assistance, in a range of circumstances, over a long period of time in Myanmar/Burma. The earliest forms of aid came from missionaries, who are still an active group in the country, and who often stay for a long time, learn local languages, and know communities well. Development agencies followed, whose local staff may stay for several years and provide several forms of assistance, often with active community involvement, but with international staff who tend to come for shorter periods of time. Humanitarian assistance has generally been provided in a much shorter timeframe, with aid often based on needs assessments commissioned from outside.

Aid to Myanmar/Burma is seen as politicized. Despite some international agencies having had a presence in the country for nearly 20 years, the amounts of international aid have been relatively small compared to other developing counties in the region. However, aid efforts have increased recently due to natural disaster relief, particularly following the cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

Prior to 1988, the self isolation of the ruling junta led to little in the way of assistance between international aid agencies and the government. However, some direct funding relationships with local NGOs, church groups, and hospitals were continued under the banner

of supporting basic needs and community development. International agencies such as the UN and international NGOs have to work under strict regulations, based on a signed MOU between the agency and the government. There has also been some support to small social enterprises from diaspora groups living abroad, and international discourse on Myanmar is primarily framed by these diaspora groups, namely the UK and US Campaigns for Burma.

Myanmar/Burma also receives bilateral assistance in the form of loans and security cooperation grants from a number of countries such as China, India and Russia, specifically supporting the Government's infrastructure development projects. For example, new roads have been built to connect to roads along the Chinese border in the northern region. However, many of these particular types of aid are often not known publicly.

People noted that aid had increased greatly in three particular areas: 1) those affected by cyclone Nargis; 2) those where ethnically-based militias agreed on a ceasefire with government; and 3) those where the Government had shut down opium production. Each region in Myanmar has had different experiences with foreign assistance. It was the perception of the Listening Teams that more assistance has gone to ceasefire areas, such as Kachin State, than non-ceasefire areas such as Chin, Kayin and Kayah State. There is also less aid going to what locals describe as the dry zone in central Myanmar, where the majority of the population belongs to the Bamar ethnic majority. Due to travel restrictions it was not possible to explore this issue further and therefore no firm conclusions can be drawn at this time. The difference, if any, of outside assistance to ceasefire and non-ceasefire areas is a topic for future research. In general, most emergency/recovery assistance is concentrated around Delta/Irrawaddy division, especially the area affected by Cyclone Nargis.

In Rakhine State, foreign aid efforts have become part of the local conflict dynamics. For example, Rakhine people perceive the Muslim minority in the north, the Rohingya, to receive considerably more assistance from the international community than the Rakhine do. On the other hand, Rakhine people felt they are more likely to receive aid from the government than the Rohingya are. In general, however, all forms of aid tended to concentrate on areas affected by Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

The difficulties and complexities of providing assistance to people in Myanmar/Burma are well described in Paul Douglas Inwood's 2008 master's thesis:

> The people of Myanmar continue to suffer chronic economic and humanitarian problems despite the country having plentiful natural resources. Myanmar ranks 130 out of 177 (on a descending scale) on the UNDP's 2006 Human Development Index. These dire humanitarian problems could be improved through proper governance and the required expenditure being made in social sectors. However, the junta continues to take much of the available public funding for defense spending, to utilize for its own projects (such as the building of Nay Pyi Taw), or for the leadership's own personal use).
>
> Aid to Myanmar remains a sensitive political issue in many quarters. There are hard-line activists working internationally who do not support humanitarian assistance going to Myanmar and there are certainly incidences where political pressure may have stopped or limited aid. The junta's poor human rights record and lack of positive steps toward democracy make any engagement, including aid, with the country contentious.
>
> As the government has near total control over the country, agencies have limited options but to comply with the conditions the junta sets or to cease operations. Nevertheless, most agencies are

generally of the opinion that they can still operate with sufficient independence so as not to compromise their mandates. The restrictive environment in Myanmar results in agencies exercising a certain degree of self-censorship and attempting to operate their programmes without attracting any negative attention from the government. This is similar to how local people generally live and work. The ability to effectively campaign against the government on humanitarian issues is also limited. Agencies that do challenge the junta encounter major problems and restrictions and in some cases they are forced to stop particular activities.[3]

Aid agencies operate in Myanmar in a difficult situation. There are problems of transportation, isolation, and communication. The context is militarized and polarized, with restrictions on the flow of information and with people living in a climate of fear. The country is large, with limited infrastructure, and there are many areas that are quite remote, difficult to access, and with limited access to information.

For these reasons, there were some anxieties among Listening Team members about whether people would be willing to engage in discussions, have knowledge about the availability of assistance, and whether they would be candid. However, most of those approached were very willing to discuss these issues, in groups as well as individually, and seemed to feel comfortable in the process.

What People Said

In the following sections of this paper we elaborate on the most prevalent issues and themes voiced by people. Below is a summary of these findings followed by more in-depth explanations of each point and illustrative stories and quotes from people on the ground.

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[3] Inwood, P.D."International Humanitarian Assistance to Myanmar." MA Thesis, Massey University, 2008, p. 98-102

Summary of Findings

Overall Experiences with International Assistance

- Most people expect to have to take care of themselves, rather than expecting assistance from the government. Most of the aid they experience comes from international or NGO actors.
- Aid is seen as politicized, because of years of self-isolation by the government; the imposition of sanctions and conditionalities on the part of international agencies and governments; and international and diaspora activists working to stop assistance to the country, which they see as propping up the government.
- Many people's most significant experience of aid was in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, and this was largely in the form of humanitarian aid.

Positive Effects of International Assistance

- Many improvements in the quality of life were attributed to international aid efforts, including treatment of malaria and HIV/AIDS, infrastructure such as roads and water systems, agricultural improvements, child protection, and education.
- There was recognition that aid is offered in order to help people in times of need.
- There were also less tangible benefits, including building community unity, challenging local practices, and modelling changes in behaviour which nearby villages see as beneficial and take up themselves.
- Good experiences with international assistance have brought new knowledge and techniques, and encouraged community participation and a sense of ownership.

Criticisms of International Assistance

- The most common criticisms were that aid either encouraged pride and ethnic nationalism, or left people dependent and willing to receive anything given.

- People contrasted this with what they preferred: long-term development assistance, with full involvement of the local community in decisions.
- There are difficulties in knowing how to access aid, and some communities get very little.
- Needs assessments, project design, and project implementation ought to involve the community more to ensure that priority needs are addressed in ways that are culturally appropriate.
- Recruitment of staff is critiqued as ethnically biased, and also prioritizing credentials rather than local knowledge.
- Distribution of aid is also seen as biased by ethnicity and region.
- There is often inadequate explanation or training in how to use new materials, so they may not be used optimally.
- There was a widespread feeling that, because communities were not adequately involved in the early stages, they did not know what to expect of aid agencies, and did not view the aid they brought as belonging to themselves.
- There were complaints of corruption, both by aid agencies and by government officials. Many thought that less than half of the assistance reached communities.
- Coordination between NGOs and between NGOs and government was lacking. This led to neglecting some communities, or duplication of efforts, or difficulty in accessing aid.
- Aid sometimes exacerbates local conflicts, for example, by inequitable distribution of goods or unequal access to services.

Contradicting Views

- **Recruitment:** Some people felt strongly that NGOs should preferentially hire local staff who know the area, while others thought that this led to ethnic biases in programs.
- **Local contributions:** Some complained that international agencies expected local communities to provide a certain percentage of the total project funding (often through "in kind" contributions such as labor or materials.) Others thought this was a very good way to build a sense of ownership and involvement.

- **Values:** Some criticized international agencies for ignoring or over-riding local culture and values, for example in providing sex education to young people. Others were pleased that international agencies challenged cultural assumptions, and thought they should do more of this.

Overall Experiences with International Assistance

People's views of international aid are framed by history, by their own experience, and by their expectations of government and of international assistance providers. People's expectations of the government are very low, and they are accustomed to having to provide for themselves, and are not encouraged to claim basic services as a right. The basic services that are available in Myanmar/Burma have long been provided by ethnic or religious associations, by missionaries, or by NGOs. Because people see the provision of basic services as falling under the jurisdiction of NGOs or other local groups, when basic needs are not met, the common reaction may be to blame NGOs or the international community, rather than the national or local government.

The Listening Teams heard complex and multi-level grievances, and there was more negativity and disillusionment than was expected by local and international staff working to provide assistance. An over-arching theme was that aid efforts either encouraged an attitude of pride, self-reliance and ethnic nationalism, or left people willing to receive anything given, either for personal or group benefit.

Listening Teams repeatedly heard in different regions that aid should focus on helping fulfill a community's long-term dream, rather than small-scale projects or short-term emergency assistance or aid. As a villager from Mandalay said, "We do have our own resource, the aid should only enable us to use our resource, and then we can manage it ourselves." Similar comments were heard from other regions as well: that local communities have plenty of resources, and they would be better off economically by themselves if there is good infrastructure and human

capacity and skills to extract or make use of those resources.

Similarly, traditional leaders, such as Buddhist monks and Christian pastors, often emphasized communal capacities to manage themselves, rather than discussing international aid in the forms of national structures or international agendas. In general, this group of people tended to give negative feedback on aid, particularly I/NGO limitations in understanding local culture and the lack of consultation with community members. It was felt the emergence of numerous NGO actors is not good for communities because it creates confusion amongst the population and corrupts the attitudes of NGO staff.

Listening Teams also heard mixed messages on the positive and negative aspects of aid, but many people pointed to the same issue: that NGO staff, both local and foreign, as well as community members, will try to direct aid to groups they belong to or identify with, before those most in need. NGO staff members often talk about their accomplishments, while community members perceive NGOs as creating more problems for the community. People see the roles of NGOs varying from being social workers to middlemen who exploit the people via their roles and status.

I.   Positive Effects of International Assistance

Listening Teams heard a variety of statements regarding the positive impacts of international assistance, particularly for health, education and infrastructure-related assistance. People commonly cited concrete, measureable improvements in their daily lives, such as wells, gravity-flow water systems, newly constructed schools, reduction in certain sicknesses (in particular, HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria) and improved prenatal care.

Interviewees also praised capacity building initiatives, particularly education and livelihood trainings as they afforded villagers greater opportunities. This was particularly true for education opportunities, both formal and informal, as the nearest school may be several hours away. Such initiatives also serve as a tool of community empowerment,

providing participants with skills which can be used throughout their lives, including to analyse and solve their problems for themselves.

"Because of the project like water supply, personal hygiene of people is improved. People learn to wash their clothes with water, thus less louses on their bodies. Since they can easily get water in the community, fetching water is no longer a burden for them. Having school in the village let the children to study within their village—they do not need to go far to attend class. When [INGO] provides roads, bridges in the communities, people from those communities can travel more comfortably—no more in the water or on muddy road… People are not closed minded because of the efforts of NGOs."

Woman from Loikaw, Kayah State

"[NGO] gave us mosquito nets and some sort of latrine. Sometimes they give us classes on peace leadership education. They give everyone mosquito nets and they do not discriminate against religion or tribe… Most people are happy with the help. Even though the organisation is Catholic, they give help to everyone."

Middle-aged man in Shan State

"[Villager] awareness is raised in different sectors—health, agriculture, education, etc—for a better life. Since people's awareness on basic health care is increased, personal hygiene is improved and diarrhea cases are decreased. Likewise, people become skillful in piping for water supply, composing organic fertilizer."

Middle-aged male from Kayah State

"Before the education is one way system. I have experienced myself. We only know when asked to do and not to do by themselves. But the NGO introduce this new method and the children are able to act by themselves. They know how to do when was asked to do and they also ask questions [now]."

Middle-aged Buddhist Nun from Lashio, Shan State

"This orphanage is very lucky compared to others. We have received much help—well, blankets, buildings, food. [INGO] often check in on us to find out how the children are doing and if we need anything. Once or twice a month [INGO] comes to see the children and see if we need anything."

Young woman, Ngyaungshwe, Shan State

"We have received help from [INGO] to repair the road. Before the road was only mud and dirt, so during the rainy season it was very poor quality. We approached [INGO] to help us build the road and they did… The assistance we received was very helpful, particularly the road because it was long-term assistance and will benefit others in the future… We have more to do, and some of it we can do ourselves [now], but we also need more help."

Middle-aged Village Chief, southern Shan State

"Before people think condom distribution and sex education is a sin. But eventually people got right way of thinking about it by NGOs. People started to allow the HIV and AIDS patient participation to the society without any discrimination."

Middle-aged female NGO staff in Dawei Township

II. Criticisms of International Assistance

Many of these positive comments were immediately followed by a "but"—often comments on what else was needed. In part, this may be a normal, human tendency to focus on unmet needs, and to take for granted what has already been accomplished. At the same time, it is important to take seriously the reservations and critiques, which have much to teach us.

There were a great many negative comments about aid efforts, more than had been expected by some of the Listening Team members, who found this rather discouraging. Negative impacts were seen as results of

how aid is delivered, including a number of issues, such as competition among NGOs, high salaries of NGO workers, inadequate needs assessments, and short-term projects for long-term needs.

A. Access to Aid

People with access to aid get it, but those who need it may not receive assistance because they do not know how to find it, and consequently some needy communities feel that they are excluded from international assistance. This was particularly so for more rural communities but is also common in urban areas, such as Sittwe. This perception may have a "chilling" effect on local communities who might otherwise initiate requests for aid. Some communities perceived it as potentially dangerous to approach major international organisations, because they are closely monitored by the government.

"I don't know where or how to approach INGOs for help. I feel it is dangerous to approach INGOs, but I don't know why. The problem is how to initiate dialogue with an INGO."

Middle-aged man from Rakhine State

"I don't know why other NGOs do not come. Perhaps it is because we are a small village and have very little communication. They may not know about our needs. I have seen INGOs, in northern Shan State distributing mosquito nets and irrigation equipment. I was very happy to see this, but I wish they would do this for us in our village. INGOs have their main offices far away in Yangon, with small field offices in state capitals, if at all. This makes it difficult for us to go to them"

Village Chief from southern Shan State

"Sometimes we see NGOs pass by our villages. It seem the government prohibited our areas to receive assistance or we were not included in target areas of NGOs. And the other thing is our village is in very remote areas, especially hard to reach in rainy season."

Village Pastor, village near Dawei

One interviewee suggested that NGOs primarily operate within their "comfort zone"—areas where communication infrastructure is in place and where the government has given them permission to operate—which excludes the most vulnerable populations. This person, a Catholic priest, said NGOs need to show greater trust and confidence in people residing in remote areas.

B. *Project Assessments, Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation*

There were reports that sometimes projects are implemented even when they are not needed. Some assistance is perceived to be oriented according to NGOs' agenda, not necessarily what communities need. In other words, a project may be implemented in order to suit the needs of the organization (be it the need to implement a certain number of a specific type of project, regardless of whether that project will actually address a community need, or the need to disburse remaining funds before the end of a funding period).

> *"There are times that NGOs do not provide what people really need. For example, according to their needs assessment they provide rain water tanks. In fact people need wells in the community. For some NGOs, the projects come from above, top-down. They should listen to the people from the communities."*
>
> Two men from Loikaw

While programs may be based on needs assessments, people felt that these should be done more often and over a longer period of time. Some suggested that both needs assessments and proper monitoring and evaluation should also be done after interventions have begun, during the implementation process, as well as when projects are finished.

People talked about how short term assistance and the lack of follow-up lead to negative impacts, such as:

- Creating dependency, without sustainability after the assistance is finished.
- Creating negative perceptions and distrust that assistance would fulfill people's expectations.
- Interrupting the problems, but not really solving them. People felt that short term projects, not properly monitored, can actually exacerbate the existing problems.

"Monitoring and evaluation are weak in NGOs. In one village, after a school building was provided by one religious organization, no more monitoring and evaluation were done. As a result, for 14 or 15 years, the school windows were not yet finished. In fact, it should have been done by the people themselves, but they were just waiting. People do not want to continue, if no one will lead them."

Woman from Loikaw

"The project evaluation was not true. Report is so good to believe, but it is not reality. Donors or funders should come and see by themselves the reality of the community's needs. NGO staff should have transparency to donors or funders by reporting the truth, challenges and real needs of the community."

Young male from Mandalay Division

"In the communities, because of NGO work, people are divided. Many committees for different projects of different organizations are formed, and people are divided according to who belongs to which organization...In some communities, after the water supply was provided, people did not want to repair the pipes when they broke. It was because no education was provided before the project. It was also because of the people's attitudes."

Two middle-aged male NGO staff from Kayin State

People also talked about how material assistance alone is not enough and that long-term programs are needed. For example, medical treatment (of particular symptoms, viruses, diseases) was equated with short term assistance, while immunization, preventive care and medical training were equated with long term assistance. Many interviewees also equated long-term assistance and sustainability with awareness and education efforts.

"The NGO has responsibility not only for giving aid, but for the impact of aid."

Recipient of international aid in Cyclone Nargis-affected area

Similarly, some interviewees reported pre-project community needs assessments excluded some villagers because the village was not notified of the assessment ahead of time.

"For example, in the distribution of mosquito nets, there is some problem of unequal distribution. It is because some people are not in the village when they make the needs assessment. And they are not included in the recipient list."

Older male from Dawei Township

Communities want to be involved in projects from the beginning, including community participation in needs assessments, project implementation and project monitoring and evaluation. It was said such involvement would increase community ownership of the project and therefore the project's effectiveness and longevity.

Community Involvement

A key issue many people brought up was the extent of local involvement and participation in projects. Many communities had experience with development programs and expected all aid to be approached in this particular way—that is, a participatory approach which first seeks

increased local capacity supplemented by appropriate material support—and were highly critical of different and less participatory approaches particularly used during humanitarian emergencies.

"Before NGOs implement the development program to communities they should decisively analyze the local situation. For example to allocate development process to IDP's areas creates burdens for them because their situation is most relevant to relief assistance. First you should discover if there is manpower or not. If not you should bring up human resources from local… Sometimes NGOs come and make need assessments and never come back. This kind of condition breaks local people's hope and later is really hard to make trust building. NGOs should encourage local people that they are the most responsible for their regional development than giving hopes. Let the people realize that the ability to change is in their hands."

Middle-aged female from Dawei Township

"The method of [international cooperation] is very effective. They create collective ownership method for community. They encourage more team work rather than individual. Support to individual doesn't fit with this region."

Older Christian Pastor, Dawei Township

"After [cyclone] Nargis, a mass of INGOs/NGOs came in, and it created problems and dependency. Now, they realize the situation, and they are starting to change to a development phase from an emergency phase."

Someone from the Delta region

People were clearly of the view that agencies need improved community participation and consultation. Some communities felt that NGOs developed and implemented their programs without consultation and did not allow for participation from the community. For many, community participation begins in the pre-project assessment period

(see "Poor Communication") and should extend to post-project evaluation .

"[NGOs should use the] Community Organizing Participatory Appraisal (COPA). Live with them, learn from them, and then educate them. Cooperative actions."

Two LNGO staff in Mandalay Division

People said that their voices and concerns are not being heard and that NGOs need to listen to community members more. For instance, some said that aid agencies sometimes ignore the community's priorities, choosing to assist people who would not be selected by the community, or assisting only some people in the community, according to pre-determined selection criteria.

"NGOs implement drilling underground water program at Nyaung Ze, Pahka, Shwe Muk Hti villages. But not successful, they operate only for organization procedures. It is just like for a show or done because of project. Water project didn't work and not useful for this region."

Two older men from Dawei Township

"Projects are time-frame oriented, not human-oriented… International aid agencies should do thorough survey and implement long-term projects. It is also suggested to learn from the experts who focus on human beings, rather than projects."

Man in Yangon

Concerns about levels of participation are also about expectations. Some people suggested that NGOs should work with the people to have realistic and realizable expectations, noting that there has been a lack of awareness-raising about international assistance and its objectives, which has confused people.

C. Poor Communication

Several communities said they had not been told why they were given assistance or for what purpose. They reported that there is no orientation to the materials and equipment given, and some materials are not relevant. Some materials given are not used properly because they do not receive instructions. On one occasion, Listeners were told of aid recipients using mosquito nets as fishing nets or to protect their water buffalo. The person who said this drew a direct connection between the lack of explanation of the projects and of the purposes of the aid given. This comes back to the issue of communication, which is itself based on NGO staffs' interactions and their relationships with the target communities.

"Some assistance are not useful for communities, such as energy saving stove program. [We have an] enormous firewood supply nearby, so people have no concern to use this kind of stove. Also mending old batteries and fixing wire connection training are not suitable with local people [in this area] who don't have access to those."

Middle-aged LNGO Director, Dawei Township

"Real needs assessment cannot be done without having good relationship with villagers. It is necessary for the NGO workers to visit the communities often. Without having close and good relationship with the community people, the real needs of the communities will not be identified…the community people should know the plans of the organization with clear objectives and activities."

Young man from Loikaw, Kayah State

"It is important that local people must understand the project. If they do not understand well, the project will not be successful. However, they will not understand if the explanation is done only once. People from the village need to have things explained many times. For them, seeing is believing; thus, the need to prove to them. To gain their trust,

NGOs need to work as they explain."

<div align="right">Two middle-aged men from Kayah State</div>

There were many more suspicions and misunderstandings due to poor communications, including:

- Assistance is equated with NGOs, instead of, for example, the government. The concept of civil society does not have a long tradition in Myanmar, and many people's experience is with NGOs, which are often seen as privatized, with the suspicion that they are a means of benefiting employees or particular ethnic or religious groups.
- There were also examples of bias, such as Christian NGOs hiring only Christians, or specific ethnic groups—primarily minority ethnic groups—being favored for employment in the civil sector.

In some areas, NGO access is restricted due to security and road access, or because of their agreed upon mandates with the government. These constraints are not well understood by people, and lead to misunderstanding and suspicion of both aid givers and recipients.

It is in the interest of aid-givers, as well as communities, for people to understand differences between humanitarian aid and development assistance. Knowing what to expect and how to interpret what happens could have a major impact on people's suspicions and dissatisfactions.

D. Dependency

People described dependency as being caused in several ways:
- When assistance is given without prior explanation;
- When assistance comes in the form of material aid rather than capacity building (e.g. giving fish instead of teaching how to fish);
- When they receive new types of assistance (e.g. emergency assistance);
- When they receive too much assistance;
- When assistance focuses only on delivery of materials.

Instead, people want self-reliance and to focus on long-term development and planning after they have awareness and training. People talked about how project timeframes are too short and that long-term projects with community involvement in needs assessments, planning and evaluation were seen as necessary. People want "know how" (awareness, skills, leadership training, etc.) before they receive aid. They want to be able to figure things out and to assess their problems for themselves, rather than having NGOs tell the people the issues they face.

People said that the community needs to understand NGO operations and be able to contribute to needs assessments. This kind of capacity-building should be done for the whole community and will encourage greater ownership and participation of the community in the aid process. People expect empowerment, awareness, and human development from NGOs.

People also talked about how training may not be relevant to the contextual situation. NGOs may not even train communities to use project materials properly.

> *"For some NGOs, the projects come from above, top-down… In one village, NGO provided buckets for toilets but some people used them for other purposes like storing drinking water. It means that providing knowledge or educating people before giving material assistance was really weak."*
>
> Two men from Loikaw, Kayah state

E. No Cooperation or Coordination Amongst NGOs

People believe that there is very little cooperation and coordination among NGOs in Myanmar. While NGOs may coordinate at the international and regional level, this is not repeated or visible to villagers at the community and village level. NGOs may be working in the same sector or in neighboring villages, but they do not cooperate and are seen to be working separately. Even if one NGO cannot provide a project

that the community needs, it is unlikely to call in another NGO that could meet that need. The Government organizes meetings for NGOs at the national level, however unregistered NGOs, which constitute a considerable percentage of Myanmar NGOs, are not normally invited.

There is also competition between aid actors, and some NGOs are viewed as focusing more on their reputations than on the communities they are there to help. Such a view may be reinforced by the perceived lack of cooperation and/or coordination amongst NGOs.

"NGOs provide assistance only to the same group of people; there are families who do not receive any assistance because they stay in a remote area. Some families have received some materials but NGOs did not take time to teach us how to use them. The reason, I believe, is that they want to give out things quickly and to work with the easily accessed community because of competition. They do not want to address the real needs, but to try to show how successful their aid delivery mission is."

A villager from Yangon Delta

F. Disappointment and Unmet Expectations

Overall, Listening Teams heard about high expectations of NGOs from the local people, and for the most part these are not being met, or people are disappointed. This disappointment is exacerbated by perceptions of the high salaries and other benefits NGO workers receive. Communities expect commitment and effectiveness from NGOs, but do not feel these expectations are met.

People in local communities often live at a subsistence level, and clearly feel the gap between themselves and NGO workers who have education, transport, and money to buy food. The following quotes highlight the delicate nature of balancing how communities perceive NGO staff identities:

"People see NGO workers as people who help others as well as people who get high salary. Development workers should not be boastful but should be humble and mature."

Two middle-aged men from Kayah State

"NGO staff work for their salary and not to better the communities—when faced with challenges and difficulties, they simply leave or give up."

A farmer from Mandalay

One Listening Team member summarized the result: People were positive about assistance, and negative about NGOs. Or, as another put it, people realized that bad things can come from trying to do good.

Some said that NGO staff lack concepts of development, though this appears to be more of a misunderstanding over how development is defined; community members and NGOs may define it differently. One person pointed out that NGO projects are often timeframe-oriented, rather than human-oriented; that projects occur only during the defined timeframe, whether or not the project objectives were achieved and were sustainable.

"For outside donors, the way they work sometimes is Westernized. They should understand the local context and people. They should understand well about their beneficiaries. It is important to fit with the local context and culture. Since some activities are done depending on the available time of local community people, they cannot be exactly finished according to the plan. Likewise, some programs have to work depending on the unstable political situation in the area, thus it might be beyond the timeframe. Thus, it is important to understand the local situation. For agencies, they should understand their beneficiaries and their needs. If they do not understand, participation of the people will be weak and cannot finish on time. For the community, their

participation can be increased through education but not giving expectations."

<div align="right">Two middle-aged women from Kayah State</div>

Reflection of the Listening Team
Humanitarian aid is different from development assistance. Humanitarian aid workers are likely to move around rapidly, trying to distribute aid as widely as possible, as quickly as possible, rather than engaging in slow, participatory processes of development. Are these results an indication that more attention needs to be paid to people's understanding of what they can reasonably expect from aid workers? Or an indication that communities question whether emergency aid is useful in the form in which they have experienced it?

III. Assistance Exacerbating Local Conflicts

On several occasions, people talked about how aid and/or assistance efforts had exacerbated local conflicts. This was primarily seen as a result of a poor understanding of the local situation, including real community needs (as opposed to wants), community dynamics, and poor aid distribution methods. Inequitable assistance worsened existing conflicts between communities, and was seen as discrimination in distribution. This makes existing conflicts worse, and also feeds people's suspicions that assistance is biased.

Tensions were particularly felt in Rakhine State between the Rakhine and Rohingya, whom the Rakhine view as receiving a disproportionate amount of aid to address urgent needs, which are felt by both the Rakhine and Rohingya. Similarly, as the Rakhine perceive the Rohingya to receive a disproportionate amount of aid, they also are seen to receive a disproportionate amount of NGO jobs, as many NGOs require staff to speak Bengali, and the native Rakhine population do not. A foreign INGO staff member said: "Residents think [INGO] is pro-Muslim because we hire Muslims who speak Bengali. Actually, we hire based on our needs, and we need people who speak Bengali. Muslims have

never said [INGO] favors Buddhists or Rakhine. Our Muslim staff would be at risk if [INGO] left Rakhine State."

"International aid is really weakening ethic groups and causes more conflicts in their community. There are three things which are making main problems, the first one is 'political system', the second is 'staff from NGOs,' and the third is 'cultural conflict.' Political changes are very important, but NGOs' staff are not reliable for their receivers, and the problems of Bengalis and Buddhists are still clashing since 1948. NGOs have been staying long in Rakhine State before Nargis, and our state also used to have more NGOs than other states. But it is clear that we still need more effective aid from international [agencies]."

Buddhist monk from Sittwe

Some people felt excluded from aid distribution, and they did not understand how NGOs classify people to decide who receives aid, and this often exacerbates existing tensions and/or divisions within or between communities. Several interviewees from Mandalay said their village suffered conflict as a result of aid because greedy community leaders preferentially distributed aid. They suggested NGOs directly distribute the assistance, rather than relying on potentially corrupt community leaders.

"Discrimination and greed among community leaders (for example first for himself, second for his family, third for his relatives and the rest is for the community) leads to conflict between community members and point out that this became because of NGO."

Youth Pastor and Nurse from Mandalay Division

"In the communities, because of NGO works, people are divided. They become divided base on who belongs to which organization since many committees for different projects of different organizations are formed."

Two Kayah male NGO staff

"Some organizations have policies to respect race and religion, but in practice they are not respected and they practice discrimination... For example, [if] there are 100 households [and] 30 are Catholic, when NGOs come to work they approach pastors, so pastors only approach their denomination which are the majority. So Catholic feel that the projects are for their denomination and this is the act of discrimination and not the NGO work. This kind of action happen because it is always easy to work with majority as it is easy to call for the meeting for both the pastors and NGOs."

Middle-aged man, Lashio, Shan State

"In our district, if the assistance comes through government, the Rakhine get more while if assistance is through NGOs, the Rohinga get more."

Rakhine Businessman

IV. NGO and Donor Practices

Interviewees raised a number of issues relating to the practices of NGOs and donors. These include criticism of negative practices, such as corruption and staffing policies, as well as areas, such as engagement with the government and local conflicts, where interviewees would like to see greater NGO involvement. Many of those interviewed said there is relatively little government interference in NGO operations in the field, and interviews with I/NGO staff suggested as such. Interviewees emphasized the importance of long-term development projects, particularly regarding awareness, education and capacity building. In short, communities want to be more involved in the aid delivery and implementation process.

A. Misuse of Resources

Several of those who talked to the Listening Teams believed that their community was not receiving all the aid that had been intended—that aid was siphoned away by intermediaries between the donors and beneficiaries.There were also quite a few comments about biases,

unfairness, exclusion, and corruption. These stemmed in part from a basic lack of understanding of what assistance is, and on what basis it is given. Misunderstandings result when some people expect that everyone will get equal assistance, and do not understand that need is a component.

"Not all 100% [of aid] reach to the ground level. Only 25% reach to the community because of government restriction. INGO and LNGO cooperation is so weak. If these two can work together well, it may increase to 50% to the ground level."

Businessman, Lashio, Shan State

"For NGO funds, 50% is used to get permission, 30% for staffing and project management, and only 20% for community."

Man from Mandalay

"It is the system that changed people mind into corruption mind and bribe. There was time which gasoline cost 5 Kyats and later the government sell the limited amount of gasoline, so those who need they use them but those who not need, they sell them in the market with the high price. And those who brought up in such environment, they continue to do that in the NGO work."

Villagers, Lashio, Shan State

It was said that greater NGO and donors oversight of aid delivery methods would result in less siphoned-off aid. Missing or siphoned-off aid was blamed on both NGOs and government.

"Sometimes staff did not distribute, they just left the rice at the village head's house to do the distribution. Staff should be present at the distribution point to see the process themselves. Staff should also inform the beneficiaries which amount they will get and should be with them during the distribution."

Local Vendor, Lashio, Shan State

An older man from Rakhine State said materials which are provided to communities for free are often for sale at local markets. He specifically cited donated school materials, which at local markets sell for several US Dollars, and suggested that it was the responsibility of [the donor] to ensure the materials are distributed free of charge. He suggested [the donor] directly distribute the materials itself, rather than using government distribution channels, which according to this person, is how materials end up being diverted and sold at markets.

Some cited corruption in the form of NGOs claiming to have more programs or staff than they actually had. For instance, two people said that NGO staff asked local workers to sign that they were receiving higher salaries than they really received. In another instance, a local NGO staff was forced out of his job because he could not afford to adequately bribe his local coordinator:

> *"I am working with an international NGO. I will be terminated at the end of this programme period… My complaint about my present organization is that the district coordinator has accepted bribes in order to appoint new staff. The price for the present post I am holding cost the person who is taking it for the coming year… 550,000 Myanmar Kyats… I am losing the job because I cannot afford to provide that sum of bribe."*
>
> INGO Staff, Lashio, Shan State

One local NGO worker commented that people had become smart, and now they know how to please them by lying in order to get more assistance.

B. Staffing Policies

People perceive NGO recruitment as based on credentials rather than willingness or commitment to do the work. These comments often reflected a desire for NGOs to hire local workers, even if they do not have credentials, rather than someone from outside.

"NGOs should not recruit their own denomination and they should have diverse staff because some NGOs, they have all staff from only one denomination."

Middle-aged Catholic nun, Lashio, Shan State

"Religion is also a barrier because sometimes Buddhists provide assistance and Christians are not invited, and when Christians provide, Buddhists are not invited.

Middle-aged businessman, Lashio, Shan State

"NGO staffs are not local so they don't understand the local situation."

Businessman from Sittwe and Yangon

"Staffing of projects should decrease. Instead, there should be more cooperation with locals, recruitment of volunteers and fully funding their allowances."

Muslim man from Mandalay

Two general practitioner doctors in Rakhine State differentiated between locals from Rakhine State and Myanmar nationals from Yangon, saying, *"Top level NGO staff do not understand local needs, culture and are from Yangon—not locals."*

People perceive NGO staff as brokers rather than community workers, and they do not understand clearly the role of NGO staff. Some people feel that NGOs' staff recruitment shows a lack of understanding of the local context, and a lack of commitment to training local people and ensuring local community ownership of programs. There were comments that NGO workers were only interested in high salaries and living in town, while the community expected them to want to live with the community, develop close relationships, and live at the level of local people.

C. *Donor Presence on the Ground*

On several occasions interviewees said NGOs and donors should have a greater presence on the ground, particularly as it relates to monitoring and evaluation of aid projects. It was said that there is pressure on NGO field staff to write a good report, regardless of the actual effects of the project, so as to ensure continued and/or increased funding. It is important to note, however, that such statements generally were made by recipients of international aid, not by NGO field staff themselves. As such these statements should be understood from the perspective of recipients.

"The duty for donors is not only giving fund but also need to care, see the reality and improvement of the community."

Two LNGO staff, Mandalay Division

"For donors when they came to the project site, they should meet and listen to all stakeholders rather than meeting with counterparts [in NGOs] and going back. Donors should try to catch up to grassroots level rather than listen to somebody interpreting [the situation]."

Young female from Dawei Township

D. *Long-Term Development vs. Short-Term Development*

Interviewees often made a distinction between long-term development and short-term development. In their view, long-term development entailed capacity building measures such as livelihood training and education, as well as infrastructure projects such as road, bridge and well construction. In the case of infrastructure, these projects were often seen as having both short and long-term impacts. Short-term development assistance was often equated with emergency humanitarian assistance and the immediate alleviation of specific problems, such as food and medicine distribution. Some people complained that short-term strategies were being used to address long-term needs and vice versa, or that long-term needs were being ignored in favor of addressing short-term needs.

"In providing assistance to the people, the same approach should not be used for different situation. Emergency assistance should be provided in emergency situation, but the same approach, just giving, is not suitable for long-term development. In order to have "change", the real needs must be addressed."

Middle-aged man from Loikaw, Kayah State

"People from this area are not really at the starving stage. Thus the approach should not be the same as emergency cases... Some villages, where IDPs live, are still adjusting their lives in new environment and the economic condition is not stable thus people just want to have money... Assistance should fulfill the real needs of the people and the community."

Two men from Loikaw, Kayah State

Many interviewees called for greater NGO emphasis on "capacity building" for communities and less emphasis on material assistance. Examples of what communities perceive as capacity building include: education and awareness raising, livelihood training such as new agricultural techniques and methods, and leadership training.

"Education is the most important, but it must reflect job opportunities and occupation."

Monk from Karen State

Long-term development projects were often equated with a deeper understanding of real community needs, which according to interviewees is attained by spending time with and listening to the communities. Project time-frames also impact how communities perceive whether a project is short or long-term.

"INGOs have good techniques but weak in mobilizing the community people since they have limited time-frame. Not all people from community know well about the organization and its purpose, and when the field staff cannot explain well to them, misunderstanding

occurred. Since they cannot build the capacity of the community people, the projects are not sustainable."

<div align="right">Man from Yangon</div>

V. Contradicting Views

There were a number of areas where people offered observations which seemed contradictory.

A. *Distribution of aid and the relation to recruitment of local staff*

Many people were clearly watching very carefully how aid was given and who was hired by aid agencies. Some said that aid should be given equally, or in a balanced way, to all groups present, and to all communities, whatever the level of need or remoteness of the community. As one person said, "Don't provide aid just to places where people die." Others were just as firm that aid should be targeted. Some wanted assistance to be based on need, while others wanted decisions to be based on how likely the assistance was to have a good impact or be a good investment.

This seems to connect to the question of whether local and international NGOs should preferentially hire people from the area of the beneficiaries. Some made the argument that local people know the language, culture, and needs of the area, and so staff should be recruited from among them. Others were equally adamant that local staff were more likely to direct aid toward their own relatives, friends, or ethnic/religious group, so it was better to hire people from elsewhere.

Both these issues revealed a high level of distrust and suspicion of aid efforts, as well as toward other communities and ethnic groups in the country.

This, in turn, seemed to relate to another major issue: Many people did not seem to understand very well what aid was intended to do,

and how decisions were made about the allocation of assistance. This was particularly noted when comparing comments from areas which had experienced quite a lot of assistance over a long time, with areas which had much more limited experience with international aid. Those who received aid after suffering from cyclone Nargis, for example, often considered aid as emergency assistance only.

> *"Fertilizer is to increase what we grow, not for our basic living. Living (livelihood) is our own self, our own responsibility.*
>
> Someone from the Delta region

Others had become so accustomed to aid that they could scarcely imagine life without it, while recognizing that it seemed unlikely to continue.

> *"It is good if they can give assistance forever. How can they feed us forever?"*
>
> A villager from Yangon Delta

This connected also to the question of whether people were expecting emergency aid or long-term development. The critiques went in both directions. Much emergency assistance was criticized for not being long-term, developmental, and participatory, while some long-term aid was criticized for offering awareness and training rather than meeting people's basic needs. One person lamented the lack of community commitment to repair donated equipment, while another insisted that the agency which gave a water pump should be expected to maintain it. There is no shared sense of the respective roles of communities and aid agencies, and no shared set of expectations.

And, to complicate this issue further, many people were not at all aware of where assistance was coming from. Many thought all aid came from the government, others that all came from outside the country. Some believed that all NGOs are religiously-based (and biased). Many did

not know which agency had assisted them, where they were based, or what their objectives were.

B. Values

There also seemed to be opposite views on the issue of values. Some reported that assistance programs do not do enough to address values and morality, including progressive change on gender, sex education, and civic education. Others, particularly the older generation, saw sex education and gender awareness as inappropriate to local culture and leading to a decline in morality, or commented that training people in values was not as important as meeting basic needs. For instance the most widely criticized across ethnic groups and regions were condom distribution and sex education for children. One interviewee reported condoms being handed out to children as young as seven years old, which this person said was eroding the moral standing of youth by encouraging promiscuous behavior.

And, at the same time, others commented favourably on the way international agencies model values of respect and equality.

"Some NGO promoting condom seems that they encourage young people to go for sex. Before, they do not know about this but after this they know and want to try. We prefer training on family planning instead. The promoting condom puts us the teachers in difficulties to stopping it… We do not see the NGOs working with government department for example education department and work with teachers especially on this sex education."

Teachers, Lashio, Shan State

"Condom distribution to 5-7 years old children is not acceptable.. The booklet that distribute to young children about sex education on HIV/AIDS is not appropriate because now the children also want to try and before they did not know about this. The information in the booklet is misleading by the children. This thing need to also think about the

culture, custom and tradition of Myanmar before distribution."

Middle-aged Hindu businessman, Lashio, Shan State

"They do not discriminate, and they have respect for human dignity. All are human beings. They are there to protect and rehabilitate victims of human trafficking, child labourers, street children."

Middle-aged male farmer from Shan State

There were particular problems in communities which were already experiencing a clash of values between groups which were culturally different. Aid agencies often seemed unaware of these conflicts, and therefore often had unintentional impacts on them.

Several people commented that every community has its own cultural practices with respect to what individuals are expected to do for others (for example: collaboration, local contribution, donation, voluntary spirit), and NGO assistance diluted this, making people less likely to assist each other voluntarily. Some assistance seemed to make people less community-minded, more individualistic, and less likely to help each other. This was particularly true of assistance which paid or compensated those who were involved.

C. Local Contributions

Many aid agencies expect a high level of involvement on the part of the community, and local "contributions in kind" as part of the program. Some communities agreed with and appreciated this, while others did not. "Local contributions" and having to serve on committees were seen as a burden for some because they disrupted communities' daily routines.

"We are working for the NGOs and not for ourselves. We expect them to work for us, and instead we find we are working for them."

A pastor from a community in Myitkyina

The non-uniformity of NGO practices has led to some confusion, and sometimes conflict, in communities. Specifically, this was said to be an issue regarding community contributions to development projects: some NGOs ask for community participation and/or contribution and some do not. Some communities wanted a greater sense of ownership, and local contributions may be NGOs' way of creating community ownership. Some communities wanted greater participation, while others complained that NGOs formed too many committees and expected them to take time away from their own work to come to meetings. In principle, both parties (NGOs and communities) agree that both have a contribution to make, but are still misunderstanding each other in terms of what can be expected.

D. Aid Agencies' Relations with the Government

A related issue was whether NGOs should cooperate with the government. There were both favorable and unfavorable comments about how certain NGOs seemed to work with the government, both at the local and national levels. There were some who suggested that NGOs should work with the government, saying that this would increase efficiency, while others insisted that aid must be diverted away from government if it was to reach local people at all. Some thought that all aid should come through local development committees, while others told stories of corruption at this level. Some people also said NGOs should take more risks to transform the system at both the local and national government.

"There is corruption among local officials. Aid disappears as it goes through the hierarchy. NGOs should give aid directly to the people, with no government involvement."

A teacher from Rakhine state

"We see that NGOs miss the opportunity to transform the system and practices of the government because they are practicing the same

things as the government, like authoritarian and dominant leadership, favoritism and corruption."

A Catholic priest from Lashio

"In Myanmar we had so much issue on minority versus majority in all level and we need the healing process, we need reconciliation and conflict transformation because more than 40 years that we had experienced our internal conflict and thus we continue to practice disharmony and discrimination—the top-down system hatred and bitterness. And we observed that NGO have not much focus on these areas and also the subjects of conflict transformation, healing, reconciliation is also new."

NGO staff, Lashio, Shan State

A few cases were mentioned where NGOs cooperated with the government and their projects had better results. For example, [an INGO] in Rakhine State has an arrangement with the government to have [INGO] staff in local hospitals to treat malaria, but they are not permitted to work on any other issue except malaria. It was said this enables local hospital staff to focus on other medical conditions, while at the same time increasing the effectiveness of malaria treatments. Some ministerial staff and local authority members said they are willing to cooperate with NGOs, and some communities think that NGOs should take the risk to trust the government and local authorities.

"It is good to involve authority in the process. [An INGO] makes state authority know about the organization's vision, mission, goal and activities. After getting permission for implementing the activities, sometimes they also help in area selection and organizing village track leaders."

Man from Yangon

"INGOs and LNGOs, to be more effective need to build rapport with the local authority. Some NGOs work good but strong cooperation with

the authority is needed… INGOs should make use of USDA (Union Solidarity Development Association) because they have access to every place. The organization and staff should get along well with the government so they can get more access."

<div align="right">An NGO staff based in Loikaw</div>

For the most part, people said the government usually does not directly interfere with NGOs. However, NGOs have to get permission to operate in an area, which may include convincing local and provincial officials. Local authorities do not need to give permission, but protocol includes informing them and giving "gifts." Most communities did not seem to understand that a Memorandum of Understanding with government is necessary in order to provide assistance, and that this may specify what kinds of aid can be given where. Communities called for greater understanding between agencies and beneficiaries to allay suspicions and misunderstandings.

Views differed on whether NGOs, either local or international, should take it upon themselves to change things within the country. One view holds that empowerment alone is not enough when the system remains oppressive. Therefore, it is necessary to change the system as well as empower the people. The opposing view was that the people of the country have their own ways of doing things, and it is not appropriate for outsiders or even local NGOs to try to change this.

"[NGOs] need to understand the ideology and the thinking of the Burmese government. They need respect. And maybe NGO finds it difficult at the state level to cooperate but at local level and township level the government is ready to cooperate with NGOs. Our government is only control in the NPD and they do not control in every place of the country. So we need to understand this and need to cooperate with authority at the ground and township level to get more access and to be more effective."

<div align="right">USDA Staff, Lashio, Shan State</div>

"NGOs should encourage more local people that they are the most responsible for their region development than giving hopes. Let the people realize that the ability to change is in their hands."

Young female from Dawei Township

VI. Insights and Reflections of the Listening Team

The following are reflections and insights by Myanmar nationals of various ethnicities and religions on their unique experience with the Listening Project. For many, the Listening Project was the first time to travel to certain regions, or an opportunity to return to their home state. Such travel and internal exposure opportunities are extremely limited in the Myanmar context and as such these reflections may provide further insight into the complex system of international assistance in Myanmar.

- This was a very interesting experience. I expected NGOs to be praised, but we found lots of complaints against NGOs and that is something that struck me. It was a good chance to bring these complaints to the NGOs themselves so that they can learn to work effectively in our country.

- Even though we were in the community, some people felt they could not talk freely. Many people thought NGOs were Christian organisations, so some were resistant to NGOs because of this.

- My feeling is that NGOs need to select local leaders so that aid can be more effective.

- The activities of the Listening Project are very helpful for developing Myanmar as a whole. In the future if we have more projects like this, I hope there will be more changes in our communities. People want to participate in their development. I learned how to work in a group. Sometimes we had different opinions in which villages to go to, so we had to compromise and come to an agreement. This was a very good experience.

- I learned, especially from [my Listening Group members] and NGO workers. As a citizen of Myanmar we have fear: if we see soldiers with uniforms we are afraid. It is our nature. Because of this trip I can reduce my fear. I am not as excited when I have to interact with soldiers; I am calmer. I learned even NGO workers work with fear; they were not sure if they could trust us at first. I learned if you want to talk to them you have to build credibility. I learned from [my team members] to be calm. Calmness builds on the spirit, I think. I learned about the security situation of the villagers who always said they are afraid of the military government. I also learned the situation of women, and human trafficking is a big issue and very risky in this area. People said [INGO] is a bad INGO, even a [INGO] employee said this. [INGO] uses a lot of money and destroys the people's minds by giving them lots of money. Other NGOs did not want to work in the

same area as [this INGO] because of the type of work they do. Someone said before you train villagers you need to first train social workers. There are two types of NGO workers in Tasche Lake area in Shan State: those with spirit to do the work and those who just want the benefits. So first we need to train social workers to be better before helping villagers.

- What the government has been doing for so many years has become something true or right in the mind of the people, even children. What struck me most was teenagers' interest in social work. When I was their age my mind was on education, but now I see many kids interested in helping others. They get training in Thailand or on the border; they cannot get training in Myanmar. They want more exposure to training. They are also given mini-projects to manage themselves. There is a programme to help parents find missing children who have run away or been abducted. Young people are looking for role models, and they find them in Thailand and not in Myanmar; they are not confident and are looking for an older person to be a guide for them. Ministers are no longer working for the people, they are working for themselves—same with NGOs; it is no longer humanitarian work, it is a business. This made me ask myself if I am working for the people or if I am working for the money. [INGO] is spoiling the people and spoiling their values by giving people allowances for helping them, so once this NGO leaves the work will not be sustained. Widespread corruption in [INGO] in this region—NGO manager says he has 36 employees, but he really just has 6 and he keeps the rest of the money for the 30 other people for himself.

- The first trip in Lashio we had a lot of NGOs and lots of expectations, but in Dry Zone we hardly heard about INGOs or international assistance in the area. This struck me. I am also trying to find out why few organisations work in this area, and we got some insights but I am still trying to figure this out. There are some things that are possible to do, even in this restricted context. I was amazed with social development projects with

[INGO]. I have seen many mistakes in this field but I was encouraged by what I saw in Myanmar. I really appreciate that [INGO] sees the needs of the people and build on that, and nothing is a gift—villagers buy the pump with a loan and must pay back the money without interest. [INGO] relates to the people as a customer and client with rights, rather than a recipient of aid without rights.

- I learned about the mindset of the people who get support. The mindset of villagers is totally different; in one village the villagers came to us because they thought we were giving aid. That situation shocked me. If they get support from INGOs, when foreigners or NGO workers visit they expect to be given support/material goods. In another village we did not experience this. If there are more NGOs the people have higher expectations. International support has a big impact.

- What the people need is time to talk and to express themselves, and NGO staff do not have the time. Talking to the villagers is more important than giving them stuff.

- I am sick of working with NGOs because my experience is sometimes terrible, especially in Delta. I feel that NGOs spoil the community and villages. I talked to villagers in Dry Zone and there are only a few organisations there. So when we talk about social structure, they are still simple and honest and helping each other with very little tension; they work together despite differences. So I think that if INGOs come and work here then the people will become like the Delta area. But I really like the social entrepreneurship programmes. I think these programmes can be more helpful to improving the people's mindset and situation than other NGO programmes. For example the use of solar cookers and farming pumps, I think this is very good and helps the people. I also understand more about gender issues after talking with team members. I think building the capacity of the local people and civil society is very important.

- Assistance that is project based is not effective. If we go and talk to them before giving assistance, then our assistance will be more effective. Post-Nargis assistance has created dependency and changed the mentality of the people; previously some had never seen NGOs. Delta area is spoiled by NGOs. Networking is very important. The people would like NGO staff to spend more time with them. NGO staff are polite but the people do not know them. Each community has different needs, and NGOs mostly focus on the poor but the rich people also need help, like knowledge and capacity building. Before we give assistance we need to give awareness training because they don't know how to use the materials given to them. NGOs should ask all the people what they need, not just village chiefs. Project monitoring is very important and should be done more often. I think organisations compete because they want a good name for their organisation and they want to report results to donors.

- I imagine three levels of people in international aid: sender, receiver, and middle people. Everyone talks about middle people and hate the middle people. The problem is local authority and NGO worker, they just take from funder and give to community. We have to observe and go inside the villages; we have to listen to their perceptions and thoughts, but that should be linked to evidence. We heard a lot of stories, but we don't know if they are real or not. People reported much assistance is lost through the middle people. People are waiting for international aid and expect aid from NGO workers. In Delta, assistance has caused problems and INGOs have a responsibility to be aware of that and to correct those problems. NGOs and people point fingers at each other instead of actually trying to solve the problem. If you explain the Listening Project in-depth the people are more willing to talk to you and explain their situation. INGO and LNGO have a big gap and it is still getting bigger; they point the finger at each other and do not cooperate. Moreover they do not want to cooperate; they just do by themselves and do not care about each other.

Shalom (Nyien) Foundation is a Myanmar NGO working towards the transformation of the conflict inside their country. It has been at the forefront of peacebuilding processes in Myanmar since its inception in 2000. Shalom has been actively involved in mediations between the government and ethnic armed groups, has played a central role in institutionalising peace practices at the local level throughout the country through the creation of local peace committees and organizes peace education initiatives throughout the country.

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