

The work in BURMA after Cyclone Nargis

Somsook's report about her brief visit to Yangon, Burma
March 21 - 22, 2009

Unfortunately I was not able to visit any communities in the Irrawaddy Delta, since it now takes about a week to get permission to go there and it would have taken some ten hours to reach the affected areas. So I was only in Yangon, but while I was there, I was able to meet with several groups, including :

- UN Habitat
- Three overseas aid agencies (ACTED, AMURT and NRC)
- Three local groups working on Nargis rehabilitation and in Yangon

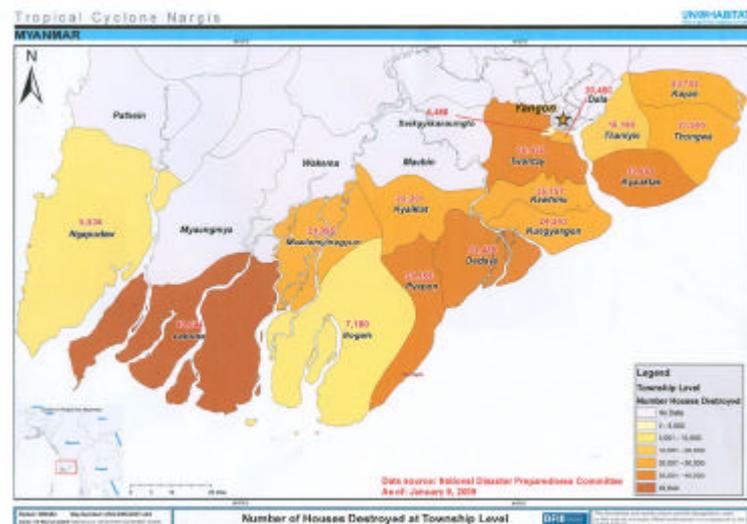
And able to visits a few poor communities at the outskirts of Yangon

1. Meeting with UN-HABITAT

The situation after Cyclone

Nargis: Nargis hit Burma on May 2, 2008. Ten months later, the problems from the storm are still very serious, and the speed of the solution is still very slow. The key problem in the rehabilitation of the areas of Burma hit by Cyclone Nargis continues to be housing and maintaining the livelihood of affected communities.

- **450,000 houses were totally destroyed by the storm**
- **another 350,000 have been damaged**
- **approximately 800,000 houses total have to be repaired or rebuilt**



And it's not only housing, the storm wiped away everything: people's houses, their farms, their trees, their jobs, their food sources, their belongings. They were all destroyed by the storm and have yet to be revived. And these were all mostly poor, rural people who were living subsistence lives on the edge of survival even before the storm. Most of these families are still camping out in tents and temporary shelters in their villages, without access to services and are facing serious problems of water supply, sanitation, housing, health, diseases, education and all sorts of post disaster needs. So the lives of the Nargis affected people are still very, very difficult.



Everybody's worried about how these survivors will survive the coming monsoons : Everyone is worried now that the monsoon season is coming in the next few months, and thousands of people who lost their houses in Nargis are still camping out in tents and temporary housing. The fear is that they will all have a very difficult time weathering the monsoon storms and rain without proper houses to live in. Nobody knows how strong the monsoons will be this year, but normally they are quite heavy.

So the focus is on building as many houses as possible, as fast as possible : There are about 60 overseas organizations working on Nargis rehabilitation, on the official list, from all over the world, many having experience working in Aceh and other disaster areas. Volunteers and so on. Each of them will have been assigned their specific area to work in by the Burmese government, and there is no overlap. Most assigned areas are in the delta areas where it was hardest hit and more damages and needs are severe. Most of the NGOs and international aid agencies are working on relief and several development support but also focusing their efforts on building as many houses as they can for people whose houses were damaged or destroyed by the cyclone, which hit Burma ten months ago, on May 2, 2008.

Relief agencies assigned their own territory, mostly in remote areas of the delta. The system for implementing relief assistance is completely coordinated by the government, which strictly demarcates the areas where each development agency is allowed to work. And most of the areas they assign to these organizations are in remote areas at the Delta. The areas closer to Yangon, which were as badly hit by the storm, are not being covered and it's hard to get information about the situation in these areas at all, since access to them is so tightly controlled by the government.

- ***I asked people why?*** Probably it's just a matter of being too close to Yangon, and probably they may not want these outsiders working close to the city. So most of the NGOs and aid agencies have been assigned to work in the rather remote areas.

Still a long way to go : But up to now, even when ten months have passed, only about 50,000 houses have been rebuilt - nowhere near the scale of destruction or the scale of need. That means there is still a backlog of some 750,000 houses that need to be repaired or totally rebuilt!

The UN is now playing an important coordinating role in the Nargis rehabilitation process both in coordinating with government and international bilateral and multilaterals to mobilize support as well as coordinating development agencies who are actually doing support work on the ground, they were also involved in delivering relief initially. The figures that UN Habitat presents about all relief effort distribution, first-aid, and food indicate that 95% of the total affected population has been reached. But what exactly this relief assistance means is not made very clear - and it could mean that some of those within the 95% might have at one time received a relief package or a sack of rice, but that might have been months and months ago.

Collaboration between aid organizations in Burma is good. The UN is acting as a coordinator to bring various groups to meet each other and share information. They have a "shelter sector" group meeting every two weeks, so it's very regular to exchange this information. This is probably one of the best coordinated effort by international communities, I feel.

When the problems started, the Burmese government helped facilitate the relief process, with the collaboration with neighboring Asian countries and the UN. They linked together, and were supposed to raise about US\$ 600 million for the rehabilitation process. But up to now, the money has not yet there. In the early stages of the relief process, this collaboration helped to bring about some relaxation of the rules for getting visas to enter Burma and for getting permission to go to certain areas called "Nargis Visa".

- ***But more recently, the Burmese government is tightening things up,*** making it more difficult to enter the country and to get permission to go to affected areas(in Burma, you always need permission to enter into any area). Just a month ago, they started imposing many new rules and regulation. It now takes a week to get permission to visit areas outside of Yangon. Everything now seems to be much stiffer and more difficult. It seems that the government wants to control these aid resources a little more, and would like to have more say on how this US\$ 600 million aid money will be used.
- It is suspected that this tightening up has to do with the upcoming elections, which is creating a lot of political tension.
- ***But the human rights lobby has been applying pressures of its own,*** trying to discourage the various governments from contributing to this \$600 million aid fund for Burma, fearing that the money will never reach the people who need it but will be swallowed up in corruption by the

military government and to boycott the military regime. So the people trying to do rehabilitation work inside Burma find themselves being squeezed from both sides.

2. Discussion with 3 overseas aid organizations

- **AMURT** (www.amurt.net)
- **NRC** (www.nrc.no)
- **ACTED** (www.acted.org)

1. **AMURT (*Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team*)**, is an international NGO, based in India, which since 1965 has specialized in disaster relief, with experience in many countries. The two people I met: Kurt Behringer and Luis Uribe, from AMURT have extensive experiences working on disaster rehabilitation seem to have a good sense of people's participation. In the areas where they have been assigned to work, they organize community meetings and consultations which have representatives from all the villages they support to decide all issues related to housing construction and other matters. They have developed a core house model (which they say is strong enough to withstand a cyclone!), and they help residents build this core house, with hired local professional technical support. But people are involved in the construction and can adjust the designs or build on additions where necessary, using whatever old wood they might have. The houses show a great variety of extensions and alterations by the house owners, and this indicates to me a sense that the house-building process leaves room for their owners to exercise their freedom and creativity. Amurt have built about 400 houses.

2. **NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council)** was established in 1946 to assist refugees in Europe after World War II, and today works as a private foundation to provide different kinds of assistance to refugees, internally-displaced people and disaster-affected people around the world.

3. **ACTED (*Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development*)** is a French-based international relief agency which began in Afghanistan in 1993 and now works in 23 countries around the world. has been assigned an area in the Labutta Township, which is in the delta, on the Andaman Sea, and extremely hard to get to. It's just 150 kms from Yangon, but there aren't good roads to the area, and if you go by car, it takes some ten hours to get there! You can also go there by boat, but that will take you ten hours also. You can also get there by helicopter twice a week, but that's expensive way to reach Labutta. These idealistic people have my great admiration, because they're committed and they actually go there and are helping the people on various aspects day by day.

ACTED and NRC are larger organizations than AMURT, and have committed to build larger numbers of houses. They have already supported the repairing of 1,700 houses and have promised to build about 6,000 houses. The two organizations work together and have set up a factory in Labutta (at the delta) which produces wooden building components such as beams, columns and construction joints, and these components are then transported to the villages to be assembled. The villagers participate in giving their opinions and are involved in the house construction. The problems is that the production process is a bit slow. They can produce about 2 houses per day at the moment. Apart from building houses, ACTED also support many other livelihood activities. It is one of good solid organization working on variety of activities from various pressing needs of communities in affected areas and get high praise from UN Habitat

These groups have to collaborate with the government system : It seems, the groups should be able to understand the collaboration with the government and the people. If they don't know how to do this, they have a lot of problems. I have got the information that some big organizations like CARE and World Vision are not working on building houses in Burma because they were unhappy with the government's demand that whatever they build they have to give to the local authority, and the local authority will decide to deliver the houses to the community members. So some of the big agencies are not working on housing construction at all.

- ***But I gather from my discussions with these three groups that the groups who are actually working with the local village authorities and the local communities don't have any problems.*** If they do it in such a way that have village representatives and also closely

- **Other groups take a more easy going approach and hire skilled carpenters from the local area** to give advice to people who are rebuilding their houses themselves (under some standard core house design). This seems like a little more flexible approach to me.



BIG QUESTION : Why not give the money to the people and let them rebuild their houses? Most of the groups working in Burma are now concentrating on how to build houses and how to give houses to the cyclone-affected people. It is understandable but my instinctive reaction is that this is a bit strange approach - from a development point of view. Why? Because the main building material in Burma is wood: there is plenty of it, it's cheap, it's easy to get and most local Burmese, like the Thais, understands how to build with it. It's a very flexible and relatively easy material to work

with, compared to
Assembled core house of ACTED, each wooden member produced from factory. There is the design of special bracing to add strength to the structure

compare to concrete or steel. People in these communities have lived in timber dwellings all their lives and they have all built or altered their own houses, or got their houses built by local carpenters. There's no mystery to wood for these communities!

- **So my big question for all the people I spoke to was this:** *Wouldn't it be easier to just give the money to the people and let them organize the reconstruction and rebuild their own houses?* And the simple house types the government and development agencies have designed and are building are not much different than the extremely simple houses that people already build themselves!
- **How to promote a different reconstruction model with a more human ownership dimension, in which communities use their energy and knowledge and use all their strength to build and manage the whole reconstruction and rebuilding their communities?**
- **The problems will be on how money can be managed easier so larger number of the affected can be the active actors to work for themselves, not just being recipients, but how to work on that in the context of Burma where no flexibility in the system has been given or provided much ?**

3. Discussion with local NGOs and community people

Moo's Thailand-based organization, SEM (Spirit in Education Movement), links with several very promising and committed young people, working in and around Yangon (*both individuals or small local NGOs who link together and whose names have to keep being changed!*).

I was able to speak with a few of these young people. These local NGO groups are working more with community people and local village structures. So they use the way to organize community saving groups, distribute money to various local community groups to construct houses together. I found this way more simpler and believe that it can be much faster since we let the people (or the "beneficiaries") be active actors in constructing their houses, with some supervision and support from skilled carpenters. I think the process is simpler and can be using housing construction to boost community people to work together for many other things.

They quickly understand this concept of letting people do the rebuilding themselves: just link the communities into groups, and then they survey their community (who needs to get a fully rebuilt house, and who needs only house repairs, who is sick, who is elderly, etc.) Then how the whole group would help each other in the reconstruction. So reconstruction of houses are only one part of the rebuilding of these communities - physically, socially, economically and emotionally.

And probably for the Burmese, this is very natural! They already live like that! And they have all built their own houses!

- .However, it seems like the local groups can implement this participatory construction process much easier than the internationals.

Discussion with community leaders about the Nargis house rebuilding : I couldn't go to the township, so on the second day, the local groups invited three community leaders from the affected area in Kwamu township at the outskirts of Yangon where they are working to have a discussion with us in Yangon. We talked about a lot of things, but one of the questions I asked them was :

- **QUESTION : *What do you think about the assistance many NGOs are providing to helping to build houses?*** They all said, "It is very good that the NGOs give houses to the people!" Then I asked another question.
- **QUESTION : *Would you prefer to have an NGO design your houses, work out all the details and build them for you, or to get the money and build your own houses together?*** They spoke with each other a bit and then said, "Oh we'd much prefer to have the money and build ourselves! We can work out all the details and build the houses ourselves together. It would be much easier to manage the rebuilding that way and we can clear up all budget and spending properly!"

4. Brief visit to a few poor communities in Yangon

It's interesting, when you are in Yangon you will see a nice, clean, old city, which looks like proper Asian cities looked 50 years ago, with lots of trees, wide streets, beautiful old buildings and not too many cars. It's a nice environment, really wonderful. So I asked, where do all the poor people live? And then they brought me to the poor settlements, which are mostly at the outskirts of the city. It is similar to many countries where the inner city is kept clean and nice, but then all the poor have to stay in the periphery. Because the land in these peripheral areas is - or was - farmland, owned by farmers. And these farmers divide up their land into plots to rent out.

- **Jobs here :** daily workers, vendors, laborers, migrant workers, sex workers.
- **Land rental : \$15-\$20 per month.** I asked how much one land plot would rent for, and I was told that one plot rents for about \$15-\$20 a month, and people have to build their own house. And the houses here are very, very poor and shabby.
- **This area we visited was huge, and I think similar settlements must be all around the city.** The only place to live for the poor migrants pouring into Yangon are these huge land-rental slum settlements: either to rent a plot and build their own house, or rent an already-built house from someone else.
- **Huge work to do in Yangon it seems.**
- **Starting work : plans to do a survey in Yangon and start savings :** The group of Moo's colleagues in Yangon, who brought me here, are going to conduct a survey of poor settlements in Yangon, and they're going to start savings groups in communities I visited