

## Notes from NEP teleconference - Cyclone Nargis Myanmar

14<sup>th</sup> May 2008

### BACKGROUND

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2008 Cyclone Nargis struck the coast of Myanmar with winds of 190 km per hour followed by a 12-foot wave of water. The category 4 cyclone swept across the Ayeyarwady delta, hitting Myanmar's largest town Yangon. The official death toll currently stands at 31,938 with 29,770 missing although unofficial estimates are considerably higher. It is estimated 1.5 million people are severely affected.

Of the 22 HAP member agencies, 12 are currently responding or preparing to respond to the cyclone: ACTED, CAFOD, CARE, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, DanChurchAid, Muslim Aid, Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, Tearfund and World Vision. Of these, CARE, SCUUK and World Vision were already operational with each having 500-600 existing staff in country; Christian Aid, DanChurchAid and Tearfund had been working in the country through partners.

In response to the cyclone an NEP teleconference was called in order to:

- Discuss HAP members' current priorities and activities for emergency response.
- Discuss members' suggested strategies for promoting accountability in the Myanmar context.
- Agree action points for members and the HAP Membership Services Team.

### PARTICIPANTS

Fiona McAlister – ACFID  
Claire Goudsmit – CAFOD  
Holly Solberg – CARE  
Beatrice – CARE  
Juliet Parker – Christian Aid  
Toireas Ni Bhriain – Concern Worldwide  
Lisa Henry – DanChurchAid  
Mona Hanim Sheikh Mahmud – MERCY Malaysia  
Norshamshiah Ali Afandi – MERCY Malaysia  
Anamul Haque – Muslim Aid  
Yo Winder – Oxfam GB  
Meri Ghorkhmazyan – Save the Children UK  
Alison Joyner – Sphere  
Sudarshan Sathianathan – Tearfund  
Alexandra Levaditis – World Vision  
Julian Srodecki – World Vision

*From the HAP team:* Nick Stockton and Katharina Samara (in Geneva); Monica Blagescu and Emily Rogers (in London)

## SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

### Highlighted issues

#### Visas, getting aid in, accessing money and movement within country

*Visas* – process time and type issued seems to depend on where you apply from: some have been issued with four week tourist visas, others business visas.

*Getting aid in* – WFP cargo is able to enter the country and INGOs have been asked to go via WFP. Directors of Save the Children, World Vision and CARE have been communicating on best strategy for getting aid in, as so far have had to rely on local procurement alone. Options include trying different routes, e.g. via Bangladesh.

*Accessing money* – different agencies reported different experiences in terms of accessing funds. Those with existing operational programmes in-country had been able to use their normal banking channels. Aid agencies new to Myanmar are having more difficulties, and face challenges of inflated exchange rates. Some are resorting to hand-carrying cash, others going via Hong Kong banks.

*Movement within country* – both CARE and World Vision (with existing programmes in the area) were able to get written approval to extend their area of work during the relief stage, move freely about affected areas, and distribute aid directly. CARE reported their longer-term rehabilitation work would be subject to further approval.

MERCY Malaysia reported their officers have not yet been able to make contact with affected communities due to lack of access.

#### Government centres and informal camps

Government centres are open and people are transferring to these temporary shelters in order to get support. Those within these shelters are getting the most aid compared with those outside.

NGOs working through churches have seen gatherings around churches and monasteries of groups between 250-2000 families to receive aid. Often these are people who feel they would face discrimination and security threats at the government centres. In places, government officials have dispersed such gatherings.

Population movements are complicating the response as needs assessments become inaccurate and finding people becomes a challenge.

#### Separated children

Both SCUK and Oxfam had reports of many separated children, SCUK had so far identified 800 but estimates there will be more.

### Strategies for promoting accountability and options for action

- *Muslim Aid* - deployed staff are being given inductions on accountability as part of their briefing notes. Partners are also being introduced to what accountability means in such contexts. A “things to do, things not to do” guidance has been developed for staff which includes elements of accountable practice.
- *Tearfund* - will keep all updated with news from partners on opportunities for accountability. Their partner World Concern is currently translating the Sphere guidelines into Burmese.
- *World Vision* - Good needs assessments are key to identifying the most vulnerable and their needs. Currently mapping out different options for providing technical support from a distance if experts cannot gain access to Myanmar. Options include bringing people out of Myanmar to do training in Bangkok or Singapore. While World Vision have experience from other countries, e.g. Sri Lanka, staff capacity and current civil liberties situation point to the need for more informal mechanisms, in particular for community feedback.
- *Oxfam GB* - approached by UNDAC to be the NGO Liaison and Accountability Officer.

- *ICVA* - recently circulated paper proposed an NGO liaison officer, likely to start working from Bangkok.
- *CARE* –
  - Emergency response strategy includes an accountability framework, which specifically refers to HAP standard.
  - Country Director in Myanmar was formerly working in Cambodia, a HAP pilot country. He is very familiar with HAP standard and priorities and will promote accountability and transparency to the extent possible throughout CARE's operations with the affected population, partners and government.
  - Emergency staffing structure for the Myanmar response includes a specific accountability position. While it has not yet been filled, it is a priority and support is being offered remotely with suggested approaches to do what can be done under the very difficult and complicated circumstances.

A number of points to bear in mind were raised in relation to this context:

- Local partners are intimidated about the idea of sharing information with communities, especially beneficiary lists, selection criteria etc.
- There is a need to implement accountability mechanisms while avoiding obvious terms, for example: ensure that beneficiaries are well informed/receive information and that needs assessments are conducted with adequate participation. Must be creative as there is no easy access to the country and information from field level. CARE is trying to capture good quality and accountable practice through sitreps and reports.
- As a group of agencies we should model accountability elements. For example, starting with NGO coordination and information sharing within the country and in Bangkok. This would also decrease the risk of missing out vulnerable communities.
- Staff in country are overstretched (emotionally and work wise), and this should be taken into account when thinking through how to strengthen accountability such as by focusing on doable specific points that can be jointly developed.
- Accountability should be integrated into existing coordination mechanisms (ensuring NGO coordination builds on clusters, rather than duplicates efforts).

**SUGGESTED ACTION** – HAP members to continue sharing learning from similar scenarios and thinking on how accountability activities can be integrated into the Myanmar emergency response.

**SUGGESTED ACTION** - HAP secretariat to provide feedback on meeting notes (as requested by members) and identify key questions for NGO coordination groups and cluster meeting groups to address. For example outlining three key issues each different cluster should focus on.

**SUGGESTED ACTION** - HAP and Sphere to coordinate support during activities to maximise efficiency.

**SUGGESTED ACTION** - While staff are waiting for visa approval, HAP members to prepare a 2-3 pager for wide circulation amongst staff including key points to consider and basic accountability principles they can integrate in their work once they are in Myanmar; for example key factors to look for when doing needs assessments, minimum information to share with communities and how to do that; how to encourage community feedback to gain their trust from this very first crucial stage of the response

**SUGGESTED ACTION** – follow-up teleconference on **30<sup>th</sup> May 10am Geneva time** to:

- Discuss further developments related to accountability from member agencies in Myanmar – both challenges and opportunities
- Share HAP suggested action points that NGOs on ground can consider.

Questions for members to consider prior to next teleconference:

1. How are accountability principles raised with staff on the ground (without increasing pressure)? How are they integrated into activities to date? What are some of the emerging challenges?
2. If an NGO liaison function (ICVA) is established how can the HAP Secretariat best support this?
3. What type of support can the HAP Secretariat offer to agencies present in Myanmar and those preparing for deployment should access improve?