

Religion, Disaster Relief and Reconstruction in the Burmese Delta after Cyclone Nargis: How can disaster foster enhanced social capital, community empowerment, and socio-political transformation?

Helen James

The Australian Demographic and Social Research Institute

College of Arts and Social Sciences, ANU

Email: helen.james@anu.edu.au or waldenent@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Cyclone Nargis, which struck the Burmese Delta on the evening of 2 – 3 May 2008, left over 138,000 people dead or missing across ten of the most densely populated provinces of Myanmar. It destroyed most of the health and education facilities in its path, large numbers of religious edifices of various persuasions, as well as tens of thousands of fragile dwellings, and infrastructure. The severity of the destruction was a function not only of the intensity of the storm, but also because no similar event had previously been visited on the country and people had no experience of how to prepare, respond, evacuate, or take mitigation measures. An Early Warning System in place was ineffective because, having no prior experience with it, people failed to heed its messages, and many in fact had no technological asset such as a radio, which could have enabled them to receive the Early Warning messages broadcast by the government meteorological service.

In a policy and operational vacuum in terms of disaster risk reduction management, grassroots and local community groups, and individual citizens took the initiative to render emergency relief to the survivors. In a society which is predominantly (95 per cent), though not wholly, Buddhist, well versed values based on the Buddhist

philosophy of giving and *metta* (Loving Kindness), energized a major emergency relief response by individual citizens, local community groups and non-government organizations to deliver food, housing, shelter, clothing, medicines and basic needs to survivors. ‘We dropped everything and went to help the survivors; I helped collect the bodies,’ one young lady in Yangon told me. Another said: ‘Myanmar people from as far as Bago and Moulmein, made curry and took it to feed the survivors.’

Largely spontaneous, this immediate relief operation derived from the spiritual perspective of Myanmar people themselves, the spirit of giving, which could not allow them to stand by while their fellow citizens were in need. Similarly, a group of young technical men in Yangon left their employment and, styling themselves the HandyMyanmarYouths, went to the Delta to erect shelters for the victims of the storm. Others based overseas mobilized resources and had temporary shelters flown into the country for the survivors, whilst people from the rice growing districts of Upper Myanmar which were untouched by the storm, organized transport of rice and food to the devastated Delta communities.

Amidst the carnage, storm survivors testified to an amazing awakening occasioned by the mutual experience of disaster, trauma and loss which led to formerly conflictual religious differences being set aside, albeit perhaps temporarily, as ethnic and religious groups cooperated for the common good.

The Burmese Delta is home to various ethnic communities of diverse religious affiliations, including both Karen Christian and Buddhist groups, Burmese Buddhist groups, and Islamic groups. Historically, these have often had conflictual relations. However, the traumatic experience of the storm seems to have been a catalyst urging greater inter-community and inter-religious cooperation. Two groundbreaking studies

based on interviews with all the major ethnic and religious communities by the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), Cambodia, after Nargis, entitled *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis* (2009) and *Listening to Voices from Inside: Ethnic People Speak* (2010),¹ give startling evidence of the views of the impacted communities and their overwhelming perceptions that the path to a better future for all the people not only of the Delta, but of the people of Myanmar in total, lies in setting aside these historically based grievances. 'We didn't care if people were Karen, or Buddhist or Burmese, we made no distinction. Before Nargis, there was a lot of discrimination between religious groups, especially Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. When Nargis happened, no one could stay in the house. Everyone came out to work for the affected people and people didn't want to stay alone. People don't see religion and race, they just see human beings. These things came out, that spirit' said one of those interviewed for the CPCS (2009, p. 34) study. Others commented on the new relationships which the storm precipitated, and the determination to build a new community in every aspect of the meaning of this word which would erase the differences of race and religion in this divided society. Nargis was seen as a catalyst bringing people together across both ethnic and religious lines. One interviewee commented: 'As a result of Nargis, we have been able to work with the mainstream Buddhist community. Many religious leaders have been a part of our trauma healing program. They are convinced now of the need for it and have even invited us to stay in the monastery.' (CPCS, 2009, p. 35)

¹ Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (2009) *Listening to Voices from Inside: Myanmar Civil Society's Response to Cyclone Nargis* (Pnom Penh: CPCS); and Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (2010) *Listening to Voices from Inside: Ethnic People Speak* (Pnom Penh: CPCS). 15 local organizations and 32 individuals were interviewed for the 2009 study. In the second study, 87 interviews were conducted with representatives of all the major ethnic groups, both in rural and urban settings.

In addition to the spirit of giving, there was a perception that the spirit of forgiveness needs to break out in Myanmar. The results of the interviews conducted after Cyclone Nargis by the CPCS, testify to the views of people at grassroots level that the mutual suffering engendered by the storm may be a means to greater enlightenment through exercise of charity, mutual understanding, and inter-faith dialogue. ‘From a religious point of view, this is what we are on about. Religion shouldn’t be carried out in an elitist way’ said one field worker (CPCS 2009, p. 37).

These perceptions, detailed in the above study, of course have been rather rudely shattered by the communal violence in Rakhine in June 2012 between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya, a tragic situation which is yet to be resolved.² One could argue however, that the Rakhine region is outside the scope of the study area impacted by Nargis for the purpose of this short paper; it seems necessary, however, to note it, lest we become too romantically imbued with the notion that overwhelming tragedy such as Nargis has a cathartic effect and can *always* precipitate sustained improvement in communal relations between different ethnic and religious groups. Other Islamic groups in Myanmar which inhabit areas outside Rakhine, including closer to Yangon, were in the path of the storm, but do not appear to have had the same experience of communal violence as those in Rakhine do, although research on this aspect is still ongoing.

Another reservation to note is that Cyclone Nargis cut its sway up the eastern side of the Delta, not the western side, so the area around the Karen stronghold at Patheingyi and the Muslim areas of Rakhine were not impacted by this particular cyclone, although they certainly were by later cyclones eg Cyclone Giri.

² UNHCR is working in Rakhine to get a solution to the violence; and the Myanmar government has set up a Commission of Inquiry.

With these reservations, this paper investigates the conjunction between civil society, social capital and community empowerment arising from deeply embedded religious traditions and perspectives as they impact on relief and reconstruction in three towns in the Burmese Delta which were in the path of the storm - Pyapon, Bogale, and Thanlin-Kyauktan. Based on field work in the Delta and in Yangon in June 2012, it explores the possibility that the subsequent efflorescence of a nascent civil society has provided a promising base for the socio-political reform processes now underway; these have seen the country undergo an amazing transformation since 2008 from a military dictatorship to an electoral democracy in 2010 which apparently enjoys the strong support of the United States. It should be emphasized that the findings of this research are preliminary at this stage, and ongoing.

IN THE EYE OF THE STORM – RELIGION AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE RELIEF AND REHABILITATION PHASE

My field work encompassed interviews with 16 domestic NGOs and INGOs, two universities, two government departments, and one medical research institute. I was also able to gather some material from individual interviews with citizens who had been involved in assisting the victims of the storm. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on four religious spaces which are tightly correlated with the conference theme. These are: (1) the Thanlyn-Kyauktan Kyaik Khauk Pagoda; (2) a newly built earthen stupa in a village on the Pyapon-Bogale Road; (3) newly built large scale commemorative stupas in some of the villages on the Pyapon-Bogale Road; and (4) the Buddhist Education School outside Thanlyn. These all are involved in aspects of salvage and salvation which give rise to opportunities to explore the interactions of civil society, social capital and community empowerment in Myanmar post-Nargis.

Preparation and Relief

Firstly, let me take two contrasting experiences. Those at the Community Library in Bogale and at the Buddhist Monastery School near Thanlyn. Bogale is one of those towns most severely impacted by the storm in terms of both mortalities and infrastructure losses. The Community Library is sturdily built of concrete and brick, and has a mezzanine above the ground floor. It is funded, staffed and stocked by community donations without assistance from governmental resources, and in effect functions as a community association/NGO. It is very much part of civil society in Bogale. In talking with the chief Community Librarian there, I was advised that his home, close to the library, was one of only three houses/buildings left standing after Nargis swept through. Looking at the town now, completely rebuilt as a result of efforts by the local military commander (personal communication with the Community Librarian) it is difficult to credit that a major disaster occurred here.

As Nargis approached, the Community Librarian sheltered 30 people in his house, close to the Library. He informed me that at first people had taken shelter in the library, on the mezzanine level. However, soon after, the local military had come to chase the people out so that the military could occupy the premises themselves.

According to his testimony, the people in Bogale had no perception that the storm would be so severe. They had heard around lunchtime, he said, that the storm had swept through Laputta, a town right at the foot of the Delta which was almost entirely destroyed, but people in Bogale had not thought to make any specific preparations or take mitigation action, indications perhaps of both weak social capital and lack of leadership in the community. On hearing of the destruction at Laputta, he said, people in Bogale thought, 'Oh well! That's Laputta', a statement indicative of either karmic resignation, or a-typical, non-compassionate indifference. It was not until

around 10pm that night (ie 2 May 2008) that the storm hit Bogale, according to his account. Had trust, that crucial element in social capital, been placed in the Early Warning System, perhaps appropriate preparedness and mitigation measures might have been taken.³ Had social capital in Bogale been stronger, evacuation measures may have been implemented in a timely fashion which could have saved lives; had community leadership been appropriately exercised, as in the case of the Vietnamese community based around Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in New Orleans at the time of Cyclone Katrina,⁴ not only might lives and assets have been saved, but also the basis for a robust recovery might have been implemented in a more effective fashion. Vulnerability of place conjoined with social vulnerability (Cutter 2003) at Bogale contributed to the significant number of mortalities, and widespread destruction of assets.⁵

The Librarian's account is consistent with the findings of a survey by HelpAge International (2009) which compared the situation of older persons in Bogale, Kyaiklat and Dedaye, and found that variations in social capital resonant in the services provided for vulnerable older people, had significant consequences for their recovery and ongoing psycho-social well-being. Of the three seriously impacted sites, social capital in Bogale was found to be the weakest, giving rise to ongoing fears of

³ Social capital in this paper is being defined, consistent with Lin, Putnam, Bourdieu and Coleman and related theorists, in terms of the networks, norms and trust which facilitate access to and mobilization of resources within a community (bonding social capital); external to the community (bridging social capital); and within the government sector (linking social capital).

⁴ C. Airriess et al (2008) 'Church-based social capital, networks and geographical scale: Katrina Evacuation, Relocation, and Recovery in a New Orleans Vietnamese American Community,' *Geoforum*, 39(3):1333-1346.

⁵ S. Cutter et al (2003) 'Social Vulnerability to Environmental Hazards,' *Social Science Quarterly*, 84(2): 242-261. I am using the definition of 'vulnerability' as set out in the *Hyogo Framework for Action, 2005-2015*, that is, the conditions arising from physical, social, economic and environmental factors which make individuals and communities likely to experience loss as a result of exposure to a hazard.

another cyclone, fears for food and health security, and livelihoods security among the older persons included in the study.

By contrast, the residents of villages near Thanlyin, not far from Yangon, converged on the Kyaik Khauk Pagoda for shelter from the storm, and in the local Buddhist Monastery School. Here I interviewed the head monk who advised that although there was a good deal of destruction at Thanlyin and its environs, no lives were lost here. As the storm approached, villages gathered to pray, chanting prayers led by the monks, until the storm was over. The head monk smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling, as he related the events, his judgment of the event clearly being that the prayers of the monks and the faithful had averted catastrophe, even though the roof of the monastery was among the casualties of the storm.

The venerable Kyaik Khauk Pagoda built on Hlaing Pote Kone hill at Thanlyin also housed and fed hundreds of refugees from the storm for many days until declining sanitation conditions compelled them to leave.⁶ In Myanmar, important pagodas are always built on a hill, but since the Delta is largely flat, scarcely one metre above sea level, those on high points like Kyaik Khauk Pagoda are in a minority. Their elevated locations proved to be lifesaving for the thousands who sought refuge within monastic walls. Many less substantial pagodas on the flat lands of the Delta were simply washed away by the storm, as were many Christian churches built on low ground, for the storm had no respect for religious affiliation. The Kyaik Khauk Pagoda and others built on similar high points proved to be places of salvation for

⁶ Older and more vulnerable people remained in the monasteries for some time; younger people returned to their homes to start rebuilding. HelpAgeInternational, (2009) *The Situation of older people in cyclone affected Myanmar*, p. 18.

those who sought shelter there; but for many other people of the Delta, the religious nature of their refuge proved unable to save them.

FUTURE SALVATION AND RECOVERY

Four years on from Nargis, the NGO sector, community associations and government agencies work in tandem, if not always in partnership, to prepare for any future similar catastrophic event. In June 2012, the government Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement promulgated a Disaster Risk Reduction plan; NGOs/INGOs such as Metta Development Foundation, Action Aid and World Vision have developed disaster preparedness, evacuation, and recovery programs in villages across the Delta. Radios for receipt of Early Warnings are being distributed to village elders by the domestic NGOs in an effort to ensure that the ‘going the last mile’ principle is enacted.⁷ Along the Bogale-Pyapon roadway, at various points, coloured loudspeakers on high poles have been erected to relay the early warnings to those who may not be in contact with a radio. It is not clear at this stage what provisions have been made for the hearing-impaired to receive early warnings in a future event. The roadway itself, barely more than a car’s width, has been built up two metres above the rice fields in an effort to provide a ‘high point’ for villagers to congregate should a similar storm surge burst through the Delta. In some villages which are project sites for Metta Development Foundation, new sturdy concrete schools, two stories high, modelled on those built in Orissa after the 1999 cyclone, have been erected so that they can double as both centres of education and evacuation sites for villagers in the surrounding areas. Evacuation training programs teach the villagers to bury their

⁷ UNISDR (2005) Hyogo Framework for Action, 2005-2015 (UNISDR: Geneva); International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, (2009) *World Disasters Report: Early Warning, Early Action*, (IFRCRCS: Geneva).

personal documents (birth, marriage certificates, land title deeds) in sealed, waterproof containers, at sites where they can readily recover them after an event.

Domestic civil society is now centrally engaged in pro-active measures to prepare for any future similar event to Nargis, in an effort to increase resilience, reduce vulnerability, and foster sustained recovery of those in the path of the storm.

But a tell tale sign of past suffering are the man-made hillocks some 30 – 40 feet high, crowned with a miniature pagoda, which have been constructed at various points in the flat plain of the Delta rice fields. Four-sided, and tapering to a conical shaped peak, they are testimony perhaps to the frustration, fear, and yet faith of the villagers, that in the absence of a proper high point at which they might be able to seek refuge, the man-made hillock with its miniature replica of a Buddhist pagoda, might yet afford them safety from another similar storm. On a future visit I may see the earthen sides encased in concrete and decorated with gold artistic works, a series of steps on each side waiting for those who need them to mount to the higher ramparts in an attempt to save their lives.

Another very different type of religious space is now present in the Delta rice fields. Given the extensive loss of life, where whole villages were wiped from the map, and 61 per cent of mortalities were women,⁸ lower than in the Asian Tsunami of 2004 where the death toll of women to men was 4:1 (Oxfam, 2005), new, large scale commemorative stupas have been erected at various points along the Pyapon-Bogale roadway, identifying what has clearly been a mass grave and perhaps cremation site. These are located close to homes, in the midst of newly built villages, perhaps so that survivors still feel close to loved ones lost in the storm. Lovingly tended and

⁸Tripartite Core Group, Village Tract Assessment, June 2008.

decorated in gold leaf and ornaments, they testify to the veneration the living give to the dead, regardless of the material assets or lack thereof of those making the donations.

Whilst the flat rice fields of the Delta, the newly constructed simple dwellings of villagers, the ubiquitous road stops requesting 'donations' from each vehicle traversing the route, the multitude of small children, goats, ducks, pigs, dogs, geese and chickens which consider the narrow road their playground, all give the impression of a set of lifeways fully restored after the devastation of the storm, this apparently quiescent landscape belies a population still struggling to come to terms with loss and grief, for whom the daily mechanical tasks of restoring livelihoods provide respite from traumatic memories. The commemorative stupas erected over the remains of the dead discussed above, may be seen as among the first substantial symbols of a population of survivors which has taken some early, material steps towards individual and community recovery. Erection of these commemorative stupas would have taken considerable mobilization of resources at community level, a sign of reviving bonding social capital present amongst the survivors, trust, leadership and organizational skills. Some four years after the storm, there are some signs that the local, indigenous bonding social capital at community level, acknowledged by NGOs to be fairly robust, working together with the bridging social capital present in the activities of domestic NGOs, is providing the material and spiritual resources required to enable these devastated communities to recover their livelihoods and cultural lifeways. In a fashion similar to the people of Kobe after the 2005 earthquake, the villagers in this part of the Delta seem to be relying on their own resources, re-constituting their own civil society, not dependent on government or the international community to effect their longer-term, sustainable recovery. Moving from partial recovery of livelihoods

to full recovery, they are drawing on their own cultural contexts to bring a regenerated spirit to their communities.⁹ While housing and infrastructures funded by government and/or the international community may be reconstructed, villagers seem aware that their own reconstruction and recovery phase is still continuing, and that their emotional life may be on a quite separate plane to the material reconstruction around them.

The apparently calm outward appearances of villagers may thus belie considerable trauma within. In my discussions with NGOs and INGOs, I was advised that widespread psycho-social distress still permeated the lives of the survivors; that building programs and re-stocking of assets with the assistance of domestic NGOs merely engaged the mechanical external lives of survivors; that the internal emotional lives still needed considerable repairs.

There appears to be various approaches to dealing with the trauma of the event. The head of one large INGO confidently informed me that Burmese Buddhists seek solace in meditation and prayer and that Western psychological approaches to dealing with grief are not considered necessary or effective. However, in a similar discussion with a large domestic NGO, I was advised that the opposite is true, that grief counselling is widely sought and rendered to the survivors. Discussion with a colleague at ANU who is an expert in these matters, elicited the information that most recent research on these issues is now inclined to take the approach that traumatic experiences should not be continually unpacked; that those who have suffered in this way should be allowed to bury their emotions within and, in effect, 'move on', as this is the most efficacious

⁹ R. Shaw and K. Goda (2004) 'From Disaster to Sustainable Civil Society: The Kobe Experience,' *Disasters* 28(1): 16-40. Following Shaw and Goda, who recognize that the cultural context is crucial in disaster recovery, I define 'culture' as the 'collection of beliefs, norms, attitudes and practices of a given group, organization, institution or society (Toft and Reynolds, 1999).

way to encourage the healing processes. On further investigation, I discovered that two of the domestic NGOs most heavily involved in the relief, rehabilitation and recovery programs for survivors of Nargis, Metta Development Foundation and Shalom, have been implementing both approaches ie the indigenous, community-based approaches utilizing shared activities, religious prayers and meditation; and the professional, individual-based Western style counselling approach. Metta has followed the former; Shalom the latter.

Community and the Individual in the healing process

Following the devastation of the storm and large scale loss of life, it was recognized that psycho-social interventions were likely to be needed; that the traumatic experiences of losing many family members and friends may be too great to be dealt with by traditional methods. Both the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA 2008) and the Post-Nargis Recovery and Preparedness Plan (PONREPP, 2008) discovered that some 23 per cent of those interviewed had surviving family members who were experiencing psychological difficulties as a result of Nargis; and some 7 per cent of households had lost at least one family member. Teachers and children, according to Save the Children, had difficulties concentrating. Amongst survivors in towns and villages across the Delta, anxiety about another cyclone was widespread (HelpAgeInternational, 2009; field visits to Laputta in May 2009 by Michael Paratharayil) especially when a strong wind blew. Assessment by Myanmar organizations found that the ‘social functioning of survivors appeared severely affected.’¹⁰ Given the extent of the tragedy, it is not surprising that Shalom Foundation (2009) found that one year after Nargis, problems in coping with losses

¹⁰ M. Paratharayil, (2010) ‘Basic versus focused psychosocial interventions for community well-being: lessons following the Nargis cyclone interventions in Burma/Myanmar, *Intervention*, 8(2):148-157.

and feelings of hopelessness were still widespread among some survivors. As a result, many local faith-based organizations – Buddhist, Christian and Muslim – have been involved in bereavement support and community rituals, especially in the immediate aftermath of the storm.¹¹

Longer term, Metta Development Foundation (Metta, Loving Kindness) and Shalom (Peace) have developed two different approaches based on community support and individual support. In Metta's approach, a series of activities focused on the Community Kitchen sought to incorporate psycho-social methodologies with community empowerment models. This approach brought surviving community members together around the 'community kitchen', cooking nutritious meals, mobilising resources, sharing stories, planning for the future. Working through community leaders and volunteers, Metta set up the Community Kitchen projects in 15 villages of two townships including Bogale for a period of six months in a process which was recognized as 'coming together for collective healing.' Initiated in three villages in Bogale in August 2008 where 75 – 80 per cent of the infrastructure had been destroyed, the Community Kitchen project was holistic in its approach, geared to the needs of the communities themselves, and designed to identify and support the most vulnerable groups in the villages. Thus, Metta states:

[The] Community Kitchen Project became a catalyst for mobilising communities. Communal sharing of food and feasting, a common phenomenon central to community life, gave members a sense of shared responsibility. Coming together to prepare and share meals provides a natural opportunity to talk to one another, hear each other's stories and encourage

¹¹ Ibid, p. 149.

each other to move on. When community members came together for meals several times a month, it also enabled greater participation in planning, designing and implementing community-building programmes.¹²

The holistic approach also included wider community rehabilitation activities: installation of sanitation facilities, hygiene training, provision of nutritious food to ward off malnutrition in children during the re-building phase, and measures to prevent outbreaks of infectious disease such as cholera. Since children had been very severely impacted by Nargis, special measures were implemented to assist their emotional recovery. In addition to building cyclone resistant shelters and schools in some of the worst affected areas, Metta built 14 Early Childhood Care Development Centres (ECCDCs) to assist children in learning to play and socialise again, to trust and to feel safe. ‘The children had lost their appetites, were sickly, and lost all interest in school and studies. The children were constantly anxious and ready to run whenever there was a little wind or rain. Community Kitchen[s] were conducted around school activities and during school hours. These helped the children understand and feel that adults and parents were nearby working together and preparing communal meals.’¹³ These ECCDCs were centres where, through drawing and art, children could articulate their sorrow.

Metta’s Community Kitchen projects reached 8, 370 people (including over 4000 from Bogale and Ngaputaw), mostly children. Their approach through training volunteers, and through community elders, mobilized the resources of survivors themselves in a concerted programme to develop what Douglas Paton has called

¹² Metta Development Foundation (2010) *Post Cyclone Nargis Trauma Healing and Recovery Initiatives*, (Yangon: Metta), p. 12

¹³ Metta, (2010), p. 13

community ‘collective efficacy.’¹⁴ Evaluating the project (which gradually was taken over by communities themselves) Metta states that ‘storytelling, recognition of shared pain, grieving together and listening to each other’s hope and aspirations [are] powerful tools towards collective healing and recovery.’ (Metta, 2010, p. 12). The strength of this approach resides in its holistic, participatory, inclusive character which involved everyone in the village/community: thus women, young girls helped prepare food; men cooked; elders and children fed animals and arranged dining areas; young men collected water, firewood, and food items. The creative faculties were fed by ‘singing, celebration of local festivals like full moon day (an auspicious occasion in Buddhist tradition), friendship football matches and other sports activities.’ (Paratharayil, 2010: 151). This approach has been characterised by Paratharayil as ‘therapeutic.’ (Paratharayil, 2010: 150), but may go far beyond that in fostering both community and individual recovery.

An alternative, individual-based approach was taken by Shalom Foundation, using focused psychosocial services for those having difficulty coping with loss of loved ones. Shalom made use of traditional Buddhist meditation methods, Vipassana transcendental meditation. It drew on the resources of some nine NGOs, and was funded by Christian Aid and two other European agencies. Much of its work was focused in Mawlamyanggyun and Pyapon and while it was individual-oriented, it involved community leaders, teachers, religious elders, and Buddhist monks to become caregivers. Training in international methods, listening skills and group work supported the caregivers. This approach sought to combine both community and individual aspects of post-trauma care. According to Paratharayil, the Shalom

¹⁴ D. Paton et al (2007) ‘The Impact of the 2004 tsunami on coastal Thai communities: assessing adaptive capacity,’ *Disasters*, 32(1): 106-119.

program reached 30,000 people in around 5000 households. Assessing this approach, Paratharayil comments that the trained caregivers had little capacity to absorb western psychological methods and that given the recognized need following a major disaster such as Nargis, incorporation of such training in preparedness measures could be considered in future programs to enhance community and individual efficacy.¹⁵

Both these approaches sought to draw on the inherent strengths in Myanmar cultural and religious traditions to give grounding to their work, and the recognition of the need for psycho-social counselling amongst survivors, many of whom detailed their continuing sense of loss. While both approaches may seem to be different in orientation, both have sought to bring healing and solace to the survivors through drawing on community traditions, religious cultural contexts, and participatory practices to bring hope to survivors.

TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIO-POLITICAL COMMUNITY POST-NARGIS

My discussions in June 2012 amongst both the civil society sector, individuals as well as associations, and the government sector were unanimous in perceiving Cyclone Nargis to be a catalyst for socio-political change in Myanmar. The Myanmar today, two years after multi-party elections held in 2010 subsequent to a controversial referendum in 2008 shortly after Nargis on an equally contested Constitution which had an elephantine gestation, gives all the appearance of being a society in the early stages of transformation. Nargis swept through a society long oppressed by a military dictatorship which appeared unable to come to grips immediately with the urgent relief operations required to assist the victims; but at the same time was at first

¹⁵ Paratharayil, (2010), p. 155.

resolute in seeking to manage the entire relief and rehabilitation phase itself, on its own limited resources, by means of the time-honoured self-reliance philosophy which had been a characteristic of the military government for most of Burma/Myanmar's post-colonial existence. However, the full extent of the destruction, the huge loss of life, and the good services of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, soon convinced the previous military government of Senior General Than Shwe, that international assistance was essential. The devastation was so widespread, and the costs of reconstruction so great, that it was soon realised that Myanmar would be unable to cope by itself. It was clear that the good offices of the international community assisted not only in saving lives, but also of expediting Myanmar's socio-political transformation. Yet, it should not be thought that it was a transformation accomplished entirely by the international community. What is clear, is that Myanmar people have effected the early part of this democratic transition largely by themselves: from their spontaneous initiatives in rendering relief to the storm's victims, to participation in the initial referendum despite the tragedy, subsequent participation in the 2010 elections, and their support for the efflorescence of civil society which has occurred in tandem with these political developments.

Five years on from Nargis, the country gives all the appearance of a very different society. Whereas previously citizens were reluctant to speak out, I found that now they are delighted to discuss openly any and every topic, and exhibit a wonderfully relaxed attitude, quite contrary to the severely restrained modes of comportment previously. There is a new energy in the country, as citizens from many walks of life participate in the new governance arrangements now directing their lives. A measure of this is the determination by a poor fisherwoman from the Delta who informed one

of the domestic NGOs that she intended to run for electoral office in the next elections, as she had never been able to do so previously.

Much of the discussion about Myanmar's transformation centres on whether it will last, or whether there will be a regression, and of course this is still to be seen. But all indications are that the change is here to stay, that the socio-political reforms in the democratic transition in Myanmar now underway will continue. There may be some 'bumps in the road', as has happened in other democratic transitions in neighbouring countries, but the consensus is that Myanmar will draw on its human and physical resources to build a better society. There are of course many severe problems in the country and one would not wish to suggest that the reform process will be simple or without some backward steps. Resolution of the ongoing ethnic and communal violence is a high priority; bringing a higher standard of living, education and health to all the people through both economic reform and better, more equitable distribution of the benefits of the reforms and ongoing institutionalization of democratic governance, is also a high priority. These key issues will require cooperation between all the sectors of Myanmar, both NGO and governmental, to make the best use of the resources available if a thoroughgoing and sustainable reconciliation is to break out in Myanmar. Pelling's (2011) insights into the conjunction of different levels of resources, governmental and local, in facilitating transformative transitions seem apposite: observing the 'limits of autonomous and spontaneous adaptations' and the 'necessity for a coalition of local and higher-level organizations and interests' which enable 'alternative experiments ...[to] come to the fore once governance space is opened following a disaster event', he envisages that a climate-change induced disaster such as Nargis can provide opportunities for transition because initiatives to build adaptive capacity 'intervene in relationships between individual political actors

and the institutional architecture that structures governance regimes.’ Although such adaptation and transformation can be obstructed by those whose interests are threatened in the existing governance structures, Pelling suggests that ‘External shocks that show the existing institutional architecture wanting can potentially provide the impetus needed to generate will for transition, and potentially also transformation.’¹⁶ This appears to be the case in Myanmar.

CONCLUSION

The conjunction of domestic and international civil society and the resources and networks inherent in their bridging level social capital has been critical in facilitating both the relief and recovery phases in Myanmar, both for individuals, their local communities, and the wider political community. Whilst much more research is required on these aspects, it is also clear that this level of social capital has been able to accomplish its work by capitalising on the reasonably robust bonding level social capital inherent in the traditional social, community and kinship networks permeating Myanmar villages and towns. To bring about that sustainable transformation envisaged by Pelling and others, requires the intermeshing of these levels with those of the governmental level; and in turn this will presage a diminution of the gap between government and citizen, the long-standing historically-based distrust of government which has inhibited the country’s socio-political development. As the democratic transition proceeds, a key aspect for Myanmar observers and researchers will be how the transformation in governance is deployed through transformation of the relationships between the government level and the citizens. Risk governance, responding to and managing the effects of a natural disaster, are critical tests of the

¹⁶ M. Pelling (2011) *Adaptation to Climate Change: From Resilience to Transformation*, (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 79, 82.

efficacy of national level governance; should another cyclone of similar proportions impact on Myanmar, it is to be hoped that the socio-political transformation currently underway, will produce the disaster risk reduction measures which will put in place more effective preparedness measures, enhance resilience, and mitigate losses. To achieve these outcomes, a more cohesive society will need to emerge as part of the reform processes, a society which can benefit from higher levels of trust at all levels of governance. Myanmar people will continue to pray, donate alms to monks, visit the pagoda, and seek solace and salvation in their traditional lifeways; concomitantly, they will also choose to exercise their rights to participation as new opportunities for creative adaptation emerge through the transformed socio-political processes.

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