CONTEXT-SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT:
HOW INTERNATIONAL NGOs OPERATE
IN MYANMAR

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Publications Associated with this Research

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List of Acronyms

ADB  Asian Development Bank
ASEAN  Association of South East Asian Nations
BIA  Burma Independence Army formed during WWII under Aung San, renamed Burma National Army after WWII
CPB  Community Party of Burma, known as the Red Flag communists
EIU  Economic Intelligence Unit of the London Economist Magazine
ESCAP  UN Economic and Social Commission on Asia and the Pacific
EU  European Union
FAO  Food and Agricultural Organisation
FBO  Faith-Based Organisation
GDP  Gross Domestic Product
GONGO  Government Organised/Operated Non-Governmental Organisations
ILO  International Labour Organisation
IMF  International Monetary Fund
INGO  International Non-Government Organisation
KMT  Kuomintang Chinese Nationalist
LDC  Least Developed Country, according to the UN list
LNGO  Local Non-Government Organisation
NDF  National Democratic Front, a loose coalition of pro-West/anti-communist ethnic groups along the Thai border, long supported by the US as a buffer against the perceived communist threat
MDGs  Millennium Development Goals
MoH/MOH  Ministry of Health, Government of the Union of Myanmar
MOU  Memorandum of Understanding
NGO  Non-Government Organisation
NLD  National League for Democracy
<table>
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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ODA</td>
<td>Official Development Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Pricing Power Parity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUANGO</td>
<td>Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBA</td>
<td>Rights-Based Approach (to Development)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLORC</td>
<td>State Law and Order Restoration Council, the ruling junta 1988-1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPDC</td>
<td>State Peace and Development Council, the ruling junta 1997-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children's Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US / USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USDA</td>
<td>Union Solidarity Development Association, a Myanmar state-controlled mass civilian, charitable, development organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USDP</td>
<td>Union Solidarity Development Party, the ruling political party since the 2011 elections, formed from the USDA and backed by the former SPDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organisation</td>
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<td>YMBA</td>
<td>Young Men's Buddhist Association (1906-1921), modelled on YMCA, became GCBA</td>
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List of Myanmar Terms

bodhisatta a being already enlightened, remaining voluntarily to teach the path to others; an emergent Buddha; occasionally claimed by or about Burmese kings

cakkavatti a universal monarch (world conqueror) in Theravada Buddhist thought

dhamma Pali form of dharma, the natural and moral teaching or law, the uncreated ethical, rational and eternal law of the universe, a blend of nature and justice

dhammaraja literally, 'lord of the law', an ideal ruler who restores political, moral and religious order, creating an environment in which people have peace and prosper, thus being able to spend time gaining merit

dukka the first Buddhist noble truth: suffering, unsatisfactoriness

hpoun amount of innate merit or glory a person possesses, effectively a measure of the level of their kamma, a concept not dissimilar to mana in Polynesia

hsaya teacher, whether religious or secular

kamma Pali form of karma, the law of cause and effect, personal destiny or fate as determined by the result of volitional personal acts

nibbana soteriological goal of Buddhism

samsara the Buddhist cycle of rebirth

sangha the order of Buddhist monks, collective term for the monkhood

tanha the second Buddhist noble truth, the cause of dukka: desire, grasping or attachment

tatmadaw the Myanmar armed forces

Thakin master, a term equivalent to sahib by which the British were addressed, taken as the name of the nationalist party founded by Aung San and U Nu, and a title claimed by members of the party
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Abstract

This thesis examines the manner in which International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) work in Myanmar, as a case study exploring development that is sensitive to difficult socio-political contexts. Myanmar offers an interesting and illustrative example for this study, being a developing nation with a large proportion of the population living in extreme poverty and having a wide range of associated humanitarian needs, but being internationally isolated because of concerns over abuse of power, human rights violations and suppression of democracy. INGOs working in Myanmar therefore face a difficult context, with the humanitarian space being restricted on one side by limited funding and mandates from donors who hold deep reservations about work in the country, and on the other by what has been an authoritarian government deeply suspicious about the motives of international agencies.

This research suggests that a more nuanced understanding of the complex socio-political context and its deep historical antecedents aids understanding of how to approach such complexity with sensitivity. This thesis therefore traces the evolution of theory about sensitivity to context, proposing an extension to current models. It expands current theory about conflict-sensitive development and development in fragile states to a so-called pariah state, recognising that Myanmar is not only in conflict internally but also with the international community. A historically informed analysis of the socio-political context therefore follows, considering significant antecedents impacting on contemporary politics, the significant post-colonial sensitivities, and the values and strategic objectives of key contemporary political actors: the military regime, the democracy movement, the ethnic minorities and the international community.

The ways in which INGOs contextualise their operations and projects in order to be sensitive to the socio-political context face in Myanmar, in an effort to maximise development effectiveness has then been documented and analysed. This analysis considers the ways in which they: a) work in local communities, under the ideas of participation, equity, sustainability, active citizenship and culture-sensitivity); b) relate to other stakeholders in development, including civil society, NGOs, donors and government officials, under the ideas of partnership, capacity building, advocacy, rights-based approach and accountability; and, c) seek to expand the humanitarian space.
Preface: Burma or Myanmar?
A Note on Names and Political Orientation

On 18th June 1989 the then-new regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), issued a decree changing the official English-language name of the country from 'The Union of Burma' to 'The Union of Myanmar'. The government argued this change was in part to discard a name chosen by British colonial authorities, not the people themselves, and that 'Myanmar' is a more inclusive name. They argued that 'Myanmar' is a transliteration of both the official Burmese-language written form of the name of the country, and that it reflects the name the Burmese people traditionally use for the nation—while 'Burma' is derived from the name the Burmese people traditionally use for the majority Burman ethnic group only (Steinberg 2010b). The rejection of the regime's legitimacy to change the country's name by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) has led to choice over which name to use becoming a highly political and emotional one. As Holliday (2011a:5) observes, "The quarrel unleashed by these edicts is an appropriate place to begin this analysis."

The origins and usage of these two names are disputed. Some contend a totally opposite position to the regime, that the name 'Myanmar' is historically used of the dominant Burman ethnic group and 'Burma' is the more racially neutral and inclusive. Hall (1956), for instance, writing during the democratic era in Burma well before any of the current political issues, cites examples of inscriptions dating to A.D. 1102 and 1190 which refer to the ethnic group as Mraanna and Mirrna respectively, as well as evidence that the Chinese knew the ethnic Burmans as the Mien. Some suggest 'Myanmar' is simply an old written form of the name (Steinberg 2009). Others argue that both terms have long been in common usage, are as ancient as one another, and that the general population do not distinguish between them (Houtman 1999). Still others argue that the name 'Burma' was a distortion by the British of the Mon pronunciation of 'Myanmar', and that since colonial times political leaders have wavered between the two terms as indicators of national (rather than ethnic) identity (Rozenberg 2009).

Holliday (2011a) notes the name change was deemed necessary precisely because something had been lost in the British transliteration of 'Burma' and other place names. He argues that 'Burma' remains the more suitable name to use. He does argue, however,
that the name 'Burma' has better links to democracy, as the name used during the
nationalist struggle for Independence, as well as being the name used during the
negotiations with ethnic minorities leading to the 1947 Panglong Agreement. 'Myanmar',
by contrast, he suggests has come to symbolise brutal military rule.

The name 'Myanmar' was widely used prior to the three wars with the British, to refer to
the territory under the rule of the kings, but fell from use during the colonial period
(Badgley 2004b). It was used as late as the 1920s as the title of the leading nationalist
organisation of that period, the Myanmar Athin Chokkyi (the General Council of Burmese
Associations), and in the 1940s by Prime Minister Ba Maw’s Myanmar Wunthani Aphwe
(Myanmar Nationalist Organisation). It has been suggested that U Nu, Prime Minister
during the democratic era 1948-1962 and outspoken opponent of both Ne Win’s regime
and SLORC, expressed regret that he did not lead parliament to change the name of the
country back to 'Myanmar' shortly after independence, to undo more of the colonial
legacy (Rozenberg 2009).

Today, the general population inside the country, particularly the ethnic Burmans, widely
resort to the distinction between 'Bama' and 'Myanma' as markers of ethnicity and
nationality respectively, as the regime argue (Rozenberg 2009). Both names are used
widely inside and outside the country referring to the political entity, however the choice
of 'Burma' or 'Myanmar' has taken on political connotations for many people (Steinberg
2009; Taylor 2009).

Choice of name is quite confused at an international political level. The United Nations
(UN) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have accepted the official
English name 'Myanmar'. The European Union (EU), including the United Kingdom (UK),
have officially adopted the clumsy formulation 'Burma/Myanmar', although they often
revert to one or the other even in official communication. For example, the British Foreign
and Commonwealth Office continue to commonly use 'Burma' in their public
communication (FCO 2011), and UK bills imposing financial sanctions from 2000-2005
used 'Burma' (Treasury 2011), while the EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign
Affairs and Security Policy commonly utilises the formulation 'Myanmar (Burma)' or simply
'Myanmar' rather than 'Burma/Myanmar' (EEAS 2011). Australia, Canada, and the United
States of America (USA), amongst others, continue to recognise 'Burma' as the official English-language name of the country in solidarity with Suu Kyi and the NLD.

The continued use of the name 'Burma' by these nations in international settings is an ongoing point of irritation to the regime. On the other hand, many exiles and migrants outside the country who adhere to 'Burma' feel they are expressing the illegitimacy of the current regime by refusing to accept the name change. They see those who adopt 'Myanmar' as having compromised with an illegitimate regime. Steinberg laments that,

> The name of the state has become a surrogate indicator of political persuasion and even projected legitimacy, causing considerable antipathy and confusion in both official and popular circles ... The use of one or the other name thus politically identifies the orientation of the writer or speaker. (Steinberg 2006:xxx)

In recent years almost any analysis of the country has become politicised, with the polarisation within Myanmar studies reminiscent of tensions within Soviet and China studies at the height of the Cold War (Selth 2010b). Recent academic studies of Myanmar largely come from one of two perspectives. As Robert Taylor (2008) expresses it, the first wants to assess Myanmar against an external model, has a political "axe to grind", sees Myanmar as "a case of deviancy from the norm of the contemporary republican nation-state in ideal modern form"; the second tries to play down comparative analysis and sees the situation in Myanmar "as emanating from its own logic ... history, 'political culture', or religious, structural, and institutional characteristics", and is in "danger of concluding that what is must be"(Taylor 2008:222). In other words, is the Myanmar context "a problem to be solved or a political system to be understood and explained comparatively and historically?" (Taylor 2008:233).

In such a highly politicised context, any choice of name risks criticism and causing offense. This research seeks a middle ground. The final decision of the name adopted in this thesis is made out of respect for the fact that this research focuses on the work of International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) and other development agencies working inside the country, many officially with Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with the government. Possibly largely out of pragmatism, but these development agencies almost exclusively use the name 'Myanmar' in all written documentation. It is also noted that an increasing number of academics are simply adopting the name change. For example, Robert Taylor has switched from using Burma (1987, 2001a) to Myanmar (2008, 2009).
Throughout this thesis I have chosen to adopt the convention of Prof. David Steinberg (Georgetown University) who, for simplicity and attempted neutrality, uses ‘Myanmar’ to refer to the state post-1988 (although the name was actually changed in 1989), ‘Burma’ to refer to periods prior to that, and Burma/Myanmar to indicate continuity (Steinberg 2006). The language will however be referred to as ‘Burmese’, as it is more commonly known. ‘Burmese’ (or ‘Myanmar’) will refer equally to all ethnic groups in the country, and ‘Burman’ will be used to refer to the dominant ethnic group.

When the regime changed the name for the state they also changed the English spelling of many cities, districts and geographical features. This thesis will also adopt the new spellings of place names rather than the traditional British spelling (e.g. Yangon not Rangoon, Bago not Pegu, Ayeyarwady not Irrawaddy, etc.) for all post-1988 references for the same reasons, given these new names are now starting to become more widely recognised, but use the old spelling for pre-1988 references. For comparative discussions on the difficult choice of naming conventions, see Taylor (2001a), Silverstein (2001) and Mya Maung (1988).
PART A:

THEORY, LITERATURE & RESEARCH DESIGN
Chapter ONE: The Challenge & The Research

It is quite unrealistic to pretend that in a country which is fundamentally authoritarian, an agency is going to come in and be able to run a project in a totally participatory manner. This would guarantee a draconian response from the government.

former Chair, UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

I have spent the last two and a half decades physically, spiritually and emotionally engaged in Southeast Asia.

I first became intensely interested in Burma, as it was then, in the mid-1980s. For a teenager part-way through a science degree, it was an odd attraction. I knew no one who had emigrated from Burma, nor anyone who had lived there. I had no family or friends who had even ever visited the country, and it was never in the media. I knew nothing about the place, although I quickly began absorbing everything I could find out about its people, culture, politics and history. For me, this was a spiritual experience, full of exotic, romantic imagery and idealism. It changed the course of my life irrevocably, becoming what could only be described as a strong sense of destiny, a life-calling, to somehow bring something of benefit to this nation. This interest has only grown over the years, the more I have visited and come to understand the country.

I vividly remember the shivers of emotion when news broke of the mass demonstrations and Ne Win’s resignation in 1988. I recall my horror at the brutal crackdown against demonstrators that August, and the frustration that no more than two minutes of news made our TV screens for such a momentous event in the history of one of our Asian neighbours. The following year I had the opportunity to spend an evening with the first person off the first plane out of Burma after that event, a businessman whose account and recordings had been played endlessly on CNN and other news channels. I followed Aung San Suu Kyi's 1989 house arrest, and the excitement then heartbreak of the 1990 elections. I began learning Burmese language and reading Burmese history. Then finally I got to visit!
It was 1992, and my wife and I travelled in for a week with our baby daughter. Everyone was shocked that we would take such a young baby into such an isolated, underdeveloped, and unstable part of the world. That was during the height of the tension over the military’s refusal to hand over power to the National League for Democracy after their decisive election victory. We made a few connections, but it quickly became apparent that Myanmar at that time was not welcoming to young, inexperienced, and idealistic workers connected to a small agency with no experience in Myanmar. We went home disappointed, and applied for a position in Thailand instead, devoting ourselves to the study of Thai language, history and culture.

For the next decade I watched Burmese affairs from the relative comfort of Bangkok, busy in projects in that country but occasionally visiting to monitor the changing situation. All the while I pondered two questions: 1) given the restricted domestic and international situation, how could we gain access to work in needy communities in that country? and, 2) if we did gain access, what could we do to work effectively with those communities without provoking a backlash by the authorities on either ourselves or the people we worked with? Visits to Laos, Cambodia or the Burma border region only fuelled these questions, which eventually led to this doctoral research.

By the early 2000s, as Prime Minister Khin Nyunt’s limited expansion of the humanitarian space began to be felt, it became apparent that visa access to the country would be possible. But by then we were responsible for four young children, and the weight of this burden signalled it was time to return to Australia to attend to their needs. Still, the possibility of access only accentuated the questions in my mind of what an agency would do to be effective in that difficult socio-political context.

This research has thus been a very personal journey of discovery, the culmination of a lengthy and long-distance courtship, if you will, with an intriguing and complex country. I look forward to my own next steps, whatever they may be, but even more to what I hope will be a far brighter future for this land of dreams and possibilities.
One hundred and twenty-two years ago Rudyard Kipling described arriving in colonial Rangoon and seeing the golden spire of the Shwedagon Pagoda for the first time:

A golden mystery upheaved itself on the horizon—a beautiful, winking wonder that blazed in the sun ... 'There's the old Shway Dagon,' said my companion ... The golden dome said, 'This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land that one knows about.' (Kipling 1889)

Burma then was an exotic tropical playground full of gems and teak, a peaceful Buddhist land of mystique filled with pagodas and monks, with a proud history and rich variety of fascinating cultures. It was a thriving, romantic colony, to become a setting for Oscar Wilde's (1922) amusing *For Love of the King*, Noel Coward's (1931) satirical *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, and George Orwell's (1934) illuminating *Burmese Days*. Burma was a hive of new business investment, the latest colonial acquisition, already the largest rice exporter in the world and the busiest seaport in mainland South East Asia. Much has changed and Myanmar today occupies a very different place in the world, but Kipling's remark still seems highly appropriate: for most people Myanmar remains "quite unlike any land that one knows about".

### 1.1 The Development Challenge

This thesis examines the manner in which INGOs work in Myanmar, as a case study exploring development that must be sensitive to a difficult socio-political context.

After North Korea, Myanmar "is probably the most obscure and obscured state in the contemporary world" (Steinberg 2010b:1). The country presents as a difficult context for the international community to understand; indeed, "few states in the contemporary world present the complexities that characterize Burma/Myanmar" (Steinberg 2006:xii).

Myanmar is a developing nation, in which at least a quarter of the population live in extreme poverty (IHLCA 2011). The depth of the humanitarian need can be quickly illustrated by simply observing that government investment in key areas like health and education rank amongst the lowest in the world (based on MoH 2008 figures; & UNICEF 2003 report).¹ Such low state investment in crucial areas of the economy inevitably results in a wide range of significant development and humanitarian issues. The poverty and
vulnerability of the people was highlighted by the level of destruction caused by Cyclone Nargis, which struck Myanmar on 2nd and 3rd May 2008. Despite only being a category 3 cyclone, Nargis resulted in 140,000 deaths and caused "unprecedented destruction", affecting 2.4 million people across the Delta region of the country (TCG 2008).

Most countries with this level of humanitarian need receive significant levels of development assistance (OECD 2011). However, grave concerns by the international community about abuse of power, human rights violations, and suppression of democracy by the ruling elite have led to restrictions, not only in bilateral aid but also in humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. These concerns are reflected, for example, in the fact that the UN General Assembly has passed resolutions against human rights violations in Myanmar at every sitting since 1991, while a Special Rapporteur for Human Rights has been monitoring the situation in Myanmar on behalf of the Human Rights Council since 1992. These apprehensions result in Myanmar being widely ostracised by the international community, and many countries have instituted sanctions to pressure the regime into reform. Prior to Cyclone Nargis, Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Myanmar was the least of any of the UN Least Developed Countries (LDCs), at just 5% of the average per capita assistance to these other needy nations (ICG 2008).

Thus, while the global community is concerned about the level of poverty and humanitarian need in the country, it remains unconvinced about the regime's sincerity about alleviating poverty and is divided over how best to respond to the humanitarian need. Together with restrictions applied by a government suspicious of the motives of outside organisations, it becomes clear that Myanmar is a particularly difficult context for international development agencies to operate within. International agencies face a very "complex political and bureaucratic environment" in Myanmar (ICG 2008:15), a "politically delicate situation" (EC 2007b:28), and even INGO leaders who have spent some years in the country find some areas "nearly impossible to understand" (Allan 2009). It is the adaptation INGOs make to this difficult socio-political context which this thesis considers

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1 Economic and demographic data on Myanmar has been of questionable validity since independence, and is an acute need. Best available data have been used throughout the thesis. This issue is discussed in detail in Section 3.7, (p. 108).
in detail, a context restricted by a combination of challenging domestic politics and reactionary international responses. This research suggests that a more nuanced understanding of this Myanmar context with its deep historical antecedents aids understanding of how to approach this complexity with sensitivity.

In the field research described in Part C of this thesis, INGO managers working in Myanmar describe facing a wall of negative sentiment from the West; from politicians, civil society organisations, and even their own boards and the general donor community. They describe facing an environment of very restricted aid funding and mandates, and contending daily with the restrictions and scrutiny of officials extremely suspicious about their motives, officials concerned (rightly or wrongly) about potential negative side-effects of their work on the security, unity and sovereignty of the nation.

One result of these restrictions and political concerns over engagement in the country is that many major agencies do not work in the country at all, and many others that do work in the country operate under only limited mandates. For example, significant multilateral agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) all have no official presence or work in the country, while the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) operate in the country on greatly restricted mandates. The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) is possibly the only multilateral agency operating in Myanmar without any mandate restrictions, working directly with government departments. A similar situation exists within the INGO community. For example, World Vision was initially much divided over re-entering the country, while Médecins Sans Frontières—France commenced work only to withdraw in a blaze of publicity in March 2006, expressing concern at the level of restriction and scrutiny imposed by the regime. The International Committee of the Red Cross continues to work in the country, but greatly restricted its activities after expressing similar concerns about government restrictions in 2007. Plan International, Opportunity International, and Habitat for Humanity, amongst many others, have all decided not to conduct any official work in the country at this juncture, after feasibility studies and funding limited projects via local NGO partners.

This confluence of very significant need, restricted resources, absence of some major multilateral agencies, limited mandates, authoritarian government, and deep reservations
by international donors and governments, create a difficult socio-political context for those agencies that do operate within the country. Nonetheless, approximately eighty INGOs have negotiated Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with the government, and operate a range of development programs and projects primarily aimed at alleviating the impact of extreme poverty. These include some of the largest INGOs in the world; for example, World Vision, Oxfam (UK), Care International, Médecins Sans Frontières—Holland and Save the Children are all present. In addition, a large number of other INGOs of various sizes work into Myanmar from outside the country, through partnerships with local (often unregistered) NGOs, businesses, civil groups or other INGOs.

1.2 The Research Question—Significance and Objectives

1.2.1 The Research Question

This thesis explores how INGOs contextualise their operation and approach to Myanmar, in an effort to maximise development effectiveness within such a complex domestic and international socio-political context. It considers the state of the theory on context-sensitivity in development, analyses the socio-political context faced by INGOs in Myanmar, and explores how the INGOs who are working in Myanmar contextualise their approach to this particular context.

The research question explored throughout this thesis can be succinctly stated as: How do INGOs contextualise their operations and projects in order to be sensitive to the socio-political context they face in Myanmar, in an effort to maximise their effectiveness toward alleviating extreme poverty in this complex context? Specific aspects to this question consider ways INGOs contextualise their development approach when working directly with the extremely poor in local communities, in their relationships with other key stakeholders, and how they contextualise negotiating funding and access with both the domestic government and the international community.

There are therefore three aspects to this research. The first explores the ways in which INGOs contextualise their approach when working with the extremely poor in local communities, due to the wider socio-political factors. It examines how development
principles or approaches, as expressed by these organisations globally, are applied in Myanmar. For example, what level of community participation are INGOs allowed to implement by domestic political decision-makers, both formally and in practice? And, how do INGOs implement these ideals of participation? In other words, this question explores what is done differently in working with communities within this socio-political context.

This aspect of the research question also considers, in part, what the people and communities themselves respond to. While Myanmar culture also may impact on this question, a key issue is how free the people feel to involve themselves in community development, and in what aspects of programs. The situation in Myanmar is greatly complicated by the authoritarian nature of the regime. Aung San Suu Kyi (1995a) has spoken of the people living under constant fear, a fear which she suggests leads to a pronounced, learned helplessness and dependence amongst the poor. She argues that a chain of command culture trivialises people who do not enjoy formal positions, demotivating initiative and independent self-help action. The regime is also accused of deliberate action to break down collective action, the ban on free association of groups being a case in point. This aspect of the research question will therefore examine how INGOs achieve participation and local programme effectiveness.

This aspect of the research question also considers how INGOs prepare for sustainability, of the achievements of interventions after the end of a project cycle. Presumably, a successful community project will have improved incomes and standard of living, empowered people by building on personal capability, social capital, and freedoms, and develop greater participation, inspiring hope and renewing initiative. It will also, presumably, have improved people’s sense of wellbeing and security by bringing improvements in areas like health, food security or livelihood. The question is, how do INGOs provide for sustainability of these improvements within the constraints of a suspicious regime, who do not always have the interests of their people at heart, and international donors restricting use of funds to build the capacity of the officials and agencies that might otherwise support these achievements for fear of further entrenching the regime?

A second major aspect to this research question asks how the socio-political context in Myanmar changes the way INGOs relate to the wide range of other stakeholders with whom it is important to have relationships, in order to assist the recipients of
development programmes. These stakeholders include Myanmar government officials and agencies, local Myanmar civil organisations, other agencies in Myanmar, transnational civil society, international state actors, and the agencies' own boards, governments and donors. This aspect of the research question, therefore, asks how INGOs express context-sensitivity in the manner in which they relate to each of these stakeholders, given the tensions within the domestic and international political relationships.

For example, given the sanctions and strained international relations with the West, how do Western-based INGOs relate effectively with officials, from ministry down to township level? How often is this relationship with departments and officials formalised? How do they advocate for change within this context of strained relationships? The research explores the extent to which is it beneficial for projects to connect with local authorities or local civil society, and how they implement those relationships. It explores what is required in relationship with officials to facilitate positive community development, without them undermining projects nor offending international donors and boards. Likewise, it considers how the context impacts on the promotion, transparency and accountability INGOs offer their donors and the international community.

A third aspect to this research question stems from the complex set of restrictions INGOs face from both by the domestic government and the international community. This thesis asks how INGOs negotiate with these domestic and international actors for the humanitarian space and funding required to conduct projects effectively, and what these negotiations mean for their development programming. For example, the number of visas issued to foreign INGO staff is limited and foreigners are required to apply for travel permission from the government to travel to many parts of the country. When they do gain visas and travel permission, they must almost always be accompanied by a watchful, regime-appointed guide. This research explores the extent to which such restricted access to project areas by international experts curtails activities, how agencies adapt to this restriction, and what they find works (and does not work) in this context. Likewise, it examines how INGOs work within donor restrictions on the use of funding, restrictions aiming to prevent funding being misappropriated by regime officials, and how INGOs adapt to mandates preventing partnership with government officials. It explores how these impositions change the development approaches of the INGOs, and how they find effectiveness within these parameters.
The research question can therefore be summarised as follows:

**How do INGOs contextualise their operations and projects in order to be sensitive to the socio-political context they face in Myanmar, in an effort to maximise their effectiveness toward alleviating extreme poverty in this complex context?** Three specific aspects to this question have been identified:

**Working in communities:** In what ways do INGOs contextualise their development approach to the Myanmar context when working directly with the extremely poor in local communities? How are organisational principles or approaches to international community development applied or adapted?

**Relationships with key stakeholders:** How does the context impact on the way INGOs relate with the key stakeholder individuals and organisations/agencies who are not the recipients of development assistance, but with whom it is important to have appropriate relationships in order to assist the poor? This includes government officials and agencies, local civil society organisations, other international agencies, the agencies’ own boards, governments and donors, and transnational civil society.

**Creating access and funding:** How do INGOs negotiate with the domestic government and the international community for access and funding to conduct projects effectively, and what do these negotiations then mean for their development approach?

### 1.2.2 Significance and Objectives

The primary objective of this research is, therefore, to examine how INGOs contextualise their operations and projects in order to be sensitive to the socio-political context they face in Myanmar. Answering this question requires a theoretical base by which we might understand sensitivity to context in INGO development. It also requires a detailed understanding of the socio-political context in Myanmar. This thesis therefore offers a detailed review of context-sensitivity in development, as well as an in-depth examination of the Myanmar context—including critical analysis of significant historical antecedents—
before proceeding to document and analyse the ways in which INGOs contextualise their operation and projects to Myanmar.

The anticipated outcome of this research is clear documentation of contextualisation in INGO development, particularly identifying that which most effectively facilitates extreme poverty alleviation in Myanmar within the current conditions. The significance of this research is elucidated through an examination of existing research and literature in two areas: a) the role and place of 'context' and 'context-sensitivity' in international community development, and b) how INGOs create space and operate context-sensitively in Myanmar.

a) Developing Theory of and Illustrating Context-Sensitive Development

'Context' in development theory certainly includes local cultural factors, but the greatest complexity in the case of Myanmar is the strained national and international political situation, both of which have long historical backgrounds. In this sense, Myanmar is one of the more difficult contexts faced by Western-based international agencies today, complicated by, for example: a military/ex-military regime ruling out of political values not well understood from the outside; a lack of rule of law; international concern over human rights violations; stringent domestic restrictions on the action of both foreigners and local civil society; an environment of fear, suspicion and distrust; tough international sanctions; simplistic stereotypes and international opinion geared against engagement in the country; strong external advocacy groups often not in full agreement with groups based inside the country; and a very long history of poor relationships with the West.

Chapter Two of this thesis, therefore, reviews the existing research and literature regarding 'context' and 'context-sensitivity' in international community development. This thesis argues that while in theory the global development dialogue has largely moved past universal prescriptions to recognise diversity, multiple paths and unique contexts, this does not always operate in practice. No one has seriously advocated universal policy prescriptions for international development for decades, other than broad calls for things such as a gender mainstreaming and a Rights-Based Approach to development. However, insofar as Development Studies and development practice have sought to identify
commonalities across diverse contexts in order to ascertain and transfer at least broadly applicable lessons, if not universal principles and approaches to development, the dominant presentation of international development approaches and principles remains expressed in terms of norms.

This thesis therefore argues that there are strong political and organisational normative forces working to undermine the theory and practice of context-sensitivity in international development, including the fact that large international agencies derive much of their legitimacy from normalised mission and strategy statements they are then held publicly accountable against. This dominant presentation of development in terms of norms has resulted in insufficient articulation of how external development agencies ought to tailor what they do to specific contexts, and therefore that 'context' requires renewed attention and theorisation.

In particular, this thesis suggests the need for the extension of the ideas of participatory development to also deliberately include the empowerment of agency in-country personnel within the meso-macro socio-political contexts within which they are the primary actors. It suggests that ideas from social change theory and an extension of conflict sensitive ideas are most relevant, extending the conflict sensitive development ideas from overt, violent intra-state conflict to also include highly strained international relations of an isolated, so-called 'pariah' state. This research thus offers a contribution towards the development of such theory, particularly for complex international socio-political contexts like Myanmar.

\textbf{b) Documenting how INGOs create space and operate context-sensitively in Myanmar}

The other significant contribution of this research, documenting how INGOs create space and operate context-sensitively in Myanmar, is highlighted by the scarcity of literature in this field. This thesis goes significantly beyond existing studies of INGO development work in Myanmar, presenting analysis of over 90 hours of primary interview data by the author, and focussing specifically on the ways in which development agencies contextualise their approaches to maximise aid effectiveness.
There have been many studies of Myanmar politics, and reports examining the pros and cons of sanctions, but while this body of research often mentions the humanitarian impact of the political stalemate there has been very little research into aid effectiveness in Myanmar, much less any examination of how INGOs adapt their development approaches in order to operate most effectively within this context.

Selth (2010b) offers a timely survey of the Myanmar Studies literature. He suggests that tension in Myanmar’s international relations is reflected in a politicisation and polarisation within the field of Myanmar Studies that is reminiscent of tensions within Soviet and China Studies at the height of the Cold War. Selth cautions that, as a result, a considerable amount of material published since 1988 must be treated with caution and that a number of myths and misconceptions have found their way even into the academic literature.

Selth concludes that largest proportion of published research on Burma/Myanmar prior to 1988 broadly considers history, particularly the history of political development (or lack thereof) since Independence. Since 1988 the major emphases have been on comparative politics, the state of Burmese political institutions, and the implications of these for a possible transition from military rule to democracy. Other areas of solid research publication have been strategic analysis of military capability, ethnic insurgency and human security, with a number of major publications considering the decline of the economy since Independence, as well as sociological or anthropological studies into the social, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity in the country. This includes the role of Buddhism in Burmese society and the plight of ethnic and religious minorities.

Notably absent from Selth’s survey are studies of the work of international development agencies, an area with very little published academic research. In one rare study, Inwood’s (2008) MA thesis examines whether international development agencies provide effective humanitarian assistance in Myanmar. He particularly focuses on theories of humanitarian intervention, and whether intervention based truly on humanitarian principles is possible in Myanmar. His research is based on 13 semi-structured interviews and two discussions with groups of representatives from INGOs, UN agencies, donor agencies, journalists, members of exile groups, and academics, between May 2006 and May 2007 (i.e. prior to the ‘Saffron Revolution’ and Cyclone Nargis).
Inwood’s (2008) research provides a solid starting platform upon which this current research can build, including findings showing that agencies in Myanmar believe:

- poor governance is the central cause of poverty in the country; yet the humanitarian situation does still demand international intervention;
- assistance can and should be significantly increased to be closer to levels given to neighbouring needy counties, and should continue to be given via development agencies and not through partnership projects with the government;
- this humanitarian funding should not be conditional;
- the policies of both Western countries and ASEAN to bring about political change in Myanmar have failed, particularly the sanctions policy;
- gaining access to the humanitarian space in Myanmar remains a challenge, especially initial access for new agencies, and access to more sensitive and poverty-stricken areas such as Kachin, Chin and Karen states;
- visas and travel authority to remote sites remains a problem, with visas for consultants taking up to two-three months to obtain and with a one to two month delay on permission for in-country travel;
- small grassroots projects are the most effective means to deliver humanitarian assistance, thus INGOs have a greater role to play within the current context than larger multilateral agencies; and
- agencies do actively self-censor their public information and promotion of their work, so as to not attract adverse attention of officials. This affects working relationships between agencies.

In a smaller study relating to the same time period, Igboemeka (2005) considered the perceptions of development agencies on aid effectiveness in Myanmar. The research, on behalf of the UK Department for International Development (DFID), involved telephone interviews from Bangkok with 26 representatives from UN agencies, INGOs and donor agencies over a five-day period. However, and notably for our study, only four of those interviewed were with INGOs.
Igboemeka found a lack of consensus amongst agencies on measurement of effectiveness, and on how effectiveness might be improved in Myanmar. She did, however, find consensus that the most significant constraints to effectiveness are the highly politicised context, the highly restricted humanitarian space, an atmosphere of secrecy and self-censorship, limited financial and human resources, weak capacity, a lack of reliable data, and difficulty gaining access to needy areas of the country. Divergent aid policies by other countries in the region, particularly China and Thailand, were a further complication. Some practitioners saw alignment with government priorities as a crucial need to support poverty reduction and catalyse broader policy change, but there were conflicting views on this among her respondents. Donors from countries within the region were clear that state-building should be an objective, while Western donors contested this view. Mistrust of international actors by Myanmar authorities was apparent, manifested in suspicion and controls on projects stringent enough to significantly constrain effectiveness. A major concern was that external actors do not recognise or reflect in-country understandings, leading Igboemeka to conclude that a more thorough understanding of the challenging context and its links to change processes is required by all actors.

In 2006 the International Crisis Group released a report on humanitarian aid in Myanmar (ICG 2006), with the conclusion that most aid agencies had found access to vulnerable populations had improved. By their assessment, the work of most agencies in Myanmar is better defined as providing humanitarian aid, rather than sustainable human development, and that the overall trend was for increasing humanitarian space.

In their report after Cyclone Nargis, the ICG (2008) further argued that development agencies, particularly INGOs, were being highly effective with very limited resources, and that unprecedented cooperation between the government and international agencies in delivering emergency aid to the survivors signalled that it was time to normalise aid relations with Myanmar. By that, they were recommending that all political conditionality and restrictions on aid, except the prohibition on direct budgetary support for the Myanmar government, be lifted; that substantial increases in aid be given to allow sustainable human development (not just humanitarian aid); and that economic sanctions which affect livelihoods of vulnerable groups be lifted, notably bans on imports of Myanmar garments, agricultural and fishery products and restrictions on tourism. Their subsequent report in the lead up to the 2010 elections observed that some government
ministers had been particularly active, cooperating with humanitarian assistance organisations in continuing to expand this humanitarian space (ICG 2009). The ICG suggested development cooperation was becoming a preferred means for many officials to project a more positive domestic public image, as they attempt to help secure their political futures beyond the 2010 elections.

DFID (2010) take a contrary view, arguing that development and political progress cannot be separated in Myanmar. DFID emphasise targeted sanctions as a means to push for political reconciliation and human rights. They do, however, argue that the work of INGOs in addressing severe humanitarian needs is making a real impact in the lives of the poor, particularly in health, education, rural growth and capacity development of civil society.

A working paper by Duffield (2008), sponsored by the UN Humanitarian Coordinator and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Yangon after Cyclone Nargis, examines how development agencies operate in the ‘difficult environment’ of Myanmar. This paper is not an evaluation of the aid programme to Myanmar, but an attempt to "place the humanitarian situation in a wider context." He finds that while levels of suspicion and restriction by the government are high, they are not exceptional. What is anomalous, he suggests, is the disproportionate effect external lobby groups have had on restricting aid funding and mandates, the polarising lens of Western sanctions, and the climate of political isolation.

Duffield argues that fragile state approaches are not appropriate in Myanmar. Drawing instead on theories of humanitarian assistance, he concludes that a primary role for agencies working in Myanmar is "pushing back, containing or domesticating a colonially derived design of power". He concludes that development agencies create space for independent action in Myanmar through engagement and visibility with the Myanmar authorities, by disarming the arbitrary personal power of officials through cooption, and by constant reassurances to both sides of the polarised political discourse that they are adhering strictly to the principles of humanitarian assistance, namely,

a) humanity—the centrality of saving human lives and alleviating suffering;

b) impartiality—implementation of action solely on the basis of need, without discrimination between or within affected populations;
c) *neutrality*—that humanitarian action must not favour any side in an armed conflict or other dispute; and,

d) *independence*—autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold. (See IMGHG 2003).

While each of these research papers provide useful starting material, the research in this thesis goes significantly beyond each of these previous studies of INGO work in Myanmar, to examine their context-sensitive development approaches in depth.

### 1.3 Definitions

Before proceeding further, a few important terms need to be defined.

#### 1.3.1 NGO/INGO

The earliest definition of INGO is found in resolution 288(X) of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC 1950), which simply defines INGOs as "any international organization that is not founded by an international treaty".

In recent years the designation Non-Government Organisation (NGO) has come to take on a particular meaning. Operational Directive 14.70 of the World Bank defines NGOs, for example, as

> private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development. NGOs often differ from other organizations in the sense that they tend to operate independent from government, are value-based and are guided by the principles of altruism and voluntarism. (World Bank 1989)

INGOs are NGOs with international structures that involve the flow of leadership, staff, funding, policy, expertise, and/or projects from outside the country.

The World Bank divides NGOs into *Operational NGOs*, whose primary purpose is the design and implementation of development-related projects, and *Advocacy NGOs*, whose primary purpose is to defend or promote a specific cause and who seek to influence
policies and practices. Using this terminology, this research considers Operational NGOs more than Advocacy NGOs, recognising that all NGOs do often also advocate but that the primary activity of most NGOs in Myanmar is the design and implementation of development-related interventions. NGOs whose primary purpose is advocacy, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, for example, regularly critique Myanmar, but do so from outside the country and largely do not engage communities, civil society or government officials directly inside the country.

NGOs are distinguishable from other non-profit organisations such as schools, sporting clubs, religious groups, and even people’s organisations by being “local non-profit membership-based associations that organise and mobilise their constituents in support of collective welfare goals—e.g. peasants and trade unions” (Clarke 1996:1), and by their broad public welfare aims. Clarke draws a further distinction between NGOs, Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations (QUANGOs), and Government Organised/Operated NGOs (GONGO).

Where NGOs are funded totally or partially by governments, they maintain their non-governmental status by excluding formal or informal government representatives from decision-making of the organisation (Clarke 1996; Korten 1990). QUANGOs and GONGO are therefore excluded from the definition of NGOs in this research, where established by the government to look like NGOs for purposes of social control or attracting funding. There are a number of such organisations within Myanmar, and these are beyond the scope of this research.

The website, NGOs in the Golden Land (2010), defines INGOs as any organisation that operates not only in Myanmar but also in other countries, and which provides social goods to the people of Myanmar and operates somewhat independently from government structures. They recognise that this definition is more inclusive than exclusive, and is open to discussion. It is broader than standard definitions. However, since it would appear to reflect the view of a majority of INGOs in the country it is the definition used in this thesis.
1.3.2 ‘Context’

‘Context’ is a term that is widely used, but is extremely difficult to define. Its breadth creates the possibility of being too broad a term to be usefully employed, or risks being co-opted to refer to anything anyone wants it to mean, thus actually losing meaning. Nonetheless, the term is in widespread use to embrace factors from the milieu or environment surrounding the development that impacts on operations or interventions.

In this thesis 'context' is used in line with the definition of the global consortium of INGOs now known as the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium:

- the operating environment, which ranges from the micro to the macro level (e.g. community, district / province, region(s), country, neighbouring countries) ...
- comprised of actors, causes, profile and dynamics. (Africa Peace Forum et al. 2004)

The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (formerly Africa Peace Forum et al. 2004), suggest that the 'context' within which INGOs operate typically includes political, economic, socio-cultural and historical factors, from the micro-level of the village community to the macro-level of the national and international scene. As discussed in Chapter Two, the most significant aspects of 'context' in the Development Studies literature apart from culture relate to politics, particularly conflict (a 'conflict sensitive approach') and state fragility. The most significant aspects of the Myanmar 'context' spoken about in the Myanmar Studies literature, discussed in detail in Part B (Chapters Four & Five), are likewise largely socio-political, and include: traditional values about power and legitimacy; the history of the relationship with the West; the history of internal ethnic conflict; the impact of authoritarian rule on the people; international responses towards Myanmar; the state of the economy, and; the humanitarian situation.

1.3.3 ‘Context-Sensitive’

‘Context-sensitive development’, therefore, is not a competing development approach but an extension of participatory development and conflict-sensitive development ideas to the strained socio-political factors surrounding development in an isolated, so-called 'pariah' state. 'Sensitive' means understanding these contextual factors and the interaction between them and development interventions, and acting upon the understanding of this
interaction in ways that either align with these factors, or always keep them clearly in mind, respecting the views and processes embodied by them, and seeking to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts while working for change (Africa Peace Forum et al. 2004).

1.3.4 ‘Development’ and ‘Humanitarian’

‘Development’ is a contested concept, both in terms of its meaning and means of achieving outcomes. However, the intrinsic goal of development is to advance human dignity, freedom, social equity and self-determination. A lack of development is characterised by poverty, social exclusion, powerlessness, poor-health, and shortened life expectancy. Good development outcomes are best achieved when communities have ownership of the goals and processes, and where there are participatory representation, social equity, transparency and accountability mechanisms. Good development outcomes must also explicitly consider the importance of gender and diversity, as well as expand people's freedoms and experience of their inalienable human rights. Ensuring development outcomes are sustainable therefore requires any underlying factors contributing to underdevelopment be addressed, making sustainable development inherently political and requiring partnership and capacity building of both civil society and government agencies (UNDP 1996).

The UNDP define ‘human development’ as,

>a process of enlarging people’s choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. If these essential choices are not available, many other opportunities remain inaccessible.

(UNDP 1990:10)

INGO development is based on principles that,

>emphasize that all persons share similar needs and desires, that individuals and associations of individuals can work together for the common good of humanity, that rational progress can be made towards individual and community well-being, and that all individuals are endowed with certain rights and responsibilities.

(Tegenfeldt 2001:109)

Development occurs in all societies. It involves processes that require an appreciation of existing endogenous strengths and (often) exogenous interventions. Successful
development requires critical analysis, mutual learning, and acceptance of its paradoxes and dilemmas. To ensure that benefits of development are sustained, environmental concerns must be a central priority. There is no single measure of development, and assessment of development requires a range of indicators.

By contrast, humanitarian action focuses on saving lives and relieving suffering. Traditionally, humanitarian assistance has been based on the defining humanitarian principles outlined above, of impartially alleviating suffering based solely on need, independent of the political, economic or strategic objectives of any actors (IMGHQ 2003). Seeking to remain apolitical, humanitarian assistance therefore commonly bypasses domestic governments and seeks to provide assistance directly to those in need. While often a short-term response to natural disasters, humanitarian assistance may also be a response to chronic need.

As has already been noted, NGO and multilateral development agencies create space for development in Myanmar by adhering strictly to these humanitarian principles of assistance (Duffield 2008). As a result, throughout much of this thesis the terms 'development' and 'humanitarian' are sometimes in conjunction with one another to refer to programs seeking development outcomes, but whose implementation is based largely or exclusively on these traditional humanitarian principles.

1.4 Scope of the Research

1.4.1 Should INGOs Work in Myanmar?

Debate over whether INGOs should be working in Myanmar has already been noted. Prior to 1988, the regime’s self-imposed isolation resulted in little opportunity for INGO programs. Now, with a little more opportunity, many have voiced concerns that the very presence of INGOs in Myanmar adds legitimacy to an illegitimate regime, thereby entrenching oppressive leaders, and that INGO activities are so restricted or manipulated as to be only of limited benefit (e.g. Vicary 2010). The debate is well summarised by Purcell (1997), although it should be noted that as time has passed since the imposition of
sanctions, without significant political change, the voices calling for non-involvement have diminished while those calling for increased humanitarian engagement have increased.

Even prior to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, none less than the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar began arguing that,

> humanitarian needs of the population in Myanmar must not be hostage to politics ... The international community has the duty to address the humanitarian needs in the country. [Thus UN decisions about human rights must be] guided by the best interests of children, women, people living with disabilities, those affected by diseases and minority groups. (Pinheiro 2006)

The devastation of Cyclone Nargis appears to have crystallised the view that we cannot wait for a change in government before humanitarian assistance is provided, with an approximate doubling of the number of INGOs negotiating MOUs and working directly in the country. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was long critical of INGOs "helping a few thousand here or there" rather than helping everyone by changing the political system (Smith 2001:37), has re-opened discussion on this issue, as well as aid levels, sanctions, trade, tourism and investment since her release in 2010. This research therefore focuses on how INGOs address context-sensitivity issues, rather than on whether to engage.

This research is further limited by organisational type, development model, operational location, context, and research aims.

1.4.2 Organisational Type: Western-based INGOs

This research focuses on how INGOs work context-sensitively in Myanmar. INGO work in Myanmar consists primarily of project-based community development interventions, and advocacy with government officials on behalf of communities and civil society. This research does not consider on the work of other types of agencies, such as multilateral or bilateral agencies, each with their own distinctive development strengths and approaches.

This thesis is restricted to Western-based or Western-origin INGOs operating in Myanmar, because of the specific issues connected with Western-Burmese relationships, both historically and currently. However, it should be noted that other, non-Western-based INGO do also operate in Myanmar.
1.4.3 **INGO development**

This thesis focuses on INGO development approaches. INGOs are distinct from multilateral organisations, such as United Nations agencies including the UNDP, WHO and the FAO, some of whom were also interviewed for this research. Such multilateral agencies are overseen by nation-states via the UN, as opposed to NGOs. Likewise, bilateral organisations are inherently linked with nation-states. Given the strained relationships between Myanmar and much of the international community, including the UN, tensions exist with the governments behind most bilateral/multilateral agencies. INGOs, on the other hand, have greater potential to offer humanitarian neutrality. Where their comparative neutrality is accepted by both sides, the possibility exists for INGOs to engage in action precisely because of their non-government status.

Development work may address a micro, meso or macro level, engaging individuals, communities, districts, nations and international regions (Feeny & Clarke 2009). Broad-based, pro-poor macroeconomic growth may possibly be the most effective at lifting the largest number of people out of economic poverty, although even when countries experience rapid economic growth (as in many East and South East Asian countries over the last half-century), many are left behind and issues of marginalisation and social exclusion are often not dealt with. Multilateral and bilateral agencies are often the best equipped to assist with macroeconomic growth, through institutional capacity building. INGO approaches are often more tailored to target disadvantaged and excluded communities and individuals.

Achieving significant macroeconomic growth in Myanmar would require substantial policy change, making this an inherently political path. Changes required would include: integration into global trade and finance; reform of banking, taxation, infrastructure and education; and stimulation of private entrepreneurship, savings, and investment. These pre-conditions for long-term macroeconomic development are not currently in place in Myanmar (Moore 2009, 2011). The absence of true rule-of-law and the unwillingness of the regime and the international community to partner in reforming these vital areas of the state and the economy to date have prohibited such growth, suggesting such broad macroeconomic development is still some way off. A significant thawing of relations between the international community and the Myanmar government would also be
required. There is no indication of this happening soon, nor of the new parliament or Aung San Suu Kyi’s recent release changing this dynamic in the near future.

Micro and meso levels of development are more grass-roots and bottom-up, instigated by working directly with local communities and civil society. INGO development thus is not merely stop-gap while waiting for macroeconomic development. INGO development has a specific focus and a number of key strengths, most notably in that it targets assistance to the poorest, most vulnerable, and most marginalised, those who are the last to benefit from broader macroeconomic development, and that it primarily seeks to engage with and empower civil society and local communities (Malik 2011). This is in stark contrast to the work of multilateral and bilateral development agencies who often engage primarily with the government agencies, and through them create the environment within which civil society and communities can be supported in development.

Most international donors require development assistance to Myanmar to bypass the government, and be geared toward the alleviation of extreme poverty and capacity development of communities and civil society. These are activities in which INGOs excel, and are commonly referred to as human or community development.

It could therefore be argued that INGO development is far better suited to current donor demands on assistance to Myanmar than multilateral development, although achieving long-term macro-economic development will require the multilaterals. It is relevant to note that the UNDP also operates in Myanmar under a restricted mandate preventing it from partnering with government agencies, and thus directly partners with civil society and local communities in a manner closely resembling INGO development.

1.4.4 Operational Location: inside Myanmar

This research only considers the work of development INGOs based inside Myanmar, or working inside Myanmar through partnerships. It thus deliberately excludes the work of the wide range of INGOs working for the good of the people of Myanmar from outside the country. Thus organisations working with refugees along the borders, those working across the borders into contested areas without authorisation of the Myanmar
authorities, and those conducting advocacy from bases in other countries are not examined. This does not deny the good work of these organisations, but restricts the scope of this present research to INGOs with operations in the government-controlled parts of the country, usually with headquarters in Yangon.

It is recognised that this limitation on the research means that the complexity of the long standing ethnic conflict is less directly considered in this thesis, and this research avoids any specific consideration of regions experiencing armed conflict between the minorities and the Tatmadaw, the Myanmar army.

1.4.5 Time Period: post-Khin Nyunt, the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis

Finally, this research is restricted to the work of development INGOs in Myanmar subsequent to a number of events which have significantly altered the landscape: particularly, after the overthrow of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in 2004, after the monk-lead 'saffron revolution' demonstrations of 2007, and after Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Research has been conducted both prior and subsequent to the elections and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010, and the disbanding of the military junta and convening of parliament in March 2011.

1.5 Summary of Chapters

This thesis is structured in three parts. Part A sets up the theory and research design for examining context-sensitive development, Part B explores the Myanmar context in detail, and Part C presents and analyses the fieldwork research findings documenting how INGOs implement context-sensitive development in Myanmar.

PART A: Theory, Literature & Research Design

Chapter One has introduced the topic, defined the research question and scope, and offered definitions of key terms.
Chapter Two: Context-Sensitive Development

Chapter Two traces the evolution of thinking about context-sensitivity in international development from single pathway notions of economic development after World War II. It notes the development of country specific plans, the recognition that every country faces a unique developmental environment, emphasis from developing nations on the need for greater sensitivity to their context, recent emphasis on cultural diversity, and the prioritisation of community-led development and partnership with local organisations. It notes that apart from emphasis on culture, most context-sensitive development literature focuses on socio-political factors, with the complexity of conflict and state fragility requiring the greatest sensitivity. This chapter suggests while the global development dialogue has moved past universal prescriptions to recognise diversity, multiple paths and unique contexts, that strong forces push development practice towards normative application. Despite emphasis on highly participatory development, local partnerships, and empowerment, what is widely overlooked is the ways in which international agencies themselves still need to contextually their own actions to local, national and international contextual factors.

Chapter Three: A Window on Context & Context-Sensitive Development—Fieldwork Design

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology which has been employed to explore the nature of the socio-political and economic context faced by INGOs in Myanmar, and then examines how agencies contextualise their operations and development approaches in this environment. It documents the approach to Myanmar Studies literature to arrive at a historically informed understanding of the contemporary socio-political and economic context of Myanmar today, and the methodology used for the fieldwork with INGOs. It explains the means used to identify respondents and conduct in-depth semi-structured, qualitative interviews. It provides details of the range of organisations represented in the interviews, and documents the method employed to test preliminary findings and to explore changed conditions after the 2010 elections.
PART B: The Myanmar Context—An Historically-Informed Analysis

Chapter Four: Burmese Days—Antecedents to the Socio-Political Context

Noting that Myanmar is marked by conflict and state fragility, and that the literature calls for development in such contexts to be grounded in an in-depth, historically-informed understanding, Chapter Four offers a critical analysis of the historical antecedents to the current political crisis. It does this by examining three significant historical narratives: the traditional values established during centuries of monarchy, the impact of Western contact and colonialism, and the tumultuous period surrounding independence. It is argued that traditional perceptions about power and rulership, the conditioning history of interaction with the West, and the animosities of WWII and the post-Independence civil war all continue to resonate within contemporary politics. "Without the study of (Burmese history), one’s understanding of Burmese society subsequently, though not unimportant, is incomplete" (Aung-Thwin 1985:1). This discussion lays a foundation to understanding the values of the political elite today, why they react in the ways they do, and thus points to development approaches which are more likely to gain cooperation.

Chapter Five: Myanmar Times—Contemporary Economic & Socio-Political Context

Chapter Five then explores the contemporary socio-political, economic and humanitarian context faced by INGOs working in Myanmar. The political context is analysed by examining the values and strategic objectives of the four key actors in this drama: the tatmadaw (armed forces) and the ruling elite; Aung San Suu Kyi and the opposition movement; the ethnic minorities; and the international community. Then an analysis of the economy is presented, together with discussion of the causes of underdevelopment in the country. Finally, the humanitarian challenge facing INGOs in Myanmar is investigated by considering the extent of absolute poverty and multidimensional impacts it has within the country, the key challenge development INGOs seek to address.


PART C: Fieldwork & Analysis—INGO Context-Sensitive Development in Myanmar

Chapter Six: Doing Conflict Sensitive Development in Communities

Chapter Six presents the phenomenological interview results documenting the ways in which INGOs make their work in local communities more context-sensitive, adapting to both the domestic and international context. Work in local communities is analysed under the conceptual approaches to community development most commonly expressed during the interviews, namely, participation, equity, sustainability, active citizenship and context-sensitivity. It is found that to be most effective INGOs place more effort into making their programs more highly participatory in Myanmar than they would in other contexts within which they work, with a strong focus on equity and on sustainability by local communities themselves. They largely stop short, however, of capacity building local community for active citizenship, at least until recently preferring to adopt advocacy roles on behalf of communities.

Chapter Seven: Conflict Sensitivity in Stakeholder Relationships

INGOs likewise contextualise the way in which they negotiate their relationships with other stakeholders in Myanmar’s development. Chapter Seven presents the interview results documenting the ways they negotiate these stakeholder relationships, finding INGOs approach working with local civil society, NGOs, regime officials and even other INGOs, quite differently in Myanmar than they would in most other countries. It is found that INGOs see a need to limit or proceed far more cautiously with many of these relationships within the Myanmar context than they would elsewhere. Again, this contextualisation can be linked directly to restrictions stemming from both the domestic and the international political environment. Relationships with these stakeholders are analysed under the ideas of partnerships, capacity building, advocacy, rights-based approach and accountability.
Chapter Eight: Context-Sensitivity and the Restricted Humanitarian Space

Chapter Eight presents the perspective of the interview participants in regard to the restricted humanitarian space within which they operate, both in terms of domestic and international restrictions, and then analyses this restricted space from the literature. INGOs argue that the greatest constraints on their efforts towards immediate alleviation of extreme poverty do not come from the Myanmar government, as much as from limited funding and restrictive mandates, requiring continual lobbying of their own governments, boards and donors. This chapter therefore explores the international relations theory behind international pressure on Myanmar and the restrictions on the humanitarian assistance, arguing that, while sanctions have a role in the socialisation of norm-violating states, the international community has competing approaches and concerns toward Myanmar which need to be clarified. In the light of the effective approaches INGOs have found in Myanmar, and many significant tactical concessions made recently (if not beginnings of real reform), this chapter suggests a repositioning by the international community which would expand the humanitarian space is overdue.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions—Contributions and Findings

Chapter Nine draws the thesis together, offering a range of conclusions from the research and synthesising the findings. It discusses how INGOs conduct development work in the context of contemporary Myanmar, and identifies areas for future research.
Chapter TWO: Context-Sensitive Development Theory

Development is, perhaps, the world’s most critical problem, incorporating most of the world’s pressing issues. At the same time, the subject of development has retreated to increasingly simple formulae in the minds of many of the people and governments able to address it meaningfully.

(Kingsbury 2008b:6)

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) offers an interesting case study of an international agency adapting its approach in Myanmar to be sensitive to the context.

The global governing body of the ILO comprises representatives from UN states, employer groups and employee groups. Its mandate is to promote rights at work, encourage employment opportunities, enhance social protection and strengthen dialogue on work-related issues. It usually fulfils these aims by promoting social justice and rights, developing labour standards and running technical partnership programmes between governments, employers and workers. However, restrictions required by the international community and the Myanmar government have limited the ILO’s mandate in Myanmar to solely working for the elimination of forced labour and ensuring freedom of association in the country (see ILO 1998; 2002: and supplements 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010).

Given this global mission statement and the narrow mandate for Myanmar, the ILO undertook some fascinating contextual development work in Myanmar within the response to Cyclone Nargis, highlighting the role of fieldworkers in contextualisation. The ILO Liaison Officer for Myanmar, Steve Marshall, described how he significantly innovated under the terms of his mandate from the ILO and the Myanmar government, documenting how the ILO has engaged in desperately needed community reconstruction and development within their mandate, in a highly context-sensitive manner:

During Nargis we did a specific project for the elimination of forced labour. We did it as a ‘good practice employment’ project where we let some 150-odd contracts for infrastructure reconstruction work. These contracts were let with local village community committees, which were elected for that purpose. Those committees led
local contracts to villagers. I only engaged civil engineers and liaison officers whose job it was to teach local communities the basics of governance and conflict of interest management, financial management, and to teach contractors things such as about competitive bidding, good employment, and things of that nature.

So from October last year until the end of June 2009, we have been working in the Delta in quite a big way, in what I would see as being a community development activity which happens to produce some infrastructure as an outcome. It is clearly about good employment practices. It is clearly about getting citizens to understand the fundamentals of community activity, consultation processes, good governance activities, good employment practices, good payment of wages practices, and their fundamental rights under the existing law. (Not giving them any idea about what life could or should be like, but what they actually have the right to now.)

There is not much point in giving someone a nice building and a nice farm, and helping them plant a crop if they can’t get their stuff to the market. So our project was about giving them mobility, between villages and from villages to markets. We built something like 85 km of raised concrete footpaths, we built 52-53 bridges, 25-26 jetties (not bamboo, but decent ones that will last). And this was ALL done by local contractors. Given the skills and resources, these communities employed locals from their area, and they own everything.

I am currently negotiating with the government to continue that project in a non-Nargis environment, so we are looking at expansion outside of the Delta … Obviously this goes to some very fundamental community development issues which will be critical if the government are moving to a form of democracy, because most people in these villages have got no understanding of the concepts of decision making for community development. This is not a country where you make decisions … so it is critical that people at a village level actually start to understand concepts of community consultation, discussion of issues and consensus decision making.

Everything is being done in the name of forced labour and freedom of association (laughs), because if I do it in any other name, the reality is that I am breaching the resolution of our conference, and that gets me in trouble. So, for example, this project is not a community development activity – I sold it as being a project of education for the elimination of forced labour. But the reality is that we have a very good community development project, which has some very useful physical community outcomes.
There can be no fixed and final definition of development; only suggestions of what it should imply in particular contexts (Hettne 1995:15)

Aid agencies have not advocated universal policy prescriptions for international development for decades, other than broad policies such as gender mainstreaming or rights. However, despite over thirty years of well argued critique denouncing normative, one-size-fits-all formulations of development, top-down, externally driven, non-contextual development persists, and attitudes of modernity and neo-colonialism continue to dominate much development thought and practice (Ife 2010). Rather than facilitating difference, this type of development acts more as a "homogenising conversion of extrinsic properties to a common conceptual core" (Bastin 2010). In this milieu,

... diversity is seen as a deviation from the central axis of progress and so must be tamed and refined ... While paying lip-service to 'difference' – the superficial characteristics and varying histories of groups – development programmes, including those of international NGOs, have never been patient with diversity. (Murphy 2000:342)

On one hand, participation, empowerment, and the recognition of factors, such as culture and conflict, are very widely acknowledged to be essential for effective sustainable development. On the other hand, powerful forces still drive both development theory and practice towards normative approaches. This chapter explores that tension and the ideas of context-sensitive development through a review of the Development Studies literature, examining inadequacies in current theory and proposing steps towards a new model for context-sensitive development.

Agencies and donors recognise that every context is unique, that there is no template for development, and therefore that what works in one country may not work in another (Stokes 2010). Yet at the same time, development practice has sought at least broadly applicable lessons, if not universal principles, while large international agencies derive much of their legitimacy from key organisational mission statements resulting in them being held publicly accountable against normalising criteria (Shutt 2009). Some specialists even argue that Development Studies is a normative discipline and should remain that way (e.g. Kilby 2010). Regardless, this chapter argues that the dominant presentation of development in terms of norms has resulted in insufficient articulation of the role of development agencies in tailoring what they do to specific contexts, particularly to difficult socio-political contexts such as Myanmar.
This chapter traces the evolution of context-sensitivity in the development literature, then examines the various aspects of context-sensitivity which are well reflected in it, namely, sensitivity to culture, conflict and state fragility. The distinctive roles of various types of development agencies in different difficult political contexts are discussed. This chapter then examines participatory development as the model most widely adopted by the INGO development community to ensure context-sensitivity, noting the underlying assumption implicit in this model is that local knowledge, participation, empowerment and partnership will make decision-making inherently sensitive to context. Despite the strengths of this model in terms of local knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and devolved decision-making, it is argued that this model is insufficient of itself to ensure sensitivity to more difficult socio-political issues, especially those involving significant national and international tension. The need for greater theorisation of sensitivity to difficult socio-political context and the roles INGOs themselves need to play is thus argued. This chapter ends with a discussion of social change models, and a proposed conceptual advancement arguing for an extension to the participation-empowerment model to also include the deliberate empowerment of INGO field staff by INGO head offices and hierarchies.

2.1 The History of Context-Sensitivity in Development Thought

The recognition that development needs to be sensitive to context is today widespread; indeed it is an almost implicit presupposition in most development thinking. However, arriving at this level of conceptual agreement has been a lengthy process, and this understanding is still subject to strong normative forces opposing effective contextualisation in practice.

2.1.1 Modernity, Economic Development and Modernisation

Origins of the Idea of Development

The origins of the modern notion of development are said to date to innovations in ancient Greek and early Christian thought, as early Christians, in particular, reconceived history as a linear flow of time replacing older and more traditional ideas of history as a cyclical rotation of seasons (Rist 2002). Christianity postulated a definite beginning to time
in the distant past, a present condition which included the offer of redemption in present and future circumstances, and a future consummation of all things at the end of time. While this reconception took some centuries to have its effect, the idea of a linear flow of time and the perception that history involves progress and development eventually led to the Enlightenment and became the foundational idea of modernity.

The dominant Western ideas about development are founded on the concept of modernity, and the underlying notion of progress along a linear, cause-and-effect pathway (Bastin 2010; Ihe 2010). Bastin goes so far as to suggest that 'development' is not a concept, in the sense that Deleuze & Guattari (1991) define the term, but is a mode of practice based on the underlying concept of modernity. Deleuze & Guattari argue that such propositions are commonly confused with concepts, but that concepts are distinctive by the inseparability of their components. Building on this philosophical reasoning, attempts to redefine the parameters of development fail because of the coherent and pervasive nature of the underlying concept being drawn on in development practice, namely, modernity.

The 'development era' began in the late nineteenth century, the heyday of modernism. The popular adoption of the idea of development at this time paralleled acceptance of the theory of evolution and its application in social and cultural evolution (Nisbet 1969; Rist 2002). History came to be seen in evolutionary terms, with humanity continually evolving into more developed cultural forms. History was increasingly defined in linear ideas of progress, growth and development, and the West, being wealthier at that point in history, was assumed to be more evolved than other societies, an idea with strong endurance.

Development was thus co-opted as a doctrine by the European colonial powers, to justify colonial intervention on philanthropic grounds. It was widely argued that 'higher races' had duties towards 'lower races', to share the benefits of science and progress in a 'civilising mission' (Bernstein 2000; Rist 2002). Not doing so constituted 'moral degeneracy.' Colonialism was thus justified, in part, as the most efficient means to civilise less developed peoples. Whilst local culture and other contextual differences were commonly noted during this period, development was framed in linear, evolutionary terms that sought to exchange this traditional culture for more developed forms (Rist 2002). Context was subjugated to evolutionary ideas.
Hildebrand (1848) was possibly the first to formalise this linear 'stages' theory in economic development, a theme taken up by Schumpeter in his more well known, *A Theory of Economic Development* (1911). By the end of the colonial era the linear development model with sequential developmental stages was firmly enshrined in economic theory (Fonseca 2010).

*Second Impetus for Development*

A second, more contemporary, impetus for development came from post-WWII reconstruction, the formation of the United Nations, the Cold War, and decolonisation. During the Cold War, offers of development assistance were wielded as tools to persuade poorer countries into one of the two ideological alliances, as was well illustrated by Harry Truman's famous 1947 *Truman Doctrine* speech. The UN's (1951) subsequent study of *Measures for the Economic Development of Under-Developed Countries* is clearly based on an implicit assumption that development in all societies would be triggered by investment in infrastructure and industrialisation, and result in a mass-production and consumption-based society. Lewis' *Theory of Economic Growth* (1955), highly influential in the West, required favouring an entrepreneurial capitalist class to facilitate economic growth. The paradigm was very much based on the linear stages theory.

Possibly the most influential Western articulations of development theory during this era was Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960). Even the title highlights the dominance of the idea of linear progression. Rostow was a significant voice in US Cold War modernist development, and epitomises the dominant ideology about the means of achieving rapid economic development in Third World countries. Rostow postulated a linear sequence of five universal stages of economic growth, from traditional society through to a mass-consumption economy, which all countries must pass through in economic development. His model characterised the pre-conditions for economic 'take-off' as being linked to rapid culture change in which traditional values and behaviours are substituted with more developed, Western-like ones. These ideas became the conventional development wisdom during this period (Peet & Hartwick 2009; Acre & Long 2000). Any contextual differences between developing nations were subjugated to the idea of linear development towards a more advanced Western norm.
2.1.2 Challenges to the Linear Model

The Rise of Country and Context Specific Development

One of the earliest development economists to challenge this model and argue for country-specific solutions was Hirschman (1958). While still referring to 'advanced' and 'backward' countries, and speaking of processes and sequences, he introduced the idea of context into development. This theme was taken up by Seers (1969), whose seminal paper redefined development from economic advancement measured by national product into "the realisation of the potential of human personality." This, he argued, requires not only the reduction of poverty, unemployment and inequality, but also adequate education, freedom of speech, and national political and economic sovereignty. Economic growth, he argued, could just as easily contribute to social and political problems as solve them.

Seers then examined nation-specific strategies for development, arguing that development for underdeveloped countries today is an entirely different task to that faced by, say, Britain or France in the nineteenth century (Seers & Joy 1970). Development is not a single linear progression of stages, but depends on historical and contemporary context. Marris (1970:103) likewise argued that "there are all kinds of issues which cannot be solved by any dogmatic prescription", while Streeten (1970) suggest that the real challenge is finding the appropriate means for each context. Because contexts change and our understanding of them is not good, development cannot be a set of predetermined steps but must adapt to changing circumstances. The following year Simon Kuznets won the Nobel Prize for "insight into the economic and social structure and process of development." He concluded that underdeveloped countries possess different characteristics and exist in contexts very different from those faced by industrialised countries when they developed, helping put an end to the simplistic view that all countries go through the same linear stages (Fonseca 2010).

Almost a decade later, Seers (1977) lamented that the simplistic linear growth paradigm remained because of its simplicity, and that it offered an easy, 'objective' basis for project evaluation. Development, he insisted, has not occurred unless inequality and poverty are reduced, requiring development to be country-specific and involve cultural politics. He predicted, however, a long lag before widespread implementation of these ideas.
Basic Needs, Developing Nations and Human Development

Voices for more context-sensitive development grew throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) launched a mission for equitable distribution in 1970, drawing on social rather than economic indicators of development (Seers 1977). The ILO then began arguing for development targeting basic needs, defined as: basic goods (food, shelter, clothing, etc.), basic services (education, health, etc.), participation in decision making, basic human rights, and productive employment (McGillivray 2008). These needs are contextual, thus cultural fit became seen as essential for sustainable development. One precondition for satisfaction of basic needs is "shared cultural understanding of techniques previously learned by the people" through the transmission of cultural knowledge (Doyal & Gough 1991).

As they have gained a voice in the development dialogue, developing nations have likewise called for greater emphasis on context. For example, the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) originated with the Non-Aligned Movement and was articulated in relation to their call for a New International Economic Order (Gouwenberg 2009). The preamble to the Declaration describes development as

\[\text{a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process ... [of] the entire population and of all individuals ... a many-faceted concept which encompasses the whole human being in all the aspects of her or his basic rights ... in the context within which the individual must live ... [and] the community to which she or he belongs.} \]

\[\text{(UN 1991 article 17)}\]

The inaugural UN Development Programme Human Development Report (1990) took up this theme, and proposed a new composite human development index to replace economic indicators as the standard measure of development. This shift was based largely on the work of Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, whose Capability Approach proposed development as an expansion of 'capabilities', creating freedom for people to do and to be, to exercise various 'functionings' (see Sen 1999a, 1993). Nussbaum (2000) defined these as things like life, health, bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play and control over one's environment.

Such has been the change in the understanding of development as being person-focussed and contextual that now leaders in the developing world who have no specific background
in Development Studies, such as Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, can confidently deny the previous development mantra:

The history of the world shows that peoples and societies do not have to pass through a fixed series of stages in the course of development... The true development of human beings involves much more than mere economic growth. At its heart there must be a sense of empowerment and inner fulfilment. This alone will ensure that human and cultural values remain paramount. (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995b)

2.1.3 Acceptance of Need for Context-Sensitive Development

Most scholars, international agencies and donors today would agree that, "development programs must involve a capacity for modification to local circumstances, according to local criteria ... to suit local needs ... [This] highlights and illustrates the broader principle of modification to context at every level" (Kingsbury 2008a:223). Further,

the diversity of contexts in which NGOs operate [and] the importance of understanding those contexts [means] assumptions ... are not necessarily transferable from one place to another, and misunderstandings are often rooted in cultural differences ... development interventions [must] be based on a deep understanding of the local context. (Brehm 2000:1)

A realisation of the need for development to be sensitive to context is today almost universal, and recognition of context is widely considered an essential first step towards effectiveness. For example, recent reviews of AusAID's programs by the Office of Development Effectiveness concluded that the most important factor for program effectiveness was understanding and being "flexible to the country context" (Davidson 2010). The review found that forms and institutions should not be imported from other contexts and that. Several other reviews agree, emphasising that, "Aid programs must be adapted to individual country circumstances. One size does not fit all—not even among countries categorised as fragile states" (Baird 2009:14).

It needs to be recognised that what constitutes good practice in one context may not work in another. Perhaps, then, an essential fundament of good practice is recognition that any practice needs to be designed with a close appreciation of the local context ... It cannot be overstated how important an understanding of context is to the effectiveness of aid. Gaining that understanding is not just about analysing the nature of the current government; it is also about knowing and understanding the key agents of change and continuity in any society. (Hall & Howell 2010:7,24)
2.2 Aspects of Context-Sensitive Development

In suggesting that context-sensitive development has become widely accepted in development theory, it is worthy of note that the term 'context' is rarely defined, and is rarely connected to discussion of the roles and dynamics such sensitivity might imply. A survey of the literature shows that sensitivity to two major types of context are documented, namely, sensitivity to unique cultures and sensitivity to difficult political contexts, particularly those suffering conflict and state fragility.

2.2.1 Sensitivity to Unique Cultural Contexts

Culture and Economic Development

Foremost within the idea of sensitivity to context in the development literature is the aspect of culture. Indeed, the term 'context' is commonly used interchangeably with 'culture'. Culture is one of the most complicated and disputed words in the English language (Williams 1993), with many conceptual problems stemming from widespread use without agreed definition (Allen 2000; Keesing & Strathern 1998). The modern anthropological meaning of the term, first established by Tylor in 1871 (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952), defined 'culture' as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1958 [1871]). The oft-quoted conclusion of Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952), after surveying 164 definitions of culture, is that "culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols ... the essential core of culture consists of traditional ... ideas and especially their attached values." While anthropologists have raised many other definitions and challenges to the idea of culture since, culture, broadly conceived of in this manner as a collective, coherent system of learned ideas, behaviours, values and symbols, is widely adopted in the development literature. In this, every culture is unique and thus requires sensitivity.

Prior to the 1970s, development was largely equated with modernisation, and culture with anthropology (Schech & Haggis 2000). Tradition and modernity were seen as a dichotomy, and development's interest in culture was to seek ways to transform
traditional behaviour and values into more Western forms (Braden & Mayo 1999; Williams 2004). Hoselitz (1952) set the scene during the Cold War era in the very first article of the journal *Economic Development and Cultural Change*. Discussing "Non-Economic Barriers to Economic Development", he argued that development required a complete reorientation of cultural norms and values, lamenting "the obstinacy with which people hold to traditional values even in the face of a rapidly changing technology."

Modernisation theorists of the era discussed traditional cultural elements they believed must change for economic development to occur. For example, Hoselitz cited key Buddhist and social elements of Burmese culture as good examples of obstacles to economic advancement, while Hagen (1957) saw loyalty to family in China as an obstacle. Belief that traditional culture was a barrier to development, and that rapid cultural change into modern, Western-like forms was integral to economic development, was further reflected in Lerner's 1958 Modernisation text, *The Passing of Traditional Society*.

*Culture at the Heart of Human Development Theory*

Perspectives have changed as our appreciation of other peoples has deepened. Sensitivity to culture emerged as a central consideration in the development dialogue during the 1990s, and is now at the heart of mainstream development (Radcliffe 2006a, 2006b). This new emphasis on culture has far-reaching implications, and constitutes a major challenge to rethink development; only some of these issues presented by culture are being fully addressed in the discourse at this time (Hettne 2001 in Radcliffe 2006b). Schech & Haggis (2000) offer a comprehensive discussion of the tools offered by cultural studies, postcolonial studies and postmodernism for this task. In 'How Does Culture Matter?', Sen (2004) refers to culture as a resource in the development study and practice.

The centrality of sensitivity to culture at least in theory has been widely expressed by development agencies over the past two decades. This is illustrated by a brief survey of recent discussion of culture by UN agencies, but extends far wider than just the UN. For example, in January 1988, while launching the *World Decade for Cultural Development*, UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar observed that development had often failed,
because the importance of the human factor—that complex web of relationships and beliefs, values and motivations, which lie at the very heart of a culture—had been underestimated in many development projects. (preface to UNESCO 1995)

In 1991 UNESCO established a World Commission on Culture and Development. De Cuéllar, now president of that commission, declared in their first report, Our Creative Diversity,

By 1988, it was already clear to us that development was a far more complex undertaking than had been originally thought. It could no longer be seen as a single, uniform, linear path, for this would inevitably eliminate cultural diversity and experimentation, and dangerously limit humankind’s creative capacities. (UNESCO 1995)

Our Creative Diversity argues that cultural diversity is a source of innovation, and that development must offer the freedom to choose a satisfying and valued way of life in any culture. "Development divorced from its human or cultural context is growth without a soul." Then, in 2001 UNESCO explicitly linked cultural diversity with human rights, arguing that cultural diversity is a key factor in rights-based development, "one of the roots of development ... a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence" (UNESCO 2001). The UN Development Programme concur: "Cultural liberty is a human right and an important aspect of human development" (UNDP 2004:6).

This recognition has ignited debate about development approaches which are more culturally sensitive. For example, a 2009 UNESCO symposium entitled Culture and Development spent considerable time discussing the question, "How can culture, in its broadest sense, be more effectively integrated into local, national and regional development programmes?" One participant insightfully suggested that "perhaps it is time to concentrate on the development dimension of culture, rather than the cultural dimension of development" (UNESCO 2010:18).

A similar discovery of cultural diversity can be seen within the World Bank. In 1996 the Bank put together a task force to consider the social dimensions of development, which led to the 1998 Conference on Culture in Sustainable Development. In opening the conference, the Bank president remarked,

You simply cannot have development without a recognition of culture and of history ... without cultural continuity, without a preservation of the things that matter in a society, there can be no stable development. (Wolfensohn 1998)
He opened the follow-up 1999 *Culture Counts* conference saying,

Reducing poverty is not just about increasing productivity and income, but just as fundamentally about enabling people to have a broad sense of well-being and opportunities to express and make choices about their lives. And who can doubt that recognition and expression of cultural diversity is not fundamental to social well-being? (Wolfensohn 2001)

The World Bank president, together with the Archbishop of Canterbury, formed the now recently-disbanded World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) in 1998, seeking contribution from religious institutions into the Bank’s consultations for the *World Development Report* decadal report. The WFDD immediately urged an understanding of development which includes social, political, environmental, cultural and spiritual, as well as economic elements (Tyndale 1998). A follow-up report by the WFDD entitled *Cultures, Spirituality and Development* (2001) offers a model of how this might work. Arguing that development will only be successful, even in material terms, if it takes into consideration the cultural and spiritual dimensions of people’s lives, they propose "a more truly participatory methodology than is usually the case" (WFDD 2001:7). They insist that the people who are directly impacted by any change must play a conscious role in decision-making that may result in aspects of traditional life being sacrificed. While not the first to suggest highly participatory development, they clearly articulate a recognition that cultures continually evolve by the choices of people, thus link culture sensitive development with a process in which individuals and communities are truly empowered to accept, reject, adopt, or modify any development recommendations presented by outsiders, with full understanding of the implications of their decisions.

These examples clearly show the extent to which at least the rhetoric of culture-sensitivity has become integral to the development dialogue. Nonetheless, concern continues to be expressed that despite decades of such critique and widespread acceptance of the importance of culturally sensitive development, "governments, development organisations and donors are [still] failing to engage with a crucial component of development by ignoring culture" (Commonwealth Foundation 2008a:2). Somehow, they challenge, current theory has not articulated how to move from assertions of the importance of cultural diversity to policy and strategy which provide for it in practice (Commonwealth Foundation 2008b).
2.2.2 Sensitivity to Difficult Political Contexts

In addition to the need for sensitivity to unique cultures, the development literature recognises the need for sensitivity to certain difficult socio-political contexts. Development is particularly difficult in states embroiled in or just coming out of conflict, in states marred by poor governance and weak institutions, and in states with very strained relationships with the international community over concerns about human rights and regime legitimacy. The development literature addresses the first two of these contexts. This thesis extends this analysis to the third.

Conflict-Sensitive Development

Conflict is the socio-political context most widely addressed in the development literature. It is widely recognised that conflict inhibits development, and the link between poverty and conflict is well demonstrated (Clarke 2006b; Kaldor 1999). Development is more arduous and dangerous in conflict situations, and requires greater flexibility and adaptability (Kreimer et al. 1998). Social structures, ethnic divisions, poverty and autocratic political systems can all fuel conflict, so the nature and delivery mechanisms of development can have serious ramifications (Clarke 2006a; Clements 2006). Broad-based economic growth lifting masses out of poverty is impossible in countries that cannot guarantee public safety (AusAID 2005). Conflict is also the most common difficult political context for development. For example, over three-quarters of Australia’s bilateral aid goes to countries that are experiencing, recovering from or acutely vulnerable to conflict (AusAID 2005). AusAID claim that, while far from a panacea, when implemented sensitively development assistance is one of the most effective foreign policy tools to reduce the incidence and severity of conflict in affected countries.

The idea of 'conflict-sensitive development' is more recent than 'culture sensitive development', but has nonetheless quickly become well-recognised. Momentum for conflict sensitivity began with publication by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation (OECD 1997). This report represented a significant shift in thinking, recognising that development has the capacity to contribute proactively to conflict prevention and peace-building if the root causes of conflict are understood and
explicitly addressed, and societal capacity to manage differences without violence is strengthened. It likewise recognised that careless development can exacerbate conflict by fuelling long-held fears and provoking unintended negative reactions.

Early in the discussion, Minear & Weiss (1993:18) proposed eight principles for humanitarian work in conflict situations. These include nonpartisanship, independence, appropriateness, contextualisation, and that humanitarianism should overshadow sovereignty. The term 'conflict-sensitive development' itself was introduced in a briefing paper submitted to this OECD committee by a group of INGOs (International Alert et al. 2000). This consortium defines conflict as, "two or more parties [who] believe that their interests are incompatible, express hostile attitudes or take action that damages other parties’ ability to pursue their interests" (Conflict Sensitivity 2004). Thus, most conflict is not yet or not currently violent.

This grouping of INGOs, formalised in 2008 as the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium and funded by DFID, now consists of 37 major organisations. The consortium defines 'conflict-sensitive development' as work which remains aware of local conflict and divisions,

systematically taking into account both the positive and negative impact of interventions, in terms of conflict or peace dynamics, on the contexts in which they are undertaken, and, conversely, the impact of these contexts on the interventions. (Conflict Sensitivity 2009)

Conflict Sensitivity have produced a manual of Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding (2004), which provides a set of tools for conflict-sensitive practice. They argue that conflict-sensitive development must commence with detailed analysis of the context, its causes, all actors, and their dynamic interaction. They specifically insist upon interventions being based on an in-depth understanding of the political, economic, socio-cultural and historical context, and the structural and proximate causes of conflict, including the triggers provoking fears and reactionary responses. Conflict-sensitive development requires a detailed understanding of the interaction between interventions and the context (Conflict Sensitivity 2011).

Humanitarian intervention in contested situations is always highly political, thus conflict-sensitive development places an emphasis on dialogue, mediation, and full participation by all actors (Conflict Sensitivity 2004). To omit actors increases the possibility of increased tensions. Conflict-sensitive development involves a delicate balance between
demand for human rights standards, the achievement of peace and sustainable
development, and ensuring injustice and inequality do not become further entrenched
(Conflict Sensitivity 2004).

Conflict-sensitive development seeks to ensure ‘human security’, defined in the UNDP
*Human Development Report* (1994) as ‘freedom from want’ and ‘freedom from fear’, and
thus seeks to reduce reasons to fear others (Clements 2006). Conflict most commonly
stems from grievances over political, social and/or economic inequalities, thus vital
aspects of conflict-sensitive development include: strengthening governance and civil
society, facilitating dialogue and co-operation, developing mediation and participatory
processes, and promoting human rights and democratisation (OECD 1997). Conflict-
sensitive development requires consolidation of relationships between actors and
strengthening of institutions capable of containing and transforming conflict (Clements
2006). A series of recently published case studies concur that INGOs working in conflict
contexts need to focus on: a) building and sustaining constructive relationships between
actors; and, b) addressing political, socio-economic and ethnic inequalities not just poverty
reduction, and that elite capture of development assistance is a major contributor to
exacerbated conflict (Godnick & Klein 2009; Amarasuriya *et al.* 2009; Alexander *et al.*
2009; Banfield & Naujoks 2009).

A World Bank (2006) study has found that the most common development mistakes made
in conflict zones all result from insufficiently detailed political analysis, underestimating
the influence of local politics, and assuming that democracy would of itself promote
peace. They find that working in a conflict or post-conflict situation requires an in-depth
analysis of socio-cultural, institutional, historical and political dynamics of the conflict, and
consideration of the various stakeholders, social dynamics, vulnerabilities, social capital,
and pre-existing levels of participation and equity. They conclude by stating that programs
need to be particularly context-driven in conflict-affected settings.

Given the level of ethnic and political conflict within Myanmar, these are all significant
factors for context-sensitive development in that country. However, Myanmar itself is also
embroiled in a non-violent but very real conflict with the international community,
primarily the West, and this thesis seeks to extend these ideas of conflict-sensitivity into
this this realm of non-violent conflict between pariah states and the international
community. A deep understanding of the historical and contemporary Myanmar socio-political context will therefore be a major feature of Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

Development in Fragile States

A second difficult socio-political context addressed in the development literature is sensitivity to state fragility. Research into development in fragile states is only very recent, almost entirely in the last couple of years, and scholars note a considerable gap in the literature on development in such contexts (Balamoune-Lutz & McGillivray 2008; McGillivray & Feeny 2008; UNU 2008). The Failed States Index (Foreign Policy 2010) and Index of Weak States (Rice & Patrick 2008) are generally taken to measure vulnerability to total collapse of the institutions of state, and therefore inability to provide security and basic services to the people. These indices therefore comprise a rough measure of the difficulty of conducting development in countries suffering breakdown of law and order, armed conflict, weakness of state institutions, and so on. ‘Failed’ or ‘weak’ states are, therefore, in effect, either fragile states or states in the midst of conflict.

Focus on development in fragile states commenced only recently, when the OECD released two key documents on the subject (OECD 2007a, 2007b). State fragility is understood as arising primarily,

from weaknesses in the dynamic political process through which citizens’ expectations of the state and state expectations of citizens are reconciled and brought into equilibrium with the state’s capacity to deliver services

(OECD 2007a:7)

The central objective of development in these states is therefore to "build effective, legitimate, and resilient state institutions, capable of engaging productively with their people to promote sustained development" (OECD 2007a). The focus is on peace-building, state-building and national reform, to reconstruct institutions able to overcome weak governance, and is most often required in states emerging from conflict or other disasters which impair state capacity. This makes the role of the major multilateral and bilateral agencies particularly important to development in fragile states.
The OECD list of recommendations for working in fragile states are: a) take context as the starting point; b) do no harm; c) focus on state building; d) prioritise prevention; e) recognise links between political, security and development objectives; f) promote non-discrimination; g) align with local priorities; h) coordination between international actors; i) act fast, but stay engaged long enough, and; j) avoid pockets of exclusion (OECD 2007b). Their conclusion is that,

The complexity and context specificity of the state-formation process, as well as limits of external influence, means that sustained, serious efforts as well as research and policy innovation are needed urgently. (OECD 2007a:7)

Recent analysis by Wesley (2008) concluded that the two biggest factors which must shape contextual responses in failed states are sensitivity to contested notions of the form and legitimacy of the state, and post-colonial sensitivities.

Most observers believe the OECD’s central objective of building "effective, legitimate, and resilient state institutions capable of engaging productively with their people to promote sustained development" is not currently possible in Myanmar, and governance in Myanmar would not normally be described as being either weakly held or the result of temporary fragility. Nonetheless, the new United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) project on Fragility and Development adopts a slightly different definition of 'fragile state,' as one wherein governments cannot or will not provide an environment for households to reduce or cope with poverty and other risks to well-being (UNU 2008). This definition is more relevant to Myanmar. AusAID (2010) expand this definition to include all countries that face particularly grave poverty and development challenges, which are at risk of further decline, and where state structures lack the capacity or political will to provide public security, good governance and economic growth.

Most fragile states are engaged in violent conflict or have just emerged from conflict (AusAID 2010; OECD 2007a; UNU 2008). Political contestation, together with either weak or recalcitrant governance results in the international donor community having grave concerns about the prospects of poverty reduction in fragile states, and thus restricting aid (Balamoune-Lutz & McGillivray 2008). Addison (2005), for example, presents research showing a high recidivism rate of countries in falling back into conflict within 5 years. Certainly, fragile states cannot absorb as much aid as stable ones. Several studies confirm
that absorptive capacity is reached somewhere between 15 and 45% of GDP, and thus fragile states can only efficiently absorb approximately one-third the amount of aid more stable countries can (Anderson 2005; McGillivray & Feeny 2008). Nonetheless, research also confirms that most fragile states are under-aided, meaning they could efficiently absorb greater amounts of aid than they currently receive (McGillivray & Feeny 2008). Donors over-react in limiting funding to fragile states. Anderson (2005) confirms that, up to this absorptive capacity, aid can still be very effective in reducing poverty even in very poor policy environments. He therefore argues strongly against attempting aid conditionality with fragile states, highlighting research showing that attempts to impose reform through aid conditionality is almost always ineffective. Browne (2007) believes that the major reason donors and agencies overly restrict funding to fragile states is due to a poor understanding of the context.

Development in Isolated (Pariah or Rogue) States

A third type of difficult political context for development is politically isolated states. Isolation is most commonly the result of concern over violation of international norms, usually norms to do with human rights, governance or regime legitimacy, and the response of the regime to international actions against the state. While such states often list high on the Failed States Index and Index of Weak States, they are typically led by regimes in firm control of the country and which possess a range of strong state institutions used in the administration of the country, such as the armed forces. These states, however, are internationally politically isolated because they lack legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, and thus have poor relationships with the UN and other states (often particularly with the West).

These isolated states are therefore sometimes labelled ‘pariah’ or ‘rogue’ states, characterisations which have both been applied to Myanmar (Steinberg 2006). The term ‘pariah’ states has been defined as states characterised by

> precarious diplomatic isolation, the absence of assured, credible security support or political moorings within big-power alliance structures, and ... [being] the targets of obsessive and unrelenting opprobrium and censure within international forums such as the United Nations.

(Harkavy 1981)
The term 'rogue' state is sometimes unilaterally applied by the United States, and occasionally by other Western states, to isolated states they see as totalitarian, having a strong disregard for human rights, and possessing or with aspirations to possess weapons of mass destruction in order to bolster their oppositional position to international norms (Bleiker 2003). In other words, it is applied to states which the West believes need to be watched, contained and controlled. Both these terms, however, are controversial and confrontational, and as such are more likely to provoke animosity than induce change.

Bleiker recasts so-called 'rogue' states as norm-violating states who respond to coercive and aggressive demands from the West with similarly confrontational brinkmanship. The label demonises states,

severely hinder[ing] both an adequate understanding and a possible resolution of the crisis. The rhetoric of rogue states is indicative of how US foreign policy continues to be driven by dualistic and militaristic Cold War thinking patterns.

(Bleiker 2003:731)

More productive discussion will focus on the isolation, the conflict in relationships with the global society of states, and the strain in the social compact between the rulers and the people. 'Pariah' states commonly attract calls to restrict humanitarian aid, as part of socialisation pressure on the regime to change. The lack of international trust also restricts development funding over questions of aid deliverability and fungibility, as well as sustainability, effectiveness and risk of prolonging the rule of the sanctioned regime. Humanitarian budgets to 'pariah' states are therefore generally heavily restricted. Unfortunately there is little academic literature considering aid effectiveness or context-sensitivity in countries facing this sort of international sanction. This thesis seeks to begin to address that lack of research.

It is noted that development in isolated 'pariah' states is limited not by an inability of state institutions, as it is in 'fragile' states, as much as by severe strain in the international relationships which could otherwise facilitate the global partnerships required for effective long-term macroeconomic development, and by aid budgets restricted by a lack of trust. Bilateral and multilateral aid and development agencies, bound as they are to state actors with whom the isolated state has poor relationships and who generally prefer to work in partnership with government departments, commonly suffer mandate restrictions from both the international community and the domestic regime. Pressure is often also placed on INGOs to refrain from involvement in such states, and INGOs that do
engage can be viewed with suspicion by both sides and affected by the strained international relations.

This thesis argues that INGOs, as non-state actors, have the potential of better access and broader mandates to operate in such contexts under humanitarian principles, and that this should be seen as an extension of conflict-sensitive development to the level of non-violent international tension. The distinctive development approaches common to many INGOs, working predominantly with local communities and civil society more than government departments, and a focus on alleviating extreme poverty rather than on addressing macroeconomic development concerns, also potentially facilitates their ability to work more effectively in these states. This thesis seeks to document sensitive approaches in such a context.

2.3 Participatory Development as INGO Context-Sensitivity

2.3.1 The Participatory Development Model

Recognition of the need for sensitivity to local context, as seen in this survey of the literature on economic development, really began in the 1970s. Coming from a sociological field perspective, Freire, in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972), argues that traditional processes of teaching in which a teacher transfers knowledge to students is both ineffective and a form of oppression. This, he suggests, is especially true in development. Learning, according to Freire, should be a process of people rethinking their own assumptions and acting upon their own ideas, not merely consuming the ideas of others, but he lamented that the poor were trapped in a “culture of silence” and lacked a voice in development. This paradigm has become the foundation underlying participatory approaches to development.

Building on this foundation, Chambers (1983) brought the idea of participatory development into the mainstream development thinking. Chambers conceptualises poverty not as a lack of income, assets, services or even knowledge, but as powerlessness to do anything about their situation due to marginalisation. Highlighting cultural differences, biases and the different (often inappropriate) knowledge outsiders bring to development contexts, Chambers argues for a reversal in the management of
development which transfers decision-making primarily into the hands of those embedded within a local context. Chambers therefore popularised the idea of empowerment through highly participatory, beneficiary-led development as the basis for successful, sustained development.

Participation, Chambers argues, empowers "those who are most marginalized, powerless and poor to achieve a better life for themselves" (Chambers 2005:97). This happens "when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently" and take action to change their circumstances (Eyben et al. 2008a:3). Chambers advocated methodologies in which local knowledge, participation and decision-making is made central to the planning and management of projects. His initial Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach relied on outside development workers to carry out the enquiry (Chambers 1994), but his later Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) further restricted the role of outside development workers to a facilitator of the process of local people sharing and reflecting on their knowledge.

Many quickly agreed with Chambers. For example, Edwards (1989) provocatively suggested in The Irrelevance of Development Studies that development research was having little impact on poverty because it thought in terms of transfer of goods, skills and information, and had failed to come to grips with local knowledge. "Problems are often specific in their complexity to particular times and places." Like Chambers, he advocated 'popular participation' as the means to take into account contextual factors known to the locals, but often overlooked by outsiders, as the basis for effective development.

The participatory development model involves, of course, far more than merely participation. The model requires effective empowerment through various capacity-building, capacity-development activities, training in human rights and advocacy, and so on (Cornwall 2002; Mohan 2007), which is why these aspects of development receive major emphasis in contemporary development theory and practice. It also calls for partnership with local civil society in implementation of programs in communities, and alignment between the priorities of agencies and with government departments, all in order to allow recipients and partners to exercise control over program design and implementation, ensuring development is contextual and sustainable.
This participatory development model revolves around six power-and-relationship concepts now in common usage: participation, empowerment, ownership, partnership, accountability and transparency (Chambers 2005). Such participatory development has now become central to development theory, and is now widely accepted as a minimum requirement for successful and sustained development outcomes.

It was only in the 1990s that [participation] entered almost every field development activity... By the turn of the century, the words participatory and participation were embedded in development speak.... in the early years of the 21st century, participation, in name if not in reality, is now part of almost every development activity. (Chambers 2005:101)

Fowler (2000a) suggests this participatory model of development has been widely adopted because it is perceived to address the key reasons aid was considered to have been failing at the time, namely: a) lack of sensitivity to the underlying environment (context), b) a lack of ownership by recipients, and c) inappropriate donor behaviour, specifically aid conditionality and poor coordination. By contrast, it is believed that emphasising participation, empowerment and partnership will make decision-making inherently more context-sensitive, build ownership, and overcome both aid conditionality and a lack of coordination. Many development INGOs therefore advocate participatory, beneficiary-led or beneficiary-driven development, which seeks to empower and build the capacity of recipients to actively contribute to or lead the development decision-making at every stage, as the solution to issues of sensitivity, ownership and coordination.

2.3.2 NGO Generations and Participation

One way of highlighting how integral participatory development ideas have become to development thinking is by consideration of NGO typologies. Korten’s (1990) well-known typology of ‘generations of NGOs’ illustrates the growing emphasis on participation and empowerment well. Korten describes four ‘generations’ of NGOs as being: 1) relief and welfare, 2) community development, 3) sustainable development, and, 4) people’s movement. As NGOs increasingly involve communities in the design, delivery and management of projects, they are said to become second, or third, or fourth generation NGOs. The implicit assumption within such stylised typologies is that community participation increases throughout the progression, and that this is inherently proper (Clarke 2009). It is believed that increased community involvement at all stages of a
development intervention is more likely to have a sustained impact due to: 1) better identification of development needs and their causes; 2) better account taken of local resources and strengths, thus less reliance on external inputs; and 3) better management of the project through community decision-making, which will then more likely continue after the external funding has ceased (Uphoff et al. 1998; Dale 2004).

One additional observation to draw from such stylised typologies is that as organisations move through this progression, from first and second generation NGOs to third and fourth generation ones, the more consideration of context has moved from a deliberate and conscious facet INGOs must be mindful of, to something it is assumed recipients inherently facilitate.

2.3.3 Critique of Participation as Context-Sensitivity

Shifting primary responsibility for context-sensitivity from the development agency to the recipients is both the strength of the participatory model, as well as its greatest weakness. The model facilitates contextualisation to the extent that participants and partners understand their own context, have a voice, and are empowered to make adaptations. This model may therefore work well in ensuring that local knowledge and cultural traits are identified, but without further definition of the role of outside agents, it does not of itself necessarily address issues equity, power, conflict, marginalisation, or lack of understanding of national or international socio-political contextual factors.

Oakley (1991) sees three fundamental obstacles to the success of participatory development at the community level: a) structural obstacles, such as political power excluding some from decision-making, or dictating direction, b) administrative obstacles, such as centralised government administration retaining control over resources and thereby over decision-making, and, c) social obstacles, such as divisions keeping some marginalised within communities:

participation occurs within a particular context and will be influenced by the [political,] economic and social forces that mould that context. (Oakley 1991:14)

After years of participatory development experience, Guijt & Shah (1998) elaborate similar concerns. Their primary issue is that participatory development approaches communities
as if they are discrete and socially homogenous entities, looking for a single, coherent, consensual community view to emerge. Intra-community divisions and inequalities are largely overlooked, undervaluing the positive contribution external agents could otherwise take in addressing marginalisation and thereby allowing participatory approaches to reinforce the very power relations they seek to overcome. Cooke & Kothari (2001) express similar concerns, going so far as to suggest that participation bears within it a 'tyrannical potential' for oppressing the poor and marginalised, and demanding a rethink of the entire participatory model. It has been argued that the majority of participatory projects fail in their aim of reversing local power hierarchies, with "conservatism, convenience, and risk aversion" resulting in inequitable participation which reflects pre-existing power relations based on factors like gender, age, wealth, ethnicity, religion or politics (Cleaver 2001; also Mohan 2001; Kothari 2001).

It has also been argued that, despite the rhetoric, most decision-making power in the majority of participatory projects has ultimately remained with the implementing agency (Mosse 2001). "Local decision-making is most likely to produce results sensitive to local needs and desires, [yet] such decision-making may still require [outside] assistance" to create the circumstances for that change, and to provide information, assistance and advice to enable informed and equitable decision-making (Kingsbury 2008a:224). This thesis argues that, without additional definition of the role of facilitators and INGO staff in contextualisation "not all decisions taken at a local level are appropriate" (Kingsbury 2008a:224). Some, based out of desperation, are very short-term focussed; others are based on limited understanding; while others are made out of deference to power holders, including the INGO. This is particularly true in difficult socio-political contexts. Several specific concerns are noted, as follows.

a) **Whether Participants are Empowered in Relation to Local Elite**

Given these obstacles, concern must be expressed about how well this participatory model sufficiently empowers participants in difficult contexts, whether communities or partner organisations, to make development decisions which are counter to elite interests. O'Leary & Nee (2001) note that traditional, hierarchical societies hold an expectation that the people who have knowledge, resources and power (high status) should give advice, manage and control, and that this militates strongly against real
transfer of control and decision-making. This is particularly true in conflict zones, failed states and pariah states, where other significant forces can work directly against empowerment, actively marginalising some and disempowering others through fear. In difficult political contexts such as these, participants are highly likely to defer to the established orthodoxy of prevailing power structures, not being sufficiently empowered to make contributions that challenge a fragile status quo.

Empowering highly marginalised participants is predicated on obtaining cooperation of the empowered elite, those whose power has created the people’s marginalisation, then communicating this permission to act to those previously marginalised in a way that demonstrates their freedom and safety. In difficult political contexts, these empowered elite may include figures connected to a military or militia, governing regime or dominant ethnic group, for example, and gaining their cooperation is far from assured. INGO staff and facilitators have a significant and highly contextual role in creating such a safe space for participants, and/or in making contextualised decisions on behalf of disempowered communities.

b) Whether Participants are Empowered in Relation to the Development Agency

It is just as difficult for most individuals, communities and partner organisations to challenge the perceived orthodoxy of the development agency. The agency, in effect, becomes another elite whose preference should be deferred to, particularly when they control access to funding and their representative facilitates decision-making within the community. Craig & Porter (1997) refer to this as ‘framing’, the tendency for development workers and agencies to subtly, even unconsciously, circumscribe local participants’ influence over the development agenda. Fowler (1998) argues that participation, empowerment and partnership are the three most abused concepts in development, concluding that despite best intentions, empowerment is far more difficult to achieve than is commonly acknowledged, making it far more illusion than reality.

Critique has already been noted suggesting agencies commonly really allow only superficial variation, while at a deeper level treating contextualisation as a deviation (Murphy 2000). Reviews of community-led participatory development regularly conclude that top-down assumptions continue to alienate participants (e.g. Kasongo 1998; Watson
2006), leading Ishizawa (2004) to argue that most development practice is "insidiously violent" by claiming to give voice to the marginalised while limiting assumptions and implicit values to the agency’s way-of-seeing the world. Most participatory practice, he argues, neglects to incorporate any means to allow expression of different ways-of-being and ways-of-seeing, and that recipients are thus not empowered to contextualise in ways that challenge agency orthodoxy.

One key driver of such orthodoxy is international efforts towards improving development effectiveness. By identifying commonalities across diverse contexts and seeking to identify best-practices, development is commonly presented in terms of norms, principles and approaches. The fact that these are only intended to be broadly applicable is often "obscured by global comparative analysis, presented as global conclusions" (Shutt 2009).

A second, related cause counteracting empowerment in participatory development is that decisions are often predetermined by assumptions about the need for coordination with wider programs and goals (Weitz 1986). Recent conversations between the key staff from the Institute of Development Studies (University of Sussex) and a number of large INGOs in the UK highlighted the strong normative pressure that organisational vision, mission and strategy documents instil (Shutt 2009). It was acknowledged that while INGOs aspire for documents to be framed only in the most general of terms, and for field staff to translate these into more situated strategies, that such contextualisation would create serious legitimacy issues for unelected publicly funded organisations. Translating INGO mission and strategy statements into context specific applications would mean "different approaches may need to co-exist within one organisation, jeopardising normative legitimacy as well as raising operational and ‘brand’ problems" (Shutt 2009). Allowing adaptation of approaches to local contexts would cause "significant stress within the organisation" (Ossewaarde et al. 2008).

Normative pressures are further compounded by management practices aimed at building organisational culture. For example, during interviews reported later in this thesis a number of senior INGO staff expressed concern that the common policy of rotating key international staff between fields to strengthen organisational linkages and learning is most unhelpful to contextualisation. Wallace et al. (2006) likewise argue that the centralised managerial structures adopted by large INGOs do not easily admit expressions
of cultural diversity. Craig & Porter (1997) argue that the need to be accountable to donors through effective management and evaluation is "deeply contradictory" to the goals of participatory development. The tools of participatory development can be used to equally promote either participation or control. A fundamental change is therefore required in the way development organisations and professionals operate before participatory development can achieve its lofty aims.

This is well illustrated by research in which INGO field staff with Médecins Sans Frontières-Holland were interviewed about organisational and operational principles (Hilhorst & Schmiemann 2002). This study found that most fieldworkers re-constructed their own set of operating principles on the field, in response to the contextual demands they face, often in contradiction with organisational policy and stated global organisational values. Murray & Clarke (2008) found something similar amongst staff deployed after the Boxing Day tsunami in 2005. A third example can be found in the World Bank's Civic Engagement, Empowerment and Respect for Diversity program, which aims to empower recipients to adapt programs through participation. A recent evaluation found that in practice the Bank's monitoring and evaluation systems prevent most proposed contextualisation (Brunner 2004).

There is strong evidence that these systemic normative pressures create a tension within INGOs between 'field-orientated' staff, who advocate the need for flexibility in response to the local context, and 'organisation-oriented' staff who seek consistent polity across the organisation (Suzuki 1998). Fechter & Hindman (2011) document some of this in terms of the ways field staff negotiate the often conflicting and contradictory aspects of their role. Sumner & Tribe (2008) speak of strongly contrasting policy and practice-related dimensions of international development. National staff and local NGO partners of INGOs often find their more culturally aware views regularly conflict with INGO institutional values or approaches, leading to common accusations of development models being 'imposed' on locals from the outside, despite the ideals of partnership, participation and contextualisation expressed by the agency (Shutt 2009). Thus, it is rare for participants to seriously challenge perceived development agency orthodoxy.
c) Whether Participants are Sufficiently Aware of Macro-Contextual Factors

A third concern with how well participatory development facilitates context-sensitivity is whether participants, be they communities or partner organisations, sufficiently understand macro socio-political contextual factors development needs to take into account, such as the nuances of strained international relations.

The participatory development model is based on the principle of prioritising decision-making authority be given to those with local knowledge. For communities and NGOs, this correlates broadly to local cultural understanding and local political dynamics. In this sense participatory development is a major advance, taking sensitivity to local culture and local power into consideration. Culture (including local politics) was being rediscovered during the 1970s and 1980s, as this model was being developed and popularised. However, during this era many of the current tensions in international politics were subsumed by the global political machinations of the Cold War. Today's difficult failed and pariah state contexts are a more recent phenomena, involving relatively new and difficult political dynamics. It has already been noted that in conflict zones, failed states and pariah states, information is often incomplete or manipulated as a means of control. The understanding of local communities and partners may not be sufficient for these dynamics, and participatory methodologies were not designed with this limitation in mind. The actor with local knowledge in this instance is more likely to be the senior in-country staff of the INGO, and an extension of the participatory model to this situation would imply the need for INGOs to empower and delegate significant decision-making at this level to country offices.

To illustrate the point, the UNDP Human Development Report (2010) ranks Myanmar as the fifth least-free press in the world, only exceeded by Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan and Iran. Most marginalised groups therefore live in comparative ignorance of even national, let alone international factors, affecting their situation. This raises the question of how well, for example, rural or ethnic minority communities in Myanmar could appropriately tailor development programming decisions to fit with international donor attitudes, transnational advocacy campaigns, donor-country sanctions, donor conditionality, or even recent domestic policy concessions which the regime is reluctant to promote for fear of impact on its political legitimacy.
d) Minimises or Ignores Sensitivity by Agencies in Dealing with Other Stakeholders

The final concern with relying on participatory development to facilitate context-sensitivity is that it results in a lack of definition of the sensitivity to context which INGOs themselves need to enact, particularly in their relationships with other stakeholders. In other cultural and political contexts the way people are valued, knowledge is transferred, change is handled, decisions are made—even leadership style, ethics, values in relating to people, relationships, exclusion, gender and power—can all be very different, yet there is a scarcity of literature on how INGOs might approach context-specific factors such as these (Jackson 2003). Beyond cultural dynamics, INGOs find themselves embroiled as unwilling participants in highly-strained political relationships which have a direct impact on development effectiveness. INGOs, as outside agents, need to actively contextualise the way they relate to the other stakeholders, in ways that participation and partnership alone do not facilitate.

This thesis does not suggest that INGO in-country staff do not take an active role to ensure sensitivity to such socio-political factors, especially in their stakeholder relations. Most certainly do, and this is what Chapters Six to Eight of this thesis documents. However, this research suggests that the development literature has not adequately theorised or described this vital role played by local offices of the INGO, and therefore taking this role often creates unnecessary internal organisational stress.

Thus, while on one hand the global development dialogue has moved past universalist prescriptions to recognise cultural diversity, multiple pathways and unique contexts, and most international development agencies work hard to ensure that interventions are participatory and through local partnerships, strong forces still persist which in practice limit participants’ empowerment to contextualise. Development theory lacks clear understanding of the role of the international agency in ensuring this contextualisation, beyond ideas of ensuring participation, partnership and capacity building. It is particularly difficult to genuinely empower people in difficult political contexts, such as conflict zones, failed states and pariah states, where local power seek to marginalise and control, and the poor lack awareness of macro-contextual factors. It is equally difficult to empower people to challenge normative development agency orthodoxy, especially where local participants are placed awkwardly between domestic political objectives and those of INGOs with donor conditions imposed by states their own government is in conflict with.
2.4 Conceptualising INGO Context-Sensitivity

These limitations suggest current participatory theory does not adequately describe the role of the INGO, particularly in difficult socio-political contexts. Greater clarity of the role INGO staff need to play is required, to ensure context-sensitive development occurs without diminishing the empowerment of partners and recipient communities. Radcliffe (2006b) recently called for such a detailed understanding of the roles of the various diverse actors in bringing context into development, including how, when and where they do so and their differing relationships within the context. She argues that if actors and institutions remain invisible, responsibility for roles and change cannot be attributed to actors with agency.

This need is clearly illustrated in a recent evaluation of INGO programs training workers from local NGOs for village community development work in Cambodia (O’Leary & Nee 2001). They found that local NGO workers were not effective in fostering genuine change at the village level because they themselves were unconsciously struggling to reconcile the demands of their development work with cultural and social expectations. They concluded that "[INGO] capacity building practitioners and trainers need to understand more explicitly what the people whose capacity they are endeavouring to strengthen are facing regarding the dilemmas of development practice" and need to more fully contextualise their own role to that (O’Leary & Nee 2001:ix). They raise specific concern that the power imbalance inherent in the INGO having power over which projects to fund means INGO staff must far more deliberately address power and cultural sensitivity issues. What is needed is a "theory of practice that is organic and not a set of rules, steps or tools" (O’Leary & Nee 2001:119).

2.6.1 Directed Social Change and Culture Change Theories

Recent development studies research has derived renewed inspiration from social change and culture change theories:

Development practice is informed by theories of change, but individuals and organisations may not make them explicit. Practitioners may be unaware of the extent to which strategic choices and debates are informed by disparate thinking about how history happens and the role of purposeful intervention for progressive social change. (Eyben et al. 2008b)
Social change theories constitute a diverse literature, from Marxist ideas of social revolution, to ideas of social action and social movements, to functionalist ideas that interpret society as a structure comprised of interrelated norms, customs, tradition, institutions (McLeish 1969). Eyben et al. (2008b) suggest that the most theoretically comprehensive ideas about social change relevant to development practice are contained in Rogers’ (2003) *Diffusion of Innovation*, a work first published in 1962. Rogers postulates that new ideas, behaviour or technology is innovated then diffused throughout a social system, individual to individual, based largely on psychological and motivational factors and mediated through changed knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour of individuals. This approach is sometimes criticised for its behaviourist and rational-choice assumptions, and omission of analysis of power and structural inequality, but with this critique in mind it does inform much contemporary theory (Eyben et al. 2008b).

The theory of diffusion actually dates to the nineteenth century, when it was seen as a key mechanism of social/cultural evolution. It was argued that cultural traits are evolutionary adaptations to the human environment, thus that as some parts of humanity were more developed than others (i.e. the West) it was natural for these ideas and products to be taken up by all other cultures (Patterson 1998; Naylor 1996). Such evolutionary thinking continued to dominate anthropological discussion of social change through to the mid-twentieth century. For example, Steward (1955) described a linear evolution of cultures moving toward some ultimate highly-developed state, echoing the still-popular ideas of Tylor (1958 [1871]; see Naylor 1996). Their interest was in what stage of the process various cultures were at, and the means to facilitate diffusion of more advanced ideas into these less culturally evolved contexts.

Most anthropologists, however, abandoned such evolutionary structural analysis by the early- to mid-twentieth century, in favour of a more functionalist conception of social change with a community and individual perspective (Naylor 1996). Acculturation became the key focus, defined as the study of "when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield et al. 1936). This shift was trigged by Malinowski (1929), who called for a 'practical anthropology' that could assist people with the process of culture change. As the number of ethnographic studies examining these processes grew, Redfield et al. (1936) called for research into the process of acculturation...
stemming from cultures in contact (as per Herskovits 1937). These anthropologists went on to draw a distinction between directed change, with change advocated by those outside the group, and non-directed change introduced by group members themselves borrowing from other groups (Redfield et al. 1936).

During the 1950s-60s, such 'development anthropology' appropriated anthropological insights to improve the effectiveness of directed culture change, within the Cold War Modernisation paradigm of international development. These anthropologists produced a number of handbooks for development field workers (e.g. Goodenough 1963; Arensberg & Niehoff 1964, 1971), the most well-known being Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovation*, to which Eyben et al. (2008b) refer. In this same period Christian missionaries began to articulate a 'missionary anthropology' in similar applied anthropological terms. See, for example Nida (1954, 1960), and Luzbetak's (1963) seminal missionary training handbook.

More recently anthropologists have become alarmed at the way 'applied' anthropology was appropriated to strengthen colonialism, Christian missionary enterprise, and Cold War development practice, leading most recent anthropologists to focus on critique of development itself from a post-colonial or post-development perspective, more than on the dynamics of social change in development (Naylor 1996). However, these social change theories still offer fresh inspiration and understanding when taken in addition to more recent understandings about empowerment, development of capacity and of capabilities, etc., rather than replacing them, and remaining mindful of issues of local power and inequality (Eyben et al. 2008b).

The common theme of these models, as epitomised by Rogers (2003), is that change originates with an idea, whether invented or borrowed, which modifies, subtracts from or adds to existing belief or practice. In successful social change, ideas diffuse through the group via human interaction mediated through change agents, either totally spontaneously or through planned action, until it is accepted by most individuals because it meets a felt need (Naylor 1996). Key concepts in this model are: innovation, acculturation, diffusion, agents of change, barriers to change, fit, felt needs, and knowledge and information as empowering actors.
2.6.2 Process and Agents of Directed Social Change

Innovation & Diffusion

The role of innovation in social change was first expressed by Linton (1936), with its importance as possibly the central dynamic behind change best articulated by Barnett (1942, 1953). Innovation speaks of the way people recognise the need to change in response to changing conditions, or see an opportunity and develop new ideas, behaviours or products (Barnett 1942). Innovation occurs continually, although most innovation is transitory and does not diffuse significantly. Occasionally a new idea, behaviour or product diffuses and is accepted by a majority of the group, and only then can it be said that culture has changed. People are most motivated toward change which meets felt needs, and when there is a high degree of 'fit' between the proposed change and existing forms, meanings and functions (Foster 1962).

Innovators may come up with ideas on their own (in which case changes are usually incremental syntheses of existing cultural material into new forms), or they may borrow ideas from other cultures (in which case larger changes are possible).

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process of adopting ideas from contact with other cultures (Foster 1962; Naylor 1996). Most culture change is the result of borrowing from other cultures, if not pressure from outside imposing change on the group. However, it has long been recognised that borrowed ideas, behaviours or products will almost always undergo further innovation to the new local context.

Positivism would deny any difference between cultural traits and any ascribed meaning, however constructivists like Linton (1936) postulated that every cultural trait consists of a directly-observable cultural form, carries within it a culturally ascribed underlying meaning (often not consciously articulated), and is used to fulfil a function. It is forms which are most often exported between cultures, but because of its subjective nature, meaning and thus function are commonly redefined in the new culture as a result. Thus, without innovation, exporting development approaches and norms (forms) is likely to result in the
underlying *meanings* being reinterpreted, to the frustration of field workers (Nida 1954, 1960; Rogers 2003). Conversely, since any truly universal development principles are likely to be *functions* with important associated underlying *meanings*, effectively exporting a principle to a new context will almost always require a changed *form* to maintain its distinctive *meaning* and *function*.

Throughout history, it has been repeatedly observed that while societies may adopt similar material items or other innovations, they do so only after altering them to suit their own particular cultural contexts and needs. (Naylor 1996:207)

The key role of the innovator in such acculturation is therefore the contextualisation of the same *meaning*, by reinterpreting and adapting the *form*.

Recent development studies research re-confirms similar findings. Øyen (2002) studied how 'best-practices' in development are identified, and how field workers attempt to transfer them from one context to another. Øyen struggles to find literature documenting how a 'best practice' might be successfully transferred to another context without loss of the very elements which make it a 'best practice'. She contends that what is usually transferred is the 'physical idea' (the *form*), which commonly leads to resistance or failure. Miller (2002) agrees that seldom can a best practice be taken over in its original *form* and implemented successfully in a new context without adaptation.

*Diffusion and agents of change*

For social change to occur, a new or borrowed idea must become adopted by a majority of the group, ultimately becoming part of the learned patterns they pass on (Naylor 1996). This places interactions between people, and individual behaviour and choice, at the centre of the diffusion and social change process—and identifies social, cultural and psychological aversion to destabilising stress as strong barriers to social change (Foster 1962, 1969).

For diffusion to permeate a majority of a group, it thus usually needs to be driven by one or more change agents who assume responsibility for convincing other people to accept and adopt the proposed change (Redfield *et al.* 1936). Innovators may promote their own ideas or products, but commonly innovators are not the ones who are most effective as agents promoting the change, influencing opinion leaders through diffusion networks. 
(Rogers 2003). Such change agents may be individuals or groups (e.g. professional agencies, companies, government, or civil organisations) who have an interest in persuading people into the new idea, behaviour or product (Barnett 1942). The role of change agents is well recognised, and acceptance or rejection of change is linked in large part to the prestige, personality, relationship networks, and affiliation of these advocates, as well as compatibility with the needs and motivations of recipients (Barnett 1942).

Facilitators of Change: Insider and Outsider Roles

Most culture change is the result of “cultures in contact” (adopting the terminology of Herskovits 1937). A good deal of that change is the result of outside advocacy and planning, and in that sense is directed. The work of outside facilitators is central to most development practice, and is a good example of directed change given most development agencies bring with them certain ideas and principles they advocate for adoption (directly or indirectly) as part of the development process – ideas such as normative human rights, gender equity, democracy, liberal economic systems or individualism.

Directed social change models propose a distinction between the roles of insider and outsider agents (Barnett 1953). The outsider role is often described as being a facilitator, to introduce and advocate new ideas through the provision of knowledge, information and raising awareness, while insider roles include receptors, innovators and advocates of change (Kraft 1979, 1996). Outside facilitators should attempt to de-Westernise or de-contextualise the central ideas back to underlying values and meaning (Schineller 1990; Conn 1984). Receptors, community or opinion leaders, regulate access for messages into their communicational space, then innovators redesign borrowed ideas to best fit the local context, before advocates drive the diffusion of revised ideas. Kraft (1979, 2005) argues that it is usually meaning or function outsider advocates really propose, thus that to preserve the same meaning into the new context insider innovators must be empowered to contextualise the form in any way that preserves meaning. The result is something with equivalence in the new context, even if superficially it does not appear the same.

Sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders is, however, problematic, in that it pays insufficient attention to issues of power, exclusion and inequality within social groups. Latour (2005) cautions that ‘society’ continues to experience transformation, and that
networks and social group boundaries are always transient. Analyses which attempt to provide social explanations for phenomena by assuming a stable and defined social context are therefore an oversimplification. Both elite and marginalised people exist on the edges of any social group, and distinct divisions over gender, ethnicity, religion, military service, political affiliation, and the like often exist within a social group. Sharp distinctions are confronted by the question of who constitute insiders and to what sense culture is shared, by whom. A sympathetic foreign development worker may become accepted as more an insider by a marginalised group, than privileged elite nominally of the same culture.

Accepting the problematic aspects of too broad a generalisation and too clearly distinguished roles, this model remains useful in highlighting a different but complimentary role for outside facilitators. Most change is the result of outside influence, and even many locally-driven social change processes sooner or later invite an outsider intermediary to support the process (Gujit 2007). Recent focus within Development Studies has been on the role of outside agents in providing knowledge and information to participants in a manner that empowers them as actors with agency:

Facilitation is the process of enabling social actors [individuals, groups, collective movements, organizations, institutions which undertake actions to bring about social change] to reflect on their assumptions and make informed choices about approaches to and forms of knowledge and learning to use in strategies for social change. (Taylor et al. 2006:13)

Key roles for outside facilitators of change are the deliberate provision of knowledge, helping parties interact around the way they see their problems, improving problem solving capabilities, and helping participants develop techniques for open discussion and handling confrontation (1976). Culbert (1976) speaks of a 5-stage model of 'consciousness-raising' by facilitators of social change, by assisting people to recognise how the current system works, identify what it is that concerns them, understand their relationship with the system, formulate alternatives, and identify ways to affect change for the group.
2.6.3 Extension of Current Model: Two INGO roles

Putting together the participatory development model, the ideas of conflict-sensitive development and social change theory, and recognising there are a range of levels of context from micro to macro, it is possible to construct a picture of the roles that different development actors play in participatory, socio-political context-sensitive development.

Suzuki (1998) and Shutt (2009) have already noted a division within INGOs between ‘field-orientated’ staff, both expatriates and nationals, who advocate the need for maximum flexibility in response to the local context, and ‘organisation-oriented’ staff who seek consistent polity across the organisation. Half a century ago Goodenough (1963) highlighted this same tension between field agents being more community-centred in their approach, and agency-centred staff who endorse contextualisation in principle, but struggle with allowing diversity of implementation in practice. A useful way of considering this long-standing field-oriented/organisation-oriented dichotomy within INGOs is by noting that country field offices and head offices themselves operate within different contexts, and therefore legitimately have different roles to play as agents in social change.

Figure 1 offers a visual representation of the major actors in context-sensitive development, highlighting the roles they play in context-sensitivity according to the participatory development model and social change theory.

The participatory development model of empowerment and partnership has the potential to facilitate contextualisation at the micro-meso level, through local knowledge and decision-making taking into consideration unique cultural contexts and (sometimes) local power dynamics. The model suggest that wherever it is possible to do so, local communities should be empowered, as insiders within their local context, to choose which ideas to receive, how to innovate on them, and therefore to control the planning and implementation of development within their local context. This may not be fully possible in difficult political contexts, in which case local NGO partners and INGOs may sometimes need to take on some of these roles on their behalf, paying particular attention to power dynamics in the process.
Local NGO and civil society partner organisations are embedded within district or national contexts, not local contexts. Social change theory recognises development action by these agencies is usually as outsiders to local contexts, thus the participatory development model suggests that under normal circumstances their role in community contexts is as facilitators rather than innovators: creating the space for community empowerment and decision-making, providing ideas, helping participants rethink the way they see their problems, and helping address equity, communication and problem solving deficiencies. Occasionally, in difficult socio-cultural contexts, local NGO and civil society partner organisations may need to take a more active lead in these activities, as well as ensuring sensitivity to national and regional factors local participants may be unaware of.
Local NGO and civil society partners are, however, themselves insiders within district or national contexts, and at these levels it is important for them to be the active agents of contextualisation to the greatest extent possible. They should be empowered, as insiders, to choose which ideas to receive from a general pool of international norms and approaches, and be empowered to innovate with them and drive development at this level, which would include areas such as advocacy, setting-up partnerships, goals setting, etcetera. Again, in difficult political contexts country office INGO staff may need to take on these roles on their behalf, being mindful to ensure context-sensitivity in the process.

Some INGOs, particularly where there are insufficient local NGO and civil society organisations of sufficient capacity to partner with, directly implement some of their programs through national field staff, meaning INGO field staff sometimes also take on the role of facilitating development at the community level themselves, although much of the development literature suggests this is not ideal in the longer term.

The participatory model largely sees INGO country staff as facilitators building the capacity of local NGO and civil partner organisations. Any further role of the INGO in ensuring context-sensitive development is, however, generally neglected in development theory. Social change theory, however, recognises that the INGO country office is itself embedded largely within the national context, and definitely within international regional politics, while the INGO head office is much more removed from both these contexts. As such, the INGO country office has a significant role in context-sensitive development at the national and regional international levels, and should be empowered by their head office as such. This is also implied by the conflict-sensitivity and fragile states literature, which charges the development agency to take an active role in understanding the context and dynamics, and make contextualisation a high priority. How to do that, however, without disempowering communities or partners, is not spelled out in the literature.

In practice, most INGO country offices do attempt to contextualise in the face of strong normative forces, but that this practice often creates a tension within the INGO structure. Social change theory suggests legitimising their role, focussing their role within the levels of context in which they take primary responsibility, such as stakeholder relationships. This model argues strongly for the deliberate and planned empowerment of INGO country offices and field workers by INGO head offices, for their role in adapting development approaches to ensure context-sensitive development.
2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the growth of the now widespread recognition of the need for context-sensitive development, reflected in the literature primarily in terms of sensitivity to culture and political context. The most difficult political contexts for development contextualisation are those involving conflict, state fragility or international political isolation of regimes (so-called 'pariah' states). Myanmar falls into the latter category. INGOs can potentially have more freedoms and wider mandates to operate in such internationally isolated states than multilateral agencies, because isolation stems from strained relationships between state actors and multilateral agencies have stronger connections to international state actors embroiled in the tensions.

The means by which INGOs, in particular, attempt to ensure contextual development has therefore been discussed in detail. It has been found that the INGO approach to development assumes that highly participatory development based on empowerment, partnership and capacity building inherently ensures decision-making is context-sensitive. While there are a lot of strengths and validity in this approach, concerns with the underlying assumption have been raised in connection with development in difficult states such as Myanmar, including whether participants are sufficiently empowered to contextualise in relation to both local elite and the development agency, whether they are sufficiently aware of national and international political factors, and that this model minimises or ignores the role agencies should play themselves in their dealings with stakeholders.

Directed social change theories have been reviewed in an attempt to explain the role and dynamics of outside agents interacting with local actors in the process of development, and from these a conceptualisation of the roles of the various actors has been proposed. This model for context-sensitive development extends the participatory development model to propose multiple layers of context, and that actors embedded in each layer of context are best placed to innovate within that context, while the role of those largely outside each context is to provide knowledge and information, and potentially advocate options derived from generalised development norms and approaches as discovered across many other contexts. Innovation of ideas to enable them fit the local context is best done by those within each level of context.
It has been noted that INGO head and country offices exist in different contexts, and therefore legitimately have different roles to play. This model therefore adds to the participatory development model by suggesting that the role INGO country offices and field workers already play in contextualising organisational approaches to local cultural and political factors must be recognised in the theory, and deliberate, planned empowerment of INGO country offices and field workers for this role must be facilitated by INGO head offices. It does, also, highlight the importance of INGO country offices and field workers having a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, socio-political and economic context they work within.

Chapters Four and Five explore this socio-political and economic context for Myanmar, and the historical antecedents which help understand the nature and pervasiveness of certain aspects of the contemporary context.
Chapter THREE: Methodology—A Window on Context & Context-Sensitive Development

Sitting in a room on the 3rd floor of the Wizaya Plaza on U Wisara Road, Bahan Township, Yangon, I was surprised at the reactions I was receiving as I shared the preliminary findings of my research with seventeen INGO country directors. Five months earlier I had sat in the offices of half these same leaders (as well as many other informants), interviewing them one-on-one for an hour and a half each, asking them about how they contextualise development approaches to the Myanmar context. Now, all I was really doing was distilling the key themes I had heard from them back to them as a group, at their monthly INGO Forum. Certainly, my feedback was processed and ordered, and analysed in terms of how widely respected as effective each respondent was by their peers, but this was their own information nonetheless. Given this forum was intended as a think tank and sharing gathering, the eagerness with which participants took notes and asked for items to be put on the agenda of future meetings was both surprising and encouraging.

As I finished sharing my findings, one participant asked whether even a contextualised advocacy approach such as I had outlined ever really worked. It was one of several discussion points raised by participants. I replied the number of interviewees who had been full of stories of successful advocacy using exactly that sort of approach. Three of these people were actually sitting there in the same room, but confidentiality prevented me simply responding, "Just turn and ask (person A) and (person B) sitting either side of you to tell you what they have achieved, and how." Fortunately one of those leaders did chime in at this point, but what amazed me was the extent to which so many of the INGO leaders appeared to be grasping after any insight into what may make their work more successful in Myanmar. The best answers, of course, either sat in that room or were just a phone call away.
3.1 A Window on Context—Historical and Contemporary Literature Review

The aim of this research is to discover how INGOs contextualise their development approaches and the implementation of project-based interventions to the unique context of Myanmar. Every context is unique, and Myanmar poses a difficult context for development. As has been noted, state fragility primarily stems from fractures within the state-society contract (OECD 2007a), and thus development in fragile states "must be grounded first and foremost in a specific, historically informed assessment of the state" (OECD 2007a:23, emphasis theirs). Three chapters of this thesis are therefore devoted to review and synthesis of the Myanmar Studies literature, analysing the political, social, religious and economic context from both historical and contemporary perspective. Once the context itself is reasonably well defined, we are in a position to examine how INGOs operate context-sensitively in Myanmar.

The most authoritative primary sources to use for information about INGO actions and projects are the key decision-makers in INGO country offices, generally foreigners with the role of country coordinator or a similar position description. It is these individuals who pursue or authorise development approaches in Myanmar, or at very least pursue or authorise the local implementation of their organisational development approaches. After the literature survey of the context, this research therefore then needs a window into their thoughts and actions on context-sensitive implementation of development within this environment.

3.2 A Window on Contextualisation—Phenomenological Approach

The research methodology adopted to gain such an insight into context-sensitivity desires to understand project implementation and effectiveness through the eyes of key INGO decision-makers and practitioners working in Myanmar. The fieldwork in this thesis therefore primarily adopts a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology "holds that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people's experiences of that social reality" (Gray 2009:22). A phenomenological approach aims to gain understanding of subjective experience through an exploration of
the personal perceptions of others (Denzin & Lincoln 2000), thereby exploring prevailing cultural or social understandings (Gray 2009). It aims to "get inside the social context of the phenomenon, to live it oneself, as it were, and look at the phenomenon more indirectly" (Titchen & Hobson 2005:121). This is an inductive approach that seeks to find the internal logic of the subject and understand meanings from their perspective. It works with individuals, and seeks to understand conceptual perspectives and understandings of their personal experience. A phenomenological approach therefore makes almost exclusive use of in-depth interviews.

A phenomenological approach is therefore particularly relevant to this study, which is seeking to understand the contextual environment faced by INGOs in Myanmar and the adaptations they make in response to that context, from the perspective of these INGO key decision makers, and using categories of analysis defined by these INGO leaders, not the researcher.

3.3 Fieldwork Methodology

3.3.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is regarded as a more fruitful methodology than quantitative research in circumstances where: the participant is more expert than the researcher; the research is driven by broad questions, rather than commencing with a hypothesis and theory; concepts are not clearly defined at the outset, but come out of themes found in research data; replication is not a strong goal; data is primarily in the form of participant explanations rather than numerical; analysis is generally descriptive and in the form of trends rather than statistical significance; and, the social context of the research will dictate the flow of the research (Wolfer 2007). For all these reasons, this research adopts a qualitative methodology.

Development Studies is a cross-disciplinary field without its own uniquely defined methodological approach (Sumner & Tribe 2008; Malik 2011). As such, Development Studies draws on any of a wide range of sociological and anthropological methodologies depending on the research question, although observation, interviews, surveys, and focus
groups are amongst the most common (Laws 2003). The literature suggests a distinction between problem-oriented and technique-oriented research (Sumner & Tribe 2008). Within this typology, this research is problem-oriented. Sumner & Tribe caution that because of the strong policy- and practice-related dimensions in international development, problem-oriented development research faces important issues of rigour, subjectivity and bias. They categorise Development Studies methodologies according to: sampling approach (random or purposive); data collection methods (structured or interactive); types of data collected (quantifiable or perceptual); and analytical techniques (statistical or sociological/anthropological). The following discussion of the fieldwork methodology is based around these categories.

3.3.2 Sampling Technique

Purposeful Sampling

Much qualitative research is based on interviews (Peräkylä 2008), and this is, of course, particularly true when a phenomenological approach is adopted. Most qualitative enquiry focuses analysis of relatively small samples, selected purposefully to provide information-rich cases for study in depth (Patton 1990). Purposeful selection, rather than random sampling, is particularly appropriate in circumstances where only a small number of people are qualified to be interviewed (Maykut & Morehouse 1994), and when the population to be studied is difficult to reach (Wolfer 2007). Both these factors are pertinent to the population of INGO key decision makers working inside Myanmar.

It is acknowledged that purposeful selection can lead to a distortion in findings, and given that the aim of this research is to draw tentative generalised conclusions about contextualisation in the Myanmar context at the time of the fieldwork, findings that have been distorted by purposeful selection would undermine the validity of any generalisations. This propensity has been minimised by considering sample size and the use of snowball sampling to confirm access to key informants.
Chain Referral (Snowball Sampling)

Chain referral sampling (snowball sampling), was developed as a means to overcome sampling problems in studies of hidden or difficult to access populations, and relies on referrals from one respondent to other persons believed to have the characteristics of interest, particularly to key informants in the field (Patton 1990; Wolfer 2007). Snowball sampling is ideally suited to overcoming social barriers which would otherwise prevent access, such as researchers trying to explore sensitive issues with members of a population seeking to hide non-conforming behaviour or views, or attempting to access populations who are hard to reach due to a social barrier (Faugier & Sargeant 1997). It is also ideal for reaching sufficient number of information-rich key informants (Patton 1990). With sufficient referrals, a small number of key informants who are particularly information rich get mentioned over and over, reinforcing the importance of the views of these particular key informants. However, the non-random nature of the sampling does mean that findings can only be tentative at best (Wolfer 2007).

Hendricks & Blanken concur that where

the aim of the study is primarily explorative, qualitative and descriptive, snowball sampling offers clear practical advantages in obtaining information on difficult-to-observe phenomena, in particular in areas that involve sensitive, illegal or deviant issues.  

(Hendricks & Blanken 1992:18)

While some individuals and many of the larger INGOs relevant to this research are known and others are clearly identifiable, not all are easily accessible. Many individuals and organisations work in Myanmar without MOUs or official registration with the government, and are thus largely hidden. Others, despite holding an MOU or official registration, do not advertise their presence in the country and are likewise partially hidden. Chain referral sampling is therefore an essential tool in both accessing foreign elites, such as INGO country directors and heads of UN agencies in country, as well as identifying the more hidden interview participants. It is also significant in assessing the quality of the information that key individual informants offer.

Odendahl & Shaw (2001) add that a great deal depends on networks, connections and chance circumstances, that one rightly positioned contact can provide access to a network of many informers, and that recommendations from pre-known individuals to others
relevant to the research is a significant means of identifying and gaining access to key informants. Of benefit to this project, I, as the researcher, came with some pre-existing networks and contacts with INGO leaders, and with additional contacts through my supervisor and the university.

3.3.3 Sample Size

Any meaningful analysis of populations of under 1,000 people requires a sample size of at least 30% of the total population (Wolfer 2007). At the time of conducting the fieldwork for this research, some 60-80 INGOs had registered MOUs with the Myanmar government to operate in the country. Extrapolating this to include UN agencies, Local NGOs (LNGOs) with broad experience, unregistered INGOs and other independent key informants operating in Myanmar, a target sample size of 40-60 interview participants was set, representing at least 20-25 different INGOs. With this sample size it is considered appropriate to assume reasonably accurate generalised conclusions can be drawn from the data.

It was determined that a sufficient sample size had been reached at the point further new interview responses very largely only repeated previous data, and further referrals led back to the same information-rich key individuals who had already been interviewed.

3.3.4 Data Collection Methodology

Elite Sources

The best sources to explore this research question are key practitioners, in particular country directors or program managers with development INGOs and UN organisations based in Myanmar, as well as leaders of INGOs based outside, who work in Myanmar through partnerships with or without official approval. People in these positions constitute a foreign professional elite (Herod 1999). The other useful source of information are leaders of LNGOs in the country, who constitute a local elite. However, there is a large gap in the methodological literature on researching elites. Cormode and Hughes (1999) attribute this gap largely to the difficulty of access to elites. Chain referral
sampling is particularly relevant to accessing elite sources, who are often part of intricate personal networks (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). Other issues include openness to scrutiny of elites, and differential power relations during the interview (Odendahl & Shaw 2001; Scheyvens et al. 2003).

A researcher studying any elite group is vulnerable, as they are usually dependent on the co-operation of a relatively small number of people with specialised knowledge (Cormode & Hughes 1999). Kirby & McKenna (1989) advise that to attain quality interviewing a sense of equality must be established between interviewer and interviewee. The overriding focus in methodological literature has been on scenarios where the researcher is more powerful than the researched, so most literature addresses the issue from the perspective of reducing the power position of the interviewer (Odendahl & Shaw 2001; Scheyvens et al. 2003).

In this case the participants are elite and the risk is of the interviewer being at a power disadvantage. To counter this, it is essential the interviewer establish their authority to interview at the outset of making contact, using subtle means to communicate either expertise in the field or knowledge of other prominent players within it (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). Age, reputation, gender and/or social status of the interviewer may all assist or hinder the establishment of authority to interview, and flexibility is required to respond appropriately to the personality of each individual. Ellis & Berger (2001) agree that reciprocity and self disclosure by the interviewer can help reduce any hierarchal gap between researcher and participant. Mullings (1999) found that the best strategy to open relaxed conversation in elite research in Jamaica was to occupy ‘shared positional spaces’ with the participant. To this end, she argues for presenting oneself to elites as a temporary insider, someone who "knows the ropes" and issues under concern and is therefore an intellectual equal.

These power and access issues were mitigated in the fieldwork, and status and standing with these elite was established, by being of similar age to most interviewees, having pre-existing contacts amongst the INGO leaders, having practical experience in the field in the development arena, and being well-educated. In most cases the power distance between interviewer and interviewee was therefore minimised during this research.
Semi-Structured Interviews

INGO leaders and managers are generally more practitioners than authors, and there are particular sensitivities involved in engagement within the Burmese political context. Most knowledge of adaptations required for INGO development interventions to be sensitive to unique contexts is therefore non-written, and this is particularly true for Myanmar. Very little documentation has been made public about the detailed activities of INGOs working inside Myanmar over the last 20 years.

Interviews are a particularly appropriate methodology for examining people’s experiences or views in some depth, where it is appropriate to rely on information from a fairly small number of respondents, and where people would either not attend or speak as freely in groups, and would either not take the time or be able to express themselves as fully through a written questionnaire (Laws 2003).

Semi-structured interviews are the preferred method of qualitative data collection from elites, including leaders of non-profit organisations, because it gives the participant more control over the event it also helps them to find inherent value in the interview (2001). Elites are less prepared to offer the time required for unstructured, in-depth, ethnographic interviewing (Minichiello et al. 1995), and longer interviews are more likely to be cancelled or interrupted (Mullings 1999). Semi-structured interviews are also most appropriate where questions do not have simple answers, yet there is a list of fairly standard questions which might be asked in different ways, and of which some might be left out or added to depending on the respondent.

Semi-structured interviewing invites participants to express opinions and ideas in their own words, allowing them to best elaborate their point of view, and invites them to take the lead in discussions (Esterberg 2002; Gray 2009; Lindlof & Taylor 2002; Bernard 2002). It allows the researcher to “hear the meaning’ of what is being conveyed” (Warren 2001:85). This assumes interviewees all have sufficiently strong analytic and communication skills, by which they are able to select the key information themselves once they know the parameters, and are willing and able to share information with a relative minimum of prompting by the researcher. It is seen to have high validity as a method, in that it allows people to talk about issues in depth or express the meanings
behind actions. Semi-structured interviews do, however, depend very much on the skill of the interviewer, relying primarily on the social interaction between interviewer and informant (Minichiello et al. 1995).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) present a detailed comparison of the nature and design characteristics of qualitative research (which they refer to as naturalistic inquiry). Their main argument is that qualitative (naturalistic) research is virtually impossible to define conclusively before the study commences, that the investigator unavoidably has an impact on the research, and that research design cannot be given \textit{a priori} but must emerge out of the process of inquiry. "The design of a naturalistic inquiry (whether research, evaluation, or policy analysis) cannot be given in advance; it must emerge, develop, unfold" (Lincoln & Guba 1985:225). Minichiello et al (1995) add that qualitative researchers should conduct their literature and interview research concurrently, rather than interview after the literature research is complete, to allow the development of theory from the many pieces of evidence and approach the interviews more open-mindedly.

While such definitions of emergent design are recent, the idea actually describes a methodology long common in qualitative research, allowing the research to evolve as it progresses based on emerging findings and patterns, in order to broaden or narrow the focus of inquiry and sampling strategy as new information is identified as important. For example, Pye used such an approach (without the terminology) in his interviews in Burma in the 1950s, from which he developed his version of modernisation theory (Pye 1962). The process of emergent design can be illustrated as in Figure 2.

Because this research relies on semi-structured interviews and emergent design, to come back to Sumner and Tribe's (2008) categorisation of Development Studies research methodologies, the data collected in this research is more perceptual than quantifiable and the analysis will be sociological /anthropological rather than statistical.

\textit{The Research Relationship}

An interview is a conversation (Burgess 1984) involving the asking of questions and listening, and therefore is not neutral. Rather, the method and outcomes are influenced
by the personal characteristics of both the interviewer and interviewee (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). It is a collaborative communication event, with inherent relational aspects (Ellis & Berger 2001). Strict objective neutrality in an interview is simply not possible (Fontana & Frey 2008). Fontana & Frey argue that taking a stance is unavoidable, and thus that the stand of interviewer ethically should be revealed, freeing the research to even use it for advantage in building rapport. Mullings (1999) argues for the importance of the interviewer interacting with participants "as persons," revealing personal feelings and "taking a stance" on issues, framing the interview with specific terms that create or demonstrate shared meaning (see also Fontana & Frey 2008).

This is considered to be particularly important in the highly politicised context of Myanmar. All interviews were therefore prefaced with a discussion of the interviewer’s background experience, a desire to be as non-political as possible, and the view that humanitarian engagement is both essential and constructive. Where appropriate during interviews, concern was shared over the humanitarian implications of sanctions and donor restrictions, and the difficulties these place on INGOs.
3.3.5 **Modified Delphi Method for Data and Analysis Verification**

*The Delphi Method*

The Delphi method is

> a method for the systematic solicitation and collection of judgements on a particular topic through a set of carefully designed sequential questionnaires interspersed with summarized information and feedback of opinions derived from earlier responses

(Delbecq *et al.* 1975:10)

Named after the ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi, the Delphi method was developed by the US Air Force for Cold War military analysis, then quickly adapted as a business tool to produce consensus forecasts from a group of experts. The method avoids the group dynamic problems caused when individuals with strong personalities, reputations or debating skills dominate (Delbecq *et al.* 1975; Linstone & Turoff 1975). The Delphi method generates ideas then facilitates movement towards consensus amongst a purposefully selected expert panel, over two or more iterations of consultation and feedback (Nehiley 2001; Wedley 1980; Linstone & Turoff 1975; Patton 1990). It involves "structured communication" in which some degree of anonymity is maintained, where contributors help assess the group judgement, and where individuals are given the opportunity to revise their views (Linstone & Turoff 1975).

The method is now a well-accepted qualitative research tool (Wiersma & Jurs 2005), and has been adapted and applied to a wide range of fields for use generating options then formulating advice, decision making or drawing conclusions. It has been used widely, including in: government policy, human services planning, curriculum development, public relations, conference planning, budget allocations, setting corporate objectives, even determining quality of life and planning medical research priorities (Delbecq *et al.* 1975; McGaw *et al.* 1974; Wedley 1980; McElreath 1997; Linstone & Turoff 1975).

The Delphi method is a heuristic, participatory technique (Wedley 1980). Essentially, this method involves collecting views individually from expert informants in a field, without panellists being aware of each other's responses, then using some means to generate discussion amongst them to interrogate these views (Laws 2003). It may be applied to generating alternatives or consensus. Obviously, the more open-ended the questions
asked of informants, the more analysis of the data is required before it can be presented back to the panel. It is found that this approach both provides breadth in initial responses, but then leads towards consensus as panellists revise their positions in the light of the responses of other panellists.

This process is often repeated at least one more time, although potentially several more iterations could be employed until a genuinely consensual position emerges. Conversely, where the issues and research question are well enough defined by the researcher in advance that the process can begin with an in-depth survey or interview on the issues, the Delphi method may only consist of two rounds, known as a modified or simplified Delphi process, as adopted here (Delbecq et al. 1975; Wiersma & Jurs 2005). This does reduce the extent to which genuine consensus can be said to have been reached.

Delphi does not require participants meet face to face, allowing Delphi studies to potentially be conducted entirely by mail, email or phone. However, interviews, while more time consuming, may also be utilised for the first round of data collection, and feedback and subsequent comment does not necessarily have to be anonymous or individual, allowing group panel discussion from the second round if that is more appropriate. There is no optimal size for a Delphi panel (Wiersma & Jurs 2005), although Delbecq et al. (1975) suggest 25-30 members as a logistical maximum.

The advantages of using the Delphi method are the ability to elicit a broad range of responses without panellists' responses being limited by those of others, the convenience it offers participants, and the ability to engage very complex issues over more than one interaction with informants. One of the key incentives motivating informants to participate, particularly for busy specialists, is the opportunity to gain insights into their colleagues' thinking (Nehiley 2001).

3.4 Data Collection & Analysis Process

The data collection process for this fieldwork proceeded as in Figure 3:
3.4.1 The Interview Informants

Fifty (50) key informants were interviewed during the course of this fieldwork, in line with the target set. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in Myanmar and Thailand during June-July 2009, and in Australia immediately preceding and following these dates. Participants were selected based on their experience and insight in delivering development projects in Myanmar, and/or into the context of Myanmar. Participants were drawn from one of the following categories:

1. Development INGOs
   Country directors or senior advisers to the organisation, who also have direct experience of specific development projects.

2. Development LNGOs
   Directors or advisers to the organisation with experience partnering with INGOs in development projects in Myanmar.

3. UN Development Agencies
   Country representatives or senior managers with experience of specific development projects in Myanmar.
4. **Donor Organisations**
   In country representatives of donor organisations who have experience assessing funding applications of specific development projects.

5. **Media**
   Journalists with significant experience reporting on economic development and political affairs in Myanmar, including familiarity with the work of INGOs/LNGOs.

A majority of interviewees were non-Burmese, reflecting the make-up of senior INGO and UN agency staff. Almost half the respondents requested anonymity, and this has been respected, however in all cases as much detail as possible has been provided without disclosing identifiable information. It will be noted that most of those requesting anonymity did so in response to vulnerable legal status with the Myanmar government. Several were with INGOs working into the country from outside through partnerships, but who do not have their own legal basis to work in the country. Others were with INGOs who had only recently negotiated an MOU, and who were therefore not confident of their standing. Another group requiring anonymity were workers with unregistered LNGOs. Few with UN agencies or major INGOs requested anonymity.

A list of interview participants is included in Appendix 2. The anonymity requested by many participants makes detailed discussion of all the participants and organisations impossible. Nonetheless, those interviewed represent a broad spectrum of those working in the country, including:

- 24 current and 1 former country directors or senior advisers from 21 INGOs;
- 7 directors or advisers for LNGOs;
- 6 country representatives or senior managers for UN agencies;
- 3 in-country coordinators for some of the largest international donors;
- 4 directors of INGOs who do not have MOUs, and are therefore based outside Myanmar and work into the country from outside relying on working through partnership with other INGOs or with LNGOs;
- 4 foreign journalists with extensive experience inside Myanmar; and
- 1 president of a GONGO.
The INGOs represented who can be named represent a broad spectrum of the organisations working in the country. These include World Vision, the largest INGO in Myanmar with approximately 1,200 local staff at the time of the interviews (400 of whom were at that time on short-term contracts for Cyclone Nargis relief projects), and several other major INGOs including Care, Oxfam and Médecins Du Monde. They also include much smaller organisations, such as the Burnet Institute for Medical Research & Public Health from Australia, working to build the capacity of local civil organisation in the area of health, and Terre des Hommes, Italy. They also include a number of Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), such as The Leprosy Mission International and Adventist Development & Relief Agency. The INGOs represented in these interviews, likewise, cover a spectrum from the Shalom Foundation, one of the larger, better organised and better funded INGOs in the country, through to unregistered local organisations cautiously running community development programs, orphanages and educational programs while attempting to not attract unwanted attention.

Unfortunately, several well-known directors of highly respected INGOs, UN agencies and INGOs were unavailable for interview during timeframe of the fieldwork. However, given the breadth of INGOs, LNGOs and UN agencies who were covered by the interviews, and the repetition encountered in interview responses, it is believed that most significant insights possible were gleaned through the fieldwork undertaken.

3.4.2 The Interviews

Interviews were around 1-1.5 hour in length and guided by a loose schedule of open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). The questions served as a prompt for the interviewer, but often after the introduction the interview participant led the conversation with little additional prompting. Likewise, some questions were clearly more relevant than others to various individuals. Generally, less than half the questions were put to most participants. Occasionally, in response to the direction the interviewee wanted to take the discussion, questions were expanded to explore new directions not included in this schedule, and additional, specifically targeted questions were prepared for some of the later interviews. Nonetheless, most interviews were guided by this list of questions.
Most interviews were recorded and fully transcribed; others, at the discretion of interview participants, were not recorded and the researcher worked from notes. A number of follow-up interviews were held in Myanmar during July 2011, specifically to identify any changes resulting from the 2010 elections and convening of parliament in 2011.

3.4.3 Use of the Delphi Method

Preliminary data was analysed following the depth interviews with key informants in Myanmar and Thailand during June-July 2009, and presented back to a meeting of seventeen INGO country directors meeting in the INGO Forum in Yangon during a return visit to Myanmar in December 2009 (see vignette opening this chapter). Such an application of the modified Delphi method to panel obtain feedback and data verification has been suggested as a means of reducing positive sampling errors and the potential distortions inherent in relying on qualitative interviews alone (Patton 1990).

Of these seventeen participants attending this forum, I had individually interviewed about half, with the other half having been unavailable for interview during the June-July 2009 fieldwork period. This Delphi panel discussion involved a 20-minute verbal presentation of the preliminary findings, together with participants receiving a 5,000-word draft report of the analysed findings, followed by a 25-minute discussion amongst participants moderated by the forum organisers, not the researcher.

The reactions to the initial feedback were strongly affirming on most issues. There were three key areas of discussion amongst the panellists after the presentation, namely: whether even contextualised advocacy actually worked with the Myanmar government; whether a rights based approach was or was not applicable in the Myanmar context; and whether INGOs were or were not actually sufficiently transparent with one another and accountable to their donors and supporters. The views raised in this forum have been incorporated into the final results.

One final and interesting comparative discussion of the findings of this research was afforded in June 2011. Given the elections in Myanmar and release of Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010, followed by the dissolution of the State Peace and Development Council
(SPDC) and convening of parliament under new President Thein Sein in March 2011, there were great changes in the macro-context within which INGOs operate over the first half of 2011. A further round of interviews were conducted with 12 of the original interview participants in a follow-up visit in June 2011, in which the original findings were discussed with the interviewee and discussion was invited about any changes in the contextualisation they engaged in as a result of changes within the context.

3.4.4 Referencing Interview Transcripts

In addition to many interview participants requesting complete anonymity, almost all interviewees requested that some comments be off the record or treated anonymously. To facilitate reporting of these interviews, therefore, the following guidelines have been adopted. Where consent has been granted to use comments in an identifiable form, responses are referenced with in brackets following text as author surname followed by organisation. For example, (Tumbian, WV, 2009) refers to the interview with James Tumbian, the Country Director for World Vision Myanmar, during 2009. At the same time, however, all interviewees have been assigned a randomised number from 1 to 50, and any reference to anonymous parts of their interview is simply referenced by a number. A full list of both named and anonymous interview participants is included in Appendix 2. Anonymity in this case generally means little or no further information can be provided as to the identity of the participant or their organisation. To distinguish quotations derived from interview from quotations from literary sources, interview quotations are reported in italics while those from the literature are not.

3.4.5 Methodological Bias?

This fieldwork data collection has relied exclusively on gathering and analysing the views and perspectives of key individual informants. As such, the question may be raised as to whether this methodology is biased towards an 'agency' understanding of social construction and change, without due consideration of 'structure'.

Agency is generally taken to refer to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make free choices on their own in ways that influence events, whereas structure, by
contrast, refers to the recurrent patterned arrangements that appear to influence or limit the choices and opportunities of individuals (Barker 2008). Sen (1993) notes an apparent similarity between agency and his capability approach to development, an approach which has been adopted by much of the INGO development community and reflected in the UNDP’s Human Development Index. However, Sen argues that developing capabilities goes beyond achievement of agency, arguing that capability and functionings are broader concepts which also include ideas of structure. Capability is about enlarging the space in which the individual may exercise freedom.

Most modern social theorists take structure and agency as complementary forces (Jary & Jary 1991). For example, Giddens' (1984) 'structuration theory' proposes a "duality of structure" in which social structure is both the medium and outcome of social action. It argues that agents draw on structures to produce actions that then change or maintain structures, and that the very existence of social structures relies on the work of agents within them. de Sardan (2005:17) similarly concludes that in international development, separating the 'actor-centred approach' from the 'structure-centred approach' "falls into irrelevance" at the practical level. Development Studies and development practice combines both concepts (Thomas & Allen 2000).

The reliance on individual interview data in this research, therefore, does not of itself constitute a bias towards agency over structure, so long as the issues discussed address both structure and agency-related issues. The research results presented in Chapters Six to Eight demonstrate this. For example, interview discussions addressed both structure-related issues, such as capacity, human rights and democratisation at the highest levels of State, and agency-related issues, such as building partnerships and human rights awareness at a community level. At the same time, it could be argued that because of the structural barriers INGOs face working within Myanmar INGOs who identify structure as the primary obstacle generally base themselves outside the country and advocate for policy or regime change, while the majority of INGOs within the country identify the potential for individual agency. As such, any bias displayed by the methodology is reflective of the INGOs who are the focus of this research.
3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Non-Positivist Perspective

The analysis of this fieldwork interview data is phenomenological, an interpretivist, non-positivist paradigm.

Positivism is based on a belief that reality is independent of human consciousness and can be measured through observation and discovery (Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Guba & Lincoln 2005; Gray 2009), and thus upholds the primacy of sense experience and empirical evidence as the basis for knowledge and research ('Positivism' 2002). Positivism is closely linked with empirical science, attempting to prove or disprove hypotheses and seeking to present findings as objective truth (Crotty 1998; Guba & Lincoln 2005). It is therefore not well suited to probing socio-behavioural phenomena (Rodwell 1998), and its search for objective facts stands in the way of understanding the complexity of social reality, where culture and consciousness are primary ('Positivism' 2002).

The social sciences arose in large part as a critique of positivism, and their non-positivist theoretical perspective is therefore fundamentally distinct (Crotty 1998; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). The major non-positivist theoretical perspectives are critical enquiry, constructionism, and interpretivism (Crotty 1998), although there is rapidly becoming a "blurring" of the various non-positivist perspectives (Guba & Lincoln 2005:191). All non-positivist paradigms, however, remove the focus on ontological reality and replace it with socially constructed meaning.

Critical enquiry draws on critical theory, a form of rationalism developed out of Marxism that maintains that the source of knowledge comes from mankind being rational, as opposed to the idea that knowledge comes from our sense-experience ('Critical Theory' 2009). Critical theory is generally defined as a self-conscious social critique aimed at emancipation through enlightenment (Geuss 1981). Recognising that ideas themselves are mediated by political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender power relations steeped in ideologies and self-interest, critical theory seeks not simply to interpret the world, but to also change it (Gray 2009; Guba & Lincoln 2005). It seeks to combine practical and normative thinking to "explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify actors to
change it, and provide clear norms for criticism and practical goals for the future" (Bohman 1996:190).

The literature component of this research draws on critical enquiry methodology, seeking to critique our understanding of the Myanmar context, seeing current contextual reality in that country as derived from historically shaped power relations, and seeking to empower INGO actors as agents who can act in alleviating extreme poverty. The fieldwork component is *phenomenological*, a major interpretivist approach (Gray 2009).

Interpretivism is a major non-positivist paradigm, closely linked with constructivism, in which the world is interpreted through "classification schemas of the mind" (Gray 2009). Knowledge is not inherent in objects, but constructed by people as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty 1998). It is therefore not simply objective, although neither is it subjective; it is socially constructed, actively created through social relationships and interactions (Scott & Marshall 2009). Knowledge becomes reality through intersubjective socialisation and constructed understanding grounded in individual interpretation and social intersubjectivity, not through the discovery of objective truths or facts (GWB 2009).

Interpretivists look for "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty 1998:67). The idea of *verstehen* (literally: "understanding"), developed in the eighteenth century in reaction to Enlightenment positivism being applied to human behaviour, made it axiomatic that social situations must be viewed from the point of view of the actors in order to truly understand what is happening (Lindlof 1995). Outside observers seek to understand people on their own terms rather than interpreting them based on preconceived ideas determined outside, in advance—in other words, relying on an empathic or participatory understanding of social phenomena.

Phenomenological research is only able to document the experience of a relatively small number of case study individuals. This number usually constitutes too small a proportion of the population under study to draw generalisations or be predictive. However, as previously have noted, the sample size in this case is a large enough proportion of the population of INGOs to allow valid tentative conclusions, especially when combined with use of the Delphi technique for data verification.
Phenomenological research, as naturalistic inquiry methodology is virtually impossible to delineate definitively before fieldwork commences but must emerge out of a logical process of inquiry (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Tesch 1990). Analysis of phenomenological research data should seek to identify shared meanings and understandings among participants (Titchen & Hobson 2005), and phenomenological findings are commonly presented through extensive quotation, allowing the voice of the participants to be clearly heard before any further analysis by the researcher.

Significant to this study, then, is not approaching data analysis with fixed preconceived hypotheses or categories of interpretation derived from a theoretical understanding of development practice, but as much as possible to allow the research participants themselves to construct the ideas, categories, meanings and interpretations as they see them, and as derived through in-depth and fairly unstructured interviews. This includes, therefore, their ideas on what is included within the definition or idea of ‘context’, as well as the principles and approaches to development which they highlight, and their discussion on which they feel the need to retain, adapt, or do very differently, in order to be sensitive to the Myanmar context.

3.5.2 Analysis Methodology of the Interview Data

Analysis of phenomenological data commences by attempting to discern themes in the interview data, and then examining the commonalities and unique responses within these themes to identify the "constituents" of the phenomenon under study (Tesch 1987, 1990). Tesch explains that data analysis for phenomenological research begins as soon as the first data is collected, and continues throughout the data collection as the researcher reads, rereads, and immerses themself in the data to both derive "a sense of the whole" and observe "themes" as they emerge. While some researchers painstakingly delineate all "meaning units" throughout each interview transcript, then decide which ones are relevant to the research questions, this research analysis adopted Tesch’s alternate approach of looking only for the material that pertains to the research question. Material showing similarities to other material is clustered into "essential non-redundant themes", which are then built and reworked as each new interview adds to the pool of data.
Almost all interviews during this fieldwork were fully recorded and transcribed. A few participants, as noted previously, opted to not have their interviews recorded, but were comfortable with written notes being taken during the interview. These interview transcriptions and notes were initially analysed along Tesch’s terms by looking for key development terminology being used as themes by participants, with other relevant data being grouped into other themes. Reworking this over several iterations, a set of themes emerged around development ideas and approaches frequently discussed by participants, plus the key issues of access and funding for work in Myanmar. These themes have become the basis of the major headings throughout the next three chapters in this thesis.

This task of coding and identifying themes was undertaken manually by the researcher, by highlighting interview text in different colours within a word processor. Once themes were identified, material from each interview was cut and pasted manually into separate sections of a new document under relevant thematic headings, and re-ordered until either a coherent narrative or clearly conflicting views emerged.

In many cases, most respondents addressing one of these themes agreed with each other as to the form of contextualisation which makes this development approach effective. Participants were asked to give examples of contextualisation they were doing and to assess its effectiveness, and most examples offered were positive (although several participants provided examples they were not convinced were being successful). In these cases, material was simply rearranged and connected in order for the participants to tell their story most fluently, based on consistent self-assessments between participants.

In other cases, however, multiple views were presented in terms of what they were doing, and what they considered effective. The limitations of self-assessment are recognised (e.g. Sen 1987), thus more objective evaluation is required. The most satisfying means of determining which approach is most effective would be to cross-reference the interview data with first-hand evaluations of projects. However, political restrictions make evaluations of projects in village communities highly problematic, and this research has not attempted its own evaluation of project or program effectiveness.

Instead, this issue is dealt with in large part by the chain referral sampling methodology. This research began with a small number of initial contacts, and these participants were
asked to refer other potential participants on the basis of both effective programs and insight into the context. The frequency of referrals back to a small number of key participants based on their perceived effectiveness by their peers (and a lack of referrals to others) was used alongside self-assessments of effectiveness in analysing the significance of the different views where opinions differed. In other words, the relative authority of the views of participants was ranked based on both their own self-assessment of their work and peer assessment of which agencies and programs were being more effective. Thus when divergent views were presented in interview responses, there has been an attempt to present all views but with a greater weight given to the responses of those participants who were most often and positively referred by their peers.

It should be noted that the issues with the most divergent views between respondents were the same issues raised later in the Delphi discussion. The discussion of these issues in that forum is noted in the relevant section, and helped shaped the final analysis.

3.6 Ethics

This research has been carried out according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). The Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee formally provided university approval for this study. This research has sought to strictly uphold all ethical responsibilities towards participants, namely voluntary participation, informed consent, protecting confidentiality and providing anonymity, avoiding harm, and ensuring reciprocity, avoiding deception, and ensuring accuracy of data and that results remain true to this data (Wolfer 2007; Christians 2005).

Interview participants were well informed about the research and publication process. Given all interviewees are either themselves respected authorities on Myanmar or are in senior positions in organisations which collectively would be seen as authorities on Myanmar, all interview participants are particularly well informed of any risks involved. They are all also leaders in their organisations, and therefore clearly able to offer informed consent. In all cases participation was entirely voluntary, and all requests of anonymity and confidentiality have been strictly honoured. No views have been attributed to individuals or organisations in this research without the signed consent of the participant.
3.7 A Note on the Reliability of Data

As has been discussed in Ware (2011), economic and demographic data on Burma/Myanmar have been of questionable validity since independence, and the problem is acute today despite some improvement through the concerted efforts of agencies after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. This paucity of reliable data is the result of several factors, including the regime having limited control over parts of the territory, limited resources for data gathering and analysis, and data being manipulated for internal and external consumption. Often this manipulation is by the officials and agencies who collect the data, "to please the top of the power hierarchy" (Steinberg 2006:xxvi). "The statistical record is particularly problem ridden, at best no more than a rough and unreliable picture, prone to understatement through incompetence ... [or] exaggeration through politically driven manipulation," in which it is not always in the interest of middle ranking officials to reveal what they know (Perry 2007:16). There are also widespread suggestions of deliberate misinformation as a regime survival strategy. As Rotberg (1998:154) observes, "Economic data [on Burma] often have only a tenuous link to that which they purport to observe."

The government has not published a full annual statistical review since 1997/98, and the most recent formal census took place in 1983. As an illustration of the dearth in reliable data, Table 1 provides national population estimates from various agencies showing variation of up to 16 million people over four years (a variation of up to one third the estimated population) depending on the source and on the modelling used. With that rate of variation in data as fundamental as population, other data on the state of the population, economy and nation must be considered suspect. It is also noted that data cited by international agencies, no matter how many iterations removed, can frequently be tracked back to official statistics, and perhaps to a parallel set of political incentives (Save [the Children] & Desmond 2009). It would therefore be smart to treat international agency statistics with equal caution to official sources.

This lack of reliable data and the difficulties gaining access means even respected academic researchers are often forced to rely on "informed hunches" (Taylor 2008:119). Data are "negotiated more than they are observed in Myanmar" and political incentives favour over-reporting by government officials (Dapice et al. 2009). There is "a
Table 1: Total Population of Myanmar data, as reported by various agencies
(Adopted from Save [the Children] & Desmond 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Population (million)</th>
<th>for year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADB</td>
<td>58.820</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>58.510</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFAT (Aust)</td>
<td>58.800</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIU</td>
<td>49.100</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>48.800</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoFA</td>
<td>52.400</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoH</td>
<td>56.620</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDC</td>
<td>48.400</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN ESA</td>
<td>50.519</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>48.798</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN OHRLLS</td>
<td>42.720</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>48.379</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Bank</td>
<td>49.200</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:
1. ADB: Key indicators for Asia & Pacific (2009)
2. ASEAN Statistical Yearbook (2008)
3. Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: Burma Factsheet (2009)
5. International Monetary Fund 2008
8. SDC: Mekong Programme website (info from BBC)
9. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2007)

manipulation of data culture" in which even INGOs are advised not to publish real data, but to report figures as provided by government officials. Sometimes key figures released by the government are rejected by the international community as clearly inconsistent with other information – e.g. recent GDP figures for Myanmar were not accepted by the World Bank or IMF (ESCAP 2007). Other data is either not produced at all or the Myanmar government chooses not to make it public.

Igboemeka (2005) argues that this lack of reliable data is one of the most important limitations on aid effectiveness in the country, but that deep political sensitivities make producing accurate data a challenge. Agencies are often unwilling to share the information they collect from their own operations with each other because of these political sensitivities. This may have improved somewhat with the coordination between agencies which emerged in the response to Cyclone Nargis, but still remains an issue.

Inadequate and unreliable data is not unique to Myanmar. For example similar issues are observed in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (Feeny & Clarke 2009). Still, Myanmar is the only member country of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) that has not yet begun to formulate a national statistical development strategy,
and stands out as the country with the "least capacity" in ASEAN "to produce reliable and timely data even for the most basic statistics" (ESCAP 2007). The World Bank's *Statistical Capacity Indicator* (2009) for Myanmar has been revised downward significantly over the last 3 years (World Bank 2009; ESCAP 2007). The IMF regularly admonishes Myanmar to improve data and statistical reporting (Collignon 2001), but this also suggests a responsibility on the international community to work with the Myanmar government to help build data gathering and data integrity capacity.
PART B:

THE MYANMAR CONTEXT:
A HISTORICALLY-INFORMED ANALYSIS
Chapter FOUR: *Burmese Days*

**Antecedents of the Socio-Political Context**

It would be [as much] an error to dismiss the Burmese past as irrelevant to the present or the future, as is often done in policy circles, as it would be to ignore contemporary realities and solely concentrate on history. (Steinberg 2006:37)

*Splashed across world newspaper headlines in January 2011 was the story of a letter written on pure gold sheet inlaid with rubies, contained in an elephant tusk, which had been sent to King George II by Burmese king Alaungpaya in 1756 (e.g. Ward 2011). The letter had now, finally, been fully translated at the Leibniz library in Hanover (Leider 2009). The letter is addressed,*

> To the most meritorious and supreme [king] master of all the parasol-bearing kings ... lord of ruby, gold, silver, copper, iron, amber and precious stone mines, lord of white elephants, red elephants and elephants of various colours ... the English king who rules over the English capital...

*Presenting his findings to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres in Paris on 21st January 2011, lead researcher Jacques Leider confirmed that amid the valuable gems and flowery language, Alaungpaya offers his permission for a British settlement and harbour to be built in the city of Pathein, ostensibly to encourage trading co-operation between the two countries.*

*As the story goes, in 1751 the Frenchman Sieur de Bruno arrived in Bago (the former coastal capital) just as king Alaungpaya was founding the third Burmese empire. In July 1751 de Bruno pressed Pondicherry for a few hundred well-disciplined French troops, boasting they could gain control of the Ayeyarwady Delta (Hall 1956). When the British governor of Madras heard the rumours, he pre-emptively sent a force which gained possession of the island of Negrais (a large island near Pathein, in the Delta region devastated by Cyclone Nargis in 2008). The English then tried to establish a friendship with Alaungpaya, however, Alaungpaya protested that he wanted to deal directly with a king as an equal, not with a mere trading company. Thus, in 1756 he wrote the now-famous gold letter to King George II, offering recognition of the British presence at Negrais in exchange*
for the opening of trade and a supply of arms, as initiation of relations between the two countries. However, the story goes that by the time the letter was handed to King George II by Secretary of State William Pitt, a treaty had already been signed with the French, and orders subsequently sent to abandon the unprofitable Negrais settlement (Harvey 1925). So King George simply sent the letter to the royal library in Hanover, where it has long been thought of as a royal treasure from an unknown Indian prince (Leider 2009).

When Alaungpaya received no official reply from King George II to his overtures of friendship, despite the military incursion into his territory, he concluded that he had either been tricked or insulted. Thus when the Mons in the region near the British rebelled in 1759, and rumours suggested the English were supplying them with arms, Alaungpaya ordered the complete destruction of the remaining Negrais settlement—an act which became infamous to the British as the Negrais Massacre.

This whole episode is merely one more sorry tale of a litany of failed communication and bad experiences between Burma/Myanmar and the West, stretching over four centuries.

**Plate 1:** The Golden Letter from Alaungpaya to King George II, 1756, now in the Leibniz library, Hanover, Germany

(photograph © Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Hanover)
4.1 The Need for a Historical Analysis

The international community’s deep concerns over human rights abuses and governance failures in Myanmar have already been noted, as has the intense frustration over the decades-long political impasse between the military, the democratic opposition and ethnic minorities. The intractable nature of the issues, together with the fact that Myanmar is equally plagued by longstanding poor international relations and tense ethnic conflict, point to the fact that an in-depth historical understanding of the sensitivities behind these crises is required if development approaches are going to garner support and avoid exacerbating tensions.

The limited literature on development in difficult political contexts, as explored in Chapter Two, emphasises states experiencing conflict or fragility. Myanmar typifies both. Political and ethnic conflict is pervasive and has often been violent, with Myanmar being home to some of the longest running armed civil conflicts in the world (Smith 1997). It is also a fragile state. Foreign Policy (2010) rank Myanmar as the 16th most vulnerable state to failure, and the Brookings Institute places it as the 17th weakest state, equal with North Korea as the world’s most repressive autocracy (Rice & Patrick 2008). Only Somalia is weaker across Brookings’ basket of political indicators.

The common thread running through this literature on development in difficult political contexts, as previously discussed at length, is the importance of grounding development in particularly historically-informed understandings of the context. Most development mistakes in conflict-affected areas result from insufficient analysis of the socio-cultural, institutional, historical and political dynamics, and an assumption that democracy alone will promote peace (World Bank 2006). In fragile states, historically contested notions of the state and post-colonial sensitivities are also issues (Wesley 2008). For these reasons a thorough examination of the historical origins of the contemporary conflicted politics and the strain in the state-society contract are required.

This is consistent with the research of Igboemeka (2005), discussed previously, who found that a more thorough understanding of the challenging context and its link to change processes is required. It is also consistent with Myanmar Studies literature, which regularly highlights the central importance of history and traditional culture to
understanding contemporary society and politics (Steinberg 2010b). Political analysis which fails to take adequate account of the history of how the Burmese state came to its current condition is simplistic, if not irrelevant (Taylor 2005; Guo 2009).

This chapter, therefore, offers an analysis of the monarchal, colonial and post-colonial antecedents to the current political context. It is widely recognised that the modern Burmese state, as re-established by military regimes since the mid-1980s, has been built "in a new guise on the foundations of its monarchical and colonial predecessors" (Taylor 2009:375). This historical analysis is therefore presented through these three major narratives related to the major timeframes: 1) traditional perceptions about power, rulership and political legitimacy, understandings which were relatively persistent over almost a millennium prior to the arrival of colonialism; 2) the impact of the colonial experience and history of interaction with the West, and the new security concerns this brought; and, 3) the contribution of the crises at Independence, and post-colonial sensitivities.

These three narratives form an important foundation for understanding the values, policies and attitudes of the political elite. Ultimately it is the leadership of individuals which has shaped Myanmar's modern history, and this history has been marred by some seriously poor policy decisions. However, these narratives illuminate the structural background context for the individual choices of these leaders, highlighting the fears and overreactions that many attempts to facilitate political change and economic development have provoked. They help identify approaches more likely to receive cooperation than evoke reactions. And they suggest many altruistic motivations the political elite may hold, around which agreement on development and poverty alleviation may constructively engage.

4.2 First Narrative: Historical Burmese-Buddhist Political Ideology

4.2.1 In the Tradition of Ancient Burmese Kings

The "guiding framework" of the modern Burmese state was laid at Bagan, the first Burmese empire, traditionally dated 1057-1287AD (Aung-Thwin 1985:199). Significant
aspects of continuity persist, with echoes of traditional values resonating within contemporary Burmese politics (Taylor 2009). Steinberg (2006, 2010b) calls these 'residues' from the past, legacies continuing to reverberate within notions of kingship and statecraft, in patterns of power and authority, and their relationship with Buddhist concepts. Any understanding of contemporary Burmese society is thus incomplete without study of the structure and political values of these ancient Burmese empires.

All post-independence regimes have directly appealed to pre-colonial images of rulership to reinforce their own legitimacy (Matthews 1998).

> The cultural frame in which the military as well as the civilian political leadership of Burma have defined and claimed legitimacy has been the traditional culture with its age-old symbolic images. (Mya Maung 1991)

For example, during the WWII Japanese 'independence' the Burmese civilian head of state, Dr Ba Maw, adopted the title "Adipati Ashin Mingyi", which translates literally as 'Lord royal head of state', or "Lord of Power, the Great King's Royal Person" (Lintner 1991), a title with clear "historical resonance going back to the Burmese kings" (Taylor 2009:286).

British rule and modernity did not change,

> the more fundamental attitudes toward power, authority, hierarchy, and governance that still profoundly influence how power is perceived and executed ... the colonial era ... reinforced traditional patterns of control, and emphasis on Buddhism as a reaction against rule that was widely interpreted, at least by Burmans, as illegitimate. (Steinberg 2006:29)

While little is known of the inner workings of recent Burmese military regimes, there is good evidence that each of the Senior Generals heading the state since 1962 have, likewise, seen themselves within the tradition of the great Burman kings (Haacke 2006; Steinberg 2010b). Lacking democratic legitimacy, these generals have "behaved as if they were continuing in a royal tradition", adopting agendas which traditionally conferred legitimacy on rulers, namely achieving unity, stability and development, and protecting independence, together with overt Buddhist patronage (Selth 2010a:21).

Abundant illustrations support this view. For example, Ne Win (1962-1988) married a descendant of the last Burmese royal family, then began appearing at state functions dressed in classical royal regalia, and performed the kingly ceremony of raising the spire in a pagoda-building project (McCarthy 2008). Likewise, before Saw Maung (1988-1992) was
deposed, he too dressed in royal regalia and performed royal rituals, declaring himself a reincarnation of king Kyanzittha (1084-1112), son of Anawrahta, who founded the first Burmese empire (Steinberg 2010b). Than Shwe (1992-2010) refurbished the Shwedagon Pagoda with half a ton of diamonds, rubies and sapphires and another 210 kilograms of gold, as well as brought a tooth relic from China which was carried all over the country in a chariot drawn by an elephant in full regalia (Jordt 2003). He also constructed a facility in Rangoon to house all the white elephants being discovered throughout the country.

During the time of the Buddhist kings, white elephants signified the purity and morality of a particular monarch's rule ... (these new ones) supposedly proving beyond reasonable doubt the moral fitness of the SPDC. (Skidmore 2004:88)

Than Shwe's move of the capital from Yangon to the newly-constructed city of Naypyidaw in 2005 offers a further example. While there are several other likely strategic motivations, including undoing some of the colonial legacy and reconnecting with historical Burman ethnic roots (Seekins 2009), the move clearly appealed to traditional ideas of royal legitimacy (Maung Aung Myoe 2006; Steinberg 2010b). Burmese kings signalled the beginning of a new dynasty by moving their capital to a new site and built an elaborate new palace and royal pagoda (Maung Aung Myoe 2006; Rozenberg 2009). The name 'Naypyidaw' translates as 'seat of kings' (Seekins 2009), or 'royal national site' (Steinberg 2010b:16), and was a term used in pre-colonial times to refer to the royal city (Steinberg 2010b). Further reinforcing this view are the 10-metre high bronze statues of the three most venerated warrior kings erected prominently in the city, the founders of the three Burmese empires, kings Anawrahta (1044-1077), Bayinnaung (1551-1581) and Alaungpaya (1752-1760) (see Plate 2) Official invitations to the stake-driving ceremony for the replica of the historic Yangon Shwedagon Pagoda opened with the phrase, "Rajahtani Naypyidaw", literally, "the royal capital where the king resides" (Maung Aung Myoe 2006:14).

Together, these actions suggest that the various regimes' ideas about political legitimacy have been heavily drawn from these pre-colonial models, under a veneer of modernity.
Plate 2: Senior General Than Shwe inspecting troops in front of the statues of the warrior kings Anawrahta, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya, constructed in Naypyidaw

(Source: Agence France-Presse. Used with permission.)

4.2.2 Authoritarianism and Traditional Values

Appeal to these traditional sources of political legitimacy has been an ongoing practice in Burmese politics. Even during the democratic period prior to the 1962 coup, Maung Maung Gyi expressed concern that political power was being arrogated by authoritarian leaders through appeal to pre-colonial values and beliefs, and that these values were broadly held by the entire population, not just the political elite (Maung Maung Gyi 1983). Reflecting on Ne Win’s regime after the coup, he argued that,

authoritarian rulership thrives only on authoritarian soil, that is, the type of nation that accepts an authoritarian regime. Had the social-political values of the nation been nonauthoritarian, the military, once they had straightened out the chaotic situation of the country, would be expected to return to the barracks, or else the public would use pressure to throw out the military from power.

(Maung Maung Gyi 1983:3)
Steinberg (2006) similarly argues that popular uprisings in Burma, from classical times until the 1988 demonstrations, were not designed to change the system as much as to substitute who was in command. Collignon (2001) substantiates this argument by correlating mass demonstrations with serious deterioration in economic circumstances, rather than inherently the response to immediate political trigger-events, concluding that:

the SLORC-SPDC generals [have] found more legitimacy in the traditional views of Burmese culture than the modern concept of human rights ... the root of Burma's problems may not just be the SLORC-SPDC—it may be Burma itself ... The problem is the cognitive model on which Burmese society functions ... A military regime ... can lay claim to legitimacy in the framework of the traditional cognitive model of Burmese society. (Collignon 2001:79-80,83)

Maung Maung Gyi suggests that colonialism had a minimal impact on these traditional values, arguing that the British "never seriously attempted to win the imagination of the people ... to their ideals"; since they "were never in close touch with the people ... the medieval Burmese mind underwent no essential change" (Maung Maung Gyi 1983:8-13). He concludes that colonial rule actually reinforced more than challenged authoritarian ideas about power and rulership. By the time of the Japanese invasion during WWII, just 56 years after the British conquered Mandalay, most Burmans looked forward nostalgically to the establishment of a new version of that vision (Taylor 1987).

4.2.3 Buddhist Basis of Traditional Legitimacy

Buddhism is the cornerstone of Burmese culture, and central to traditional ideas about political legitimacy (Kozenberg 2009). "Burmese polities have defined themselves in terms of Buddhist sources of legitimacy for more than a millennium" (Schober 2011), with all post-independence governments incorporating Burmese-Buddhist elements into their political ideology for legitimacy and nation-building purposes (Philp 2004). Indeed, Burmese rulers, from King Anawrahta to Than Shwe, have returned to Buddhism whenever they faced an erosion of political legitimacy (Houtman 1999).

The most comprehensive ethnographic study of Theravada Buddhism in Burma was conducted by Spiro (1982), who completed his fieldwork during the 1950s, during the democratic era. According to Spiro, while the radical soteriology of attaining *nibbana* may be the goal of many monks, it is not practical or desirable for a majority of laypeople.
Paying lip-service to doctrines of dukka (suffering) and tanha (desire), he suggests laypeople aspire to a future in which their desires are instead satisfied through the accumulation of kamma, rather than attaining nibbana and escaping samsara (cycle of rebirth). For most Burmese this means aspiring to a better rebirth, with the outcome being an emphasis on merit-making and amassing kamma. In the 1950s Spiro found laypeople in poor rural villages in Upper Burma investing between 30-40% of their net disposable income into merit-making (1982).

Inscriptions as early as Anawrahta show many Burmese kings even viewed the accumulation of kamma as a direct means of attaining nibbana, bypassing the need for ascetic meditation (Aung-Thwin 1985; Koenig 1990). Those with large stores of kamma, those with hpoun (merit, glory), were highly respected. Since social position is the most clear, outward indicator of hpoun, and because social position brings additional ability for further merit-making, advancement in social position became a major ambition for most lay-Buddhists. In practice, most Burmese modify central Buddhist concepts to see dukka (suffering) as not being caused by tanha (desire) per se, but by the frustration of desire, making accumulation of hpoun a central pursuit (Koenig 1990); "when applied to the laity at least, merit, wealth, and power thus became conceptually interchangeable" (Aung-Thwin 1985:46).

These traditional ideas continue to some extent today, influencing the legitimacy-seeking behaviour of the Myanmar elite. Burmese military rulers since 1962 have all exhibited a "deep and unfeigned reverence for Buddhism, and there is no room for such claims to moral legitimacy in regularly corrupt, nepotistic, late capitalist dictatorships" (Skidmore 2004:60). Rather, such merit-making is far better explained as recourse to traditional political legitimacy (Jordt 2001). (Merit-making likewise goes a long way toward explaining the existence and nature of Burmese civil society, with its strong emphasis on charity.]

Traditional political legitimacy is derived from these ideas of kamma and hpoun, and their corollary for political leadership, dhammaraja and cakkavatti. The dhammaraja is an ideal of rulership known throughout Burmese history, one who uses his great kamma to restore political, moral and religious order—an almost messianic role (Aung-Thwin 1983, 1985). It was the central organising model of kingship during the third Burmese empire (1752-1886), linking political power with religious ideas and ritual practice (Schober 2011). The
dhammaraja was expected to unify factions and install a higher moral order, creating an environment of peace and prosperity within which people could spend time gaining merit. Kings used this concept to legitimise conquests as wars to seek holy relics and proselytise, and limiting the power of the sangha (monkhood) to apolitical roles as an act of purification (Aung-Thwin 1979, 1983).

A cakkavatti was similar, in Burmese thought being an enlightened being who delays entrance into nibbana to serve as a universal monarch, conquering the world and implementing dhamma out of concern for the welfare of people everywhere (Taylor 2009). The concept is thus likewise messianic, similar to the Mahayana bodhisatta, except that a cakkavatti adopts the wearisome task of political rulership and military conquest as the means to help others find the path (Aung-Thwin 1983; Tambiah 1976).

Dhammaraja and cakkavatti are ideals of rulership. Tambiah (1976) is convinced that Ne Win's Buddhist observance was carefully constructed to lay claim to the role of cakkavatti, while many saw U Nu's religious patronage as a sign he was a dhammaraja (Schober 2011; Taylor 2009). Aung San Suu Kyi, likewise, has appealed to the duties expected of a dhammaraja to challenge the regime and to elaborate her political ethos (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a).

Kammaraja is a recent analytical term, coined to embrace the essential characteristic of both dhammaraja and cakkavatti, namely, rule by right of possessing the most abundant store of merit among the laypeople. It therefore describes the moral, kamnic legitimisation of kingship (Aung-Thwin 1985). It is, nonetheless, a circular argument: a king is proven to be the most worthy person to rule by virtue of being the ruler. Because they possess superior hpoun, such kings were considered to be future Buddhas. For example the name Alaungpaya is an appellation, meaning, "Buddha to be" (Maung Htin Aung 1967:168). The weakness of this belief, though, is that, "it confers legitimacy on any political regime—not only on the regime in authority, but on the regime that usurps its authority" (Spiro 1982:443).

Karma plays a curiously paradoxical role. Conferring legitimacy on the regime in power, and at the same time providing an incentive for the overthrow of that regime, this doctrine has played an important part in the political instability that has persistently plagued Burmese history ... (providing) powerful incentives for the ... extraordinary incidence of usurpation of royal power. (Spiro 1982:440-442)
Burmese chronicles record the mythical origins of kingship after eons of moral decay under democratic social structures. That decay led to a need for individuals with superior moral qualities (greater *hpoun*) to sacrificially accept a role to lead the people, "to prevent society from lapsing into anarchy" (Koenig 1990:65). The ruler's role is thus not to serve the people *per se*, but to bring order from chaos by serving *dhamma* (Aung-Thwin 1985). It should be noted that this ancient concept was expressly repeated as recently as 1829 in *The Glass Palace Chronicle* (transl. Pe Maung Tin & Luce 1923), a royal chronicle commissioned by King Bagaiddaw to bolster his legitimacy after losing the First Anglo-Burmese War.

4.2.4 Seven Perceptions of Authority and Rulership within this Ideology

Based on the preceding analysis, the "important residues" of ancient Burmese political ideology which reverberate within contemporary politics, with implications for contemporary INGO development work could be summarised in terms of the following perceptions of authority and rulership.

A. Perceptions by Rulers (those with authority)

#1—Legitimacy: Merit, Order and Control

*Kamma* provides a powerful moral authority to the social order. As the pinnacle of the social order, kings represent "the culmination of an incredible storehouse of merit" (Spiro 1982:139-140). In theory, Burmese kings had absolute power, something the most charismatic figures claimed to wield. Demonstrating that their *hpoun* was flourishing allowed a ruler to lead with "overwhelming reverence and awe", and the loyal following of the people (Spiro 1982:140). However, most were caught in a web of competing interests, with power limited by the need to manage rivals, the monkhood, enemies and the natural environment (Silverstein 1977; Steinberg 2006; Taylor 2009).

The legitimacy of rulers was thus determined by how much of this theoretically absolute control they could demonstrate, militarily, politically, economically and spiritually (Taylor 2009). For example, powerful kings had large militaries and an inclination towards pre-
emptive military action (Maung Maung Gyi 1983; Matthews 1998; Taylor 2009). In 1862 (not a time of war), King Mindon’s army was estimated at over 1% of the population, a proportion larger than today (Taylor 2009). Likewise, kings managed or removed rivals, unified factions and conquered states under loyalty to themselves, controlled business and trade, managed a 'redistributive' economy with royal monopolies in key industries, and demonstrated their authority over the monkhood (Aung-Thwin 1979; 1985:26-30; Lieberman 1980; Taylor 1987). One major difference between early modern Burma and European states was the Burmese prevention of the emergence of private wealth independent of royal favour, preventing development of a feudal system (Taylor 1987:27). Strong kings likewise periodically demonstrated their control over the sangha (monkhood) through 'purification' and reform, while remaining their chief patron (Aung-Thwin 1979, 1985; Lieberman 1980).

The importance contemporary Burmese rulers place on security, control and prosperity to build their legitimacy is significant.

#2—Moral Responsibility: Order, Reformation and Merit

Kammaraja legitimacy comes with moral responsibility. Merit and enlightenment must be used to establish political and moral order, and work for the welfare and salvation of the people. Given the belief that kingship arose to correct the failure of democratic rule, the responsibility of rulers is not to serve the people by providing freedom, law, order, peace, opportunity or prosperity, as much as to build an ordered state around themselves in which kammic authority flows from the top down, unity is maintained, morality is upheld, and state merit-making is undertaken. Likewise, under this traditional ideology royal patronage of religion is a nationally-important moral responsibility of rulers, matching the importance of providing order, security and prosperity. The religious patronage of the current and former rulers has already been noted, and their attempts to lead the people in moral reformation are clearly apparent.

#3—Nature of Authority: Personalised, Centralised and Hierarchical

Power within this traditional ideology is finite and personalised (Steinberg 2006:37-38), in contrast to modern Western theory in which power is considered infinitely expandable.
and most effective when delegated or shared (e.g. Kouzes & Posner 1995). It is common in traditional societies for power to be seen in zero-sum terms as a "limited good". In Burma, this stems from the belief that the legitimacy for rulership derives from finite, personal hpoun. As a result, loyalty rightly belongs to the individual, not the institution, and only responsibility, not authority, can be delegated; delegation of authority is both illogical and destructive without conditions that retain ultimate control (Steinberg 2010b). This is the basis of Burmese patron-client hierarchy and entourage systems. Delegating power could be perceived as a dereliction of duty, and loyalty is more important than competence. Information, an expression of power, likewise cannot be shared without control being maintained (Steinberg 2010b). Within this worldview there is a logic to concentrating power, property and rights to the kammaraja with the hpoun to use them efficiently. While private ownership of property was recognised in ancient Burma, ultimate ownership by the king meant even free subjects could be required to provide either labour or property to any royal project (Aung-Thwin 1985). Contemporary labour and property rights violations are largely a continuation of such traditional practice.

B. Perceptions by the Ruled (those under authority)

#4—Responsibility When Strong: Comply

Unsurprisingly, many successful Burmese kings were not popular during their reign. Proverbs compared kings with natural calamities: something to avoid whenever possible, and as an evil to be endured (Koenig 1990; Silverstein 1977). On the other hand, the central role the ruler plays in creating merit-based wellbeing makes compliance a moral good: "a quasi-religious duty" (Silverstein 1996:213). In line with Buddhist teaching that the individual is responsible for their own fate, the average peasant "did not expect the state to do anything to improve his life, [showing] stoic acceptance of misfortune and the government's excessive demands and victimisation" (Silverstein 1977:10). As a result, the response when kings were strong was to try to avoid interaction with their representatives wherever possible (Than Tun 1983), and comply whenever they did have contact.
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#5 Responsibility When Weak: Challenge

Coercion, always inherent in the exercise of secular authority, diminishes merit, thus Burmese kings engaged extensively in merit-making activities to counteract the negative impact of the use of force (Koenig 1990). However, overly authoritarian rule could rapidly diminish hpoun, legitimising revolt. Whenever the kingdom appeared weak or in disunity, whenever the response to a significant natural disaster was inadequate, and in times of transition, rivals almost invariably rebelled (Aung-Thwin 1985). Revolt and regicide were particularly common in Burmese history, and revolts led by formerly loyal followers were easily justified. Overthrow of a monarch immediately transferred their legitimacy to the usurper. The revolts after British annexation of both Lower and Upper Burma, and the civil war immediately following the assassination of Aung San, both fit this model, and partly explains the hesitant response to offers of assistance following Cyclone Nargis.

C. Perceptions about Competing Power

#6 Response to Internal Rivals

In this political landscape, it was important for kings to end lesser rivalries by uniting them to each other and the throne. Strong kings thus placed a major emphasis on establishing unity between factions, and on attempting to create a homogenous population from culturally varied conquered communities (Taylor 1987). Permitting the continued existence of rival political power shows weakness, whether that is a rival leader or institution (Steinberg 2006; Silverstein 1977). As leaders earn legitimacy by winning pledges of loyalty from rivals or eliminating them, princes and possible heirs were closely watched while nobles were prevented from emerging as a class with independent rights. Writing prior to the 1962 coup, Pye noted that,

Although not atypical of traditional systems, the violence and cruelty of the Burmese kings is legendary ... There are few cultures that attach greater importance to power as a value than the Burmese. (Pye 1962:67,146)
#7—Response to Competing External Powers: Non-Dependence

Since eighteenth century British trade and diplomatic contact, Burmese rulers have been labelled isolationist, intransigent and xenophobic (e.g. Donnison 1970:55; Hall 1956). The response of many Burmese kings to contact with external powers was to belittle envoys, delay them for considerable periods, engage in grandiose ceremony, and take uncompromising, belligerent positions (e.g. Donnison 1970; Harvey 1925). Burmese monarchs were particularly sensitive to being belittled by envoys themselves, for example by being sent representatives of trading companies or governors rather than direct monarch-to-monarch contact. Accepting such lower-ranked envoys willingly would have diminished their legitimacy. "Isolation and a desire to find solutions to local problems from within the Burmese tradition" are one of the more significant continuing features of Burmese politics (Silverstein 1977:4).

Labels of isolationism and xenophobia would seem, however, a slight overstatement. Rulers were more concerned about being non-dependent upon external powers. A more appropriate term would be autarky, economic (and political) self-sufficiency (Taylor 2001b). Burma's consistent efforts at political neutrality and non-alignment, both before but particularly after colonialism, stand out. Ne Win's isolationism was as much a practical response to the superpower rivalry in the region as anything else. Nonetheless, dependency on external powers, economically or politically, would undermine any claim to kammarażja legitimacy, contributing to such a response.

4.2.5 Impact on Development Programming

Residues of these ancient political values reverberate within contemporary Burmese politics. While they are most readily observable in the actions of the various juntas, they are also often evident throughout the contemporary social structure, including opposition groups, local officials, ethnic minority leaders, civil society, business, even academic intuitions, religious institutions and families (Steinberg 2010b). The persistence of traditional values has implications for international development, and suggests some approaches are more likely to be resisted while others may gain ready acceptance.
For example, traditionally the creation of alternative centres of power has delegitimised the state. Advocacy and capacity building towards modern state institutions like an independent judiciary, democratic opposition, free press, civil society, trade unions, property rights, and even a middle or business class with independent security in private wealth, all challenge traditional ideas regarding the nature of power and means to retain rulership. To the extent these ideas continue to motivate the political elite, these ideas will struggle to gain traction until there has been a significant shift in mindset. At the same time, though, these values do suggest that even senior regime officials may not be solely motivated by rent-seeking and personal power, but may have an intrinsic political and personal motivation towards providing welfare, poverty alleviation and development to their people, provided higher-order concerns about order and security are not threatened. This may imply the possibility of success for a well thought-through constructive engagement strategy, even if traditional zero-sum perceptions of power continue to feature within the ruling elite’s ideology.

Finally, these perceptions have major implications for community-level participation and empowerment. On the one hand, if villagers do not expect assistance from their rulers, assume they must own the responsibility for their own futures, and have had minimal contact with the international development industry, dependency is less likely to be an immediate issue. On the other hand, a long history of compliance in a highly hierarchical social structure, where their religion has taught them not to question authority, may raise significant challenges to achieving participation, equity and empowerment. These ideas will be picked up again in later chapters discussing the fieldwork research results.

4.3 Second Narrative: Interaction with the West and the Colonial Experience

Traditional ideology alone, however, does not fully explain the behaviour of Myanmar’s post-independence military rulers and the persistence of authoritarian rule. Myanmar’s current condition is the culmination of a number of interconnected pathways (Taylor 2005), another of which is the Burmese experience of colonialism and the longer history of interaction with the West. The pre-eminence of the military, for example, has much to do with the British use of warfare as the means of state-building (Callahan 2004). This is another major historical narrative shaping the contemporary context.
4.3.1 Early Impressions: Pre-Colonial Interaction with the West

For many Myanmar elite, the history of interaction with the West has been predominantly negative. The first recorded European visitor to Burma was a Venetian merchant in 1435, and most Europeans who arrived over the following two centuries were Portuguese merchants, missionaries or adventurers (Donnison 1970). A considerable number of these adventurers served in the armed forces of Arakan, Pegu and Siam, against the Burman kings, the Burmans themselves being much slower in incorporating mercenaries into their armies.

In 1600 the Portuguese adventurer Filipe de Brito set up a trade monopoly at Syriam, across the river from modern Yangon. Having served as a mercenary with the Arakanese, he now converted rebel Mon groups to Catholicism and set up his own kingdom. Using ships to control sea trade and levy import duties, he raided Buddhist pagodas for precious stones and gold, accumulating massive wealth before the Burmese eventually defeated him at a cost of 30,000 lives. In a gesture of goodwill, survivors (both Mon and Portuguese), were spared and settled up-country in their own villages (Donnison 1970; Hall 1956; Harvey 1925; Maung Htin Aung 1967).

This experience left deep suspicion of Europeans in the minds of the Burmese, and Donnison (1970) argues that its impact on subsequent history should not be underestimated. Burman interest in trade was dampened such that when silting in the Pegu River and peace with Siam suggested relocating the capital, the Burmans moved their capital 600km inland in 1635 (Hall 1956). As the Dutch, French then English arrived intermittently over the following years to open trading posts and shipyards, Burmese rulers, variously showed little interest, obstructed their activities, or attempted to create their own trade monopolies.

It is not without significance that Siam, which, when forced in the next century to evacuate its capital built one at a seaport rather than further inland, managed to survive as an independent state, while Burma succumbed to foreign conquest. The chief ingredient in the failure of the Burmese kingdom was supplied not by 'Western Imperialism', but by the intransigence and xenophobia which radiated from the Court of Ava. (Hall 1956:66)
In 1742, during the bitter rivalry between the Mon and Burmans that eventually brought down the Second Burmese Empire, Burman forces sacked the foreign settlements amongst the Mon at Syriam (Hall 1956). This incident similarly coloured European perceptions of the Burmese. Just a decade later the incident retold at the beginning of this chapter occurred, in which the British invaded Negrais to pre-empt a perceived French incursion and Alaungpaya wrote that now-famous gold letter to King George II, offering recognition in exchange for trade and arms (Hall 1956). The British lack of reply followed by a withdrawal was seen to confirm Burman suspicions, culminating in another massacre of foreigners in 1759, this time of the British at Negrais. Burman-Western relations just never seemed to get off on the right foot. The French tried one more time, obtaining permission for a shipyard in Rangoon, however their support for a failed Mon rebellion in 1768 led to a further massacre. The Burmans became convinced that both the French and English were arming and supporting rebels to overthrow their rule.

There can be little doubt that these incidents coloured views on both sides, resulting in deep distrust and strengthening the autarkic, isolationist and non-dependence tendencies in Burmese polity, distrust which has not been overcome to this day. By the time the British sent their first genuinely political (not commercial) envoy, Captain Symes, on a diplomatic mission in 1795, "The British encountered little but hostility and deliberately imposed humiliation" (Donnison 1970:58; also Harvey 1925). The Burmese felt insulted at being sent envoys from British viceroys rather than the king, given Burmese governors had very little real power (Harvey 1925). For their part, British delegations were accompanied by escorts designed to intimidate, and from 1799 pressed for a treaty of "subsidiary alliance" (Hall 1956:99-100), something impossible for Burmese kings to concede without losing substantial political legitimacy.

4.3.2 Three Anglo-Burmese Wars

The inability of both sides to find grounds for trust and to negotiate effectively exploded into three Anglo-Burmese wars, culminating in full annexation of Burma. The first war (1824-1826) has been called the "worst-managed war in British military history" (Hall 1956:103-105). Despite the British eventual victory, forty-five percent of the 40,000 British troops, including most of the Europeans, died when troops were cut-off from supplies.
While Arakan and Tenasserim were lost, the war gave hope to the Burmese that the British lacked real military might.

A blockade of Rangoon less than thirty years later triggered a second war (1852-1853). The British annexed Lower Burma quickly and decisively, leaving the Burmese in shock (Hall 1956). When the British did not withdraw after a brief show of force, as anticipated, the Burmese feared a full takeover. The annexed territory responded with a grass-roots rebellion that required 10,000 additional troops three years to pacify. The British were surprised that even after defeat the Burmese were neither submissive nor inclined to conduct trade negotiations. Envoys "had to encounter all the arts of subterfuge, evasion and studied rudeness, with which earlier envoys had had to contend" (Hall 1956:115). A tense, three-decade standoff resulted, culminating in a third war (1885-1886).

It has been argued that the decision to invade Upper Burma was ultimately dictated by powerful British capitalists eager to expand their personal financial interests, the trigger being a trade dispute over teak logged in Burmese territory (Webster 2000). Defeating the main Burmese army in just months, the British anticipated they would be welcomed as liberators from the despotic King Thibaw. Having boasted that they could take Mandalay with as few as 500 men, they were unprepared for the resulting rebellion that required an additional 40,500 troops five years to quell (Hall 1956; Taylor 2009).

The brutal pacification of this popular rebellion contributed seriously to the Burmese experience of colonialism. Geary, a journalist with the Bombay Gazette, arrived in Mandalay in less than a month after the initial victory to report on the conquest. He found the Burmese "stunned and terror-stricken" at the British "subjection by terror" (Geary 1886:236). The rice crop had failed in 1884 and a severe food crisis erupted as the British invasion interrupted the poor 1885 harvests. In the confusion as the British swept away the old royal administration, villages sent out men to scavenge food and most armed themselves. Colonial literature speaks of dacoits, armed gangs of robbers roaming the country, but today many scholars also see a rapidly organised grass-roots rebellion targeted against the British (e.g. Maung Htin Aung & Aung-Thwin 2008). Foreshadowing the serious ethnic politics of today, ethnic Karen troops recruited in Lower Burma were used in this suppression, as they had been guides for the British Army in the two.
preceding wars, and they were even described as "positively enthusiastic" contributors (Smith 1999:45).

Geary (1886:248) concluded that the main cause of the quick spread of what he called a resistance movement after the third war was the "promiscuous shooting of so-called dacoits" by British forces.

Dacoits are shot without trial ... [officers] regard every armed Burmese as a dacoit, and the villagers found near the scene of a raid are in considerable peril. ... They will be shot as dacoits if they have arms; if they have none, they will be robbed and possibly murdered by the dacoits. (Geary 1896:45)

A key rationale for the war had been the alleged brutality of King Thibaw. Before the invasion, given the food crisis, armed robbers caught by Thibaw were imprisoned briefly, tattooed as a warning, then sent them home for a second chance (Geary 1886). Many expressed horror at the British cruelty in direct contrast:

British military officers acted as both judge and jury ... British troops carried out mass executions and committed other atrocities. As the guerrillas fought on, the British adopted a “strategic-hamlet” strategy: villages were burned, and families who had supplied villages with their headmen were uprooted from their homes and sent away to Lower Burma. (Maung Htin Aung & Aung-Thwin 2008)

Such an account echoes Western outrages over the infamous Four Cuts Strategy of Ne Win and subsequent army commanders against ethnic insurgents—but this action was first perpetrated by the British against Burmese communities seeking food and defending their homeland against foreign invasion.

4.3.3 The Colonial Experience

The subsequent Burmese experience of colonialism differed substantially from that of the rest of British India. Central to Burma’s particularly negative experience were direct rule rather than rule through local hierarchies, integration of Burma into British India despite little shared culture or history, and importation of large numbers of Indians for the administration and economic development of Burma. Many Burmese view direct rule as the result of Burmese non-acquiescence to Britain’s commercial and strategic desires.
(Thant Myint-U 2001). Because of their harshness and lack of consideration of Burmese culture, history and identity, "The Burmese regarded British government as an even greater evil than Burmese monarchy had been, with most of its vices but few of its virtues" (Taylor 2009:117). Distrust of the West by many political elite today is in part a continuation of such nationalistic sentiment.

To be fair, not all Burmese resented the British presence, as illustrated for example by the large number who migrated to Lower Burma between the second and third wars. The city of Pegu, for example, doubled in size with economic migrants from Upper Burma during the 10 years 1852-1862 (Donnison 1970). Nonetheless, twenty-five years after the pacification there was both a serious growth in violent crime and the emergence of a nationalist resistance movement, "as a new generation who did not remember the harshness of annexation" grew up, now deprived economically and of self-respect (Donnison 1970:91-92).

**Indian Migration and Domination**

Burma was administered as a province of British India until 1937, when it became an independent colony. Until then, seeing the Burmese as unmotivated workers the colonial administration heavily promoted Indian migration, subsidising travel costs (Taylor 2009). Rangoon soon had the world's highest rate of migration, even outstripping New York (Charney 2009). By 1921 some 55% of Rangoon was Indian (Charney 2009), with 480,000 new Indian migrants arriving in 1977 alone (Hall 1956). Indians had a disproportionate influence in government and trade, were the largest landowners in Lower Burma, provided most of the finance for agricultural development, and had a virtual monopoly in key areas of the civil service (Donnison 1970; Taylor 2009). Most stayed only 2-4 years, taking their earnings with them when they returned home (Taylor 2009). By the time the first steps were being taken towards self-rule in the 1920s and 1930s, the majority of Burmese in Lower Burma were landless labourers occupying the lowest rung of the social hierarchy in their own country (Hall 1956). The economy was built on migrant workers who lacked social bonding to Burma, did not intend on settling in the country, and felt no motivation for self-sacrifice for the good of the community (Taylor 2009).
The stark contrasts between the prosperity of the foreigners (including Asian migrants) in Rangoon and the rural Burmese masses lent weight to the impression that any prosperity which the British brought was not for the benefit of the Burmese. (Charney 2009:20).

Imported Indian labour drove Burman workers away, and bypassed the need for the British and Burmans to learn to work together (Furnivall 1991 [1939]). It "erected a barrier between Burmans and the modern world that has never been broken down" (Taylor 1995:52 quoting Furnivall 1941:46). Few British spoke more than marketplace Burmese (Donnison 1970). Highlighting Burmese marginalisation, Europeans wanting to work in the Indian Civil Service in Burma had to pass exams in Hindustani, not Burmese (Charney 2009). The British colonial presence in Burma was thus "much more superficial, at least as far as political culture is concerned" than that of the rest of the sub-continent (Perry 2007:21). The Burmese, an ethnic minority in the major cities of their own country, gained little or none of the benefits of the booming economy (Donnison 1970; Charney 2009).

Ethnic Policies

The British classified the ethnic Burman majority as a 'martial race', a threat to order and stability, concluding prior to the third war that the ethnic minorities needed protection (Thant Myint-U 2001; Taylor 2005). They thus created two Burmas: 'Ministerial Burma', covering lowland areas dominated by the Burman majority, was placed under direct rule and subject to British legal, administrative and educational oversight; while 'Frontier Areas' in mountainous areas populated by ethnic minorities were left under the control of traditional rulers (Smith 1994). Smith (1999) argues that most of the ethnic minorities incorporated into the Frontier areas of Burma had previously been little affected by pre-colonial governments on the central plains of Burma. Now thrust together, both sides had grievances against the other over this arrangement. While the British quickly developed agriculture and industry in Ministerial Burma, the Frontier Areas, Karen, Kachin and Chin minorities were actively recruited into the army and police to control Ministerial Burma, alongside Indian forces. Burmans were not admitted until WWI (Smith 1994; Taylor 2005)—and even by 1940 just 12% of the army were Burman (despite constituting 2/3 of the population), while Karen, Chin and Kachin (10% of the population) made up over 75% of the army (Steinberg 1982). Making things worse, many Karen, Kachin and Chin
converted to Christianity, increasing Burman antagonism towards both the British and the minorities who closely aligned with them. As Smith expresses it, whatever shared culture, history and unity did exist between ethnic groups in Burma was "shattered" by British policies (1999:39).

Some scholars argue that race was not a significant issue in Burma prior to colonialism; that wars before that time were about political and personal power politics rather than racially motivated (e.g. Houtman 1999; Steinberg 2006). The Burmese regime argue that all ethnic groups were peacefully united prior to colonialism, even sharing a common ancestry, and that the British are responsible for creating all of the current ethnic tension (Minye Kaungbon 1994; Rozenberg 2009). This is clearly an overstatement, although, "The colonial authorities' insistence upon racial distinctiveness gave ethnicity a greater centrality in political thought than it had previously had" (Taylor 2009:150). Ethnic divisions today "have become the major political factor facing the society" (Steinberg 2006:25), and a major issue for INGO equity and empowerment initiatives.

Colonial Administration

British administration had negative implications on local representation and empowerment. For example, they replaced locally appointed township headmen, myothugyi, whose role had included representing the interests of the township, with salaried officials merely acting as instruments through which central government policy was implemented (Taylor 2009; Donnison 1970; Furnivall 1991 [1939]). Furnivall, a public official who arrived in Burma around the turn of the twentieth century, remarked that the object of the colonial administration was not for the good of the people, but increased production for the British (Furnivall 1991 [1939]). The need for increased coercion to rule, demonstrate by the rapid rise in the need for police and prisons, has long been linked to this loss of local voice (Taylor 2009; Furnivall 1991 [1939]). The British administration was, incomparably more authoritative and effective than any other that Burma has ever known ... It was a highly centralized and paternalistic system, not at all unlike that imposed by the Burmese kings—except that it was vastly more effective (and to that extent more burdensome) and of course, that it was imposed by foreigners.  

(Donnison 1970:77,83)
Rather than reconstructing Burmese political values in the more liberal and modern ideas prevalent in Europe during that time, the colonial administration actually reinforced traditional ideas about political power being legitimised through centralised control, while demonstrating a far more efficient means to exert that control down to the village level (Steinberg 2006). Despite local representation being reintroduced shortly before independence, the very short and limited experience of democracy under colonialism give little time for new values to take root. For most of the colonial period, the British ruled by decree and maintained control by retaining the right to arbitrarily suspend the law and declare a state of exception (Silverstein 1977). They maintained control, as Duffield expresses it, "through holding self-reliant populations on the threshold of emergency" and keeping them independent of the state in terms of their welfare and social survival (Duffield 2008:8). It could be argued that subsequent Burmese military regimes have largely perpetuated patterns modelled by the British.

The YMBA, Nationalism & the Hsaya San Rebellion

Burmese nationalism and opposition to British rule simmered continually. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was formed in 1906 amongst newly educated young urban Burmese to promote Buddhism and Burmese culture. By 1917, less than thirty years after the end of the third war, they had taken on the function of a political party advocating self-rule, leading mass strikes and street protests in 1920, which enlisted large numbers of monks in scenes reminiscent of the mass demonstrations of 1988 and 2007. Maung Maung Gyi’s (1983) opinion is that, had Burma been given independence at this point in time, a complete reversion to monarchical rule would not have been unlikely.

In their struggle for independence, the nationalists attracted people to their cause by fanning into folklore stories of the splendour and order under Burman Buddhist monarchs (Maung Maung Gyi 1983). When an earthquake nearly destroyed Pegu in 1930, the astrologer-monk, Hsaya San, became convinced that this disaster reflected the diminished hpoun of the British, and hence was an omen of the end of colonial rule. Raising a following amongst poor villagers, Hsaya San, was declared king and launched a 2-year rebellion. One cause of this rebellion was the severe crash in rice prices during the Great Depression; another was simmering anti-British sentiment. The untrained rebels had very
few weapons, but the British response was harsh. By 1932 some 10,000 had been killed and 9,000 captured, with mass executions and burning of villages. Photos of decapitated heads were posted at police stations across the country as a deterrent, inadvertently evoking further nationalist sentiment. The British marvelled at their superstition without recognising the alienation and depth of feeling the peasants had against foreign rule (Maung Htin Aung 1967; Charney 2009).

4.3.4 Residues in the Contemporary Context

This history of interaction with the West is therefore another major historical narrative shaping the contemporary political context. While colonialism did bring benefits, such as a modern education and health system, these experiences also underscored the fierce Burmese priority on independence from foreign domination and exploitation. For many, they also demonstrated the effectiveness of a modern military in ensuring the security and control which traditional ideology called for, together with the means to exercise direct control over the entire state. Without doubt, they also fanned ethnic differences into one of the largest issues facing the country. Despite the passage of time, these feelings all still resonate strongly in contemporary polity, and are of direct relevance to the sensitivity INGOs need to display in their interaction with local stakeholders.

4.4 Third Narrative: Independence, Post-Colonialism and Military Rule

Just as pre-colonial political ideology and the colonial experience are narratives continuing to inform contemporary politics, the more recent history of WWII, Independence and the crises that followed form a third major narrative, with many continuities impacting both contemporary politics and the economy.

4.4.1 Nationalism, War and the BIA

The rallying cry of the Burmese during the Indo-Burmese riots of 1930 was "Do Bama", literally, "We Burmese" or "Our Burma". The racial aspiration unleashed by the ensuing movement led to mass strikes, eventuating in separation from India and limited self-rule.
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The Thakin (master) Party, formed by university students and recent graduates to contest the 1937 elections, was strongly nationalist, demanding total economic and political freedom from Indian and British dominance. Boycotting the 1937 elections calling the new constitution a sham, they quickly grew to become a major political force. The Thakin described themselves as anti-imperialistic and democratic, adopting leftist ideas because of their anti-imperialism (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a; Taylor 1987). Many described them at that time as being authoritarian. For example, Donnison suggested they were:

fanatical idealists ... very socialist ... hostile to all that could be considered foreign ... [who] would accept nothing less than complete independence for Burma and [were] perfectly prepared to use violence to attain this end. (Donnison 1970:118)

The Thakin Party were proscribed in 1941 because of their hostility to the government (Donnison 1970). Mass arrests followed when the Thakin and some other politicians began forming private armies (Maung Htin Aung 1967). In the midst of this unrest, and as a demonstration of just how strong the anti-colonial sentiment was, the Thirty Comrades were smuggled out of Burma for military training in Japan. Amongst these were not only Aung San, but also future democratic-era Prime Minister U Nu and the military strongman Senior General Ne Win. The intention was to use the Japanese as a means to liberate Burma from the British, believing a Japanese invasion would be countered at the border by the British, allowing an uprising by the Burmese to secure an independent Burma under the Japanese domain (Naw 2001).

The Thirty Comrades followed the Japanese forces into Burma in 1942, recruiting 50,000 men into the Burma Independence Army (BIA) in their two months en route to Rangoon—almost as many troops as the Japanese had in their entire invasion force (Charney 2009). One reason the British were so quickly defeated in Burma was the lack of an army with incentive to defend the country.

The Burmese army was thus birthed with political motivations, commencing with driving the British out of Burma but extending well beyond this in both political and economic spheres.

Unlike the Indian Army from which it sprang, Burma’s army had no tradition of political neutrality or detachment. It saw its role as defender of national integrity in political as well as military terms. (Perry 2007:22)
As Taylor notes, going into the war and then at Independence,

Very few expected to return to monarchy, but many sought to guide the state along familiar paths, and looked forward (nostalgically and inaccurately) to a new version of the alleged order of the pre-colonial state. (Taylor 2009:236)

Preeminent amongst these familiar paths, the army felt it necessary to be involved in politics "in order to achieve the officer corps' notions of a correct social and political order" (Taylor 2009:236).

The BIA emerged after Independence as the premier national institution (Haacke 2006; Callahan 2004), and was almost exclusively Burman. With most ethnic minorities excluded from its ranks, and with a majority of the former colonial soldiers and remaining civil servants coming from ethnic minorities, the BIA was birthed steeped in ethnic tension (Taylor 2009). Progress in ethnic relations was shattered when the BIA fought with the Japanese against minority regiments who remained loyal to the British (Smith 1994). Tens of thousands died in bloody clashes and retaliatory killings that seriously inflamed tensions. The Karen, in particular, maintained contact with the British throughout the war and regarded the Thakin as enemies (Naw 2001). Ethnic minority leaders have frequently said these war massacres led to their resolve to take up arms after independence if their political demands were not met.

Much of the ethnic hostility that erupted in Burma at independence can thus be attributed to the disparity in colonial treatment, exacerbated by the events of the war. The level of trust Aung San was able to generate amongst the minorities in the lead-up to Independence shows this might have been able to be overcome, had the post-Independence government treated ethnic minorities as equals and built a truly plural or federal state, as promised. Nonetheless, the quick recourse to violence by so many ethnic groups only highlights the depth of fear and distrust which the new government inherited, making rapprochement highly problematic.

The Thakin soon found the Japanese worse than the British, treating Burma as an occupied enemy territory and imposing "a reign of terror" (Maung Htin Aung 1967:301). Aung San made contact with the British and set up an underground movement, arranging to mutiny and help liberate Burma from the Japanese on condition of complete independence from Britain. Connecting with the Thakin like this left ethnic minorities still
loyal to the British feeling betrayed, and as Donnison (1970) observes, effectively sidelined the moderates opposing the autocratic and radical tendencies of the younger nationalists, instead setting these more radical Thakin up as national heroes.

To welcome with open arms the army which had fought against the British on the side of the Japanese for just so long as it had suited them, all of whose members were technically guilty of treason, was a poor way in which to reward and put heart into those Burmans who had remained loyal to the British connection or who, without necessarily wanting the continuance of this connection, nevertheless were opposed to the communistic ideas and dictatorial attitudes of the Thakin.

(Donnison 1970:127)

While Aung San himself grew into a true statesman during the Independence negotiations, his assassination with seven cabinet members just six months before Independence reignited ethnic fears, and allowed the more radical authoritarian, socialist and ethno-nationalist views to resurface amongst many of the remaining, competing Thakin. Likewise, Japanese administration of Karenni and parts of Shan States independent of the rest of Burma during WWII fuelled the aspirations of these ethnic groups for autonomy, and set the stage for multiple political and ethnic rebellions.

4.4.2 Chaos at Independence

Civil war was an almost natural consequence of ethnic minority fears and the rivalries between the surviving Thakin. Aung San had managed to overcome enough ethnic tension to engineer a fragile trust with many minority leaders. This concord was badly damaged by his assassination, which also created a leadership vacuum. Fuelled by traditional ideas of personalised power, those elite unwilling to accept their exclusion from power plunged the country into a plethora of disunified armed rebellions remarkably similar to many earlier periods of political contestation (Taylor 1987, 2009). The Red Flag (hard line) communists rebelled before Independence, and within three months of Independence the well-organised Communist Party of Burma launched an all-out offensive (Smith 1999). Within a year at least ten other rebel groups, including the Karen, Mon, Karenni, Pai and Arakanese, followed suit (ICG 2003), making the task of political integration at independence formidable indeed.
During the democratic era, the *tatmadaw*, the Burmese army, slowly regained control of the country under the firm leadership of General Ne Win. In the process the army became further entrenched as the preeminent national institution. Chin and Kachin units initially sided with the Burma Army, but also later rebelled. Ethnic animosity and rebellion was further heightened by Ne Win's 1962 coup, prompted in part by Shan efforts to draw up a more federal constitution, and his subsequent ruthless suppression of rebel groups, forcibly relocating tens of thousands in order to cut-off food, funds, intelligence and recruits (ICG 2003).

Significant to contemporary international relations, most of the leaders and ethnic minorities vying for power were able to find foreign allies, with the Chinese backing the Community Party of Burma (CPB), Islamic mujahedeen backing groups in Arakan, and the US, Britain and Thailand supporting anti-communist ethnic minorities such as the Karen (Thant Myint-U 2009a; Callahan 2004; Selth 2002). The powerful CPB and Chinese nationalist KMT armies inside Burma both offered arms and training. By the 1970s two major alliances had emerged, another proxy frontline in the Cold War: the CPB and allied groups controlled nearly the entire Chinese border, while the National Democratic Front (NDF) maintained a pro-West/anti-communist policy along the Thai border, and were supported by the US as a buffer against the perceived communist threat (Kramer 2009).

This foreign support inflamed Burman fears of foreign intervention and created a siege mentality whereby foreign powers of all persuasion appeared intent on exerting their political will over the struggling Burmese state, and the army was the only force capable of ensuring the survival of the Burmese state. Callahan argues that the sort of institutional reforms towards more inclusionary politics which most other postcolonial states were able to achieve were swept off the agenda,

> when 'the Cold War threatened to swallow Burma'—in particular, when the United States began training Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers in Burmese territory [without Burmese approval] for their eventual counterattack (Callahan 2004:5)

A large part of Ne Win's success in regaining control over most of the country was the priority given to building the size, professionalism and resourcing of the military (Taylor 2009), a priority they have felt a need to maintain in the face of perceived internal and external threats. Thus the early rejection of Western alliances based on the colonial
experience was reinforced over time by Western support for ethnic insurgents, and this reaction has been further accentuated since 1988 by the Western push for regime change.

4.4.3 Economic Collapse

One commonly expressed view is that at the time of independence from Britain in 1948, Burma was a prosperous country with every reason to expect a bright future. Prominent Modernisation scholar, Pye, for example, argued that:

In terms of objective considerations, it would be difficult to find any serious reasons for Burma’s not being able to develop its economy rapidly ... there are so few objective handicaps to economic development in Burma ... In a ranking based on eleven indices of economic development Burmese stood as the 26th out of 46 countries ... Burma belongs to a middle category of countries in most aspects. (Pye 1962:60)

It is beyond dispute that many policies and practices of military governments since 1962 have been disastrous, but it would be wrong to simply blame the subsequent economic collapse on 'The Burmese Way to Socialism' or military rule, as many do (e.g. Clark 1999). Some 400,000 British and Indians left Burma as the Japanese WWII invasion became imminent, most never to return (Taylor 1987). The resulting drain of capital plus economic and administrative expertise set Burma up for difficulties even before the war, despite Britain forgiving all financial debt at Independence. The massive infrastructure damage of the war only compounded the problem, with Burma possibly the most war-damaged country in Asia (Charney 2009; Taylor 1987).

The Japanese occupation of Burma wrecked the country’s economic system. Burma suffered more from the war than any other Asiatic country save possibly Japan herself. Many of her towns were reduced to ashes ... works, mines equipment and river transport were destroyed ... air-raids kept her railways out of action. The Japanese systematically looted the country. (Hall 1956:172)

Even before the war, colonial prosperity "lay only in the national statistics" (Taylor 1995:49), and little wealth was in Burmese hands. The civil war added to WWII damage, eroded tax revenue and consumed a great deal of the funds required for reconstruction and development (Donnison 1970). "Burma was devastated as the armies of two colonial powers trampled across its soil" (Smith 1999:60). The democratic, civilian government’s decision in 1951 to make education free for all was admirable, but served to further
impoverish the state. Thus, while socialist policies, nationalisation, corruption and incompetence all subsequently seriously compounded the situation, the idea that at Independence Burma had every reason to expect economic prosperity, and therefore by implication that the policies and practices of the military government are primarily to blame for today's economic miseries, is a myth (Thant Myint-U 2007).

4.4.4 Military Rule and Bankruptcy

Ne Win justified his 1962 coup as being to maintain national unity, prevent the breakup of the union along ethnic lines, and to protect state sovereignty against outside control, all the while defending Buddhism (Steinberg 2001). Breakup of the ruling coalition in 1958 led to heated parliamentary debate that appeared stuck in a quagmire. Negotiations to resolve the ethnic conflicts were being contemplated, without pre-conditions ruling out secession. Rather than see this as an opportunity for democracy, with the possibility of federalism and a loyal democratic opposition emerging, Ne Win interpreted this as chaos that had to be brought under control (Maung Maung Gyi 1983).

Overnight Burma slid back to the rule pattern of the days of the Burmese monarchs ... the general public is as submissive as ever to whoever is in power. ... The military elite led the Burmese masses back into their old familiar ground of pre-democratic lifestyle and values ... Despite its facade of constitutional apparatus and formal rules, Burma is ruled by Ne Win in the role of absolute monarch.

(Maung Maung Gyi 1983:125,192,199,225)

The subsequent isolationism, autarky, socialism, military-bureaucratic rule and zero-sum personal politics all resonate with pre-colonial ideology and post-colonial sensitivities. These traits have been subsequently reinforced by the challenge of state-building in the face of numerous internal and external threats.

Twenty-six years later repression, economic mismanagement and failed socialist policies brought Ne Win's rule to an end. Economic crisis triggered mass demonstrations, which dislodged him from power. Stagnant agricultural production, overvalued currency, uncompetitive public companies, high inflation, booming black-market and massive debt led to the virtual bankruptcy of the state (Taylor 1995; Steinberg 2001). Foreign reserves are estimated to have fallen to just US$10 million in 1987-88 (Rüland 2001), in what
Steinberg (2001:42) declares the "nadir of economic decay". The government lobbied the UN for Least Developed Country (LDC) status, to gain debt relief and lower interest rates, and has remained on the list ever since.

Under pressure, General Ne Win resigned in mid-1988, recommending liberal economic reform and a referendum on multi-party democracy. His replacement, Sein Lwin, was implicated in several earlier crackdowns, and only lasted 17 days. Mass demonstrations rapidly escalated until the infamous 8.8.88 massacre, in which up to 3,000 demonstrators were killed. Sein Lwin was replaced by Dr Maung Maung, who agreed to economic reform and multiparty elections with a strictly neutral military. However, despite announcing such sweeping reform and being extremely restrained towards demonstrators, Dr Maung Maung was perceived to be too close to Ne Win; mass demonstrations continued until the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Saw Maung, assumed power and formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Charney 2009).

In their own words, SLORC ostensibly stepped in to save the country from chaos, disintegration, and foreign subjugation:

At a time when the mother land Union was on the brink of being burnt down to ashes by hellfires in the 1988 disturbances, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Tatmadaw) saved it in the nick of time. It then endeavoured to avert the terrible fate in store for the nation and build it up into a mountain of gold. (Skidmore 2004:79)

SLORC quickly pledged to liberalise the economy, open international trade and turn power over to a multi-party democratic parliament, embarking on a reform agenda "with dynamism and enthusiasm" (Taylor 2001:9). However, many saw them as too closely associated with the previous regime's failure and violent suppression of dissent, and international outrage continued. Together with SLORC's immense fear of foreign manipulation behind the hugely popular Aung San Suu Kyi, they quickly began feeling "surrounded, beleaguered and under siege" (Steinberg 2001:43). With old memories and fear provoked, attitudes hardened and Suu Kyi was arrested in 1989 as a risk to state security. When her National League for Democracy (NLD) unexpectedly won 392 of 485 seats in the 1990 elections, the SLORC regime quickly adopted the position that they could not relinquish power until a new constitution was instituted that could ensure continued unity and sovereignty (SLORC 1990). Instead of power transfer, the offices of the NLD were closed with mass arrests of members and supporters (Fink 2001; Oehlers 2004). Subsequent
demonstrations were met with force, leading to the impasse of the last two decades which will be examined in the next chapter.

4.5 Narratives in Perspective

The relevance of these three narratives in the contemporary socio-political context within which INGOs must operate can hardly be overstated. As previously noted, most development mistakes in fragile and conflict-affected states result from insufficiently detailed analysis of the socio-cultural, institutional, historical and political dynamics, and the assumption that democracy would of itself promote peace (World Bank 2006). This in-depth contextual history has illuminated many of the contemporary tensions, fears and sensitivities within which the ruling elite operate, and the reasons behind their belligerence towards the West, ethnic minorities and the democratic opposition.

These narratives suggest that some development approaches, such as many popular forms of advocacy or a strongly rights-based approach, particularly if led by agencies perceived to be Western, are likely to provoke strongly reactionary responses—reactions not entirely based out of self-preservation by authoritarian despots, as many outside advocates of political change in Myanmar imply. Indeed, these narratives suggest a measure of humility is called for by the international community, particularly by Western donors, INGOs and civil society, for our role in creating the disorder and destitution. These narratives likewise suggest that many political elite and government officials hold altruistic motivations around which constructive international engagement on poverty alleviation and development priorities may proceed.
Chapter FIVE: Myanmar Times

Contemporary Economic & Socio-Political Context

For the past 20 years Burma has been portrayed in the media as primarily a democracy issue: the military regime and its repression of the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi dominates what little coverage there is. It's a compelling story, and Aung San Suu Kyi has emerged as an iconic global figure. But it's also a story that's been frozen in time since the early 1990s - almost all the news about Burma is about this long standoff between her and the generals - and it's very one dimensional.

Than Mynt-U (2009a)

It was the middle of wet season, and we were caught in a heavy monsoonal downpour. I shuffled into the middle of the back seat of the taxi to try to stay dry as the heavy rain splashed in from both sides, through windows open a couple of inches to allow some air circulation and prevent the windows completely fogging up. Winding the windows up and turning on the fan would solve both problems, but fan and air conditioner did not work and there were no window winders in this 35 year old shell of a car, just as there were no floor covering or trim on one of the doors. I was damp from the rain, the airless humidity was stifling, and it was almost impossible to see through the windows. Stationary in the Yangon traffic as water flooded the road, I tried to engage the driver in conversation. I quickly pieced together his story despite his broken English and my very limited Burmese.

Htin (not his real name) graduated from Rangoon University with a Law degree eight years previously. However, as a devout Buddhist he quickly became deeply concerned about the level of corruption in the legal profession in his country, and could no longer rationalise such behaviour to himself. As he explained this to me, he pointed to a sticker on the dashboard which translated roughly as: avoid evil, keep your thoughts pure, and live an honest life. Htin explained that he had resolved not to practice law so long as cases were decided by bribery more often than rule of law. Instead, he turned to taxi driving. An orphan with no siblings, he was now 33 years old and married, with a two year old daughter. They live in a small, wooden, rented dwelling in Okkalapa district, near the airport. His wife had worked before the baby was born, but for the last two years Htin had
been supporting his family as the sole breadwinner. So I quizzed Htin about his income and expenses. He averaged US$30-35 a day in fares, he claimed, but has to pay US$10 a day to rent the car plus an average US$9 a day in fuel. He is also responsible for half of all maintenance costs on the taxi, meaning his family of 3 live on around US$10 per day. And this is for a taxi driver working in the economic capital of the country!

Moving again, slowly through the rain and traffic, Htin made a point of observing we were driving past "The Lady's" house. Not that it was my first time down University Avenue. But it was June 2009, and the nation was waiting impatiently for the verdict in Aung San Suu Kyi's trial. after the American, John Yettaw, foolishly swam the lake to her house. Crowds had filled the street, in front of this gate, every Sunday during her campaign two decades ago, waiting hours to be inspired by her words with truckloads of security forces standing by to intimidate or barricading off the street. Today it was wet and Suu Kyi was being housed in the prison complex. Just two armed soldiers guarded the gate. The political impasse has long held the nation captive.

My taxi driver’s reminder as we drove past took me back to my first trip to the country in 1992, when my wife and I visited to explore the possibility of commencing some sort of small projects in the country. That was during the height of the tensions over the military not handing over power to the National League for Democracy after their decisive win in the 1990 elections. Stepping out of the antiquated airport terminal into an unmarked, equally dilapidated ‘taxi’, the moment the door shut the driver had earnestly begun ensuring I was properly informed about the military regime and Aung San Suu Kyi. It was an interesting experience, hearing this activist’s passion as we drove past the many soldiers on the streets, with parks and streets barricaded off from the public and soldiers with guns in their hands and ammunition straps across their chests.

Much has changed over the past two decades, and while the tension is less intense and taxi drivers no longer volunteer such animated political commentary, there is as much hope as ever. While the political impasse continues to hold the nation captive and the nation remains almost as economically stagnant and internationally isolated as ever, the people still exude an air of expectation of a more promising future.
I think it would be fair to say that winds of change are clearly blowing through Burma. The extent of it is still unclear, but everyone who's gone there recognizes that there are changes.

Kurt Campbell (2011),
US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs

It appears increasingly clear that we are witnessing the stirring of significant change in Myanmar. It is now almost exactly a year since the November 2010 elections, which were widely criticised as being neither free nor fair (e.g. ICG 2011a; Farrelly 2010; Zarni 2011). However, a growing number of indications suggest that major political and economic reform may indeed be getting underway, despite it remaining a "military dominated ersatz democracy" (Holliday 2011a:10).

This chapter builds on the historical analysis of the last chapter, examining the contemporary political, economic and humanitarian setting to which INGOs contextualise their development activities. The historical narratives discussed in Chapter Four highlight political values, fears and strategic concerns which are echoed by many of the political elite, suggesting that for those who hold these values more strongly, reform will be incremental and take time to gain significant traction. The contemporary socio-political context is analysed in this chapter through analysis of the perspectives, values and strategic concerns of the four major competing actors: the armed forces, the democratic opposition, the ethnic minorities, and the international community. Despite difficulties of poor data, the economic context is then considered, followed by an exploration of the humanitarian situation and extent of poverty in the country. This chapter, therefore, offers vivid analysis of the contemporary political, economic and humanitarian context INGOs work within in Myanmar.

5.1 Winds of Change

The resignation of Senior General Than Shwe and dissolution of the SPDC in March 2011, making way for the inauguration of President Thein Sein and the convening of parliament, could be seen as no more than cosmetic change. General Thein Sein, was prime minister in the old regime, and simply removed his uniform to become president. This transition has
proven, however, to be a real change of personnel in effective control over the country and significant policy change does appear to be occurring as a result (ICG 2011b).

Thein Sein’s presidential inauguration speech called for sweeping political and economic reform, including things like national reconciliation, an end to corruption, a market-oriented economy, foreign investment, development of the health and education sectors, and work to alleviate poverty in cooperation with international and local organisations (NLM 2011b). Many feared this was mere rhetoric (e.g. Kinnock 2011; Zarni 2011).

Certainly, in the same address Thein Sein also declared that Myanmar needs to continue to build a strong, modern military to prevent bullying by other nations, and his oath to office involved pledging to uphold the Three Main National Causes of "non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of sovereignty", the mantra used by the former regime to justify the 1988 coup and the dominant role of the military over the past two decades (Minye Kaungbon 1994). These factors, together with the dominance of the military and regime-backed Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) in parliament, are troubling. Nonetheless continuity, especially at the rhetorical level, is to be expected, and there are a growing number of indications that Thein Sein is in fact moving to institute much of this as real reform.

Rapid and significant change has taken place in Myanmar in recent months ... Since taking up office less than six months ago, President Thein Sein has moved quickly to begin implementing his ambitious reform agenda. A series of important economic, political and human rights reforms are being made ... The president has reached out to government critics, including Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic minorities.

(ICG 2011b:14-15)

This past year has seen many changes. For example, Thein Sein moved quickly to appoint a number of well-respected non-military advisors, on political, economic and social affairs. One of these is U Myint, long-time economic advisor to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, now Chief of the Economic Advisory Unit. U Myint has long championed the needs of the rural poor, and moved quickly to hold a Rural Poverty Alleviation Workshop in May, with a raft of recommendations apparently gaining Presidential approval. These include: acknowledging the extent of poverty, preparation of a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), land and tax reform, pro-poor macroeconomic policies, and improving government transparency and accountability whilst tackling corruption and the vested interests of elites (U Myint 2011). This was followed by a broader, National Workshop on Reforms for
**National Economic Development** in August, with a number of reforms proposed by non-military participants being adopted into policy (NLM 2011d).

Surprisingly, there has been a level of democratic debate inside the new parliament, with quite lively discussions on issues like political prisoners, taxation, mobile phone costs and registration of NGOs (Horsey 2011), all published in the *New Light of Myanmar*. The fact that relevant ministers have been required to answer questions is significant, and there have been some improvements as a direct result. Likewise, censorship of foreign news websites (Hseng 2011a) and car importation restrictions were relaxed in September (*irrawaddy* 2011a)—the latter breaking the monopoly held by the top generals and their cronies. Market-rate money changers have been legalised (Hseng 2011b), and the President has met directly with Suu Kyi, who came away from the meeting optimistically saying, "We have reached a point where there is an opportunity for change" (*irrawaddy* 2011b).

Most surprisingly, at the end of September the government suspended the controversial Myitsone Dam project, a move welcomed by Suu Kyi but provoking the ire of the Chinese, who have invested much of the US$3.6 billion into the project (Hseng 2011c; Ba Kaung 2011). This was a defining, and risky, decision, which went well beyond what activists were calling for and would not have taken for reasons of popular pressure alone. Personal concerns, internal regime rivalry and strategic calculations of Myanmar’s position between China, the West and its regional neighbours undoubtedly had more to do with the decision than mere civil advocacy. Nonetheless, coinciding with popular demands this move further legitimised civil advocacy and the sense of reform.

Even more significant is the formation of a *Myanmar National Human Rights Commission* in September, followed by the release of 6,359 prisoners (including some 200 of the estimated 1,000 political prisoners). The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar declared this “a key moment in Myanmar’s history”, and a real opportunity to deepen the commitment to democracy. At the same time he expressed concern that “gross and systematic violations of human rights” still exist in Myanmar, and that the new government’s express commitments to other human rights have largely not yet materialised as concrete action (Quintana 2011).
Nonetheless, any one of these changes would have been unimaginable a year ago. Whether the key motivation is achieving removal of international sanctions and the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014, or domestic ambitions for securing long-term sovereignty and economic development, they still justify raised expectations of significant political and economic reform over the coming years. Former ILO representative to Myanmar, Richard Horsey, argues that,

> What we are witnessing now is more-or-less what we should expect to see if in the early stages of evolution away from authoritarian rule. This does not mean that is what is happening, but that we should not jump to the opposite conclusion. (Horsey 2011)

Vested interests and the inertia of post-colonial sensitivities, as described in the previous chapter, suggest change is likely to continue only incrementally. To this point, reform remains too superficial to have made much tangible difference to the daily lives of most of the population, apart from the clear air of expectation and changed attitudes by some officials. Reform remains fragile, and potentially able to be wound back easily and with minimal notice (ICG 2011b).

Recent US official comment reflects this tension. The US State Department’s Special Representative for Burma, Derek Mitchell, commented recently on the sense of expectation that “something is happening” in Myanmar (Mitchell 2011), and the State Department recently called the new government “reformist” and “open-minded” (State Dept 2011). However, a key demand remains the release of all political prisoners, and without that the US Congress renewed sanctions for another year in September 2011. The Senate Committee Chairman commented that,

> over the last year the Burmese regime has “severely restricted and frequently violated freedoms of assembly, expression, association, movement and religion.” And in furthering its hold over Burmese society, the regime has committed crimes of murder, abduction, rape, torture, recruitment of child soldiers and forced labor – all with impunity. In recent months, however, we have seen some encouraging steps … But it is far too soon to think that the walk to freedom has succeeded. (Baucus 2011)

Reform to this point has been more policy announcement than tangible. The impact of reform on the operation and projects of INGOs in Myanmar has therefore been minimal. Based on recent history, international responses that engage constructively with this reform while demanding accountability, and that allay rather than provoke fears of loss of
sovereignty or disorder, will be crucial for the continued momentum of reform. Increased development cooperation, particularly focussed around rural poverty alleviation, appears to offer great potential for such constructive engagement.

To achieve this, detailed understanding of the major socio-political actors and their strategic interests is required. This following section analyses the competing perspectives, values and strategic concerns of the four key political actors: the tatmadaw (armed forces) and ruling elite, Aung San Suu Kyi and the democracy opposition, the ethnic minorities, and the international community.

5.2 Competing Political Actors and Interests

The dominant characterisation of Myanmar in the Western imagination over the past two decades is of a nation of gentle, peace-loving and long-suffering people abused and terrorised by a brutal, authoritarian and rapacious clique of generals (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). This depiction is presented as a stark contest between good versus evil, democracy versus totalitarianism, human security versus violent suppression, and economic development versus cronyism and poverty. It is of a once prosperous nation now in abject poverty because of the ineptitude, rent-seeking and callousness of these ruling elite, violators of human rights who have been challenged patiently over decades by a united mass democratic movement led by the eloquent Aung San Suu Kyi. As with most characterisations, this is very oversimplified.

5.2.1 The Tatmadaw (armed forces)

In the contemporary world, there is probably no other country of significant size or regional influence in which the military has as much and as pervasive power, and has held it for such an extended period ... Its influence is comprehensive, pervading the society to a degree essentially unknown even in other countries where the army is a coercive force with a greater total number of troops. (Steinberg in Selth 2002:xxv)

The 2008 Constitution guarantees a leading role to the tatmadaw, Myanmar's "premier institution since Independence, with no serious institutional competitor" (Haacke 2006:13; see also Callahan 2004). This move ensures its position remains unchallenged. The only
other institution of similar size is the *sangha* (monkhood), whose nature and societal role is very different. Popular characterisations of the SLORC/SPDC military regimes portray them as irrational and self-seeking, and some scholars are inclined to dismiss the official discourse as "nothing more than primitive propaganda without any substantial content" (Rozenberg 2009:15).

Too little is firmly known to make hard-and-fast judgements about the inner workings of what has been a most secretive clique (Taylor 2009). Nonetheless, the regime does appear to be operating out of a considerably coherent ideology (Houtman 1999), discernible through pronouncements of their political objectives.

Selth (2002:3) notes that "the armed forces of a particular country are shaped almost as much by that country's geostrategic position and modern history, as by any features of the contemporary strategic environment." This is certainly true in Myanmar. The *tatmadaw* sees itself as the protector of sovereignty and national unity. Without dismissing the seriousness of the human rights allegations levelled against the *tatmadaw*, it is worth noting that it has been engaged in active, armed civil conflict continually since WWII, in one of the longest running civil conflicts in the contemporary world. "We see how war and especially counter-insurgency operations can brutalize an army after just a few years—imagine what it does after six decades" (Thant Myint-U 2009a). This conflict has claimed an estimated million casualties on all sides since Independence, around 30% of all civil conflict casualties in Southeast Asia during that time (Steinberg 2010b). Likewise, the diverse foreign backing for these insurgencies has "had a profound impact on the thinking of modern Burma’s rulers, including those military officers currently holding power in Naypyidaw" (Selth 2008a:4), both in terms of international relations and the way they quickly default to seeing their own people as a real or potential threat (Callahan 2004).

In their own eyes, SLORC stepped in during the chaos of 1988 to save the country from disintegration or foreign subjugation, as the *tatmadaw* had done many times (Taylor 2009). Two presidents had fallen in less than two months, and despite promised economic and political reform, demonstrators controlled the streets and the situation headed toward anarchy. While the offer of multiparty elections in which the military was to remain strictly neutral ran counter to many vested interests and raised the spectre of
reprisals by a new administration, it seems fair to concede that their conscious motivation was the restoration of law and order, and the protection of national unity and sovereignty. Quickly embarking on liberal economic and democratic reform, they may have initially genuinely intended to hold unelected power only briefly, although they almost certainly expected to continue to play an ongoing role in parliamentary politics. Unfortunately, their mode of restoring order resulted in many casualties, provoking an unexpected domestic and international backlash. Any genuine reform plans were side-tracked by paranoia over the perceived threat of disintegration of the union and subjugation to the West. "The underlying problem was that the SLORC viewed civilian party politics as necessarily chaotic and contributory to national disunity" (Charney 2009:165).

Fears, Values and Strategic Interests

SLORC declaring Our Three Main National Causes in mid-1989 to justify their coup and explain the role the military saw for itself (Minye Kaungbon 1994), slogans still continually repeated in government newspapers, as shown in Figure 4.

![Figure 4: The Three Main National Causes in a recent edition of the government-run The New Light of Myanmar](image)

Friday, 7 October, 2011

Our Three Main National Causes
* Non-disintegration of the Union
* Non-disintegration of National Solidarity
* Perpetuation of Sovereignty

Having taken control, they set out to restore order, reunite the country and reconstruct the economy. The regime's early claims to legitimacy rested on success against ethnic separatists, then later, in response to Suu Kyi's ongoing challenge, by appeal to other traditional symbols of political legitimacy (Selth 2010a:2). These objectives were thus expanded in 1992 into "Twelve National Objectives", slogans required to be reproduced in most newspapers, magazines and books published since then, reproduced in Figure 5.
Your Social Objectives

Your Economic Objectives

The social and economic objectives of the nation

- Promotion of economic growth
- Improvement of living standards
- Equitable distribution of income and wealth
- Development of human capital
- Protection of environment
- Promotion of cultural heritage

In accordance with the Constitution of Myanmar, the

- Promotion of a modern, democratic society
- Development of the economy through participation of the people
- Protection of the environment and natural resources
- Promotion of cultural and artistic activities
- Development of health and education
- Promotion of peace and stability

Established 1914

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These objectives clearly outline the SLORC/SPDC agenda, and reveal much about the old values of the tatmadaw elite, expressed very paternalistically in terms of the state needing to closely oversee the economy, morals, culture, patriotism, and protect a gullible people from foreign domination. It bespeaks a belief that the tatmadaw alone can offer the socio-political leadership required to bring unity out of chaos, and usher in a new era of prosperity. Foremost among the priorities expressed in these objectives are: a) forge a strong, unified nation out of competing groups; and, b) safeguard national sovereignty.

The problem of social unity is one of the greatest problems that has plagued both democratic and authoritarian governments since independence (Silverstein 1977). Nation-building requires creation of a single national identity out of the diverse ethnic peoples, and Burma’s fractured ethnic history has made nation-building a mammoth task (Smith 1999). The difficulty of this is highlighted in that the Burmese state "has been continually at war with the population mapped into its territorial claim" since the arrival of British colonialism, almost two centuries ago (Callahan 2004:13). SLORC/SPDC argued that ethnic conflict is the result of suspicion and division deliberately sown by the British to facilitate colonial rule (Minye Kaungbon 1994). A central motivation of the military has been to (re-)unite these diverse ethnic groups, militarily if necessary, thereby ending the insurgency which has prevented stability, peace, and the building of a modern, developed nation.

Central to this is the idea of establishing a single national culture, a goal expressed in the second of the social objectives above, what Houtman refers to as ‘Myanmarification’: "the search for a single dominant Myanmar national culture that could be respected both internally and externally" (Houtman 1999:91). This brings the discussion back to the challenge of state-building in the face of numerous internal and external threats. It is noteworthy, however, that SLORC/SPDC have sought to achieve this through "reconsolidation", not reconciliation, "a militaristic unity that [is] a disfigured corruption of the core idea ... harnessed to a repressive governance strategy" (Holliday 2007:391).

The second priority observed in the SLORC/SPDC objectives is to safeguard national sovereignty against neo-colonial imperialism.

If there is one clear message that Myanmar’s government broadcasts consistently, then this is that the country will resist what it perceives as ‘attempts to subjugate Myanmar’ or ‘neo-colonial politics’. (Haacke 2006:19).
This is brought out even more clearly through another extremely common set of slogans also commonly required to be printed in newspapers and periodicals, The People’s Desire, shown in Figure 6. In the eyes of SLORC/SPDC, the West's strong support for Suu Kyi only, [reinforced their] suspicion that she is, in fact, a stooge of 'neocolonialists' in 'big Western nations' hell-bent on imposing their will and advancing their own national interests, ideological or otherwise, in Myanmar. (Zarni 2007:204)

**Figure 6**: The SLORC/SPDC slogans, the *People’s Desire*, in a recent edition of *The New Light of Myanmar*

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Badgley (2004a) concludes that the strategic interests of the regime are: a) attaining unity and cohesion between Myanmar's diverse ethnic populations; b) acculturating the population to a unified Burman language and culture; c) managing the military hierarchy structures and military-monkhood co-dependency by which their power is maintained; and; d) attempting to navigate foreign policy away from isolation to increasing interaction with at least their Asian neighbours, if not the wider international community.

Burmese leaders have lived in fear of invasion or foreign control since independence (Selth 2008a). Ne Win was primarily concerned about China; SLORC/SPDC feared invasion by the West.

*The regime’s fears of armed intervention have been dismissed as the paranoid delusions of an isolated group of poorly educated and xenophobic soldiers, jealous of their privileges and afraid of being held to account for their crimes against the Burmese people ... [This is a] rather simplistic and self-serving explanation.* (Selth 2008a:4)

While there may never have been any real likelihood of invasion, the regime remained convinced that the US and its allies were determined to force regime change.
2008a, 2008b). Fears were heightened, for example, when the US tried to have Myanmar discussed in the UN Security Council, and then in 2006 when President Bush, in his State of the Union speech, listed Myanmar (Burma) alongside Syria, Iran and North Korea immediately after references to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. UK Prime Minister Blair then was subsequently labelled the SPDC as a "loathsome regime" that he "would love to destroy" (Selth 2008a:16). One official regime publication offered the theory that the US wants regime change in Myanmar because it is the weakest link in America's containment policy towards Chinese expansionism in the Bay of Bengal region (Hla Min 2000 cited in Steinberg 2007). "The SPDC effectively [saw] US sanctions and its support for the NLD and [Suu Kyi] as a form of low-intensity warfare" (Haacke 2006:64).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Burmese reacted when the US, UK and France despatched a joint naval taskforce after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008. As if confirming their fears, while the Burmese hesitated numerous Western politicians and activists called for an armed incursion into Burmese sovereign territory to deliver aid. The French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Bernard Kouchner, for example, issued a statement that Paris could not wait any longer for UN approval and would send a naval vessel to deliver aid directly to the Burmese (Selth 2008a, 2008b). They did not, but Joint Task Force Caring Response had a combined capacity of up to 82 helicopters together with landing craft and over 4,000 assault troops. While the ships were laden with aid, not troops, the sense of confrontation only hardened the military leadership's conviction that it still faced the serious possibility of attack.

One reason the regime has shown suspicion towards humanitarian agencies is that aid has been provided by numerous governments to a wide range of domestic opposition and activist groups (Selth 2008a). Donors speak in terms of 'promoting political capacity building' and 'strengthening civil society', yet funding has been given to organisations directly promoting regime change. Unsurprisingly, this was seen by both regimes as part of clandestine foreign operations, bringing suspicion on the work of all humanitarian agencies inside the country.
To ensure the regime’s ability to end the civil conflicts as well as ensure sovereignty against perceived outside threat, the tatmadaw has been dramatically increased in size and military capability, to now be the second-largest army in Southeast Asia (Selth 2009). The military-political leaders see themselves as still engaged in a patriotic anti-colonial struggle. However, Haacke (2006) also sees a genuine desire by the regime to move towards increasing regional and global interaction, although not at the expense of their security objectives.

5.2.2 Aung San Suu Kyi, the Democracy Movement and the People

The political values and strategic objectives of Aung San Suu Kyi and the democracy movement are far more readily understood in the West, since they are far closer to our own. A reluctant leader who stepped forward during the chaos of 1988 (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a:193), Suu Kyi allowed herself to be a unifying figure for popular opposition because of the ‘aura of legitimacy’ bequeathed by her father’s reputation (Charney 2009:154-155). Aung San, her father, is the Burmese national hero (Wintle 2007), accredited as founder of the tatmadaw, and both leader of the resistance against the Japanese and architect of Independence from Britain (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991; Naw 2001). His legacy and ideology have been continually appealed to by all sides of Myanmar’s political divide ever since his assassination (e.g. Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, 1995a; Callahan 2000; Fink 2001; Skidmore 2004). Suu Kyi presents herself as continuing that struggle for freedom (Jordt 2003).

Suu Kyi was just 2 years old when her father was assassinated. She grew up largely in India, where her mother served as ambassador, later being educated in England and marrying Oxford-scholar Michael Aris. She thus lived most of her life abroad, returning to Burma in 1987 to nurse her sick mother. It is not surprising, therefore, to find her ideas laden with values of democracy and human rights (e.g. Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a, 1995b, 1996). She remains, nonetheless, very Burmese. Her guiding principles clearly derive from those of Aung San (Selth 2002), and she eloquently draws on both traditional Burmese and Buddhist ideas to express these political values.

Suu Kyi’s ideas about freedom connect an alternative set of traditional Buddhist political values with ideas about freedom developed under colonial repression (Silverstein 1996).
Traditionally, Burmese Buddhists did not make the intellectual leap from religious liberty into ideas of political freedom, traditionally linking a strong state with absolute monarchy. Suu Kyi and the NLD, instead, have appropriated alternative Buddhist visions of moral authority (Schober 2011:3), espousing "traditional Theravada Buddhist beliefs and values within a modern democratic political ideology" (Philp 2004:11).

Suu Kyi frequently frames her critique of the regime in terms of a Buddhist advocacy for democratic and human rights (Philp 2004), a Buddhist ethic reminiscent of that of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama (Schober 2011). In this she draws on the legacy of kings like Mindon (1853-1878), renowned for their kind, peace-loving, humane, magnanimous and pious nature (O’Connor 1907; Thant Myint-U 2001), She likewise critiques the regime by reminding the people that in Buddhist mythology the first king was elected by unanimous consent of the people, to restore peace and justice after society fell from its original purity (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a). Suu Kyi argues that even the traditional Buddhist view of kingship,

> does not invest the ruler with the divine right to govern the realm as he pleases. He is expected to observe the Ten Duties of Kings, the Seven Safeguards against Decline, the Four Assistances to the People, and to be guided by numerous other codes of conduct such as the Twelve Practices of Rulers, the Six Attributes of Leaders, the Eight Virtues of Kings and the Four Ways to Overcome Peril. (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a:173)

These Ten Duties of Kings, for example, include dana (liberality), which Suu Kyi equates with provision for the welfare of the people, and thus that Buddhist values require the provision of basic needs such as livelihood, health and education (Aung San Suu Kyi 1996). She likewise argues that the duty of avirodha means 'non-opposition to the will of the people', and thus is a Buddhist endorsement of democracy.

Suu Kyi is dismissive of SLORC/SPDC’s statements about their security concerns;

> There is nothing new in Third World governments seeking to justify and perpetuate authoritarian rule by denouncing liberal democratic principles as alien. By implication they claim for themselves the official and sole right to decide what does or does not conform to indigenous cultural norms. Such conventional propaganda aimed at consolidating the powers of the establishment has been studied, analysed and disproved by political scientists, jurists and sociologists. (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a:167)
By presenting herself and the NLD as an alternative government ready for office, some argue that the military perceived her in traditional terms as a contender to the throne (Maung 1999). Suu Kyi and the NLD have always in theory supported the idea of a professional, apolitical military, who have a significant role in the country but are clearly answerable to an elected civilian government (Selth 2002). However, while ruling out calling for a mutiny by the army and calling on the army to be apolitical, Suu Kyi simultaneously publicly called upon the army to support democracy. Many interpreted this as a call for soldiers to disobey orders.

When my father founded the army, it was not for the purpose of interfering in politics. Rather it was for the purpose of supporting the people in their political struggle. I address all the people in the Army and saw that because of your love of your country it is your duty and responsibility to provide backup and support to fulfill the wishes and desires of the people. (Suu Kyi 1988 speech, cited in Selth 2002:278)

It is poignant that she addressed this to "all the people in the tatmadaw", rather than to the senior generals. This, of course, only fuelled regime fears of disunity leading to potential disintegration of the state or control by foreign powers.

Her position towards the military hierarchy apparently hardened somewhat after she had been imprisoned, ignored and attacked. Thus while Suu Kyi’s stance on democracy and human rights resonates very strongly within the West and she is hugely inspirational, several respected interview respondents commented anonymously during the fieldwork for this thesis that stand has often been as equally hardline as that of the former generals. Her biographer, Justin Wintle, commented upon her release in November 2010 that,

If the army is principally responsible for the stasis, it is arguable that Ms Suu Kyi’s principled commitment to full democracy, and her unwillingness, or inability, to make meaningful compromises, has been a significant contributor. (Wintle 2010)

Some suggest Suu Kyi and the NLD have often pursued a confrontational, all-or-nothing agenda deriving from "zero-sum" ideas about power (Pedersen 2008:256). Upon her two earlier releases from house arrest, in 1995 and then again 2002, Suu Kyi repeatedly resorted to acts of political provocation (Haacke 2006). For example, she held rallies drawing huge crowds, looking very much like she was campaigning for office, and likened the regime’s Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) to the Nazi Brown
Shirts, while the NLD compared the regime to Japanese fascist occupation (Skidmore 2004). These are very strong, emotive and confrontational characterisations.

Democracy activist turned scholar, Zarni (2007) observes that while the public respects and loves Suu Kyi, that scenes of her addressing massive audiences are misleading in that they give the impression that the NLD and 'the masses' are one and the same. Rather, as Suu Kyi herself has noted, what the masses most desire is security and freedom from fear (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995a). The masses primarily seek more just governance, and are less concerned about revolutionary change in the form of government than they are about the personal nature of those in power. Min Zin (2010:96) similarly argues that even at the height of demonstrations in 1988 and 2007, the NLD has many times shown a "tendency to seek to centralise control, a symptom of political culture in Burma." In 1988 the opposition failed to seize on promises of reform, instead continuing to press for a complete abdication to an interim government. Their failure to compromise then has been said to have "allowed the hardliners within the ruling body to make a justification and preparatory time to shift from their indecisive wait-and-see approach to a swift crackdown on the protests" (Min Zin 2010:90).

For most Burmese, the tatmadaw is not a totally-corrupted institution, and most families in central Burma rely on some relative in the military for access to products and services they could not otherwise access (Callahan 2000). The army, publicly credited with winning Independence from Britain, s the largest patron-client structure in the country has, in Callahan’s words, acted as a benefactor for many as well as an oppressor. The tatmadaw, along with regime-sponsored organisations such as the USDA, are institutions that redistribute resources to the general population—not fairly or efficiently, but to such an extent that even most sincere admirers of Suu Kyi also rely on their family connections with the tatmadaw (Seekins 2005). It is also important to observe that many public servants and members of the military believe that the generals honestly believe they are doing the right thing for the people, and believe that they are making Burma a better place (Skidmore 2004).
5.2.3 Ethnic Minorities

The third major competing domestic political actor is actually a varied assortment of ethnic minorities. Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with ethnic minorities making up about one-third of the population and occupying roughly half of the land area (ICG 2003). Despite SLORC/SPDC contentions that ethnic conflict is a remnant of British divide-and-rule tactics, Myanmar’s diverse ethnic groups have never shared a common set of values, identity or sense of loyalty (Silverstein 1977).

Myanmar seems like a country of ill-fitting ethnic nationalities crammed into one state united only by a long-gone colonial power ... sharing little common memory and only a vague vision of integration into one society. (Badgley 2004a:17-18)

Myanmar has been afflicted with some of the longest running armed civil conflicts in the world, being described by its military rulers as the "Yugoslavia of Asia" (Smith 1997:10). While international attention has focussed on the struggle for democratic reform, ethnic division "has long been the most important issue facing the country" (Holliday 2010b:125), requiring at least as much effort to resolve. "Ethnic conflict perhaps represents an even more fundamental and intractable obstacle to peace, development and democracy" (ICG 2003:1). The previous chapter outlined this conflict and its background. Smith (1994) and South (2008b) offer the most comprehensive histories of the conflict. Continued democratic and economic reform are unlikely without a political settlement that addresses ethnic minority concerns (Kramer 2009; Smith 1997).

Grievances and Strategic Objectives

The minority peoples have felt the deprivation of political and economic power during the military era even more acutely than the majority Burman population, as both the government and the officer corps are overwhelmingly Burman and widely perceived as a foreign force within minority communities (ICG 2003). The leadership of the tatmadaw is ethnically Burman (Selth 2002).

The main grievances of the ethnic minority groups are their lack of influence in political decision-making, the lack of economic and social development in their areas, and the repression of their ethnic cultural identities and religious freedoms by the government's
nation-building agenda (ICG 2003; Kramer 2009). While most ethnic political leaders and civilians favour democratic rule, they are concerned that a simple transition to democracy will not lead to a resolution of their political problems; they fear a democratic agreement which leaves ethnic issues unresolved. Smith (1999:439) quotes one Kachin leader commenting that, "even if Aung San Suu Kyi was prime minister, we would still have the Burmese army in the Kachin State." Most ethnic political leaders today reject separatism and favour limited autonomy within a democratic federal state (Kramer 2009), but the form and extent of their representation and voice is a major concern for minority leaders.

The only real alternative is assimilation (Holliday 2010b). The key words for ethnic minority aspirations are self-determination and equality, although as Zar Ni (2007) notes, the overwhelming majority of civilians would now be happy to simply have fundamental security in their lives and an end to conflict.

Given the scale of conflict and bloodshed in the past five decades, it needs to be recognised that reform and social transformation are long term processes and will undoubtedly be a challenge for any government that comes to power in Rangoon in the coming years. (Smith 1997:8)

Ceasefire Agreements and the Future

Over 20 armed insurgencies were active at the time of the 1988 uprising, and controlled large areas of territory (Smith 1994). The dramatic collapse of the CPB in 1989, precipitated by ethnic minority leaders turning against the CPB’s Burman leadership, led to a range of truces between ex-CPB-aligned forces and SLORC (Kramer 2009). This placed increased pressure on the remaining armed groups, resulting in a second set of cease-fires with NDF members in the mid-1990s. By 1997, there were 22 ceasefire groups (ICG 2003), and by 2003 the only significant groups continuing armed struggle were the Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party and the Shan State Army (South) (ICG 2003). The Kachin Independence Army have recently returned to open conflict with army forces.

These ceasefire accords offered a cessation of hostilities, with the ethnic armed organisations providing a transitional administration, but with access to territory by Burmese forces and bureaucrats. Any political solution was deferred to the writing of the 2008 Constitution. Given the key demand of ethnic minority leaders is to be on the inside of
the political process (Smith 1997), the inclusion of state assemblies in new constitution with some decentralisation of power represents possibly the greatest success of the 2008 Constitution, a document otherwise very heavily criticised. It constitutes something of a win for the ethnic delegates to the Constitutional Commission who continued negotiating after the NLD withdrew from the process, although with state assemblies now dominated by tatmadaw appointees and the USDP, they have so far failed to deliver on their potential.

The greatest positive outcome of the ceasefires, apart from the minimisation of bloodshed and destruction, has been the facilitation of development in these areas (ICG 2003). In negotiating these ceasefires, the military government promised support to develop these regions, and following the ceasefires most groups were given business opportunities or resource concessions by the government (Kramer 2009). This has increased access for INGOs into these regions, and facilitated the development of LNGOs. Some officials openly encouraged religious groups, as the major non-political organisations in these regions, to engage in community development, resulting in the formation of what are effectively local faith-based development NGOs (ICG 2003). The two largest such LNGOs, Metta (formed October 1998) and Shalom (formed early 2000), both arose from the Kachin ceasefire movement, and quickly became umbrella organisations for many other, smaller and unregistered groups, able to work effectively into these restricted areas.

The conclusion of these ceasefire agreements was seen by the SPDC as one of their major accomplishments (Kramer 2009). However while the ceasefires have brought many ethnic groups into the reform process, several are still fighting and peace remains fragile, with most groups still armed. Long-standing grievances remain largely unaddressed (Kramer 2009; Holliday 2010b), as evidenced by the recent return to armed conflict in Kachin State. Not all actors are prepared to negotiate on the regime's terms of "reconsolidation", not reconciliation. Some identify the government as the problem, and will not be happy with anything less than regime change (South 2008b). On the propaganda side, the regime have convinced many Burmans that ethnic leaders are no more than criminals, drug dealers and warlords, who must be "annihilated" (Smith 1997:12; Fink 2000).

Solutions will not be found by trying to rewrite the past but by facing up to long-standing grievances and sufferings in a new spirit of understanding and reconciliation. (Smith 1994:14)
5.2.4 The International Community

Myanmar today is embroiled in a battle of ideas, identities and values which is as much global as it is local. (Duffield 2008:6)

For at least the past two decades there has been a fourth significant actor in this drama, namely, the international community. As with the ethnic minorities, referring to the international community as a single actor is a gross oversimplification. The various states, international bodies, regional groupings and international organisations each have their own perspectives, strategic concerns and agenda in relation to Myanmar. Pedersen (2010) sums up the various international responses succinctly. Western countries, he observes, have shunned the military regime and imposed a variety of sanctions aimed at forcing the regime to relinquish power to a democratic government. Myanmar’s neighbours have sought to normalise relations, arguing that economic cooperation provides the best path to a more stable, prosperous and rights-abiding country. And international organisations, he suggests, have taken a middle path, working with the government as necessary for the explicit purpose of advancing the country’s political, economic, and human development.

None of these approaches have produced major successes, in part because of the enormity of the task at hand, in part because they have tended to work at cross-purposes with each other. (Pedersen 2010:114)

The gravity of international concerns over human rights violations has already been noted. Myanmar is a strong state in terms of maintaining "control, coercive power, and the willingness to employ such power" (Steinberg 2006:20). To highlight the comparatively strong state apparatus, as well as the authoritarian domestic and recalcitrant international position of the government, Myanmar has been referred to by such emotionally-laden terms as ‘pariah state’, and even ‘rogue state’ and ‘outpost of tyranny’, particularly by the United States (Haacke 2006; Steinberg 2006). Various Western leaders have labelled the regime as ‘thugs’, ‘grotesque’, ‘wicked’ and a ‘loatsome regime’ they would ‘love to destroy’ (Selth 2008:a:16). Such emotive rhetoric only antagonise without pointing to solutions, paint overly-simplistic pictures and may strengthen the hand of more hardline elements within Myanmar (Badgley et al. 2004).

The implication is that the state’s administration is irrational, when in fact it may be quite rational given different premises and in its own terms ... the use of such terms are insulting to the target, and in turn makes any possible negotiates at a later date more difficult. (Steinberg 2006:211)
Holliday (2011a) makes the observation that international assistance to Burma increased 20-fold during the 1970s, despite being a military-led authoritarian state during that period, and that it is only in the post-Cold War era that Myanmar has become labelled a pariah state, with greatly restricted engagement by the West including humanitarian aid budgets and assistance. "It can be argued that such a strong and sustained policy position would have been less likely if the Cold War had not ended, and Burma's importance in the local competition between the superpowers had not significantly diminished" (Selth 2002:16).

**Strategic Interests of the West**

"Throughout modern history, the importance of Burma's geostrategic position has been recognised by the world's most powerful countries," including Britain, France, India, China, Japan, and more recently, the US (Selth 2002:13). Major powers have therefore maintained a strategic interest towards Myanmar. Nonetheless, to speak of Western strategic interests and a Western response implies an alignment of views and interests which does not exist. The US, Europe and Australia, for example, have each developed somewhat different perspectives and policies towards Myanmar, and have very different strategic concerns (Steinberg 2007).

The United States of America speak predominantly about human rights and democracy, being particularly incensed over the denial of the democratic will of the people expressed in the 1990 election, and the subsequent treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD (Steinberg 2007, 2010b). US focus has been on the release of Suu Kyi and democratic transition (Haacke 2006), and to that end the US has imposed the most restrictive sanctions against Myanmar of any country. They have also used their position on international bodies to block IMF, World Bank and ADB involvement in Myanmar, and apply pressure via the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council (Haacke 2006)

While US policy towards Myanmar has largely been value-driven, the US has also held concerns about Myanmar being a possible risk to global order and their projection of power into the region. They are therefore concerned that Myanmar does not pursue weapons of mass destruction and is not involved in narcotics, that ethnic fighting is at
least contained, and that economic and particularly security ties with China do not become too close (Haacke 2006). In 2005, while attempting to escalate discussion of Myanmar to the UN Security Council, the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations John Bolton spoke in terms of threats to international peace and security caused by actions of the Burmese government that have resulted in things like ethnic cleansing, refugee flows, international narcotics trafficking, trafficking in persons, failure to act adequately on threats like HIV/AIDS or avian flu. (Bolton 2005)

These claims are largely based on the report to a UN commissioned by Vaclav Havel, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Cary 2005). However, these US-led attempts to put Myanmar on the Security Council agenda failed because Myanmar’s regional neighbours disagreed with the regional security threat assessment (Steinberg 2007; Haacke 2006), but it does highlight US concerns. In 2010, the US began pushing for a UN commission of inquiry into human rights abuses (Pomfret 2010; Lynch 2010), another move which has attracted little other foreign support at this point.

European Union concerns have been similar, but not always as vocal. Focus has been primarily on achieving respect for human rights, ”and a transition to democracy would be acceptable” (Haacke 2006:62). The sanctions under the EU Common Position on Burma/Myanmar are not as comprehensive as US sanctions, but still include an arms embargo, a visa ban on senior officials, a ban on non-humanitarian aid and a limited ban on investment. Many of these elements are considered “largely symbolic” (Howse & Gensler 2008:175), as, for example, Europe stepped in to replace lost humanitarian funding after the Global Fund pulled out of Myanmar (Steinberg 2007).

For Australia, Myanmar holds a more regional security concern and as such Australia has taken a somewhat different line (Steinberg 2007). Of Western donor countries, Australia places the highest value on humanitarian assistance (Asia Society 2010b), and is the only country to have given any aid to projects involving civil service capacity building (ICG 2002). Consistent with Australia’s broader foreign policy orientation, Australia has maintained diplomatic contact and offered benchmarks for greater official engagement (Steinberg 2007). Australian sanctions policy is tightly targeted on only named individuals connected to its ruling military regime, and thus the least stringent of the Western sanctions regimes (Asia Society 2010b).
Strategic Interests & Responses from Regional Neighbours

There is equally no agreed Asian or even unified ASEAN position on Myanmar. Instead, there are a range of strategic concerns and interests held by each regional neighbour, who respond to the needs and concerns from their own perspectives. The interests of China, India, ASEAN, and Japan differ substantially (Asia Society 2010b).

China is Myanmar’s largest neighbour and shares its longest border. After the reaction of the West to the events of 1988-90, SLORC turned to Beijing for political support, purchase of military equipment and trade (Haacke 2006). "Political, commercial, and military relations between China and Myanmar have grown as their interests have become aligned" (Asia Society 2010b:31), and Jagan (2010) contends that Myanmar has become China’s most strategic ally in Southeast Asia. China has engaged directly with the regime, becoming a major investor in infrastructure and the development of energy and gas reserves, and a major supplier of consumer and capital goods. More than 90 percent of direct foreign investment in Myanmar in 2008 was Chinese (Jagan 2010), and Myanmar could have suffered shortages of commodities without the massive influx of Chinese products (Kudo 2007:102). Strong economic ties with China have been instrumental in the survival of the regime in the face of Western sanctions. China’s primary strategic concerns are firstly stability along its border, and secondarily access to energy (ICG 2010a; Yohome 2010). Other strategic concerns are containment of the rise of India, and road, rail and air access to the Indian Ocean (Li & Fook 2010).

"China respects Myanmar’s sovereignty, does not interfere in the country’s internal affairs, and encourages the country to engage with the international community" (Asia Society 2010b:31). China has no interest or appetite for sanctions (Holliday 2010a), and therefore calls on the international community to offer more constructive assistance toward Myanmar, while calling on Myanmar to speed up political settlement of ethnic disputes and become more democratic (Haacke 2006). In recent years, the Burmese have looked to China for diplomatic support; however Myanmar has been very keen to avoid undue military, political or economic dependence on China, which has motivated the regime to develop counter-balancing relations with ASEAN, India and Thailand. Claims of China’s influence in Myanmar policy-making over the past 15 years, as well as ideas such as the Chinese having military bases in Myanmar, "have been greatly exaggerated" (Selth
2007b:22). The Chinese believe that that US and EU sanctions "have adversely affected the country, especially the common people" (Asia Society 2010b:26), although their own investment and engagement behaviour belie the genuine priority of such a concern beyond rhetoric.

India, like most Asian governments "believe that sanctions and isolation imposed on the regime have been the two largest impediments to change ... [and are] hurting the people of Myanmar progressively harder" (Asia Society 2010b:42). India accords Myanmar the lowest priority of all of its immediate neighbours in regard to international relations, being primarily concerned to contain China's increasing power in the region (Egreteau 2008). They also have a strong strategic interest in developing markets into Southeast Asia, prompting a move to closer engagement (Kanwal 2010). However, they urge a radical change in Western policy toward Myanmar, arguing that,

> If there is anything that could be done, it can only be accomplished through interface with the government ... Any measures to help the people of Myanmar will be a slow, tedious, and laborious process, concentrating initially on humanitarian work and consciously avoiding raising suspicions about any political agenda.  
> (Asia Society 2010b:42)

ASEAN's policy over the last two decades has been one of 'constructive engagement', and it has been argued that Myanmar's admission into ASEAN membership was allowed in large part to counterbalance expanding Chinese influence and power in the region (Rüland 2001). Ne Win refrained from joining ASEAN when it was established in 1967, arguing that US bases in Thailand and Philippines demonstrated ASEAN was not non-aligned (Haacke 2006). The more pragmatic SLORC expressed interest in joining ASEAN in the early 1990s, a move opposed by the US and EU. For Myanmar, ASEAN membership has offered increased legitimacy and a constructive engagement policy that has opened regional markets and access to institutional capacity building. For ASEAN, Myanmar's membership has enhanced its claim to truly represent Southeast Asia.

There has generally been little 'constructive' about the engagement of Myanmar's regional neighbours who have generally pursued national economic interests over reform. Nonetheless, calls by ASEAN for the release of Suu Kyi have made it harder for the regime to sideline her and the NLD, and it was a Thai 'road map to democracy' proposal which prompted the Myanmar counter-proposal that has led to this current point of reform.
ASEAN involvement was very influential in breaking the deadlock in aid delivery after Cyclone Nargis. It might, therefore, be said that the ASEAN constructive engagement policy has possibly had a marginally greatest impact of all in achieving reform, although international organisations, notably NGOs, are really the only international actors who can reasonably claim to have engaged constructively.

Japan's position, too, is quite opposite to that of the US, seeking to promote human rights and democratisation but seeing this as best done through engagement and dialogue, particularly through development aid and technical assistance (Haacke 2006). As a regional power with strong links into the country and region, Japan feels it has "a special responsibility" to address the situation in Myanmar (Asia Society 2010b). They argue that, "Rather than isolate Myanmar, the country should be integrated into the region economically, and assistance should be provided to encourage economic reform and to promote democracy and human rights" (Asia Society 2010b:58).

Japan has been the biggest donor to Myanmar both prior to 1988 and since. Japan sees building ASEAN nations bordering China as a means to balancing China's power, and thus have a strategic objective for humanitarian aid, political engagement and expanding trade (Shihong 2010). They have led the way in stepping up humanitarian assistance and offering government and civil society capacity building, rather than only providing aid through UN agencies and NGOs (ICG 2002). They have also provided grant and technical assistance to government departments, mainly in the health and education sectors, but they have also provided technical assistance in structural reform of the economy (Asia Society 2010b). Japan sees itself as situated in between the Western pro-sanctions camp, and the Asian constructive engagement philosophy.

This, then, briefly summarises the complex political context in Myanmar, dominated by competing strategic interests between domestic actors and clouded by the diversity of strategic interests and responses of the international community. As the OECD (2007b) report on development in fragile states discussed earlier noted, as important as historically-informed analyses of the context are, the most important factor to successful state-building is a process of negotiation among all contending interests. Significant political progress in Myanmar will require the military (and ex-military) elite, the democratic opposition, the ethnic minorities and the international community to all
achieve progress toward a common future through negotiation. Such negotiation is still in its infancy, suggesting that extreme sensitivity to the strategic concerns of all political actors will continue to be a requirement of effective INGO humanitarian poverty alleviation efforts for some time to come.

5.3 Poverty and Humanitarian Need

5.3.1 The Economy

Myanmar is a rich agricultural country with abundant natural resources, the land itself offering the hope of a prosperous future. The economy has been built on agriculture, which is now being surpassed by exports from substantial natural gas reserves. The country is the world’s largest exporter of teak, is one of the world’s principal sources of rubies, sapphires, jade and pearls, and is known for its tin, tungsten and silver production. The country possesses extensive regions with rich soil and good rainfall, suitable for highly productive agriculture, with major river systems allowing irrigation in many other regions. With a population density considerably lower than most of its regional neighbours, agricultural prosperity is definitely possible. Indeed, during its colonial heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, Burma was the world’s leading source of rice, earning it the nickname 'the rice bowl of Asia' (Perry 2007:51) and making it home to "some of the most productive and prosperous paddy farmers in the world" (Asia Society 2010a:14).

Yet, despite this potential prosperity, Myanmar today is impoverished by conflict, inept policies and political standoff. Politics and the economic situation of the poor are interlinked; politics is a significant causal factor behind the poverty and poor economy, while international attempts to engineer political change aggravate both the conflict and the economic underdevelopment and humanitarian need, at the expense of the poor.

The Heritage Foundation (Miller & Holmes 2011) rank Myanmar as the sixth least free economy in the world, less free than Iran, DR Congo or Libya. This is, however, Myanmar’s third year of marginal improvement after a decade of increasing economic restriction, hopefully indicative of renewed improvement in economic freedom. Nonetheless, the Heritage Foundation is particularly concerned about "extensive state controls and
structural problems that severely undermine the development of the private sector", including: poor public finance management, underdeveloped legal and regulatory frameworks, lack of investment freedom and property rights, levels of corruption, fragility in monetary stability, high inflation due to printing money to fund fiscal deficits, arbitrary tax policies, poor infrastructure, and the size of the informal sector.

According to official data, the Myanmar economy has enjoyed sustained double digit growth since 1999-2000. Official government statistics claim most sectors of the economy are booming, with exports rising 33%, rice exports up 128%, tax revenue up 28%, tourism up 27%, domestic savings up 116%, and vehicle registrations up 16% over the past two years (CSO 2011). Officials have begun talking about Myanmar catching-up economically with its neighbours by 2015, and the west by 2030 (in U Myint 2010).

Rather than an economic boom, however, "Burma is still one of the poorest countries in the world and the poorest state in Southeast Asia" (2010b:7-8). Most sectors of the Myanmar economy appear to be languishing, although accurate data is scarce. Perhaps Burmese economist Khin Maung Nyo is correct in asserting that,

No one understands the Myanmar economy. If someone says they understand the Myanmar economy, they don't understand anything. If they say they understand the Myanmar economy, they don't have a clue. (Khin Maung Nyo 2011)

Myanmar’s new Chief Economic Adviser, U Myint, has repeatedly highlighted the dubious nature of the official statistics (U Myint 2007, 2010). He points out, for example, that the government’s economic figures claim economic growth rates double that of neighbouring countries, yet with just half the investment. He also notes that the ratio of exports to GDP does not correlate with other states, and that the structure of the economy has changed little in the past seventy years. Agriculture accounted for 47.9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1938/9, and is still 43.4% of GDP in 2007/8. These facts, he argues, make claims of sustained high economic growth most unlikely.

The public data are largely ignored and are probably thought not fit to be printed, so do not appear in the major regional and world economic reviews and reports. (U Myint 2007:56)

Most internal and external observers believe economic activity in Myanmar to be much lower than reported. Estimates for the 2007/8 financial year by the IMF, the UN Economic
and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) of the London Economist magazine, place GDP growth in the range of 3.4 to 5.5% before the impact of Cyclone Nargis and the global financial crisis (in U Myint 2010). Based on anecdotal evidence, U Myint speculates that the economy may actually be stagnant.

Turnell et al. are of similar mind:

These [double-digit growth] claims are without foundation and are greatly at odds with other proxy measures (such as electricity generation, fertilizer use, and so on) of national output. Revised GDP growth estimates for Burma over the last few years would suggest rates of around 3% per annum as more likely, the principal driver of which has been Burma’s rapidly increasing export of natural gas [something which] masks an economy that is otherwise essentially stagnant. (Turnell et al. 2009:633)

Elsewhere, Turnell (2010b) estimates GDP growth at 2.3%, and goes so far as to claim that, apart from the windfall from natural gas, Myanmar’s economy is actually "regressing in every important respect" (2008:1). Collignon (2001) estimates the long-term trend of economic growth to be just 1%.

Those last statements may be slightly overstated, but best estimates place annual GDP at just US$280 per capita in 2008, or a little under US$0.77 per day (Turnell et al. 2009). Attempting to adjust this for relative cost of living, by calculating purchasing-power parity (PPP) figures, is extraordinarily difficult, given the dearth of reliable data, and Bradford (2004) argues that most calculations for Myanmar significantly overestimate real income and production figures. Nonetheless, UNDP estimates for GDP-PPP per capita were just US$1,027 between 2002 and 2005 (UNDP 2004, 2007), falling to US$904 in 2007 (i.e. US$2.48 per day) (UNDP 2009). The IMF (2009) put the figure at a little over US$3 per day. Any of these estimates suggest Myanmar is a long way from catching up with its neighbours. Bradford concludes that,

For Burma to reach the level of GDP per capita that Thailand experienced in 2000 within 50 years, it would require real growth in per capita output in Burma of 3.6% per annum. In terms of world growth history, this is an extremely high sustained rate of growth. (Bradford 2004:10)

U Myint draws a similar conclusion, calculating that even if double digit GDP growth were real and could be sustained, that "it would take 39 years to catch up with the level of per capita GDP that Malaysia hopes to attain by 2020" (U Myint 2010:22).
Inflation is one of the greatest concerns in the Myanmar economy, running at an annual average 24.9% between 2000 and 2008 (U Myint 2010). Reports suggest it hit 35% in 2007 (EIU 2008), and 50% in 2008 (Turnell 2008), with 40-45% figures also reported a decade ago (Collignon 2001). Whether these latter figures are accurate or not, only Zimbabwe, Congo, and Angola have worse inflation figures in recent UNDP reports (UNDP 2010). Official Myanmar data claims inflation is running at just 7.5% (CSO 2011).

The most common reason ascribed to such high inflation is the printing of money to fund budget deficits (Mya Than & Thein 2007; U Myint 2010; Sein Htay 2006; Turnell 2007a, 2008; Turnell et al. 2009). Indeed, money supply grew at an average 28.5% per annum between 2000-2008 (Turnell et al. 2009). Other recent significant inflationary pressures have included dramatic rises in public sector salaries and official fuel prices, shifting the capital city, and the impact of Cyclone Nargis (U Myint 2010). One major implication of such high inflation is that savings and investments are not held in the local currency (Collignon 2001; Steinberg 2010b), given interest rates are well below the inflation rate. This adds significant domestic savings and investment weaknesses to the economy. One of Myanmar’s key problems is a lack of monetised capital in the country (Collignon 2001).

Agriculture, the largest sector of the economy by employment, is neither maximised nor efficient. It is estimated that 9.3% of Myanmar’s land area is currently "wasteland suitable for cultivation", neither forested nor utilised (EIU 2008), while most agriculture is done by hand or animal-drawn equipment Just 15.9% of agricultural households own any form of motorised or mechanical agricultural equipment (IHLCA 2007). The inability of most farmers to access finance imposes heavy costs on productivity and inhibits cultivators from moving to more capital intensive modes of production (Turnell 2008). Even fertilizer is beyond the reach of most farmers.

Myanmar’s major exports are, in order of dollar value, natural gas, then timber, pulses and beans (for which Myanmar is now the second largest exporter in the world), garments, and rice (CSO 2011; Turnell 2008). Natural gas is now by far the country’s largest export earner, comprising almost 40% of exports by value over the last four years (CSO 2011), and responsible for much of the recent growth in the economy. The Yadana and Yetagun fields in the Gulf of Martaban came on stream in 1998 and 2000, respectively, and the
Shwe field in the Bay of Bengal, which connects to China’s Yunnan province via a 2,400-kilometer pipeline, may begin producing in 2013 (Asia Society 2010a; Turnell 2007b). Combined, it is estimated that these fields could bring in US$3-4 billion annually in export earnings over the next 20 to 30 years. This natural resource discovery brings with it the possibility of either transforming the national economy, or only further accentuating inequality through a ‘resource curse’.

There have been persistent allegations, however, that vast amounts of revenue from these natural gas exports are unaccounted for, due to account-keeping at the official exchange rate which overvalues the currency by more than 150 times its market value (Asia Society 2010a; Turnell 2007b). Turnell (2008) observes that natural gas earnings for 2006/07, recorded at the official rate, amounted to a mere 0.6% of budget receipts, while the 2010/11 budget only documents $US 33 million of the $US 4.7 billion in revenue received, based on what neighbouring states claim to be spending on these resources (Turnell 2011). Some allege the total accumulated unaccounted funds to 2009 was US$5 billion, and that this has either been misappropriated into offshore accounts (EarthRights 2009), or used to fund certain military or national priority expenditure off-budget (Turnell 2010a, 2011).

One recent positive change made by the Myanmar government is that in January 2011 they began publishing the national budget again (Turnell 2011), after almost a decade of not publishing this vital data (ICG 2009). The Myanmar budget has long had a disproportionate allocation toward items that do not contribute directly to production, such as defence, ceremonies and rituals, new cities and building physical infrastructure (U Myint 2010). While infrastructure may in time contribute to production, funding for the tatmadaw, the armed forces, is by far the largest budgetary component. The Tatmadaw is the largest armed force in Southeast Asia, numbering around 350-400,000 personnel (Turnell 2008; U Myint 2010), and it is widely claimed that Myanmar has one of the world’s highest rates of military spending as a proportion of government revenue (Dapice 2003). The State Peace and Development Council government long argued that military expenditure averages just 9% of the budget (Sein Htay 2006), but the official 2010/11 budget figure showed 51% spent on defence (Turnell 2011).
Since the 1988 coup, the regime has undertaken an ambitious modernisation and expansion of the armed forces. Myanmar thus has the highest military spending and is the second-largest importer of arms amongst the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) (Alamgir 1997). Selth (2008a) puts the defence budget at an average 35% of the annual national budget, since then. Sein Htay (2006) argues that with expenditure easily disguised via the multiple exchange rate system, actual military spending could be as high as 60%. Either way, "Burma now boasts a very large, reasonably well-integrated, well-armed, tri-service defence force" (Selth 2007a:14). To protect its interests during the move to a semi-civilian government, the previous regime introduced legislation preventing the new parliament discussing changes to military spending (Turnell 2011). This places a significant limitation on addressing disproportionate military expenditure.

Hopefully, the more objective and reformist economic views of U Myint and others recently appointed to advise the new President will lead to major changes in economic management in coming years. The recent announcement of relaxation of car import restrictions is one such very small but positive move (NLM 2011c, 2011a). U Myint (2007, 2010) has previously recommended major changes, such as exchange rate unification, publication of accurate and detailed economic data, further liberalisation of the export market, improvements in quality and production of agricultural commodities, development of labour intensive industries, financial services, telecommunications and information technology, and preparations for greater regional integration. It is hoped such policies will emerge in the near-future. Sustainable macroeconomic growth, Turnell (2008, 2010b) suggests, will also need effective property rights, rule of law, rational and consistent policy-making, an efficient civil service, privatisation of government monopolies, recapitalisation of rural finance, and liberalisation of agriculture, foreign trade, investment, and interest rates.

5.3.2 Income Poverty

Beyond an economic crisis largely caused by mismanagement, inordinate military expenditure, and an emerging 'resource curse', the people of Myanmar have faced a long and very real humanitarian crisis. Callahan (2010) suggests this need has often been overstated by those advocating political change, while Inwood (2008) argues that internal
political processes mean most publicly available data understates the gravity of the need, particularly in geographic locations where assistance is not being provided. The severity of poverty needs to be clearly determined.

The most recent and thoroughly-researched poverty data comes from the *Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey 2009-2010* (IHLCA 2011), which was undertaken jointly by the Myanmar Central Statistics Office and the UNDP. The survey estimates the proportion of the Myanmar population who live in absolute poverty to be 26% (IHLCA 2011). Their poverty line was calculated to reflect the minimum food and non-food expenditure required to meet a basic calorie intake while continuing to subsist, accounting for Myanmar food consumption patterns and prices. It was set at 376,151 Kyat annually per adult equivalent, or 1,030 Kyat per day—almost exactly US$1 per day at the informal economy exchange rate for mid-2010 (Shwe Rooms 2011). According to this survey, almost one-third of the rural population live below this subsistence level. There are, however, huge regional variations. For example, 73% of the population in Chin State live below this absolute poverty line.

This survey reports an apparent fall in absolute poverty over the past 5 years, since their previous survey, with the incidence of reported poverty falling from 32% (IHLCA 2007) to 26% (IHLCA 2011). This is despite the impact of Cyclone Nargis and the global financial crisis. The authors do, however, urge considerable caution in interpreting this trend, given other data conflicts significantly. For example, while the survey suggests that the poorer segments of the population have experienced faster income growth than the wealthy, resulting in increased caloric intake and small asset holdings, moderate and severe malnutrition levels have remained constant (at 32% and 9% of the population respectively). Likewise, the food share of consumption and the rate of landlessness have both increased since their last survey.

Regardless of any possible improvement, both the rate and level of poverty reported is alarming. More than one-quarter of the population live on less than US$1 per day, with over 10% of the population experiencing this level of poverty as a chronic condition. The food component of this measure suggests that the average family spend almost three-quarters of their income on food, with just one quarter of this meagre subsistence income available for non-food expenditure on clothing, accommodation, transportation,
education, health and other essentials combined (Thant Myint-U 2009b). Still, this is an improvement from 1997, when the average family income could meet only three-quarters of their total food and non-food consumption needs (U Myint 2010). "In no other country in the Asian region does an average family devote such a high share of household consumption expenditure to food" (U Myint 2010:26).

One of many ways many Burmese households have survived such scant economic circumstances has been through remittances sent home by family members working abroad, both legally and illegally (Asia Society 2010a). Surveys of remittances to Burma from workers in Thailand suggest that the average annual payments per sender are more than Burma’s per capita GDP, and that well over $US300 million was being sent home annually by Burmese living in Thailand a decade ago (Turnell et al. 2007). With more than two million Burmese estimated to live abroad in Southeast Asia, China, India and the developed world (ICG 2009), remittances are a significant economic lifeline for many otherwise impoverished families.

This survey also does not capture the large proportion of the Myanmar population who are only marginally above the poverty line. Their proximity to absolute poverty, and their vulnerability, however, is illustrated by an estimation from the UN Resident Coordinator in Yangon that an increase in food prices of just 15-20% could push the number of people in absolute poverty to "well over 50 percent" (Pedersen 2008:10). This goes a long way to explaining previous estimates of poverty in the country, which ranged from "half the population" (e.g. Steinberg 2006:xxxvi) to 90% living on less than US$1 a day (WHO 2008).

5.3.3 Multidimensional Poverty

Poverty, of course, is not primarily a lack of money, but, as Sen (1993, 1999a) argues, is deprivation in any of a multitude of dimensions, resulting in people being unable to satisfy crucially important functionings. Poverty is the result of deprivation that leads to a lack of well-being, as well as exclusion, lack of opportunity and lack of freedom to choose how to live. There are thus multiple dimensions of possible deprivation.
The UNDP’s *Human Development Index* (HDI) seeks to measure poverty on a broader range of indicators than just income. While classifying the country as having low human development, this index places Myanmar reasonably favourably, at number 132 out of 169 countries ranked (UNDP 2010). This is, however, based on government-supplied data which is widely-held to be too high. Nonetheless, this HDI data suggests there has been a significant overall increase in development over recent years, with an improving HDI score and offering examples such as under 5 year old mortality rates falling from 147 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1996 to 98 per 1,000 in 2008. This is solid progress, although a comparison with Australia’s rate of under 5 mortality, at just 6 per 1,000 live births in 2008, shows how large the gap remains.

The UNDP’s (2010) *new Multidimensional Poverty Index* seeks to measure the number of people experiencing multidimensional deprivation as well as the intensity of that deprivation across 10 indicators, within the health, education, and standard of living dimensions of poverty. The report suggests that 14.2% of the Myanmar population are 'multidimensionally poor', with another 17.6% poor in one dimension and facing significant risk of multidimensional poverty. While this compares favourably with many other LDCs, the report also finds that those who are multidimensionally poor in Myanmar typically suffer a particularly high intensity of multidimensional deprivation (UNDP 2010).

This is not surprising. The percentage of the national budget spent on health and education fell steadily during the 1990s (Aung San Suu Kyi 1996), and while spending has increased somewhat in the last decade, non-military services are still grossly underfunded. "Burma is the only country in the region whose defence budget is greater than that of health and education combined" (Selth 2002:135). Turnell (2008) estimates Myanmar spend a mere 1.4% of GDP on health and education, less than half that spent by the next poorest member of ASEAN (Laos). Purcell (1997) found that in the mid-1990s the government’s education and health budget was consumed almost entirely by salaries, with bodies such as UNICEF providing the bulk of program funding and little or nothing left for maintenance and program development.

Table 2 offers a comparison between Myanmar and regional and LDC reference countries in terms of government spending on health and education. Estimates of military spending are not provided in comparative reports.
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<td>Singapore</td>
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<td>Thailand</td>
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Government investment in education fell to just 0.3% of GDP in 1999-2000, placing it amongst the lowest in the world (UNICEF 2003). It has since increased to 1.3% in 2007 (UNDP 2010), but this still leaves it very poorly funded. Myanmar's education system has thus now degraded to such an extent that the national average years of schooling is just 4.0 years, and less than 17% of the population over 25 years of age have had any secondary education (UNDP 2010). Myanmar thus claims one of the highest primary school enrolment rates in the Asia-Pacific region, but has one of the lowest secondary school enrolment rates (ESCAP 2008; IHLCA 2011). And while they claim an adult literacy rate of over 90% (UNDP 2010), a 1999 UN survey found functional literacy to only be 53% nationally, and as low as 10% in some remote areas (internal UN working paper, referenced in Pedersen 2008). Myanmar "is one of the few places in the world where the present generation of children will be worse educated than their grandparents" (Turnell 2010b:22).
Myanmar likewise has the lowest per capita government expenditure on healthcare in ASEAN (Vicary 2007). Government figures show they spent just US$0.66 per capita on public health in 2006-7 (MoH 2008), almost double the amount spent the year before and up substantially on previous years, but still exceptionally low even for a poor developing nation. Due to low government spending on health, and despite the high rates of poverty, 89% of all health expenditure in Myanmar is private expenditure (ESCAP 2008). Turnell quotes an unnamed UNICEF source as suggesting the Myanmar health system has become the second-worst in the world, after Sierra Leone, and is now "a hub from which communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, elephantiasis and avian influenza spread though the region" (Turnell 2008:3).

Chronic underfunding has resulted in a wide range of significant health needs. Life expectancy at birth for women is just 65 years, while for men it is well under 60 (ESCAP 2008). Infant mortality and under 5 mortality rates are now the third and second highest in the Asia-Pacific region, respectively (ESCAP 2008), and the rate of death from AIDS is now equal highest in Asia, equal with Thailand. One in five people have not been vaccinated against measles and the same percentage do not have access to basic health care, while 30% do not have access to safe drinking water (IHLCA 2011). Malaria threatens 70% of the population and is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality (WHO 2008), with one third of all malaria-related deaths in the entire Asia-Pacific region now occurring in Myanmar (ESCAP 2008). Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality among women of reproductive age, and are mostly preventable, while nationwide 32% of children under five are moderately to severely underweight, another 32% are stunted, and 8.6% are wasted from poor nutrition (WHO 2008). Anaemia is put at 71% amongst pregnant women, and 75% for schoolchildren (WHO 2008), while only 37% of households consume a recommended daily requirement of calories and only 56% consume sufficient protein (EC 2007a).

2 Converted from Kyat into US$ at the exchange rate quoted by The Irrawaddy (www.irrawaddy.org) for February 2007. Vicary (2007) puts the figure at $0.09 before PPP calculations. The WHO (2009) online statistical database simply lists this figure as < $US1 in PPP terms.
Chapter 5: Myanmar Times –Contemporary Economic & Socio-Political Context

Similar deprivations occur beyond health and education, as a smattering of the available data shows. A low 2.0% of the population have telephones, either fixed or mobile (UNDP 2010). There is just one registered vehicle of any description for every 22 people in the country (CSO 2011). Almost half the population have access to nothing better than leaves or thatch as roofing material, while over half do not have electricity (IHLCA 2011). Landlessness is a significant problem, at 24% of those who derive their primary income from agriculture, the largest employment sector (IHLCA 2011). And, less than one third of those engaged in agriculture can access any form of credit, as can just 11% of the remainder of the population (IHLCA 2011). In short, while there are hopeful signs of improvement, and of positive policy change, "the daily life of the average person in Myanmar is characterised by grinding poverty and unrelenting struggle for survival" (Asia Society 2010a:21-22).

5.4 Concluding Picture: the Socio-Political Context

This, then, is a sketch of the complex socio-political context INGOs face as they approach poverty alleviation in Myanmar.

Residues of pre-colonial Burmese-Buddhist political ideology remain, particularly in some of the perceptions about power and statecraft. These are not all negative, as Aung San Suu Kyi’s discourse about traditional ideas of the duties of rulers, provision for the welfare, and respecting the will of the people has shown. However, traditionally these values were linked political legitimacy with ideas of hpoun and the demonstration of accumulated kamma. Merit, while demonstrated through Buddhist patronage and charity, was also demonstrated through order and control, resulting in authority being seen as highly personalised and hierarchical, and non-dependence on others being an important value.

These traditional values are echoed in contemporary politics, certainly under Than Shwe but also now under Thein Sein. For example, while also reflecting more contemporary political thinking, the emphases on nation-building, achieving order and control over ethnic minority territory, and having a slowly guided, orderly transition to democratic rule and a market economy, are all loaded with traditional political values. Change in these values is only likely to be gradual.
A post-colonial narrative is also clearly evident in the Myanmar socio-political context. Centuries of suspicion, conflict and tension between Myanmar governments and the West have only be accentuated since Independence, first through foreign support for ethnic insurgency, then through more direct pressure for regime change. Oddly, the largely positive experience by both sides of temporary expansion of international assistance in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, after a thorny first few weeks, may have done more to reduce suspicion and tension on both sides than six decades of Independence combined. International rapprochement and internal reform may therefore trace their roots, in part, to the context-sensitive work of INGOs and other development agencies as documented in the following chapters.

A final major issue within the socio-political context of Myanmar is that of the ethnic tension, with its long, deep history. The important task of nation-building is grossly complicated by serious tension, distrust and violence, as well as fears of being marginalised economically and politically, and of being assimilated culturally. Brokering solutions is also complicated by the fact that the international community, particularly the West, is so complicit in the origins, complexity and perpetuation of the issue.

Great economic and humanitarian need, particularly in health, education and livelihood, are complicated by the vested interests of the regime, traditional political values, post-colonial sensitivities, and ethnic security concerns. The opposition's democratic and human rights position, as well as their perseverance, are inspirational, but their approach until the past year has only succeeded in increasing political tension and heightening security. The seemingly intractable ethnic divisions continue to result in deep-rooted social conflict, even to the village level, driving marginalisation and exclusion. The West’s confrontational sanctions approach has repeatedly provoked reactions and empowered hardliners in their defence of national sovereignty, while significantly restricting humanitarian aid funding and mandates. Meanwhile, Asian neighbours have achieved some, limited, humanitarian and political gains, but largely committed minimal resources themselves to these ends.

The persistence of these traditional values, historical grievances, and post-colonial sensitivities, and the domestic and international political context, have implications for
international development, and suggests certain approaches are more likely to be resisted while others may gain ready acceptance. Traditional values suggest some development approaches may be easily interpreted as a threat to personal power, even where they are not intended as such. Post-colonial sensitivities and fears of neo-colonial motives suggest the need for western donors and agencies to deliberate focus on trust building, and suggest the humanitarian approach to development of many INGOs in Myanmar may be a means of facilitating progress. Ethnic fears, violence and marginalisation have huge implications for equity and participation in development, as well as advocacy and other aspects of INGO development. Peace-building and conflict-sensitive development approaches are clearly called for.

How INGOs respond sensitively to this context will therefore be documented and analysed in detail over the next three chapters.
PART C:

FIELDWORK & ANALYSIS OF

INGO CONTEXT-SENSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

IN MYANMAR

Part C of this thesis moves past the literature and the analysis of politics and economics, to detail and analyse the findings of the field research interviews with key INGO managers and development professionals working inside Myanmar. This fieldwork particularly examines the ways in which INGO field workers adapt their organisational mandate and international development approaches to be context-sensitive in Myanmar. It adopts a phenomenological approach to articulate their perspectives, largely in their own words, before engaging in analysis. To clearly distinguish interview responses, quotations from the interviews are shown in italics while quotations from the literature are not.
Chapter SIX: Doing Context-Sensitive Development in Communities

Over a coffee in the offices of Hope International Development Agency, Yangon, David Tegenfeldt told many stories during my interview with him in 2009. This is one of them:

There is a village up in the north of the country that I visited a little over 10 years ago now. As we drove into that village in kind of a remote area in a truck, there was a bunch of villagers doing roadwork. My immediate assumption was that it was forced labour. My wife and I, we rode in and I said, 'Urgh, seeing this out so remote is discouraging.' We turned the corner and came into the village, and the village was laid out on a grid, with crowned roads, grass growing beside the road, and a drainage ditch on each side of the road. Every house had a cactus and bamboo lattice woven fence, with houses set back, up on poles, and with a latrine out back, a place to keep their draught animals, and a pig sty/pen rather than just running around wild, citrus trees, a garden patch ... and I said, 'Wow, this is amazing!'

I went started asking them typical questions, and it soon became clear. When they had an issue either the whole community, or representatives they had chosen and respect, came together. What they said is, they keep talking about it until they come to an agreement, and then they follow it through and people are committed to it. Here is this one community I ran into up there, and they developed this on their own with no foreign input (no international agencies came in or anything).

Their leader was killed about 10-15 years ago, and they are continuing on. Sustainability! ... When I ask them, 'What percentage of your primary age children are in school?' They said, 'a hundred percent, of course.' I said, 'Why do you say, "of course"?' They said, 'Because education is important.' This was a village in Burma that came up with this on its own. It looks like a relatively wealthy community. Why? Because they worked together. They don’t allow alcohol to be produced or sold in their villages. Most other Kachin villages have a problem with alcohol abuse.... Participation is one thing. But it is this kind-of deeper, spiritual level of, how people see each other, how they relate to each other that really makes a difference.
Socio-political and economic contextual factors have a major impact on the manner in which INGOs approach working in local communities. Much INGO work in Myanmar is directed at extreme poverty alleviation in rural villages. This field research has found that effective INGO development in communities contextualises approaches to empowerment at each stage of the intervention or programme.

This chapter analyses ways in which INGOs contextualise empowerment of local communities under ideas of participation, equity, sustainability, active citizenship and sensitivity to culture, religion and language. Broadly speaking, effective INGO programmes place additional emphasis on highly participatory development, often with the goal of building the capacity of participatory committees to the point they become long-term sustainable community-based organisations that can continue to work for the good of communities without the same need for outside facilitation or funding. In such a divided society, however, equity in such participation is a major concern, with emphasis placed equally on equity for those of different ethnicity, religion, political persuasion, and age, as much as on equity between genders. However, in order to do no harm most organisations feel the need to take on most advocacy roles on behalf of communities and limit active citizenship, elsewhere widely seen as the logical conclusion of highly participatory development. Sensitivity to the local context involves efforts at peace-building, such as facilitating negotiation and consensus decision-making skills, and work to strengthen both bonding and bridging social capital. Given the large role religious belief plays for most Burmese society, sensitivity also involves working with this and thus often partnering with religious organisations. Finally, use of local language is highlighted as a means of enhancing understanding of culture and facilitating partnerships and collaboration with stakeholders in work in local communities.

6.1 Participation

Participation is a central concept in development theory, and has "become widely accepted as the minimum requirement for successful and sustained development outcomes" (Clarke 2009:1065; Chambers 2005). The UNDP, for example, have long argued that participatory approaches are crucial to any successful human development (e.g. UNDP 1990). "Empowerment happens when individuals and groups are able to imagine
their world differently, and are enabled to take action to change their circumstances” (Eyben et al. 2008a:3). Diokno (1978) argues that development requires people’s participation in decision-making, and that denying participation is the nature of authoritarianism and repression.

The participatory development model was discussed in some detail in Chapter Two of this thesis, and revolves around concepts of empowerment, ownership, and partnership (Chambers 2005). These are all ideas involving power within relationships, and in that sense participation has a political dimension. Øyen (2002) argues that an implicit assumption in much of the ideology behind shared decision-making in participatory development is that participation will, over time, lead to increased political participation by the marginalised poor and further democratisation of the country. Siglitz (1999) and Sen (1999b) both echo similar ideas, linking participation with democratisation. Øyen contends that this assumption is ideological, and rooted in Western culture rather than being empirically based, and conveys a political dimension on the implantation of participatory development practices and possible political restrictions in more politically restrictive contexts. Oakley (1991) concurs that political power can be a fundamental obstacle to participatory development. It has already been noted that Alston, the former Chair of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, considers it quite unrealistic to expect fully participatory development to succeed in a country which is fundamentally authoritarian in nature (Alston 1995).

These perspectives raise many questions about the possibility of implementing fully participatory development approaches in a politically restrictive space, such as Myanmar. This question was therefore directly raised and explored in some depth with interview participants, out of concern that highly participatory development may either be restricted by the political context or result in some form of unwanted consequences. The following responses were somewhat surprising, and demonstrate the experience of the more highly respected and effective agencies.
6.1.1 What Level of Participation in Myanmar?

Participation is not always implemented well in Myanmar. While this may be true anywhere, political limitations, access issues for personnel, local and regional conflict issues, restricted and short-term funding, and concerns about restrictive official attitudes does mean some agencies' participatory programming is less well constructed in Myanmar than they would do elsewhere. One Burmese former-manager for a UN agency complained that participatory committees set up for most projects "are just user groups that stop at the end of the project, leaving again a vacuum" (Source 41 2009). Another, a bilateral donor, complained about the projection of INGO identity and will, something which compromises genuinely participatory processes:

\[
\text{[INGOs] say participation and ownership, but like to label the school or well with the agency's brand logo ... the INGO have their perceived idea on politics, and that becomes dangerous for the community.} \quad \text{(Source 2 2009)}
\]

Nonetheless, most agencies still do adopt a participatory approach, and throughout the interview it was found that those INGO leaders and agencies who self-assessed their work as more effective and who were most highly recommended by other respondents all implement highly participatory, "process-led", "human-centred" or "integrated" development, programs that create ownership by empowering communities to assess their needs, prioritise, and design the mechanisms and solutions to address those needs, often resulting in the emergence of genuine community-based organisations (CBOs) in the longer term.

This finding, that highly participatory development works well in Myanmar, reflects global thinking about best-practice development. Yet it is counter-intuitive given the strongly authoritarian government. One respondent commented:

\[
\text{I found myself, in my early time here, amazed that we had the flexibility to do what we were doing with so much of this community empowerment work. It puzzled me immensely as to why there was never any kickback on this.} \quad \text{(Allan, Spectrum 2009)}
\]
6.1.2 Obstacles to Highly Participatory Development

Anthropological research by Skidmore (2003, 2005) and Fink (2000, 2001) into the psychological impact of military rule on the people in Myanmar, as observed in Chapter Five, has demonstrated that the population have largely developed an aversion to risk (trying new things) and are disempowered in decision making. This conclusion is mirrored in Aung San Suu Kyi’s (1995a) writing. One journalist interviewed, who had long-term experience in the country, fully concurred: “people here are not willing to try things outside areas that are safe” (Goddard, MT 2009).

This creates a very real potential for the disempowered poor to refrain from active involvement in participatory processes, or to abstain from expressing their voice. It opens the possibility of decision-making being dominated by those connected to the regime.

Respondents bore out this concern in communities. Certainly, “fear is a significant component of the landscape here ... it is very real” (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). There is a lot of fear of doing new things, or of being seen to be taking the lead on things or pushing things forward ... there is kind of a status-quo culture. You don’t ever stop doing anything, but you don’t do anything new either ... There is a real fear of being clamped down on, with a really strong self-reliance. (Wells, Paung Ku 2009)

At the same time the “chronic resource shortage of grinding poverty has a very disabling effect” (Allan, Spectrum 2009). Combined with “a kind of cultural-religious karmaic view [these factors have] quite an impact on how people perceive the possibility of change and their personal role in it” (Dorning, Burnet 2009).

People will come together, but they’re not used to making decisions for themselves ... some of that is due to political repression, and some of it is due to the people just being really poor. (Agland, Care 2009)

Thus, in this context, invitations to participatory development are often met with scepticism from village leaders ... worried what this will mean for their relationship with local authorities ... if the local authorities do not agree ... For the population that is then the same thing ... sceptical ... wondering what it means for them, if they are really going to have a say in the development of the community ... scepticism that you will really be able to provide that for them. (Source 20 2009)
Nonetheless, a majority of interview respondents felt Skidmore, Fink and even Suu Kyi’s conclusions about the debilitating impact of fear immobilising people, resulting in a breakdown in collective community action and de-motivation for action, apply more in the political space than in development and poverty alleviation, and perhaps more in urban and peri-urban areas than in rural community development. They thus believe that fear and scepticism can be overcome, and that highly participatory development is thus not only possible, but even strongly applicable in Myanmar. However, they emphasised process as important.

6.1.3 Generating this Participation in Myanmar

In many parts of the country, community-level participatory committees are not yet in existence. Commencing in 1992-3, the UNDP initiated human development programs in townships, and have since tried to develop participatory projects in many areas. The result is there is some form of development committee widely in place in townships. However, "they are at village-tract level, which is really too big to allow [meaningful] participation" (Lancelot, MDM 2009). The first stage in generating a high level of participation in community-level projects, for many INGOs, is therefore to establish village/community level participatory committees. There are now an increasing number of such committees at the village level, particularly throughout the region targeted in the post-Cyclone Nargis reconstruction and recovery efforts, but many communities remain who still do not yet have such a committee.

Gaining approval and building a relationship with local officials is a crucial first step. [Forming] a village committee, is, of course, a very sensitive thing here in this country, more sensitive than in other countries. But once we have got agreement with the local authorities to start it, then it is quite similar to other countries. (Feindt, Welthungerhilfe 2009)

A process involving sufficient time, a considered approach, and the demonstrated involvement or approval of key people is then critical to overcome this fear and scepticism. The process is greatly helped if formal or informal community leaders in the village commit their support early:
Chapter 6: Doing Context-Sensitive Development in Communities

... an individual who is able to motivate and inspire others, and that’s usually someone in the village themselves ... That may be a headman or former headman ... They need to be confident in their position. So whether that means they’ve got high level relationships or they formerly occupied a good position ... [they] have to be fairly confident in their position.  

(Griffiths, TLM 2009)

Most people also require a demonstration that the development intervention has approval from local officials.

They need the door opened for them by local senior authorities, to give them permission before they’re willing to move forward ... they would need to make sure that the link is there ... they need to be reassured that what they are doing is acceptable. Here it is more than in other places..... Here it needs to happen.  

(Agland, Care 2009)

Gaining the initial approval and a good level of cooperation from local officials is most often undertaken by local partner organisations, who often spend "a lot of time talking to local officials to convince them this is good for the community and not a threat" (Source 20 2009). In other instances this is a learned skill undertaken by key community formal or informal leaders who have the confidence to approach authorities and who have learned that, "if you don’t liaise with the authorities, then the authorities will follow up what you have been doing anyway, so you might as well try to do the right thing" (Allan, Spectrum 2009). It is not often a role undertaken directly by the INGO, which may be attributed in part to the misgivings many officials have about any Western-based organisation, connected to Western governments or not. This also demonstrates why strong buy-in from the right key community leaders and partnership with the right local organisations is often essential for INGOs to establish strong participatory processes.

Where possible, including officials in projects in such a way that they can consider they helped the work and take some credit for the results can be fruitful, although this can result in pressure for infrastructure projects, which is a predominant focus of many local authorities because such projects provide the most tangible outcomes they can readily report to their chain of command (Allan, Spectrum 2009).

However, even with this sort of process in place, "getting people to talk and contribute takes time—two years in my experience" (Source 41 2009), one Burmese national former manager with a UN agency noted. Another INGO leader explained they regularly spend two years just building the relationships in a village by doing isolated sectoral projects
before they attempt to commence an integrated participatory project with a new community (Tumbian, WV 2009). The pressures created by a lack of resources and short funding cycles for projects mean that "it needs more time than we normally get from donors" (Feindt, Welthungerhilfe 2009). Developing highly participatory processes in Myanmar takes considerable time and focus.

6.1.4 Reasons Participation is Emphasised in Myanmar

One final observation from the fieldwork research is that many INGO indicate that, if anything, they are emphasising a high level of participation even more strongly in Myanmar than their organisations do elsewhere. Certainly many indicated that they prioritised participation both because it is highly suitable to the Myanmar context and because it is highly necessary for democratisation.

Many informants pointed to high levels of volunteerism, self-reliance, self-motivation and independence within the culture, demonstrated by the local response to Cyclone Nargis, as making highly participatory programs particularly suitable in Myanmar (Source 24 2009; Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009; Tumbian, WV 2009; Wells, Paung Ku 2009). Certainly, as previously noted, a very long-term traditional Burmese perception of governmental authority is that it is one of the five evils people must endure, thus that self-reliance is a far more common attitude than dependence on government. The Western adviser to one unregistered NGO noted that,

*We've found that communities, unlike so many countries where they have so much Western support and INGOs and all, that people here do things for themselves. In the communities you'll find them thinking in terms of doing things for themselves.*
(Source 37 2009)

A couple of informants went further, explicitly stating that participation was a deliberate effort on their part to build highly democratic grass-roots practices, preparation for a more democratic national future (Source 24 2009; Source 41 2009; Source 28 2009). One respondent expressed the sentiment that while the international pressure for top-down democratic change has largely resulted in a stalemate over the past two decades, that opportunity for change continues to exist at the community and small local organisation-level, and therefore that this is where the resources ought to be directed. Interestingly,
two of these respondents identified with a rights based approach to development, and saw participation as part of a process of educating people about rights and developing active citizenship, but doing so safely in the process of providing other assistance.

This is consistent with other studies; South (2004), for example, argues that while the development of civil society is not in itself sufficient to bring about national-level political transition, that promoting grassroots social mobilisation builds networks of independent, community-level participation that can address underlying inequality and undermine the ideological and practical basis of military rule. Participation at a community level thereby forms a base for the broad-based democratic political participation which could sustain political transition. He argues that empowered, participatory civil society "will be essential to any process of sustained democratization" (South 2004:234). Given the restricted humanitarian space, he argues that international actors should thus focus on grassroots, bottom-up, community-based approaches to development, maintaining that this offers the greatest likelihood of effecting national-level socio-political change (South 2008a). Bottom-up approaches have the ability to support national democratic development, although it is less likely they can be the principle driver of democratic reform.

Thus, highly participatory processes are quite possible and both very relevant and effective in INGO community development interventions in Myanmar, at least when approached using a well thought-through process. However, such approaches take time and deliberate, concerted effort.

6.2 Equity

Equity is a fundamental element of effective participatory development, and requires that the disempowered be given input into decision-making processes, that equal opportunity be afforded to all, and the redressing of inequalities (Klasen 2006). Equity in development is usually emphasised in terms of gender issues, to address the serious gender disparity in most societies and even within development organisations. Nussbaum (2000:1), for example, observes that "women in much of the world lack support for fundamental functions of human life", identifying a range of social and political inequalities which commonly lead to women working harder while being less well nourished, less healthy,
more vulnerable to violence and abuse, less literate and educated, discriminated against and facing greater obstacles than men, without effective legal recourse or guaranteed human rights.

More broadly, equity speaks of addressing all forms of social and political inequality that lead to marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination, acting as drivers of poverty for individuals and groups of people. Addressing equity issues is essential to poverty alleviation and sustainable development (World Bank 2005). Equity "requires the voices of women, the young, the old, and landless, disabled, and other marginalised groups [to be heard alongside] the voices of traditional leaders, religious leaders, and landowners" (Clarke 2009:1066), and requires the removal of barriers and disadvantages faced by certain groups in society (Klasen 2006). Equitable development therefore also needs to be sensitive to conflict and seek to mitigate fault lines within society which drive exclusion and marginalisation (Carment & Schnabel 2001; Conflict Sensitivity 2004).

Equity is a significant issue in Myanmar. Unlike participation, equity was not an issue which was anticipated and directly enquired about during the fieldwork, but was rather a topic raised by many respondents themselves. The extent to which equity is crucial for context-sensitive development in such a "deeply fractured society" (Wells, Paung Ku 2009) quickly became apparent. Building equity and genuine participation in the face of exclusion and marginalisation requires time and deliberate effort to empower the voices and opportunities of women, minorities and other marginalised groups. The deep ethnic, religious and political divisions in Myanmar society have been examined in detail in the previous chapters, divisions with a long history of serious grievances and competing strategic goals. Overcoming these barriers to ensure equitable participation and programme involvement is a major concern.

"The result of living under such a system of strict hierarchy, is that [most] are not used to being able to have a say in the development of their own village" (Source 20 2009). Equity in such a context needs concentrated effort to mitigate fault lines and marginalisation within society, and build conflict prevention measures into communities (Conflict Sensitivity 2004; Carment & Schnabel 2001). Peace-building is an extremely significant component in ensuring equity; "Without peace we cannot have sustained development" (Saboi Jum, Shalom 2009).
Hope International Development Agency is possibly the agency most directly targeting social division and exclusion in development within Myanmar. David Tegenfeldt, Senior Advisor to the organisation, argues that,

[Westerners] characterise this country as a peace-loving Buddhist people who have the misfortune to be ruled by some military thugs ... I see this, in contrast, as a country that has a long, deep and broad history of violence, and the use of violence and the threat of violence to maintain social control. And those methods of social control ... go throughout the institutions of this country. It is in the family, it is in the community organisations, it is in the religious organisations, and of course it is in the military. So, in fact, the way I would describe this country is: it is a resource rich country with a very poor population that has a problem with relationships. So if, in fact, the problem is relationships, we cannot just focus on the removal of the military hierarchy ... we need to work on ways of relating to each other that use more dialogic methods of negotiating our differences ... so that the diversity of this society does not continue to tear it apart. (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009)

Perry (2007) agrees in his analysis of the development failure in Burma, contesting that:

The popular western view of Buddhism as gentle and non-violent [is not correct] ... this [authoritarian violence] is no Burman peculiarity – recall Kampuchea ... In practice Burma is a violent place on which violence religion is a weak restraint. (Perry 2007:41)

Equity issues are thus of fundamental importance.

Gender equity is a significant issue in Myanmar (Feindt, Welthungerhilfe 2009). When asked about the reported reduction in household-level poverty over the past five years (see IHLCA 2011), Tegenfeldt commented, "yes, but if the men still control the budget, and eat well while the women and children are undernourished, then how much benefit is there?" (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2011). However, women have enjoyed a social position and respect in Myanmar which may be a little less inequitable than in many traditional societies. For example, women in Burma traditionally "enjoyed great freedom in marriage, divorce, inheritance and property ownership rights" (Silverstein 1996:214), as well as being involved in business, money lending, and the gem trade (Perry 2007). Myanmar has, likewise, already achieved gender equity in education enrolment indicators of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (ESCAP 2010). Thus, focusing equity solely on gender issues, Perry (2007:6) argues, simply demonstrates the "blinded character of some development discourse".
Several respondents made this point, emphasising that religious and ethnic background, and things like political view or affiliation and age are equally important factors requiring similar equity mainstreaming across programming to overcome discrimination and ensure equity. For example, one Burmese respondent commented, "religion is very important ... like gender" (Salai, Swissaid 2009).

We oftentimes come in with a western perspective ... our proposal documents all say we are being sensitive to gender issues. There is no box saying we have to be sensitive to ageism issues – but quite frankly ageism is probably more an issue here than gender is ... and gender is a big issue. The hierarchy here is differentiated on a number of issues, of which gender is only one. But from a Western perspective we only ask about gender. (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009)

As well as addressing gender disparity, equity must reduce suspicion between groups and build social cohesion. Participatory practices must demonstrate development is not just for one ethnic, religious or political group (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). One INGO reported coming under pressure several years ago to exclude known supporters of the NLD from eligibility for its microfinance program (Source 31 2009). Likewise, the Myanmar Red Cross came under pressure at one point to exclude NLD supporters from even giving blood donations (Tha Hla Shwe, MRC 2011).

This is a very authoritarian, very hierarchical culture, and we must change those relational dynamics before we can hope to change issues like corruption and vested interests at the national level. (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2011)

Other research has corroborated the fact that one of the difficulties of working in partnerships in the Myanmar context is the extent to which local civil society shares the cultural tradition of hierarchical relationships (LRC & Oxfam 2010).

However, political discrimination is not only unidirectional or perpetrated by those aligned with the Myanmar regime. Western INGOs sometimes equally discriminate against local people perceived to have overly-strong connections to the regime (Salai, Swissaid 2009). One serious concern of many agencies is the extent to which most poor people defer to village leaders, military officers, or those connected with the regime. Agencies report that it is not uncommon for villages to choose local members of what was the regime-backed Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), which has now been converted into the Union Solidarity Development Party, the new ruling party in Myanmar, to serve on village development committees. Clearly, where their election was due to deference by
community members out of a sense of hierarchy, power, or patron-clientism, or where their presence on committees was shown to stifle the voice of more marginalised groups, this would be reason for serious concern. Out of such concerns some INGOs have, therefore, discriminated against USDA members, preventing their election to committees. Others, however, are inclined to see this as a positive move, as a sign of broad representation, provided genuinely participatory processes facilitate all members of the community having a voice. Concern was expressed where INGOs have their own idea on politics, and use these to discriminate against these community members.

There is evidence in the literature that such unequal power distribution within villages must be carefully monitored (Labonne & Chase 2009; Platteau & Gaspart 2003), and that accountability processes and highly democratic decision-making processes are significant factors safeguarding against elite capture of community-driven development (Fritzen 2007). While INGOs should strive to ensure committees include women and some of the poorest and most vulnerable, several respondents were adamant equity also means USDA members must not be excluded simply because of political affiliation (e.g. Win, Oxfam 2009). Likewise, equity means village and religious leaders are also included in participatory processes, not completely sidelined (Tumbian, WV 2009).

Dealing with the root-causes of authoritarianism and marginalisation which seek to deny voice and opportunity to women and minorities is essential to equity in development. Tegenfeldt (Hope 2009) emphasised that empowerment should facilitate personal transformation that results in people coming to see one another in more mutually respectful relationships. It must help groups develop good communication, negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making skills. It must build inclusiveness and encourage in decision-making skills based on equity and fairness at every level of society. Building equitable processes is thus possible in Myanmar, however, agencies do not find it easy: "We have found that the process has been a real struggle" (Agland, Care 2009). Oxfam speak of the significant time and very deliberate awareness raising that takes place before equity concerns begin to be addressed (Win, Oxfam 2009).
6.3 Sustainability

The concept of sustainable human development was developed by Anand & Sen (1996, 2000), and is an application of the idea of sustainable development to the UNDP's human development concept. The World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987), and highlighted that the concept contains within it the two key concerns: that needs of the world's poor must be given overriding priority, and that the environment only has a limited ability to meet present and future needs. Sustainable development builds on the idea that society needs to manage three types of capital: economic, social, and ecological (McKenzie 2004), thus sustainability requires appropriate utilisation of all three systems (Fowler 2000b).

The political and economic restrictions in Myanmar mean that the economic and social dimensions of sustainability require equal attention, whereas the ecological dimension is often the primary focus of sustainability in many other parts of the developing world. Sustainable human development explores these ideas of economic and social aspects in particular, while keeping environmental and resource sustainability issues in mind. Sustainable human development is therefore defined as "expanding and sustaining the choices for all people in society" (UNDP 1996), or as "the enlargement of people's choices and capabilities through the formation of social capital so as to meet as equitably as possible the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future ones" (Banuri et al. 1994).

The Human Development Report 1996 spoke of the need to sustain short-term advances in human development, and concurs that "Issues of sustainability go beyond the environment" to include the need for economic and social sustainability of human development (UNDP 1996:63). The UNDP suggest that sustainable human development requires sustaining poverty elimination, supporting livelihoods, and ensuring equity (particularly gender equity) in an ecologically sustainable way. Social sustainability of development interventions therefore requires participation and sufficient organisation for communities to themselves collectively identify strengths and needs, and cooperatively take responsibility for them (McKenzie 2004). Thus, capacity building and governance are
essential components for the sustainability of development interventions (UNDP 1997). At a minimum, the sustainability of the impact of development interventions requires ongoing support for the improvements from community networks, civil society and local authorities.

Such sustainability is thus obviously a significant concern in Myanmar. Concerns over the potential negative impacts of authoritarian rule, abuses by authorities, and governance failures on sustainability led to questions about INGO approaches toward sustainability being raised in the interviews with informants. Sustainability of the results of development interventions needs to be carefully planned.

Local and regional authorities, even when they are fully supportive, have very limited resources and capability. In an environment where international agencies are restricted in building the capacity of even township officials, it is difficult to empower them to provide systems of support for village-level development. In most parts of the country there is also a low baseline of capacity in surrounding communities and civil society, limiting the support which might come from community and civil society networks. Sustainability therefore requires communities themselves be able to maintain their own development beyond the project lifecycle.

A number of INGOs interviewed thus have a very deliberate goal of capacity building equitable, participatory development committees within local communities into well-functioning CBOs. The goal is CBOs who are able to maintain, if not advance, the process of community empowerment and sustainable development without the requirement for ongoing outside facilitation and funding by either the international or local agency. This resonates well with Fowler (2000b) who argues that real sustainability depends on building community capacity to the point community based organisations (CBOs) emerge, capable of continuing to plan and direct their futures without dependence on either the NGO or the government. They assess this approach as effective in Myanmar:

_We have proven on the ground [in Myanmar] that the poor, if given opportunity, can fully participate in prioritising their needs and to work together with the project in shaping their lives ... If these groups are given proper support, guidance and training can be a springboard to the emergence of community based organisations._

(Source 41 2009)
Part of the reason for this appears to be that, rather than a learned dependency, "it is just the complete opposite: most people are not expecting any help from anybody and assume they are just going to have to do it themselves" (Wells, Paung Ku 2009). This attitude reflects the traditional Burmese proverbs and attitudes towards kings and authorities dating to pre-colonial and colonial times, as discussed in Chapter Four, in which most people attempt to avoid official contact and assume they cannot rely on assistance from the government. Self-help, and reliance upon community cooperation, are therefore very traditional Burmese ideas.

However, given the fear-impact of authoritarianism on the people, this level of community capacity development takes time. While the approach and program of agencies differ, the agencies involved suggested that from their experience it takes between seven (Source 41 2009) to fifteen years (Tumbian, WV 2009) to develop a functioning CBO in a village community, although two leaders suggest they believed it could be achieved in as little three years if it was made a deliberate and intensive central-focus of the intervention, with a facilitator living in the community much of the time (Source 24 2009; Source 30 2009). It was also noted that success in such a venture "depends largely on whether committee members are assigned by the village, or whether people with a real heart, spirit and genuine leadership character are brought into the committee." (Source 41 2009).

"I think this is really the main issue. If we could take more time on these processes ... what we would start is a kind of social transformation, and I wish we would have more time for this, but we don't. This is maybe one of the reasons why sustainability is always the question, whether the committees are really sustainable even beyond the project period." (Feindt, Welthungerhilfe 2009)

One agency, well spoken-of by other respondents, focus on self-reliant, community-led development. Their approach seeks to empower participants to use the resources and capacity already available within the community to address their needs (Source 24 2009) in what is described in the literature as asset-based community development (Mathie & Cunningham 2003). This approach appears to also be effective in Myanmar.
6.4 Active Citizenship

Active citizenship is widely seen as the logical conclusion of highly participatory development, when communities and local NGOs take ownership of development initiatives that they naturally advocate and hold authorities to account to sustain the development (Clarke 2009). Given the surprising finding that, despite the high degree of authoritarianism in the country, the most effective development programs in Myanmar are strongly participatory and inclusive initiatives, one might anticipate effective programs also incorporate a high degree of active citizenship. Bray (2009) describes active citizenship in terms of public accountability, involving,

strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens (especially poor citizens) to participate in exacting greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials and service providers ... [to ensure] that those with the power to affect our lives are held to account for their actions. (Bray 2009:42)

However, effectiveness of such accountability is highly dependent on the political climate and cultural context. Newell (2002) argues that success in such public accountability is limited to places where the state tolerates protest and criticism, where a free media exists, and where an accessible and functioning legal system operates under rule-of-law. Respondents were very conscious that empowerment and awareness-raising of rights must 'do no harm,' and not put people or communities at risk. They are also very aware that "most Burmese are very reluctant to challenge authorities at any level" (Goddard, MT 2009), or even to talk about issues they perceive as relating to higher-levels of authority (Wells, Paung Ku 2009), although this is changing noticeably over the past year or more. One respondent candidly noted that, at least prior to the current turn of events, "there is a lot of evidence that the government views the people as the enemy, that they fear the public, and fear the public doing too much" (Long, MT 2009).

In the midst of a discussion about local NGO and CBO networks, Dorning lamented that, "What we can't do here, but would be possible in other countries is ... they could become political in themselves, they could lobby for their own constituency" (Dorning, Burnet 2009). Most INGOs therefore don't encourage any politicisation of their work in villages or of their local partners that would see them lobby local, regional or national officials for their own needs, cause or constituency. Indeed, most attempts to facilitate local NGOs even to lobby donors and international authorities themselves were unsuccessful. Instead,
apart from actively seeking cooperation from officials at a township level, through lines of relationship, INGOs largely assumed the role of advocacy on behalf of local communities. Some INGOs avoid even using the word empowerment in communication with the government (Source 6 2009).

This finding is consistent with research on places where active citizenship may put people in danger. Clarke (2009:1065), for example, notes that participation has become "fetishised to some degree," such that it is considered the overriding factor in all development interventions and that consequently active citizenship is also widely assumed to be optimal in all circumstances. Instead, using the example of illegal Burmese workers in Thailand, Clarke argues for realistic expectations. Questioning whether active citizenship should always be a goal of community development, he concludes that active citizenship may not be possible (or optimal) where public participation could endanger lives, and where people do not have the supporting legal and political mechanisms for such a role. He concludes that in such situations INGOs should assume an advocacy role on behalf of such vulnerable people, as in fact INGOs have in Myanmar.

Nonetheless, the space for active citizenship does appear to be expanding quickly in Myanmar. Over the past few years, a number of local NGOs have become adept at using the government’s own language to open public political debate and build political capital, such as Myanmar Egress who publish The Voice journal discussing democracy and democratic values while maintaining a good relationship with the government (Wells, Paung Ku 2009). And there does appear to have been a further decided change in the space for active citizenship since the recent elections and the inauguration of the new President and parliament.

Local NGOs have become far bolder in using the public civil space to engage in public debate of policy issues, something previously heavily restricted. For example, local advocacy so raised the profile of the controversial Myitsone Dam hydroelectricity project in Kachin State that it became a common discussion topic even on the streets of Yangon, leading to the project’s suspension in September 2011. Similarly, local groups are organising regular seminars in Dawei calling for corporate social responsibility in relation to the deep sea port, and an Ayeyawaddy River awareness campaign by a local Yangon-based foundation is using media and art to raise issues of watershed and environmental
management within the Ayeyawaddy basin (Wells, Paung Ku  2011). This is a new level of locally-led active citizenship within the country currently being tolerated by the authorities, and something most INGOs have yet to significantly engage with.

6.5 Sensitivity to Culture and Language

6.5.1 Language and Culture

One final comment from several agencies is regarding the insights gained into the culture through learning the language and staying in country long enough. Since trust in relationships appears so central to effective development in Myanmar, longer terms in the country and learning the language are useful tools.

Language-learning is not an expectation for most agencies in Burma, unlike, say, Thailand where it is more often considered that one really should learn the language. The Burmese have a stronger heritage of English speaking than the Thais do, due to their colonial history, and a lot of officials want to speak English as a matter of pride (Griffiths, TLMI 2009). Nonetheless, one of the best ways to gain insight into culture is through language, and many key people in the country including many connected with senior officials do not have strong English skills. Those who are fluent in Myanmar speak highly of the advantage speaking the language creates:

Being able to speak Burmese language ... when we meet with officials it’s relaxed ... there’s no need for translation ... they are less afraid of miscommunication ... By understanding language and culture you understand a way of thinking ... even if you don’t agree with the perspective, by understanding it you understand why a decision is made ... [It] really helps you to be more confident in building relationships with local communities, government officials, and authorities ... when you [speak the language], it’s got a very high value here. (Griffiths, TLMI 2009)

6.6 Conclusions on Context-Sensitive Development in Communities

INGO’s clearly find the need to contextualise their development approaches toward local communities in Myanmar in order to ensure and enhance effectiveness, due to the domestic-international political nexus embroiling the country and other contextual
factors. Within communities this largely involves intensifying efforts to generate genuine participation, ensure equity and effective empowerment, and offer the best chance of sustaining the results of development interventions, rather than limiting or restricting these activities because of the authoritarian context. These findings both highlight the need for context-sensitivity in the application of development principles, and demonstrate that the popular idea that Myanmar is too restrictive an environment for effective poverty alleviation is based on a lack of understanding of the actual situation inside the country. While effective long-term sustainability of development requires engagement at more than merely the community level, this research demonstrates that relief can be delivered for the immediate impacts of poverty inside Myanmar.

Effective INGO community development places additional emphasis on high levels of participation in development, but a process and greater timeline is needed to elicit this genuine involvement and overcome the obstacle of fear evident in Myanmar. In such a divided and hierarchical society, capture of such community-led development by powerful groups is likely unless power imbalances based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion and political affiliation are directly addressed within programs, making equity concerns a significant issue. Equity in Myanmar embraces gender inequality, but also extends into many other arenas of discrimination and marginalisation. Sensitivity to the local context involves efforts at peace-building, building social capital, and remaining conflict-sensitive in all development programming.

The goal of community participatory development is long-term sustainability of results. In light of the restrictions most organisations face preventing them from engaging in local government capacity building, many of the more-effective INGOs deliberately plan from the outset to develop village community-based organisations as a means to facilitate sustainability beyond the direct involvement of the agency. However, in order to do no harm most INGOs feel the need to take on most advocacy roles themselves, and feel active citizenship in terms of empowering communities to advocate with authorities on their own above the local level may neither be possible nor desirable. Most INGOs feel they should assume any advocacy role on behalf of communities, for the time being.

NGO leaders and many INGO leaders also felt development must take the people's religion particularly seriously in Myanmar, so while religion can often be a cause of
division and conflict, FBOs and religious leaders or institutions seeking to work with the community in development-like projects should be actively engaged as a means of strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital. Many therefore advocate deliberate inclusion of local FBOs, religious leaders and religious institutions into partnerships and to participate in programs. INGO leaders who are more fluent in Burmese language and who have been in the country longer also highlight the importance a personal understanding of Burmese language provides to understanding the culture and to building effective trust relationships with authorities, and thus advocate much longer terms for senior appointments by INGOs to the country, with a budget to become fluent in the language before taking on their role. These examples, therefore, demonstrate many of the context-sensitive adaptations INGOs need to make to global INGO development approaches in order to enhance development effectiveness.
Chapter SEVEN: Context-Sensitivity in Stakeholder Relationships

The unique history of Burma/Myanmar ... calls for unique solutions to rather common international problems that many states share, although those in Myanmar are exacerbated.  

(Steinberg 2010b:xxx)

Excerpt from personal interview with David Tegenfeldt, Senior Advisor with Hope International Development Agency  
29th June 2009, Yangon.

David just loved telling stories. He continued:

In those days [1991-1992], when I was travelling in here and when we first started working up in Kachin State, ... we were only the fifth organisation to sign an agreement at that time, and the international agencies were only working in the satellite townships around Mandalay and Yangon and in northern Rakhine with the Rohinga – the rest of the country was untouched ...

The very first official trip I took after we signed our MOU was a project trip down the river from Myitkyina. We had a small team, an initial team we had hired, maybe 4-5 people on the trip. We were going to meet village leaders down the river. They sent a special branch police officer with us—a fairly seasoned guy. My initial reaction was, 'Why is he along? This is an intrusion. He is going to make us look like we are with the government or with the police. And we don’t want to have that identity.' But my national colleagues treated him like he was a member of our team, sharing their food with him. By the time we were not even done sharing with leaders and our health worker and midwife about our health education messages, he became so excited that he began delivering the messages himself directly to the villagers, saying to the villagers, 'You really need to listen to these ladies, because you see those big goitres you have, well that means that the brain development of your children is being stunted. It is not just the goitres.' He was giving the whole message! 'You really need to get iodised salt. This is something that is really important for your young people and the future of your village'. He was delivering our message.
The long and the short of it is that by the time we finished our 2-3 day trip, he explained to me that we were doing exceedingly good work that the government would very much welcome, and in his required report directly to the Northern Commander he would give us a very positive recommendation. He said we would have nothing to worry about from the government. The next time, a few weeks later, I came up to Myitkyina, probably within 20-30 minutes he showed up. He had told the staff they had to inform him the moment I showed up, but the reason he came was not to monitor me, he came to report to me about his meeting with the commander. He told me how well the meeting with the commander had gone, how happy the commander was, how relieved, that we were actually a good organisation and that he was not going to have to worry about us. And he told me, you will have no problems going forward. You will be fine.

Now, I could never have convinced the commander myself that we were an okay organisation, but a trusted emissary of his who had monitored us for a few days and become convinced we were doing good work—he opens the door wider for us. And that, I learned that from our national staff. It wasn’t my natural inclination. My inclination was to stay as far away from this guy as much as possible and give him as little opportunity to intrude on our visit to these villages as possible.
Chapter 7: Context-Sensitivity in Stakeholder Relationships

One of the greatest issues complicating the work of INGOs in Myanmar is the strained relationships between the Myanmar government and the Myanmar people, and between the Myanmar government and the international community. The complex socio-political context therefore impacts on INGO stakeholder relationships even more solidly than it does on INGO development work in communities.

This chapter explores how INGOs manage these relationships with other stakeholder inside the country, considering relationships with local civil society, NGOs, government officials and other agencies. It explores context-sensitivity in relations with domestic stakeholders under the ideas of partnerships and capacity building, advocacy, rights-based approaches to development, and accountability. Again responses are presented phenomenologically from the INGO point of view, with analysis interspersed. INGOs approach working with civil society, local NGOs and officials quite differently in Myanmar than they would in most other countries, finding need to limit and adapt many of their approaches in the highly politicised Myanmar context. Much of this can be directly linked to the various restrictions stemming from either or both the domestic and international political environments.

The next chapter, Chapter Eight, will then explore how INGOs negotiate to create and enlarge the humanitarian space in Myanmar, both with the Myanmar government, but particularly with the international community.

7.1  Partnerships and Capacity Building Civil Society, NGOs and Newer INGOs

7.1.1  Civil Society and NGOs

It has long been recognised that INGOs need to move from being service providers to equal partners with civil society in facilitating development (Paldron 1987). Strengthening civil society is essential to promoting self-help and overcoming both paternalism and dependency (Frantz 1987). As a result, capacity building and local organisational development are primary objectives for many development agencies globally; "Instead of local organisations being the means for sustaining projects, projects are now seen as means for strengthening local organisations" (Pettit 2000).
The capacity and development of civil society in Myanmar has, however, long been constrained by government policy and action restricting basic freedoms (Liddell 1997; Steinberg 1997; ICG 2001). A decade ago, Steinberg wrote that "The military have destroyed whatever remnants of civil society ... existed in the country. The private groups that continue are controlled or authorised by the state" (Steinberg 2001:53), while Skidmore described it as the "strangulation of civil society through censorship, propaganda, self-censorship, informers, and the surveillance and regulation of the public space" (Skidmore 2003:9).

Because of this recognition that civil society has long been a restricted space in Myanmar, this was an aspect respondents were directly interviewed about in some depth. What they demonstrated was a clear agreement that over the last decade or so a very active civil society has begun to re-emerge, often not registered and usually not large, but very active. One respondent described much of it as attempting to operate "below-the-radar" (Lancelot, MDM 2009; Lorch 2007). The response to Cyclone Nargis clearly demonstrated both the resurgence of this "informal" civil society, and also how robust this sector has become in such a short space of time (CPCS 2008).

This response to Cyclone Nargis is entirely consistent with traditional perceptions of authority and rulership discussed in Chapter Four. Despite the military's perception of itself as being the only effective protector and provider of development for the people, the local response to the disaster was to organise self-help, leading to the re-establishment of scores of civil society groups and community networks.

Since Nargis there has thus been a large push to develop partnerships between local and international implementation agencies (Dorning, Burnet 2009). Complicating this is the constrained operating environment, which creates the perception of a high level of risk for civil society actors, as well as most NGOs being very limited in their capacity given their early formation stage (LRC & Oxfam 2010). In reality, few welfare-oriented civil society groups have actually got into serious trouble except in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Naris, however, the fear remains very real.

"There is a widespread recognition from the international community that they don't have enough interaction with local groups" (Dorning, Burnet 2009). The major constraint for
most INGOs wanting to partner with local civil society is this limitation in capacity. This is particularly significant for bigger INGOs with large or more specialised programmes.

A good many INGOs ascribe globally to an ethos of working primarily through local partner organisations, but because of limited local capacity, find themselves needing to still implement most of their programs directly through paid staff in Myanmar. For example, while the global practice of Care International is to minimise the number of their own staff and work primarily through local partners, in Myanmar they have a large staff who directly implement ninety-five per cent of their programs (Aglend, Care 2009). This is something they are seeking to address, but developing the sort of shared culture, ideals and beliefs they look for in a genuine partner takes time.

They are not alone. Médecins Du Monde (MDM) likewise discussed the fact that they work in direct project implementation of projects in Myanmar to an extent they are not happy with, and they would not usually accept in other countries, directly running their own HIV/AIDS clinics and other programs without having the time and resources devoted to capacity building local NGOs they would prefer.

_We absolutely want to build local capacity of local NGOs, CBOs, informal groups, whatever ... And we would like to do hospital cooperation ... [But for now] we are operating as if we are in an emergency situation, and we are not in an emergency._

(Lancelot, MDM 2009)

There are several reasons MDM attribute to this. One is the limited budget they have for projects in Myanmar, constraining them to almost have to choose between their programs or capacity development of potential partners. Another is their inability to find suitable partner organisations. In 2006 MDM conducted a survey to identify suitable partner organisations.

_We found some NGOs claiming to be involved in HIV/AIDS, but ... [it] turned out to be a total disaster. We could not find a single bona fide NGO [with active HIV/AIDS programmes]. Maybe we did not know where to look, that is possible ... We think things have now changed ... We were so busy doing real care and prevention directly, we somehow missed that there was in the last – I would date it maybe 5 years – I think there has been the development of a very active civil society._

(Lancelot, MDM 2009)

MDM’s desire and commitment to partner are not in dispute, but limited local capacity has been a major constraining factor until now. Like MDM, many INGOs in Myanmar
would prefer to focus on technical cooperation and capacity building of local NGOs and civil society, even of government departments, as they do in other countries, rather than direct programme implementation. The limiting factors are most commonly scale, governance, and management and evaluation skills of potential partners. Many of the emerging civil society groups wanting to partner with can’t even write reports in English, so unless INGO leaders have sufficient Burmese language ability themselves, partnership opportunities are greatly restricted (Griffiths, *TLM* 2009; LRC & Oxfam 2010). A lack of these capacities makes genuine partnership difficult.

Developing potential partner organisations has, therefore, become a conscious high priority for many INGOs over the past couple of years. Several organisations, including Oxfam, ActionAid, SwissAid, and the Burnet Institute, for example, have all made conscious decisions to implement almost all programs through local partnerships and build local capacity rather than directly implement programs themselves, despite this limited local capacity (Dorning, *Burnet* 2009; O’Leary, *ActionAid* 2009; Salai, *Swissaid* 2009; Wells, *Paung Ku* 2009).

For example, SwissAid like to consider the local partner as the more important side of the relationship, and one of their principles is to attempt to commence a partnership not based on the project as much as on who the partner is and how the process and partnership is constructed (Salai, *Swissaid* 2009). Several centres have been set up to directly further civil society partnerships and capacity development, including Paung Ku (Wells, *Paung Ku* 2009), the Local Resource Centre (Herzbruch, *LRC* 2009) and the Capacity Building Initiative (Ngwe Thein, *CBI* 2009). The greatest challenges INGOs face are identifying suitable candidates then building their organisational capacity, and taking them from being small and unregistered organisations into ones with sufficient size and management skill to partner, often also involving assistance with the process of attempted registration. Capacity development of technical skill is far less of a difficulty.

One of the key issues discussed in the literature regarding partnership by large international agencies with civil society and LNOGs anywhere is that, rather than being a mutual trust-relationship based on shared goals, principles, understandings of the causes of poverty, and so on, such partnerships rarely genuinely empower local organisations or help them gain credibility and develop their autonomy and effectiveness (Fowler
1998:140). Instead, partnerships often slide towards patron-client patterns because of the knowledge and resource disparity. "A precondition for authentic partnership is dealing with asymmetric power relations, particularly for donors to delegate 'bounded authority' to the people on the ground which are context-specific" (Yonekura 2000:44).

Partnerships based on long-term commitment, shared responsibility, reciprocal obligation, shared credit for results, mutuality and balance of power are not common in any area of life, quite uncommon on the field with development (Fowler 2000a:3). It is therefore perhaps surprising that a common criticism made by NGOs in Myanmar is that where large NGOs do partner with them, NGOs often complain that the NGOs "see the local partners as their implementers, not in any sense of true partnership" (Dorning, Burnet 2009). Most NGOs working in partnership with NGOs feel a power imbalance in the relationship, due to NGO control of knowledge, skills, and funding, although the NGOs often do not themselves perceive the power balance (LRC & Oxfam 2010).

NGOs perceive their strength to be the provision of local knowledge, but in many cases they talked about decision-making mostly lying with the international partners. While this is not an uncommon criticism globally, it persists in Myanmar even where the NGO is aware of the issue and significant attention is given to minimising its impact. This size of the power disparity is such that many NGOs have a fear of large international agencies coming in and rolling over really good local initiatives (Dorning, Burnet 2009).

Dealing with such asymmetric power relations when local civil society is still limited in capability and vulnerable is a particularly thorny problem most agencies are still grappling with. Oxfam, for example, deal with this by not expecting all partners to be equal, identifying a range of 'project partners,' who interact around implementation of programs, while concurrently focussing on significantly developing the capacity a few 'strategy partners' who have demonstrated both strategic innovation and that they adequately share the culture, ideals and beliefs of Oxfam (Win, Oxfam 2009).

Likewise, SwissAid distinguish between three types of partnership based on the capacity of the partner organisation, from newly-formed community-based organisations to mature local organisations with clear vision and mission who are able to effectively manage complex projects, negotiate with other donors themselves, and apply for
registration (LRC & Oxfam 2010). SwissAid then retain long-term, largely non-financial partnerships with strategic partners who share a common interest and ethos. The fact that most local organisations are not registered is an additional obstacle to partnerships for many INGOs. Many local organisations consider the greater risk of being scrutinised and controlled disincentives, such that they do not wish to pursue registration (e.g. Source 11; Source 12; Source 30; Source 32; Source 37; Source 38; Source 39 2009), and registration is nigh impossible for other local organisations. However, many international institutional donors don't want to take the risk of investing money into groups that are not registered, so it is not uncommon for INGOs to partner with smaller unregistered organisations to facilitate this. It can be tricky: "you find funding but you have to carry it for them since institutional donors will not take the risk of investing money in a group that is not registered, that is not controllable" (Lancelot, MDM 2009). Duffield (2008:36) provocatively refers to this practice in Myanmar as "aid laundering", citing similar examples of funds flowing from a donor through a UN agency to an INGO, who administer the funding on behalf of an unregistered local NGO who would not otherwise be funded. He suggests this is directly "due to the restrictive international climate."

Agencies like MDM find that not only do they need to find funding for small, unregistered local organisation, and carry it on their own books, but their lack of size and organisation means most of what they can do is find small amounts of money to access capacity building programs for them from other NGOs or the UN, “push these people to organise”, then scale up what they are doing if the LNGOs can reach a scale to register (Lancelot, MDM 2009). However, operating such partnerships under an umbrella of an INGO exacerbates power and control issues (Source 20 2009). One other issue resulting from the relatively small number of LNGOs who do have experience and reasonable organisational capacity is that multiple INGOs and donors often cluster around them competitively, something which can undermine their autonomy and ability to operate (Source 33; Source 37 2009; also LRC & Oxfam 2010).

Two recent reports raise several other concerns regarding potential issues stemming from partnerships in Myanmar with LNGOs of limited organisational capacity. Caution is expressed over the fact that most LNGOs are led by leaders from minority groups, meaning partnership can itself potentially favour minorities, exacerbating ethnic tension capacity (Desaine 2011). Paung Ku, a local consortium focusing on capacity building of
local NGOs and CBOs, agrees, expressing concern at the number of examples of partnership with INGOs increasing interpersonal, inter-community and inter-ethnic tension. Likewise, most NGOs are led by a single charismatic leader in whose hands most of the power lies, with a team of staff. Mirroring the authoritarian structures of the state and the military, some behavioural similarities are noted. "The NGO sector offers a rare opportunity for the pursuit of power by leaders, besides military, armed groups and recent political parties" (Desaine 2011:106). In such a context partnerships carry a dangerous potential to concentrate power to a few individuals, undermining the community support and democratic representation civil society should bring (Wells 2009).

One recent report notes that to register NGOs need to act in ways which respect and help the regime save face, limiting their capacity to confront or attempt to change the system (Desaine 2011:106). This idea that civil society should "confront" the state and "change the system" is a very limited view of the role of civil society in authoritarian states, where respect for ‘face’ and connections with the regime are elements of context-sensitivity which can enhance voice and change is often more evolutionary. It does mean, however, that publically most civil society in Myanmar concentrates primarily on meeting practical needs within the society.

Nonetheless, despite the complications of such partnerships the Burmese nationals and NGOs interviewed definitely want to see more of these capacity building partnerships with unregistered civil society groups, as partnerships which deliberately design capacity building elements into the implementation of shared projects.

7.1.2 Faith-Based and Religious Organisations

Approaching this research, the focus was on the complex socio-political issues not religion or culture. Interview respondents were therefore not directly asked questions relating to religion or culture. Nonetheless, several INGO respondents chose to raise religion and the faith-base of many civil society and NGO actors.

The importance of sensitivity to culture has been discussed extensively in Chapter Two. However, despite the fact that religion is a defining force within culture in much of the
world, religion and faith-based institutions have largely been marginalised and ignored in the development discourse, treated either as irrelevant or an impediment (Marshall 2001; Ver Beek 2002; Selinger 2004; Clarke 2011). Most religious adherents do not separate their religious belief from the economic and political spheres of life, thus development strategy must seriously account for the role of religion as a powerful aspect of public culture and faith-based organisations as significant actors if development is to be both successful and sustainable (Tyndale 2000; Selinger 2004; WFDD 2001). Avoidance of the topic of spirituality or of religious institutions or organisations results in less effective programmes (Ver Beek 2002). The role of the beliefs of the outsider is especially sensitive in this regard. Faith and religious organisations are often a powerful source of social capital in communities (Candland 2000), and significant actors in development issues.

However, as the UNFPA (2010) point out, "Too often the strengths (efficacy, commitment, knowledge, networks and influence) and experience of FBOs are overlooked by development planners", as well as in development partnerships. More often, local religious leaders and institutions are either ignored or seen as empowered elite whose excessive influence needs to be countered through more equitable, participatory approaches. As a result, many faith institutions have chosen to position themselves outside the development sector when working to improve lives in the local community, often viewing the work and approaches of development institutions with scepticism (Marshall 2001; Clarke 2008).

Myanmar is a deeply religious society, making these issues particularly pertinent:

|This is a very religious society here in Burma, and we set up quite an artificial barrier between religion and community development when we have to always keep it separate ... That is not to say that we should be tolerant of groups that may want to use development work to proselytise or convert others to their religion ... But I think that international agencies ... [for] fear of that ... want to separate it so much that it becomes artificial for local community.|

(Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009)

Prior to the recent boom of new actors in the civil society space, local religious institutions and what might be loosely termed FBOs are the most prevalent civil society in Myanmar (Steinberg 1997), and even today most civil society in the country has a religious base. The higher status the culture has afforded religious leaders, and the perception by officials that religious groups will remain largely apolitical, has given these organisations an
advantage, allowing them to operate more freely than most non-religious civil society groups. As one Burman Buddhist former manager with a UN agency remarked,

Where natural CBOs have perished, church or religious organisations have not ... there is a very great religious toleration in Myanmar ... [and] there is a big role being played by faith based organisations, who have taken up a very big and challenging role, especially after 1988 ... The church leaders and religious organisations provide a very important link between the 'rulers' and 'the ruled'. (Source 41 2009)

As a result, a very large percentage of civil society groups today are either FBOs, or have religious connections. Most others, because of their religious roots or the sincere religious beliefs of their members, are what the LRC describe as strongly "values-driven", meaning workers are highly motivated by spiritual beliefs such as the earning of merit (LRC & Oxfam 2010:32-33).

It is natural for INGOs who are faith-based to partner with local faith-based organisations. What is more unusual is that a number of respondents from secular INGOs noted that when they partner with local organisations they too were more likely to partner with faith-based organisations than secular NGOs. Several secular INGOs even suggested that working with local religiously-affiliated partners is often beneficial in Myanmar (Source 19 2009; Agland, Care 2009). The country director of one secular INGO remarked, "Most of our local partners have a religious affiliation. It helps a lot" (Source 20 2009).

However, working with local religiously-connected civil society can have complications. The lack of resources of these local FBOs mean that they often operate out of a religious premises, a complication for many secular INGOs and bilateral donors (Source 20 2009), raising fears of INGO programming becoming linked to proselytisation efforts by local religious institutions. Indeed, a recent report has suggested that most local NGOs and civil society has a religious (or sometimes an ethnic or political connection), and therefore often have additional agendas they seek to pursue alongside or through their social activities (Desaine 2011).

On the positive side, local faith-connected agencies are more likely to operate under some form of registration, and even if not they are better tolerated than secular unregistered local NGOs (Agland, Care 2009). Likewise, because they have been around longer and have a natural connection to their faith organisations internationally, agencies with a
religious connection are more likely to have organisation, scale, and governance more in keeping with Western requirements (Source 20 2009). Those groups from Christian backgrounds, in particular, have often been able to maintain connections with the global Christian community, and thus often better understand the requirements of Western agencies and have better English skills to support this.

The Buddhist sangha generally have better connections with local authorities, and provide significant social cohesion, being, as Goodwin-Dorning (2007:16) expresses it, "cultural guardians of knowledge" in a range of significant areas. However, one director of a secular (not faith-based) INGO cautioned,

> It is much harder to work with the sangha. We have tried it. If the concept of participatory development is weak within the church, then within the sangha it is a lot more alien ... [When] people donate to the head monk, and the head monk decides how the money is spent. (Source 20 2009)

The sangha traditionally had the primary role in education, and still play a substantial role in this area (Goodwin-Dorning 2007). They also redistribute food and provide emergency housing and so on to the extremely poor in their communities. However, beyond meeting such immediate needs in a more ad hoc fashion, as a Buddhist informant expressed it,

> Buddhist monks historically have not been good at social work, but they do take a charitable role providing food for the poor, and opening monastic schools that provide both food and education to children. (Source 41 2009)

Nonetheless, partnering with FBOs has largely proven effective, particularly when they include "representatives from both the Buddhist and Christian communities.... But that is difficult" (Source 20 2009).

The feedback from local LNGOs, however, is that INGOs far too readily bypass local religious and faith-based organisations, rather than approaching them as part of the community and part of civil society (Source 37; Source 41 2009; Saboi Jum, Shalom 2009; Salai, Swissaaid 2009). Myanmar culture includes respect for religious leaders and volunteering with religious organisations, both of which are advantages INGOs should build on rather than resist because of some foreign secular organisational ideology (Source 41 2009).
Smaller, Newer INGOs

Most newer and smaller organisations to Myanmar work through partnerships (at least initially), either working under the MOU of another INGO or implementing small projects without official approval in urban-fringe areas which do not have access restrictions, operating "under the radar" and partnering with a local registered company, an unregistered local organisation, or a faith-based group (Source 8; Source 11; Source 12; Source 14; Source 25 2009). This latter model, in particular, is widely used by INGOs based outside the country who do not have permanent local or expatriate staff inside Myanmar and do not have an MOU with the government for their projects. Under this arrangement, the local organisation becomes the project implementer, and the INGO primarily provides funding and possibly training, project design and evaluation through periodic visits. One commented, "We don’t have a generic work of our own. We’ve primarily worked with people that are already doing it and build our model from theirs" (Source 14 2009).

As a consequence of the restrictions they face, their projects often remain few and much smaller than registered organisations. Working through local partners, these INGOs often do not need to maintain much direct interaction with local township officials or military personnel (Source 14 2009). However, as they grow the pressure for some sort of official status increases, and with no MOU they do face a range of additional restrictions. For example, they are unable to apply for travel permission themselves, and are thus often restricted in terms of the regions they can visit. One regional manager explained the consequences for project monitoring and evaluation

*We recently completed our first project evaluation, with a foreigner travelling in. However, the foreigner could not access the villages. I, too, have not been able to go to many of our places, so it is hard to get accurate evaluations.* (Source 11 2009)

In some cases the intent is to maintain this arrangement indefinitely, to avoid the need for excessive interaction with officials. This is particularly true of smaller INGOs, who do not feel they have the resources to commit to the implications of registration. However, other new INGOs maintain this arrangement as part of a strategy to personally build rapport with local authorities through delivering several successful development projects, with a view towards potentially ultimately negotiating their own MOU and placing personnel
inside the country in the longer term. Naturally, each of these organisations sought anonymity in this research.

Several organisations working from outside the country in this manner indicated they would love to bring in staff and open an office immediately, but the complexity of negotiating an MOU was keeping them out. More than one such organisation described how they had limited their projects and funding into Myanmar because of complications in their relationship with their partner, stemming largely from not having personnel on the ground often enough, or because their unregistered partner organisation feared that if the program grew too much or became too effective it would attract unwanted attention. A couple of other organisations wondered why they might want to formally negotiate an MOU and invite the additional scrutiny, suggesting remaining unregistered and informal offered advantages of greater anonymity.

7.2 Partnerships and Capacity Building Government Officials

If a white elephant is defined as something expensive to maintain and useless, then international Burma policy has many white elephants! But if there is one I would recommend we change quickly, it is capacity building ... technical capacity. (Thant Myint-U 2011)

*We should not think of the government authorities are our enemies. We should receive their assistance for the benefit of the people.* (Salai, Swissaid 2009)

Building the capacity of government agencies and departments, and strengthening state institutions and civil service is widely seen as essential for sustained economic development (e.g. ESCAP/ADB/UNDP 2007). A few UN agencies, such as FAO, have sufficient mandate and good relationship to work in close partnership with and capacity-build Myanmar government departments (Imai, FAO 2009). The FAO has been working in Myanmar since 1978, and operates out of government facilities in Yangon, advising government on policy, running a range of capacity building programs, and running joint emergency and rehabilitation programs alongside the ministry. Such UN agency leaders are highly pragmatic about their role: “*our work is apolitical, it is technical ... working with the host government in the country will allow us to best help the people we want to help*” (Ghermazien, FAO 2009); “*every country has politics ... we have to work together [with the*
government]...If you come here as a guest to contribute to this country, you have less problems” (Imai, FAO 2009). Still, despite the freedom in their mandate, and long-term close working relationships with the government, even the FAO acknowledge that “many restrictions happen” (Imai, FAO 2009).

However, most agencies, whether UN or INGO, lack such a mandate or the funding to work closely with government departments. For most INGOs, partnership with government officials and departments is very complex, and fraught with tension. On one side, restrictions applied by donors, boards and the international community to prevent funds flowing to those connected to the regime often include officials down to the township (local government) level (Source 1 2009). On the other side, many officials are deeply suspicious of the motives of INGOs and their donors (Source 16; Source 31; Source 50 2009).

They don’t want input. They are not interested in it. At a very high level, MOH [Ministry of Health] very much does not particularly wish to participate. International staff do not have access to hospitals, officially. I am not allowed to walk into a hospital. Most hospital directors would not allow me to walk in to their wards ... The first, big reason we don’t have a lot of care cooperation with MOH is because they don’t want it.” (Source 18 2009)

As already noted, ”The regime believes INGOs are not just there to do a specific task, but to organise politically against the regime” (Source 50 2009). Many officials in higher positions in the departments don’t want partnership "because they don’t want the strings which they feel are attached to aid; they don’t feel they can control aid" (Lancelot, MDM 2009).

This fierce independence and second-guessing of motives by officials on both sides is nothing new. It stems not only from the strained relationships between Burmese military governments and the international community over recent decades, but reverberates with the Burman-British struggles of the colonial era and the democratic post-independence state—as well as echoing centuries of tension and posturing between Burmese monarchs and European expansionism dating back to the sixteenth century. This tension was documented in Chapter Four.
What is actually surprising is that despite the tensions most INGOs find that, at least at a local township level, most local authorities do want help and do want partnership, so long as it is genuine and non-political.

At a more technical level, if you talk with doctors, they are very much concerned that they need, and would very much love to receive, some help, as long as they can manage that contradiction—as long as their technical people can receive the aid without it becoming a political thing that then puts them into problems with MOH. (Lancelot, MDM 2009).

To begin to connect in this way, many agencies deliberately invite township-level officials to their training events. One bilateral donor spoke of the positive experience they had providing specific technical assistance and training to township-level officials during the fight against Avian Flu: they "found ministries to be very professional and motivated ... [with] no leakage of money" (Source 1 2009). However, building partnership relationships requires "spending a little more time and effort building relationships [with officials] here than in other countries ... because relationships are often clearer in other countries" (Tumbian, WV 2009). And because of the tension, political forces on both sides work against partnership. One respondent complained about the inequalities which their funding guidelines force them to perpetrate, not allowing them to pay the travel expenses of low-paid civil servants attending their training when they do pay these expenses for all other participants: something, "very frustrating for us and for them" (Agland, Care 2009). Another found that the township officials who were most open and interested were quickly moved to another area (Source 24 2009).

One INGO implemented a three-way partnership in a community-level livelihood program, between themselves, a local implementing partner, and a government agency (Source 25 2009). They provided funding, strategy and training, while the local partner handled all direct implementation in the community. No funding went to the government agency, and despite the strained nature of the relationship they found that including officials in the partnership promoted healthy dialogue and coordination. However, another agency attempting similar involvement expressed frustration that in such approaches local officials are almost seconded to be included in INGO projects, rather than any genuine partnership being generated (Agland, Care 2009).
Western concerns about corruption in partnership with officials appear less significant:

_I have had less problems with corruption in Burma than in Laos or Thailand ... The problem is mostly with business ... there is definitely less corruption when it comes to aid (except exchange rate, big issues) because most locals are concerned about the poverty of the people._ (Source 31 2009)

This correlates with Pedersen's research, which found that

_neither manipulation of aid for political purposes nor corruption is a huge problem for those organizations that remain vigilant, or at least, not greater than in a number of other fragile states._ (Pedersen 2010:123)

Likewise, not all officials at all levels are tainted with the same regime brush, as is commonly intimated by some in the wider international community. Reflecting on her own experience, the Western adviser to one unregistered LNGO noted that,

_I learned to differentiate government from civil servants, and many of them are committed to their own people and their own people getting educated. There are some really, really good people in the civil service._ (Source 37 2009)

Thus despite the obstacles, many INGOs expressly indicate that if they were given more freedom, this would be something they would do more frequently. One key Burmese worker with a UN agency who, because he is Burmese, had a great deal of experience working in communities without the presence of the government liaison officers that accompany foreign staff, argued that INGOs need to find ways to overcome the clear tensions and competition, and that cooperation or partnership with officials is an essential component of facilitating the political change the outside world is seeking in Myanmar:

_Once the INGO leaves the local authority comes and claims the credit. That does not mean anything. We should allow that. We should see that as a positive thing – let them take ownership, support it! ... A key role for INGOs is to gain trust from the government. The government knows it needs to change, but feels threatened. We need to allow them to own the changes at the village level. Only the INGOs can offer that – the local people can't. The INGO must learn to work with (but not through) the government._ (Source 41 2009)

One respondent noted that where communities take the lead on an integrated development project they sometimes take the initiative to instigate inclusion of township officials on their own, when they have good relationships with local authorities already and believe partnership with them is the most efficient way to achieve their development goals (Source 30 2009).
Partnering with government officials requires access to funds with little in the way of restrictions. Respondents who have done so describe the positive outcomes that come from partnering with officials. For example, when Nargis struck The Leprosy Mission International (Griffiths, TLMI 2009) realised both that this was going to be a big issue for people with disabilities, but also that the Social Welfare Department was going to be overloaded with proposals—so they rang the department and asked what additional equipment they would need to be able to process the coming administrative mountain, and provided it. Prior to that they had been working with local partners, but finding things hard going, and while they did this with a motive to ensure people with disabilities were cared for after the cyclone, they found the strengthened relationship most empowering for their work.

*When their seniors come, they get top marks for having done a good job ... Then getting top marks because we helped them gives them flexibility to grant more operational freedom to us. We did this not with the aim of greasing the relationship, but ... [later] they just said, “Do whatever you want to do, we know you, we trust you, just go and do it. We’ll sign the papers later” – [even in areas we] haven’t really had operating permission before.* (Griffiths, TLMI 2009)

TLMI were subsequently commissioned to write a disability protection plan and disability access guidelines for public buildings in Naypyidaw under the SPDC, and now since the elections to help draft disability legislation to be introduced into the new parliament. To them, this clearly demonstrates the extent to which constructive engagement around mutual priorities can bring enhanced influence for change, and is a requisite for lasting development outcomes in the country (Griffiths, TLMI 2011).

*Relationship building often comes through being willing to recognise and work with the agendas of other people. ... No matter who’s in charge of the country in the future, the same group of civil servants are going to provide these services, so up-skilling and resourcing them is not necessarily putting money into the hands of restricted people. And by strengthening their hand, it strengthens their ability to do a lot of good things that they want to be doing.* (Griffiths, TLMI 2009)

Many respondents agreed that,

*If we are going to see any kind of long term development going the way we want it to go in Myanmar, we are going to have to start now to build up the level of the people who work in the administration. Because, whether there is reform or outright change, we are going to have to work with the same people ... [but] we can’t currently do that.* (Source 20 2009)
Thus, at one level this translates into building the capacity of officials within townships, departments and ministries, often in some very basic ways:

> If they don’t know how to use a typewriter, let alone a computer, where are you leaving the next persons who are going to take over the country, who have better intentions than the ones we have today? You are really giving them an impossible starting point. (Source 20 2009)

At a deeper level, it can involve actively involving officials in projects:

> I came to this situation seeing my government counterparts as an intrusion into the work that we were trying to do in communities, and therefore trying to keep them away from meddling … What I learned right away was that if we used an approach of trying to make friends of our counterparts and using very transparent ways of working, we could in fact either work together, or they would be too busy to spend time trying to monitor what we were doing … If we treated them as obstacles or as ones who wanted to interfere, that would almost be a self-fulfilling prophecy … But if in some ways we treat them as a partner … solicit their input … government counterparts, or even special branch police or military intelligence, can sometimes be a better ambassador for me than I could ever be for myself. (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009)

Duffield (2008) argued that the main role of INGOs in Myanmar is to "push back, contain or modulate the effects of unchecked, arbitrary personal power" by all connected to the regime. Clearly many UN and INGO leaders do not agree. For example, the country liaison for the ILO in Myanmar argues that one very key obstacle to effective long-term development work in Myanmar is the absence of a cohesive civil service who can implement the high-level policy initiatives agencies are currently negotiating with senior officials (Marshall, ILO 2009). This view makes capacity building the civil service essential, somehow. It is unmistakable that funding and mandate restrictions on partnership with officials are a point of great frustration for many international agencies. Given the emphasis on poverty alleviation in President Thein Sein’s inauguration speech (NLM 2011b) and subsequent signs of policy development around this goal, INGOs are increasingly thinking that this is the right time to explore capacity building partnerships with the civil service (Herzbruch, LRC 2011).

The danger, of course, in building a good relationship with government officials is that "you may be perceived from the outside as being too close; you have to tread a fine line" (Source 15 2009). Many of the UN and INGO leaders making the comments above, particularly those who self-assess their work in Myanmar as more effective, felt the need to defend themselves against being labelled regime apologists. For example,
The reason I am here and working inside the country is not because I see the systems as any better than my colleagues on the other side of the border see them. The reason I am here is because I think these systems are really evil, they are really bad for the people. And the people will benefit, including those in the military will benefit, from change in these very destructive systems that are in place now. Lest people think, and some people do think, or would like to describe me, as too close to the regime and that is why I am here. Absolutely not! The reason I am here is because there is a lot of suffering, it is due to the bad systems that are in place, and those systems need to change. (Source 16 2009)

7.3 Rights Based Approach

Definitions of a Rights-Based Approach (RBA) to development diverge greatly between various authorities and agencies. One definition suggests that RBA simply means ensuring every programme, policy or process of development remains conducive to, and furthers the realisation of and overall respect for, universally recognised human rights (Gouwenberg 2009). However, an RBA usually conceptualises poverty "as the direct result of disempowerment and exclusion" (ACFID 2009:5). Since exclusion constitutes a denial of human rights, an RBA seeks to address poverty by empowering rights-holders. A central aim of an RBA is thus "a positive transformation of power relations" for those in poverty (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004:iii). The grounding of such an approach in human rights legislation makes it distinctively different to other approaches to development, repoliticising development work. To many, an RBA wants to be a normative framework for development that "puts politics at the very heart of development practice" (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004:2).

Rights-holders are usually seen to be citizens. Domestic governments are usually seen to be the prime duty bearer (ACFID 2009), as the authority vested with the responsibility under human rights law to ensure the rights of citizens are not violated either by themselves or other actors. In theory, there are a diversity of duty bearers. Governments themselves are not monolithic, with a diverse range of levels of government, public service departments and government sponsored organisations, as well as the army and agencies such as the Myanmar Development Resource Institute and Myanmar National Human Rights Commission. Other duty bearers include businesses, civil organisations, community members, and even the international community, all of whom may have obligations as duty bearers under international human rights law.
An RBA seeks to hold duty-bearers to account under international human rights legislation, empowering the poor "to claim their rights and to change the social structures that keep them poor" (ACFID 2009:6). In particular, the RBA seeks to assist marginalised poor people assert their rights to a fair share of existing resources and power, including provision of basic services and an equitable application of the law, "making the process explicitly political" (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004:3).

In practice, the primary duty bearer is widely taken to be the national government—particularly in a state with a reputation of state violation of human rights—and an RBA is often seen as a "vehicle for increasing the accountability of government organisations to their citizens" (Ferguson 1999:23).

The RBA is a contentious topic amongst INGOs in Myanmar, and seen by practitioners to almost always refer to holding government officials or agencies accountable, including the army and USDP. Several organisations interviewed have adopted the RBA globally as their approach to development, yet in order to "do no harm" and not put people at risk, work in Myanmar instead in a more reserved way to advocate for basic services, recognising that poverty itself is a violation of human rights (Source 24 2009). The ILO, with their mandate to work against forced labour, already spend most of their time advising citizens of their rights under existing Myanmar law. They suggest that existing national laws provide a reasonable framework in many areas, and that awareness-raising of rights under these laws is a critical part of development. However, they find that even when people understand their legal rights very few are brave enough to exercise them (Marshall, ILO 2009).

Many interviewees felt an RBA was not appropriate in Myanmar since "the law is in the mouth of the generals; there is nothing down on paper, no real rule of law because what is written can always be manipulated" (Source 16 2009). Some see the RBA as built on concepts not relevant in Myanmar given neither the people nor military leaders believe there are rights;

This country does not believe there are rights. They believe there are needs, but not that there are rights. That is not just the military leaders, that is the rank and file person. The concept of rights is not a very common. (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009)
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Others suggest that many government ministers and key officials actually

*are aware of human rights principles, are concerned, and are trying to improve on them ... but they have very little budget in which to operate ... [Therefore,] criticism is not helpful when officials genuinely are concerned.* (Source 31 2009)

Central to the problem is that international governments and agencies regularly couch their most stinging rebukes in human rights language, to the extent the SPDC government have repeatedly responded by arguing that human rights allegations are being exploited to destabilise the state, and are being raised by certain countries for political advantage more than out of genuine humanitarian concern (e.g. see NLM 2009). One of the greatest obstacles to progress on human rights globally is said to be a "lack of understanding of the psychological legacy of imperialism and colonial rule" (Yasuaki 1999:104). Most nations who are the targets of the most serious criticism for human rights violations were, like Myanmar, previously victims of military intervention and economic exploitation by developed countries via colonialism under slogans like 'humanity' and 'civilisation'. Human rights therefore appears to many former colonial states "like nothing more than another beautiful slogan by which great powers rationalize their interventionist policies" (Yasuaki 1999:104). Human rights allegations have been accused of being co-opted as just "another weapon in the arsenal of Western countries in their efforts to bring recalcitrant Third World nations to heel in their 'New World Order' ... to judge third world governments" (Aziz 1999:39).

The Burmese reaction to human rights allegations reflect all of these, reverberating with the fierce Burman desire to maintain their independence and the rebuff of the long history of poor interaction with European powers discussed in Chapter Four. The SPDC have regularly countered human rights allegations by arguing the hypocrisy of the West in pursuing such claims, and that the upshot of the work of human rights activists is that the people of Myanmar are further denied their human rights by actually restricting the right of the people to economic growth and development (Ware 2010; see for example U Soe Tha 2006).

One common argument is that to overcome local concern of human rights being used to mask cultural imperialism in former colonial states, alternate language must often be employed and local variation in the implementation of rights may be required (An-Na’im &
Hammond 2002). Several INGO respondents argue that gains are being made towards achieving greater human rights in Myanmar, particularly in areas such as forced labour, human trafficking, disability and child protection, but not under the name or using the language of human rights or the RBA.

Interestingly, several interviewees expressed the view that poverty itself had one of the greatest impacts in denying the rights of the people (Source 24 ; Source 28 2009). Pedersen agrees, suggesting "poverty has emerged as the most acutely felt constraint on human rights for the majority of people across the country" (Pedersen 2009:2). This is a widely accepted view: Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, long argued that extreme poverty is "the most serious form of human rights violation in the world today" (UNDP 2003b). Certainly, the Vienna Declaration of the World Conference on Human Rights observed that "the existence of widespread extreme poverty inhibits the full and effective enjoyment of human rights" (UN 1993).

This perspective on human rights and poverty does seem to imply greater shared obligation between the Burmese government and the international community than an RBA sometimes engenders. There is even a view from at least some nationals that, "instead of advocating for political rights, international organisations should start working at the grassroots level strengthening the capacity of society" (Source 41 2009).

Those agencies interviewed who self-assessed their work as most effective in these areas (eg. Source 6 ; Source 16 ; Source 31 2009; Griffiths, TLMI 2009; Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009; Win, Oxfam 2009) believe the RBA agenda is better pursued by building relationship with authorities and appealing for assistance non-confrontationally rather than using the language of responsibilities and rights with an adversarial approach.

### 7.4 Advocacy

Many question whether advocacy works in Myanmar, or has produced any significant outcomes. INGOs point to a wide range of policy change and development to show that advocacy can work, such as human trafficking, drug control, disability strategy, sustainable forestry, and HIV-Malaria-TB prevention (Allan 2009). TLMI point to recent invitations for
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INGOs to assist in drafting legislation surrounding disability, the elderly, and the protection of women and children (Griffiths, TLM/ 2011). One of the limitations for work in Myanmar, though, is that these advances generally take place quietly, and receive little press or credit in the international arena. President Thein Sein's enthusiasm for the alleviation of extreme rural poverty could also be taken as an advocacy win.

However, progress in advocacy seems as related to the issue as it does to the methodology and approach, with items related to security or involving budgetary reallocations making less progress, and change related to technical matters or local needs is more likely to succeed than calls for political policy change. For example, despite much advocacy increases to health and education spending have been minimal (Source 19 2009).

Respondents widely agreed that sustainable change is not possible through village-by-village interventions alone, but will require major policy change to address, for example, education, healthcare and infrastructure deficiencies, and secure things like property rights and access to finance. "[Advocacy] is really the main thing we need to do" (Lancelot, MDM 2009). Yet most INGOs are "particularly hesitant to pursue fully rational advocacy strategies that would do a better job of leading to more complete overall development in any sense" (Source 30 2009). Several INGOs acknowledged a lack of understanding of government decision-making processes as a cause, particularly once decisions need to go beyond regional or ministry level (Source 18 ; Source 25 2009), while those citing the greatest success argue there is enormous space for advocacy. One UN informant argued that, "Most organisations ... don't engage and negotiate boldly enough behind closed doors. When we push back non-confrontationally, but boldly, they generally move closer to a consensus or compromise solution" (Source 42 2009), Yet these same organisations implied vulnerability for such work by seeking assurances of anonymity for these answers!

Given power in Myanmar is personal, most successful advocacy in Myanmar is personal and non-confrontational. This is typical in authoritarian contexts, where participatory advocacy is often inimical to change because of the nature of the political culture. Advocacy NGOs working in authoritarian contexts can easily adopt means that impact negatively on policies and on the needs of the poor (Tadros 2009), violating the 'do no harm' principle. One respondent spoke of "silent advocacy" (Source 20 2009), by which she meant away from any public spotlight, while the Myanmar Red Cross speak of
"informal advocacy" or "situation sensitive advocacy" (Tha Hla Shwe, MRC 2011). "We can't work in an advocacy-based way" (Source 20 2009). Oxfam prefer to speak of advocacy as "building relationships", and note that success is very dependent upon the individuals involved (Win, Oxfam 2009).

Indeed, "the word 'advocacy' itself, in some cases, makes people afraid" (Tumbian, WV 2009);

Advocacy is not so nearly as helpful a term as dialogue. I would much rather talk about dialogue and engagement than about advocacy. A Western form, a marketing approach, a civil rights based approach to advocacy is simply inappropriate here, but that does not mean you can’t have an advocacy strategy that uses a whole range of tools and techniques to progress exactly the same messages in a very different way, using very different media. (Allan, Spectrum 2009)

Several INGO leaders suggest that,

When we push back non-confrontationally, but boldly, they generally move closer to a consensus or compromise solution. Most organisations don’t strike the right balance – most don't engage and negotiate boldly enough behind closed doors.

(Massella, OCHA 2009)

The most effective approach appears to be through exploring needs and issues together with officials, with no confrontation and no blame, just looking for ways to meet needs together, particularly at the community-township level. "It is more like seeking support or seeking to supplement what the community has already done to help themselves" (Source 24 2009). World Vision explained this advocacy as "report[ing] needs to the government, so they know and so they can even support us by sending their technical people" (Tumbian, WV 2009).

Øyen (2002) argues that such a pedagogical element to advocacy in order to change the minds of authorities is often required anywhere in the world:

Much of the resistance to poverty-reducing practices is due not only to the antagonists' self-interest and the potential loss they may have from redistributive measures; much of their hostility stems from a lack of concrete knowledge about poor people and the causes and consequences of poverty. (Øyen 2002:25)

This approach is most contextual, too, in that under traditional political ideology derived from the ideas of kamma and the dhammaraja (discussed in Chapter Four), Burmese rulers are very aware of their responsibilities towards the poor and the need for
development. Producing development and overseeing a prosperous nation are seen as both the righteous act of a good ruler, and a means to demonstrate their legitimacy to rule. However, these are secondary priorities after the immediate need for state security and control of power have been established, so advocacy approaches which threaten security or challenge the position of authorities can quickly become counter-productive. Avoiding confrontation therefore opens the opportunity to appeal to inherent motives of Burmese political rulers to assist the needy as a form of legitimising their power.

Effectively, such an approach involves adopting methods described in the literature for involving elites in poverty alleviation, despite their vested interests lying elsewhere. Hossain & Moore argue that elites in poverty alleviation do not depend on the elites being altruistic. They argue for,

\[
\text{Involv[ing] national elites in constructive dialogue about the nature, causes of and solutions to poverty, in ways that will maximise their empathy and engagement with the issue, and minimise the danger that they will feel railroaded into responding.} \\
\text{(Hossain & Moore 2002:5).}
\]

Hossain & Moore (2002:10) propose constructing "persuasive narrative around notions of joint gains," rather than by attempting to blame or shame elites into change. This is precisely the approach INGO leaders in Myanmar have found most effective, where advocacy has worked.

\[
\text{Our approach is to make them understand what the reality is ... we give them real information, bring them to reality, bring them to the field, so they can understand what the reality of the situation is. Why would you make other people ashamed? ... If you want to win, don't make other people feel like they have lost.} \\
\text{(Source 6 2009)}
\]

MDM, as a specific example, are engaged in an advocacy campaign seeking to gain acceptance for needle and syringe exchange, as part of an HIV/AIDS strategy. Currently, possession of syringes is taken as proof of drug addiction, and can constitute enough evidence to put people in jail (Lancelot, MDM 2009). They have had success in terms of the needle and syringe exchange program idea being accepted by the Ministry of Health, but the obstacle they have found is to: a) have official policy change endorsed at the highest level; and, b) to have the police and the army take ownership of such a change. One of the greatest issues, they have found, is a lack of understanding on their side of government decision-making processes, and therefore on how to go about targeting an advocacy campaign of that nature to work through the remaining obstacles.
Such influence must be exercised person to person. Using the media, political pressure, or writing has not been effective in Myanmar, at least not until this current juncture. One respondent emphasised that many officials at the township level are genuinely concerned about many of the same issues as development agencies. Advocacy which directly criticises officials who are wanting to assist but hamstrung by policies or budgets is not helpful. (Source 31 2009)

7.5 Accountability

Eyben (2008) argues that mutual accountability in international development is not so much about the parties holding each other to account for performance against pre-established objectives, as about the messy complexity of relationship and process, with notions of mutual responsibility. "Much of what proves with hindsight to be effective aid may well be an outcome of relational approaches." This conception of accountability appears particularly apt in Myanmar, where agencies need to overcome the strained relationship between the West and the Myanmar government in order to operate freely and cooperatively.

Accountability and transparency were not initially within the question framework for this research, but once the issue was raised by several interview participants themselves, questions about accountability were incorporated later in the interview cycle.

INGOs with the greatest ease of access have strong relationships with authorities, built largely through highly transparent dealings with Myanmar officials. Many invest significant time and personnel into government relations (e.g. Agland, Care 2009; Griffiths, TLMI 2009; Purnell, WVI 2011; Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). Transparency is key. Many are

even more transparent [than usual] ... The entire thing that is at stake ... is to build trust ... So we are absolutely transparent in everything we do ... we are trying really to build trust with them, that they see the value of us working with them [and] spread that message that international aid – that it can really bring development and improvement, and that it is not just political ploying. (Lancelot, MDM 2009)

World Vision explained that

We go and talk with the local authority – they know us and question us about what we’re planning to do. And we are very transparent with them: This is our planning,
this is long-term development, this is the type of development where people should participate and do [things] for themselves, people should develop their own decisions about where they would like to go for the future. So everything should be transparent with the local authority. And then through the local authority, they say “OK you can go. That village is very poor. Why don’t you start from that village?”

(Tumbian, WV 2009)

The Myanmar government is, of course, not all that transparent in return. However, that is perhaps sometimes more a matter of bureaucratic capacity as intent. “I don’t think they want to be non-transparent, but they don’t want to be required to give more than they can provide” (Lancelot, MDM 2009).

Interestingly, however, given the level of transparency in direct relationships with officials, reports being delivered to higher levels of authority are not always as transparent. One INGO country director explained that,

_We tell [our contacts in the department] exactly what we are doing and ask for their advice on what to put into our written reports—people in the department advise back what to write up and what not to write up. It creates more trouble for them if we report everything. One colleague insisted on proper reporting of what they actually did, which caused problems._ (Source 20 2009)

Another went so far as to suggest that,

_There is a manipulation of figures culture which is a disaster for any aid program, because you can’t get any figures for a baseline or any figures on impact. And if you publish any figure on impact you are putting yourself in danger because you are not supposed to publish any research of any sort. So that is a major obstacle to any sort of cooperation. I really think that is a culture that has permeated the UN as well. The UN ... they literally said to me, use your research data where you want and when you want, but please, could you report it like this and like this._ (Source 18 2009)

At least one INGO leader voiced concern that, "INGOs here seem to be less open to information sharing [with other INGOs] than we found them in [other country named], as if they mimic the government and become less transparent themselves” (Source 18 2009).

The unprecedented relief cooperation in the wake of Cyclone Nargis seems to have improved the situation significantly, with, for example, eighteen agencies cooperating very openly in an impact study after the March 2011 earthquake, and interagency discussion of salary scales for local staff (Herink, WV 2011). Still, these comments were made a full year after the Cyclone. Journalists working longer-term in the country have likewise noted a reluctance by INGOs to talk about their work. One suggested he had noted a much greater
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reluctance for INGOs to go on record and talk about their activities after the purge in the military leadership in 2004, and that since then that they preferred their work to remain more "under the radar" of the media (Goddard, MT 2009). Another commented

*NGOs will say 'everything is fine, the government is cooperative' but at the bar they often suggest a different story ... NGOs think that if they complain the government might kick them out, so when we ask them about their work and relationship with the government, as a reporter, they say to us that all is ok.* (Long, MT 2009)

In terms of accountability to donors, many respondents readily agreed that they maintain a very low publicity profile of their work, both in Myanmar and overseas (in donor countries). "Caution is wise" when it comes to publicising projects outside the country, and some country directors are particularly sensitive to advise visitors from other parts of their organisation about being careful that they don't anything in their promotional materials that would upset either the Myanmar government nor people outside of the country (Source 6 2009). In part this is recognition of the government's sensitivity that portrayals of poverty are exploited by opponents. But it does highlight the complexity of accountability towards donors. Likewise, allowing donors to visit and see with their own eyes is often not possible, many times external project evaluations are limited or not possible, and flexibility in the application of project funding to changing situations is often required. Accountability and disclosure is generally good with large institutional donors, but often minimal with small donors and the general public.

7.6 Conclusions on Context-Sensitive Development with Stakeholders

This research has drawn out many of the key adaptations made by INGOs to facilitate greater effectiveness in community development programs they implement within Myanmar. Such contextualisation which they describe in their development approach can be linked directly to restrictions stemming from both from the Myanmar government's domestic politics and the international community's response to this.

INGOs approach working with civil society, local NGOs and officials quite differently in Myanmar than they would in most other countries, finding the need to limit or seriously adapt most of these activities because of the macro-political context. Contextualisation in these interactions has been explored in this paper through the development approaches
of partnership, capacity building, advocacy, rights-based approach, and accountability. It was shown that after long being suppressed, "informal" civil society has become quite strong in Myanmar over recent years. The need to partner with and build the capacity of this sector is widely recognised within the INGO community, however efforts are complicated as much of this civil society is unregistered (and difficult to register), and lacks both the scale and organisational capacity required for effective partnership with most INGOs. Partnership and capacity development usually also emphasises work with government departments, which is heavily restricted by both domestic and international politics and so rarely undertaken in any significant manner. However, most speak of the need for such civil service capacity development, and where cooperative work has been attempted those involved speak highly of the outcome.

A rights-based approach, being defined as holding the government to account for human rights publicly and by a public educated in their rights, is inherently political. The government’s domination of the political space in Myanmar has therefore meant such an approach has not been effective in this format. However, many INGO informants insist that a non-confrontational strategy of advocacy towards the same goals is being very fruitful in a number of areas. By non-confrontational advocacy, these leaders speak more of a dialogue away from media spotlight and mass mobilisation, referring to a process reminiscent of strategies designed to involve elite in development through an exploration of needs together in a no-blame fashion. To avoid exposing civil society to undue risk, this sort of advocacy is primarily undertaken by INGOs directly with government officials, although some local civil society is now independently taking some interesting initiatives as well. Permission to operate, the possibility of partnership, and effectiveness in advocacy are built on the quality of relationships, so in a context where political will and international funding for partnership or civil service capacity development is low, INGOs instead seek to build personal contact and trust with officials primarily through activities involved in being absolutely transparent. As such, the more effective INGOs initiatives in Myanmar seek to be transparent with officials to an extent well beyond levels of accountability which they would usually undertake in other countries.
Chapter EIGHT: *Dancing with the Devil, but Not Holding Hands*

*Context-Sensitivity and the Restricted Humanitarian Space*

It is vital that Burma be opened up to greater NGO presence, both local and international, so that pressing development issues can be addressed. In adopting an engagement agenda of this kind, it will be important to accept that initially it will entail considerable hard work for no more than limited benefit. It will not deliver the instant democracy sought by many political activists and some external powers ... Engagement with the generals who have done so much to damage Burma will be, paradoxically, the best way to deliver tangible benefits to its citizens ... The world needs to find ways to move on and engage with its domineering military rulers ... focusing on underpinning economic and social change [to] open up options for incremental political reform. (Holliday 2008b:52)

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Looking across the empty coffee mugs and small café table, John (not his real name) kept quizzing me about working in Myanmar. John was the director of a philanthropic foundation, exploring the possibility of funding a proposed INGO development project in Myanmar. But John struggled to see past the stereotypical media images, and the newsletters from various advocacy groups he received, describing the oppression of Karen and Kachin Christians in Myanmar.

Preferring to call the country Burma, John enquired about government restrictions, surveillance and interference in projects by the authorities, and all the obstacles to working in Myanmar. Not an interview participant, John had visited Myanmar just once, some time ago.

‘How do you get money in? How freely can INGOs work? Aren’t they heavily scrutinised? So what sort of projects can NGOs actually do in Burma, and how effective are they, really?’

He had many questions, but the implication was clear. Political restrictions by the regime surely limited any real effectiveness, suggesting it was perhaps not yet time to fund projects in Burma. He listened politely, but my responses clearly conflicted with the mental image he had of the context. I could see scepticism reflected on his face.
The conversation was almost a direct correlation with the interview with Ann Lancelot, Country Representative in Myanmar with the French INGO Médecins Du Monde in 2009. She articulated a viewpoint many of the interview participants shared:

For me, I have a huge advocacy responsibility inside MDM, to explain to them that this country has a different operation mode. We don’t get enough money. We need to get more money in the country. Political oppression or not, political oppression is not the issue: there is a huge humanitarian need that is not covered. The sanctions are a disaster.

I am building that internal advocacy, and I have a few people on the board who are very much online and willing to listen to that. We must also build a more structured advocacy towards donors and donor countries, especially towards France. We have a good cooperation towards the French ambassador, to try to convince French corporations to put more money into this country. I have received $4,000 this year from French corporations covering two trainings of local staff – because I went and begging at the French embassy. They are ashamed of that, rightly, the French ambassador, that he has so little money to spend on aid. And yes, the French are one of the first contributors to the EU ...

So there is a huge responsibility NGOs have to build advocacy towards donors and donor countries, and that is one of the things we need to do.
Chapter 8: Context-Sensitivity and the Restricted Humanitarian Space

INGOs working in Burma operate in a difficult environment. On the one hand, INGOs face international criticism ... [often] paint[ing] a simple black and white picture of the situation [that] is counterproductive. On the other hand, INGOs do find it difficult to work within the constraints of the situation in Burma [in relation to the government].

David Tegenfeldt (2001:115)

The restricted and complex socio-political context not only impacts on the way INGOs approach communities and relationships with other stakeholders, but also has a major impact on INGO access and funding. This third chapter based on the fieldwork presents the perspective of the interview participants in regard to the restricted humanitarian space which constrains their humanitarian poverty alleviation work. INGOs argue that the greatest immediate constraints on their projects and programmes stem from the limited funding and restrictive mandates applied by the international community, more than from the very real but less impacting restrictions applied by the Myanmar government. This finding is only more true as the new government’s reform agenda begins to be felt, while little change in sanctions policy and mandates has yet been forthcoming from the international community and funding remains lower than during the post-Nargis period.

After exploring INGO perceptions of the constraints on poverty alleviation in the country, this chapter then analyses these Western restrictions on the humanitarian space from several theoretical perspectives and in the light of these research findings, in order to evaluate the intent, efficacy and future applicability of Western development policy towards Myanmar. It considers the international relations theory of the role of sanctions in the socialisation of norm-violating states, as well as the demands of humanitarianism and the political philosophy of global justice. In the light of the findings from this field research, as well as the tactical concessions made by the regime and the demands of humanitarianism and global justice, this chapter concludes that a repositioning of pressure by the international community that expands the humanitarian space is overdue.

8.1 Gaining Access

While it seems almost so obvious as to be trivial, two preconditions for effective INGO development interventions are the ability to gain access and funding. In the context of Myanmar, because of the political tensions both inside and outside the country, neither
can be taken for granted. Several INGO country directors spoke of being confronted by an extra level of complexity in obtaining access and funding when they arrived in Myanmar from postings in other developing countries, including conflict zones and failed state contexts (e.g. Source 18 2009; Source 24 2009; Source 30 2009). Context-sensitivity thus begins in dealings with international stakeholders and the Myanmar government, to expand the space in which they can operate within the country.

Access to Myanmar communities is complicated by the competing strategic concerns held by the international community and the government. On the one side, the government can be slow to negotiate the MOUs, equally slow to issue visas, and then restrict the places and sectors organisations may work in and their travel to visit project sites, particularly for foreign personnel. These are serious access restrictions which the European Commission (EC 2007b) suggest threatens the whole humanitarian space in Myanmar. On the other side, Western governments, international donors, organisational boards and the international community as a whole, directly and indirectly restrict the humanitarian space in Myanmar in an attempt to put political pressure on the regime. One in-country representative of a major bilateral donor pointed out that the greatest consideration for Western governments, which tempers humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar, is that aid must "not keep the regime in power one day longer than would otherwise be the case" (Source 1 2009). Prioritisation of this concern restricts the work of INGOs.

8.1.1 Creating Space with the International Community

When contrasting these two pressures, even in 2009 before the recent reforms INGO respondents almost uniformly suggested that the greatest constraints on their humanitarian and development efforts (mostly extreme poverty alleviation projects), come not so much from the Myanmar government as the international community. For example,

Many external people will say that it is the government that constrains so much of what we do. I guess I feel that much more it is the international environment in which the country is forced to operate because of sanctions and policy that is having a much bigger impact. When I say, having a much bigger impact, I mean on what work it is possible to do at this point in time, as opposed to the fundamental humanitarian
situation in the country which is of course the direct result of the country's historical, cultural, political context over a very long period of time. (Allan, Spectrum 2009)

While many agreed that the fundamental issues of poverty in Myanmar are closely connected with domestic politics and political history, when questioned about restrictions from the Myanmar government most respondents counteracted with examples of solutions, or examples of what they actually can do in the country. What frustrates INGO managers at least as much as domestic restrictions are the restrictions on aid funding and mandates by the international community, particularly because they believe they are largely based on false, stereotypical perceptions. Examples of their responses include:

The reality on the ground is not what is portrayed by the Diaspora or those that work in the camps on the Thai-Burma border ... Cyclone Nargis demonstrated that you can deliver effective humanitarian aid. (Agland, Care 2009)

The regime, they do things I find completely abhorrent. They are difficult to deal with. But they are not always as bad as the picture that is painted. I find it equally abhorrent that the people outside the country feel the need to 'garnish the lily', lie through their teeth, exaggerate ... I find that equally obnoxious [and] extremely unhelpful. (Marshall, ILO 2009)

A lot of Western media coverage of Myanmar is not fair. (Tumbian, WV 2009)

Relative to some other countries there are restraints here, but there are restraints in other countries as well. If we take the longer term context as well as putting it in the context of other third world or more difficult countries, Myanmar is not nearly as much of an anomaly as Western media and policies would lead us to believe. (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009)

Pedersen made a similar argument when he suggested that,

There is no doubt that the military leaders are hostile to economic and administrative reforms that would directly weaken their hold on power, and less than enthusiastic about community development and other programs that contravene national notions of development, which lag several decades behind current international thinking. There is no doubt either that both the state and society lack the capacity to absorb and effectively apply large amounts of assistance, or that this capacity will have to be built up gradually ahead of any major new financial commitments. The international aid community, however, is hardly unfamiliar with such obstacles, but has a range of strategies and tools available that are used in other countries with arguably less government commitment to development and less potential for long-term success. (Pedersen 2008:269-270)

Limited mandates are also a considerable restriction for some organisations. Most organisations face restrictions on partnering with government departments and officials, as previously discussed. Some are also restricted in terms of sectors they are permitted to
work within. This is particularly true for multilateral agencies like the UNDP and ILO, whose mandate restrictions mean they work in Myanmar more like INGOs than they would in most other contexts, with programs largely independent of the government. As a result of these Western restrictions on the humanitarian space, many INGOs who work in Myanmar find the need for continual advocacy towards their own boards, donors, country offices, and governments, to present their perceptions of the in-country context, as described by the vignette at the start of this chapter. The attitude of INGO country managers can be summed up with the statement that, "As long as you can get assistance to the people and do so with integrity, you should do it ... humanitarian aid must flow" (Walker, WVM 2009).

One respondent suggested that the single greatest challenge in Myanmar is "to make this local context understood by the international community" (Tumbian, WV 2009). He explained his strategy of bringing organisational marketing managers and country-desk managers from home offices to Myanmar, so they can go home and communicate the context more effectively within their national offices and with private donors. There is also an antipathy by foreign donors towards funding unregistered NGOs. Many complain that they are not able to promote what they know and can do, "with glossy brochures like those on the border do, so then donors say they can't support NGOs in-country based on the advocacy from the border" (Source 20 2009). This further limits both their programs, but also those of their INGO partners.

8.1.2 Creating Space with Myanmar Domestic Politics

Having said all this, INGOs working in Myanmar certainly do also find working with the Myanmar Government restrictive. It is not possible for INGOs to operate in Myanmar without in some way connecting with or gaining approval from the government. One participant colourfully described it as being like "dancing with the devil, but not holding hands" (Source 15 2009).

A typical comment was, "we in NGOs and the UN could do a lot more if we got better access" (Source 20 2009). The European Commission (2007b) report that travel
restrictions and lack of access to project sites directly led to two of their INGO projects being suspended in 2005. The core of the issue, as one journalist observed, is that

_The regime believes INGOs are not just there to do a specific task, but to organise politically against the regime. That general suspicion, to the point of paranoia, is the key obstacle._

(Source 50 2009)

Myanmar is "a complex operating environment" (Massella, OCHA 2009) for aid agencies. "To operate effectively in Myanmar you must be astute politically. You spend a lot of time trying to intuit what the authorities are thinking." Operating conditions in Myanmar, however, are not unique, being similar to many other difficult environments: "attempts to register and control NGOs are reminiscent, for example, of Sudan" (Duffield 2008:35).

INGOs with MOUs devise creative ways around some of the restrictions in their MOUs; Duffield cites an example of an INGO stretching their MOU (as he expresses it), by conducting a livelihood project under an MOU for preventative health, arguing it allows people to be able to pay for medical care. Those without MOUs circumvent restrictions through partnerships with LNGOs or joint projects with other INGOs.

Over the last two decades there has been a dramatic increase in access given to INGOs, with both,

_geographical access having increased, as well as the types of sectors and issues being worked on having been expanded ... that often times is not appreciated, particularly by those who have only been around for the last 3-5 years._

(Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009)

Access did become a little more restrictive after the removal of Khin Nyunt as Prime Minister in 2004; he "provided space for INGOs to operate in a way that the regulations did not limit operations too significantly" (Source 31 2009). Until Cyclone Nargis, the process of negotiating an MOU with the government became "more laborious and uncertain" after his removal, but space to operate again expanded after Cyclone Nargis. INGOs noted a tightening and increasing delays between early 2009 until well after the November 2010 elections. Several attributed this to uncertainty and election security more than a deliberate longer-term restriction of the humanitarian space, although it may also have been a backlash from hardliners who felt that too much had been given away in the access provided after Cyclone Nargis, given the lack of other restrictions surrounding the elections.
Almost universally INGOs suggest the most essential factor facilitating access is relationships and trust built with individual officials, at both township and ministry level. Decision-making in government departments is based on personal politics. It all depends on the right relationships with the right officials.

The response you get from one person can be completely different from the response you get from another person. Some are really positive; others are the complete opposite. They are not a coherent group. (Massella, OCHA 2009)

Once trust is built with senior officials within a department, INGO staff find they have good access to various people under him (Agland, Care 2009). Until then, access can be difficult. These relationships open the door to more formal agreements later.

It’s all about relationships ... if you have an MOU but don’t have the relationship you can’t do anything. If you have the relationship but no MOU you can do anything. (Griffiths, TLMI 2009)

There is no doubt that the government restrictions and all the travel restrictions and everything else have a real impact on the ability people have to operate ... But on the ground it really boils down to how good your networks are and your relationships with local authorities ... Most effective organisations really invest a lot in getting those local relationships really solid. (Dorning, Burnet 2009)

As one INGO manager expressed,

I am not sure that we’d actually do anything very much different to what we are currently doing because, while there are restrictions and so on, it is hard to tell what we might change ... I think that the model that we’ve got is working well. (Source 14 2009)

INGO respondents with the longest association with Myanmar have observed that "it takes several years to be accepted by officials" (Walker, WVM 2009). Burmese nationals and long-term INGO leaders agree that "a big drawback in the INGO world is that directors and staff come and stay for 2-3 years ... by the time they know enough about the culture and the context they leave" (Source 41 2009). Instead they argue INGOs should aim to retain good leaders in country as long as possible, "so they build shared experiences and lives with national leaders" (Walker, WVM 2009). It is the strength of the trust within these relationships which has allowed many INGOs the space they have with the Myanmar government to operate.

One other significant observation from the interviews is that larger organisations with higher profile international reputations or significant funding bases appear to be able to
Chapter 8: Context-Sensitivity and the Restricted Humanitarian Space

negotiate MOUs more quickly, and gain wider access. Larger and better resourced
organisations have greater expertise, and can more easily demonstrate their humanitarian
rather than political motives. While this may be an issue of resources and expertise, it
might also be an indicator that status, where organisations which might be termed
‘higher-status organisations’ are granted better access, while smaller organisations with
lower status do seem to struggle to negotiate official access to operate in Myanmar
(Source 11 2009; Source 14 2009; Source 20 2009; Source 30 2009; Source 21 2009).

8.2 Obtaining Funding

International governments and major donors maintain that “the necessary pre-conditions
for long term development are not currently in place in Myanmar”, as Moore (2009),
Deputy Director General (Asia) for Australia’s AusAID program, expressed it. They imply
that without political reform, poverty reduction and development efforts are very limited
in their impact, at best. Major foreign donors are particularly concerned at the
government’s expenditure on the military, and harbour suspicions senior generals are
diverting funds into personal bank accounts. From this understanding they ask, "why
should we put more in when they don’t?” (Source 1 2009).

It is therefore not surprising that INGOs, who believe that much poverty reduction can be
achieved in Myanmar despite the politics, find funding one of the greatest challenges to
working in Myanmar, and the political conditionality attached to Myanmar’s aid funding
most frustrating. Many see an injustice inherent in a token high moral ground position
being taken with a poor country that is already isolated, where it poses virtually no
economic cost to the West (see also Camroux & Egreteau 2009). One Western in-country
bilateral donor representative spoke candidly, lamenting the low funding levels offered by
both their own government and the wider international community, arguing that,

Looking through a human rights lens, these guys are not much worse than Laos,
Vietnam, Cambodia, even Thailand. The thing that gets under people’s skin about
Burma when you have been here for a while is, yes they are bastards—but are they
really any worse than any of these other countries we are happily playing with? Some
of these are making no attempt at democracy, others just using it for corruption.
(Source 1 2009)
The issue of conditionality on aid, particularly in fragile states, has already been discussed. Many have argued that attempts to impose reform through conditionality is ineffective (e.g. Anderson 2005; Clayton 1994; Santiso 2001) and the need for both increased funding and less conditionality on humanitarian aid to Myanmar (ICG 2008, 2011a; Pedersen 2009; Steinberg 2009; Thant Myint-U 2009b). Nonetheless, significant restrictions on the amount and use of aid in Myanmar are a reality.

Cyclone Nargis brought additional funding, but it also brought many new agencies; both funding and the number of agencies in Myanmar more than doubled during 2008-2009. However, that increased funding was for emergency humanitarian needs and has fallen off quickly while most agencies have remained. On the positive side, one agency reported that "a lot of donors are now interested in funding work inside the country who have been traditionally only funding the border-related pro-democracy work" (Dorning, Burnet 2009). However, it is widely recognised that "INGOs who came in without a solid base of other funding are finding it hard; some are leaving or reducing their office and staff" (Source 1 2009). Despite recent funding increases announced by several donor nations, as discussed in Chapter Five, competition over funding and the funding squeeze are likely to get worse, given the increased number of organisations now competing over reduced net funds since Cyclone Nargis.

This shortage of funds impacts directly on programs. "You have to cut corners at times ... you struggle to gain an efficiency that you might gain in other programs with a different level of scale" (Allan, Spectrum 2009).

We have never had the long-term stability in our programs to [build participatory and integrated programs] ... you tend to have scattered projects all over the country, wherever you can get funding ... you implement a three-year project in one year.

(Agland, Care 2009)

Another impact on efficiency also comes from the complexity of "always checking your procurement and expenditure to make sure you are not giving money to anyone of a large list of people on the banned list" (Agland, Care 2009).
8.3 Restricted Humanitarian Assistance: Sanctions and Aid

8.3.1 Restricted Humanitarian Assistance

This claim by INGOs, that the greatest restriction on the humanitarian space for interventions alleviating extreme poverty comes from Western sanctions and restrictions on aid, is possibly the most contentious of the findings of this research. It is thus worthy of further analysis. This next section will thus examine this international dimension of the socio-political context from the perspectives of international relations theory, development theory, and contemporary political philosophy.

Behind the comments of these INGO leaders is the fact that, despite the Asian constructive engagement, Myanmar's connectedness to the international community and, particularly, international aid flows have remained particularly restricted. Most major donors remain concerned about excessive military expenditure, macroeconomic policy, poor governance, human rights abuses and the suppression of democracy.

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), in 2008, shortly before Cyclone Nargis, Myanmar received the least ODA of any of the UN's least developed countries, at just five percent of the average assistance given on a per capita basis. This restriction in development assistance appears highly disproportional, especially when contrasted with assistance given to other least developed countries with "similarly repressive governments", who receive substantially more aid: Laos 22 times more, Sudan 19 times more; and Zimbabwe 7 times more on a per capita basis (ICG 2008:15).
Table 3, below, contrasts ODA levels with GDP for Myanmar with a number of regional and LDC reference countries.

ODA to Myanmar more than doubled in response to Cyclone Nargis, reaching US$10.80 per capita in 2008 (UNDP 2010), creating an improved environment of development cooperation in Myanmar (Sadandar 2010), as this thesis has demonstrated. However, this was a temporary, emergency-response increase. The return to previous levels has been partially off-set by smaller, ongoing increases from a number of donor governments, but ODA to Myanmar still remains particularly low in comparison to other least developed
**Table 3**: GDP and ODA indicators for Myanmar and reference Least Developed Countries
(Source: UNDP 2007, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GDP per capita (PPP US$)</th>
<th>ODA per capita (US$)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>29,663</td>
<td>40,907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>8,677</td>
<td>8,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>3,843</td>
<td>3,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>3,071</td>
<td>2,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>2,727</td>
<td>1,802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>2,039</td>
<td>2,165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Myanmar</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,027</strong></td>
<td><strong>904</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>2,083</td>
<td>2,086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>2,038</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo</td>
<td>1,262</td>
<td>3,511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>1,055</td>
<td>779</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note**: the UNDP Human Development Report 2010 reports 2008 GDP figures which have been grossly distorted by the global financial crisis, and no figures are provided for Myanmar. In 2010 the Human Development Index was been calculated from Gross National Income, not GDP, preventing meaningful direct comparison.


Restricted aid has become one dimension of the international coercive pressure designed to compel the regime into adopting democratic and human rights reform. It also reflects donor concerns that increasing humanitarian aid may send the wrong signals, inadvertently prolonging authoritarian rule and stymying political change (Source 1 2009). The absence of the rule of law, lack of administrative capacity, and a number of specific policy shortcomings (such as a lack of property rights), are also of concern, undermining the macro-economy to the extent that the preconditions for growth are not considered to yet be in place (Moore 2009). Thus donors implicitly question Myanmar’s absorptive capacity for development assistance, and the probability of fungability.
Chapter 8: Context-Sensitivity and the Restricted Humanitarian Space

The argument in favour of sanctions, from a humanitarian perspective, relies on the idea that the formal and informal economy are largely independent of each other, that the poor primarily derive their incomes from the informal sector, and that the informal sector is not dependent on foreign investment or markets (Burma Campaign 2004; Asia Society 2010a). It therefore argues that sanctions targeted at the formal economy with minimal impact on the vast majority of Myanmar’s people. Oehlers (2004) argues that these structural and institutional characteristics of the Burmese economy make sanctions an effective device against the military regime, without causing harm to the poor:

> It may reasonably be presumed the negative consequences arising from sanctions will have greatest impact on the military and its closest associates. Far from the blunt and indiscriminate tool it is often accused of being, in the case of Burma at least, sanctions appear to be surprisingly well targeted and capable of exerting considerable pressure on the military regime. (Oehlers 2004:43)

It is significant to note that Oehlers recognises this is a presumption. Certainly, the majority of the poor are primarily connected to the informal economy, and it is domestic policy not economic sanctions which are the greatest immediate cause of the economic difficulty faced by most of the poor. However, the level of poverty and the depth of multidimensional deprivation means that even a marginal impact on the poor will have a significant effect on their wellbeing, and this assessment ignores the fact that many poor do also connect with the formal economy. In a command economy, what hurts the leadership hurts the people.

World Vision, for example, found that the May 2003 US sanctions had the largest impact on factory workers in the textile industry (James 2004). US and European sanctions have "significantly hampered growth in export sectors such as agriculture, fishery, and garments, as well as tourism, which are a crucial source of jobs and income for millions of impoverished families" (Pedersen 2010:116). Taylor (2004) argues that sanctions have created an economic malaise that has deepened the poverty of most people in the country, whilst weakening the prospects of sustainable democratisation and making resolution of the fundamental issues more difficult through postponement and polarisation. As Moore (2011) suggests, the crucial questions are: "How do we make the welfare of the people our main priority? And, would an increase in international assistance lend too much legitimacy to the regime?"
8.3.2 *International Relations Theory: Sanctions as Norm-Socialisation*

Risse & Sikkink (1999) offer a theory of the role of sanctions in socialising norm-violating states to international norms that fits closely with the Western response to Myanmar. They illustrate their model with a discussion of socialisation to human rights norms.

According to their model, socialisation pressure is triggered when a particularly flagrant violation of an international norm activates a transnational advocacy network that succeeds in putting the norm-violating state on the international agenda. Such a transnational advocacy network, they suggest, will typically attempt to shame the norm-violating state by labelling it as a 'pariah' state which does not belong to the community of civilised nations, then begin documenting and publicising human rights violations.

Such transnational advocacy network began to coalesce in Myanmar after the brutal crackdown on demonstrations in 1988, and particularly when Suu Kyi was arrested in 1989. It was solidified when the NLD won the 1990 elections but were subject to mass arrest rather than power being transferred. Advocates quickly labelled Myanmar an uncivilised 'pariah' state, highlighting human rights abuses and calling for sanctions.

According to the Risse & Sikkink model, the initial reaction of most norm-violating states to such overt confrontation is to refuse to accept the applicability of international human rights norms to their case, and challenge international jurisdiction. SLORC did exactly this. In response, transnational advocacy networks almost always advocate material pressure, from targeting the key interests of regime officials to making aid conditional on human rights performance. Regimes vary greatly in their vulnerability to this sort of pressure, based largely on the strength of their desire to maintain good standing with the states applying the pressure.

Several Western governments responded to Suu Kyi’s arrest by severing or downgrading diplomatic links and slashing aid, particularly budgetary support assistance (Pedersen 2008). The US Congress passed the Customs and Trade Act enabling the president to impose sanctions, although then-President Bush declined to do. Suu Kyi was awarded the Sakharov Prize and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, to enhance the legitimacy of the opposition. The UN appointed a Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma in 1992,
and the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council began passing resolutions against Burma/Myanmar. The response from the regime was to explain their need to ensure order and security in the face of foreign and ethnic threats to national security, to claim that international pressure was in violation of the UN principle of state sovereignty, and to talk about Western hypocrisy and the right to development (Ware 2010). Such a response fits closely with Risse & Sikkink’s model, although several authorities see an irony in using sanctions to attempt to isolate the regime:

It is ironic that as the regime seeks once more to disengage from the rest of the world that the world considers disengagement in the form of sanctions as a weapon for change in Burma.  
(Perry 2007:175)

The irony is that western threats feed into the founding ideology of the military regime, which needs external enemies to justify its harsh rule and divert attention from its economic and other failures.  
(Pedersen 2010:116)

Increased pressure from the transnational advocacy network is aimed at enlarging the space for domestic groups, amplifying their demands in the international arena. This can result in a backlash and further repression against activists; however further repression is costly to the government in terms of both domestic and international legitimacy. Where further repression occurs, Risse & Sikkink suggest, transnational advocacy will increasingly call for donor countries to make foreign aid contingent on human rights.

Again this fits the Myanmar saga closely. Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 1995, but issued a travel ban which she repeatedly defied, provoking confrontations. Concerted advocacy stepped up pressure in response. Aid budgets were further slashed, and the US Congress debated the Free Burma Act, which called for the imposition of stiff economic and trade sanctions against both Burma and any countries that traded with or provided aid to Burma (a clause later dropped). When the act passed with amendments in 1997, President Clinton quickly imposed an arms embargo, a ban on new investment, the suspension of bilateral aid, withdrawal of trade privileges, visa restrictions on senior leaders, and a veto of any loan or financial support by international financial institutions (Oehlers 2004). The European Union (EU) followed the same year with an arms embargo, withdrawal of trade privileges, a visa ban on senior leaders, and the suspension of aid.
The impact of the initial 1998 crackdown and the abortive election of 1990 on aid flows to Myanmar, and then the further impact of the 1997 bans by the US and EU, were immediate and dramatic, as shown clearly in Figure 7 (below). Sanctions were further tightened in 2003, in the wake of what American diplomats and the NLD claim to have been a deliberate ambush on Suu Kyi and her supporters by the regime, and after which she was taken into "protective custody" (Seekins 2005). The US response was to ban all imports "mined, made, grown or assembled" in Myanmar, together with halting all US dollar transactions in and out of the country (Oehlers 2004). The EU, Japan, Canada and Australia also reassessed their positions. However, humanitarian assistance had already been minimalised to such an extent that the additional sanctions caused little further effect on aid.

**Figure 7:** Official Development Assistance (ODA in US$m) to Myanmar 1960 – 2006

Source: World Bank

Returning to Risse & Sikkink’s model, their most important contribution is the observation that, as international pressures continue to escalate, the first steps towards institutionalising international norms into domestic practice are usually only intended as cosmetic tactical concessions to pacify criticism, rather than steps to institute real reform. However, by changing their discursive practice they unintentionally open greater space for
the domestic opposition. The first aim of transnational socialisation pressure should therefore be to force the target regime to offer concessions which may initially only be tactical, rather than sincere reforms.

Many argue that sanctions lack coercive force, not being universally adopted (e.g. Holliday 2005; Pedersen 2008; Steinberg 2010a; Taylor 2004; Thant Myint-U 2009b; Thant Myint-U in McDermid 2009). The significant contribution of Risse & Sikkink is recognition that the role of sanctions should not be coercion, but socialisation, and that the indicators of success should initially be tactical concessions and incremental change, not radical reform.

Klotz (1996) elaborates this distinction between coercion and socialisation, arguing that coercion relies on threatening state survival. Since sanctions anywhere are generally incapable of inflicting that high a cost on the target state, he finds that sanctions are almost always an ineffective instrument of coercion. Socialisation, on the other hand, seeks to promote the desire for acceptance within the international community. Sanctions, he argues, can sometimes do this well. Klotz concludes that what is essential is not that pressure be applied comprehensively by all international actors, as is often argued, but that it is both targeted against key regime interests and that it quickly adjusts in response to concessions and other decision-making or actions within the target state.

It is hard to see how funding interventions that bypass government officials to deliver assistance directly to the extremely poor via UN and INGO agencies constitutes a key interest of the regime, and therefore why it should ever have been included within such socialisation pressure. This aside, decades of international pressure has now resulted in a number of tactical concessions by the Myanmar regime. Most notable is the 'Roadmap to Disciplined Democracy' (NLM 2003), culminating in the 2008 Constitution, 2010 elections and 2011 convening of parliament, followed by the reform agenda of the last year as discussed in Chapter Six. Whether these are the result of Western sanctions, Asian engagement or internal drivers of change is debatable. Nonetheless, these clearly do constitute significant tactical concessions.

Other significant tactical concessions have been also achieved, including cooperation in regional forums addressing HIV/AIDS and human trafficking (Moore 2011), declaration of
forced labour as illegal with some effort to enforce this (Pedersen 2010), and policy changes in areas such as drug control, disability and sustainable forestry (Allan 2010). Risse & Sikkink’s model, and Klatz’s argument, therefore insist that socialisation pressure must re-adjust quickly in response to these concessions and the ongoing reforms in the country, something the INGOs in this fieldwork strongly advocate.

8.3.3 Development Theory: Competing Political and Apolitical Approaches

Switching to analyse this issue through development theory rather than international relations, the same debate emerges. Underlying this analysis is an altercation between contrasting political and apolitical approaches to international development, accentuated in the case of Myanmar by the highly strained and politicised context. A recent paper by Nelson (2007) describes these as an MDG-motivated approach and a Rights Based Approach (RBA). Nelson sees these two approaches as fundamentally conceptually different.

The MDGs mobilize the classic development sector tools ... The MDGs are a careful restatement of poverty-related development challenges, in language that avoids reference to rights ... The RBA rests ... on internationally recognized human rights standards and principles, to which governments and donors are obliged to adhere ... Rights-based approaches ... tie development to the rhetorical and legal power of internationally recognized human rights. (Nelson 2007)

It is this clash of understandings of the nature and resolution of poverty that lies at the heart of the disagreement between international development approaches to Myanmar.

The RBA has been termed "empowerment through external pressure" (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004). It seeks "to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress" (OHCHR 2006:15). When applied, it enables people to recognise their rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, works to build their capacity to claim these rights, and works with the state, as the primary duty-bearer, to strengthen state capacity to respond and be accountable in fulfilling these human rights (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004). The RBA uses recourse to international law to guarantee "a protected space where the elite cannot monopolize development processes, policies and programmes" (OHCHR 2006), and as such is explicitly political,
Putting politics at the heart of development (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004). Of some concern, however, is the question of who exactly is empowered for which rights, by what 'external pressure', applied by whom.

By contrast, the MDG-approach insists on political neutrality, with a focus on poverty alleviation on a needs basis, targeting assistance to the most poor and vulnerable. Nelson observes that the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs were deliberately constituted in apolitical terms. An expectation that humanitarian poverty alleviation be apolitical is likewise brought out by many others. For example the Brazilian ambassador to the UN noted to the General Assembly in 1991,

Humanitarian activities ... must by definition be disassociated from all shades of political consideration. They are, by definition, neutral and impartial. ... the secret of effectiveness in the humanitarian field is that even when nations disagree on everything else, even when they clash, they can still agree that ... suffering must be relieved. (cited in Minear & Weiss 1993:24)

Baulch (2006) argues donors should allocate aid based on the level of poverty and the ability to make an impact "in accordance with the priorities set out by the MDGs", rather than on political considerations. Alesina & Dollar (2000) express similar concern that too often aid is not given in response "to the variables that make aid effective in reducing poverty ... [but] is dictated as much by political and strategic considerations as by the economic needs and policy performance of the recipients."

While some argue the two approaches are entirely consistent (ACFID 2009; OHCHR 2006; UNDP 2003a:29), others recognise only a "limited convergence between the two agendas" (Alston 2005:761). To Nelson (2007), the inherent conflict is between the key agents mobilised and policy recommendations espoused by the two approaches. The MDGs were couched in strictly humanitarian terms that seek to make developing country governments, donors, UN agencies and NGOs all mutually accountable, with a focus on international cooperation to address the issues created by poverty, and without any inherent reference to cause or blame. The RBA, by contrast, focuses on national governments as primary duty-bearers, seeks to empower populations to make substantive claims against these governments, and is couched in international legal terms. The MDGs want the best equipped actor to address specific poverty needs, drawing on best practice.
international development to meet the most severe needs as a priority. The RBA seeks to reform systemic causes of poverty by demanding change of political power structures.

As already noted, Duffield (2008) argues that aid agencies create space to operate in Myanmar through strict adherence to these humanitarian principles, and constant reassurances to all sides that they are adhering strictly to the principle of apolitical humanitarian assistance. This finding is strongly borne out by these fieldwork responses, where deviation from apolitical neutrality could threaten the operating space granted by the Myanmar government. With neutrality, however, aid agencies are confident they could deliver substantially more aid to effectively alleviate more of the suffering they see, while continuing to bypass the government. They thus argue the greatest restriction on the humanitarian space is caused by the international community, and therefore that humanitarian funding (and mandates) should be significantly increased.

8.3.4 Political Philosophy: The Demands of Global Justice

Holliday (2011a) observes what may be considered a flaw in this logic, namely that a new idea of humanitarianism has emerged since the end of the Cold War that denies the old principles of impartiality, apoliticality and neutrality, and is instead ambitious to engage politically to redress the root causes of injustice.

In a post-Cold-War era of humanitarian engagement driven by generic notions of global justice, [Myanmar] has for years looked to be a prime candidate for political reform, and the main task facing the rest of the world has long seemed crystal clear: helping to make it happen. (Holliday 2011a:2)

Holliday therefore explores theories of contemporary political philosophy and global justice in relation to Myanmar, concluding that "a prima facie case for external engagement with Myanmar is readily made" based on the obligations of our shared humanity (Holliday 2011a:145), but finds it far less clear exactly how such engagement should be undertaken and what issues specifically it needs to address.

To analyse any such foreign intervention, Holliday (2011a) proposes a typology of possible interventions by various actors, suggesting they may involve expressive or aggressive
pressure, and consensual or belligerent engagement, by either state or civil actors. These possibilities are summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4**: Holliday's (2011a) proposed typology of engagement options for external actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>State Actors</th>
<th>Civil Actors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Expressive Pressure</td>
<td>diplomacy</td>
<td>advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive Pressure</td>
<td>sanctions</td>
<td>boycotts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensual Engagement</td>
<td>bilateral assistance</td>
<td>INGO/corporate engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belligerent Engagement</td>
<td>military intervention</td>
<td>cross-border terrorism</td>
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Since 1988, Western state and civil actors have primarily responded to the Myanmar regime with a range of both expressive and aggressive pressure (diplomacy, advocacy, sanctions and boycotts), with restricted consensual engagement through limited bilateral assistance and INGO engagement. However, the old regime was primarily concerned with foreign investment, trade and financial sanctions, not humanitarian aid, so this form of consensual engagement had little bargaining power. Asian regional neighbours, on the other hand, have primarily acted through consensual corporate engagement, and (in some cases) bilateral assistance and limited expressive diplomatic pressure. This has thus had marginally more impact.

Holliday argues that in determining an appropriate response to the global justice demands of contemporary political philosophy, insiders must play a leading role and the dismissal of the views of regional neighbours such as China, India and ASEAN, is "worrying"; their voice should be "an essential moral and practical precondition for external engagement with Myanmar" (Holliday 2011a:142).

The conclusion of his extensive analysis of the demands of contemporary political philosophy and global justice is to a call for increased expressive pressure (diplomacy and...
advocacy), a readjustment and evaluation of the extensive repertoire of aggressive pressures applied by Western powers against Myanmar, and an increase in consensual engagement by the West—particularly an increase in INGO engagement. He expresses great concern at the imbalance in which so little Western consensual engagement has been attempted. While ascribing this imbalance mainly to "the difficulties put in the way of internal action by the Myanmar authorities" (Holliday 2011a:164) he advocates a major increase in effort be given to such intervention, "led from the grassroots through civic action, undertaken ... by UN agencies and INGOs ... a recasting of major power engagement" (Holliday 2011a:172). The field research of this thesis concurs that, despite serious restrictions applied by the Myanmar government, there is considerable scope for increased INGO consensual engagement with the regime to be effective.

8.3.5 Challenging Western Responses

A wealth of scholarly research has thus arisen to suggest that humanitarian aid to Myanmar should be significantly expanded, in line with the calls made by INGOs. From a sanctions perspective, the range of tactical concessions made by the regime requires a repositioned response, and humanitarian assistance offers the best option to do that in a manner that supports reform without otherwise strengthening the regime. From a humanitarian perspective, whether one ascribes to an apolitical or actively political humanitarian approach, development theory and contemporary political philosophy both call for increased intervention in the form of assistance delivered via the UN and INGOs to help alleviate the impacts of poverty.

This conclusion is supported by other research. The OECD (2007a) report on development in fragile states discussed earlier, for example, suggests a range of reasons why engagement is necessary and beneficial in authoritarian states, including the risk that non-engagement increases the chances of state collapse and humanitarian disaster. The OECD specifically cite Myanmar as an example, suggesting:

There is almost no development aid going into Myanmar because of its human rights record. The dilemma is that aid to the state would risk reinforcing a government with severe domestic and international legitimacy problems and an appalling human rights record. However, the absence of aid appears to be reinforcing a process by which most state resources go to the security sector and investment in health and social welfare services is negligible. UN analyses show severe deprivation and signs of risk
of humanitarian crisis in parts of the country. The question becomes: even if political transformation occurs, will it result in the collapse of core state services and risk humanitarian crises? (OECD 2007a:30)

Steinberg argues that sanctions are based on false assumptions, and that efforts to censure Myanmar in the UN are "more theatrical than likely to achieve their objective" (Steinberg 2007:219). He continues, suggesting that,

The international community has been more concerned about the impact of political repression on human rights than on any human rights issues arising from endemic extreme poverty, yet the latter is equally important and is something the international community may both have had a hand in contributing to, and the power to help address, at least to some extent. (Steinberg 2010b:3)

8.4 First Steps of Repositioning

The opportunity now exists, therefore, to acknowledge domestic political reform by increasing assistance to the poor and vulnerable, in a way that reduces conflict in the international political relationships. As Pedersen (2010:117) expresses it, we now have the opportunity to redress the fact that, "The Burmese people for the past 20 years have been denied the international assistance normally provided to the world's most vulnerable."

While the 2010 elections were not free or fair,

It would be a massive wasted opportunity if the West failed to engage with this new government, to assess their willingness to take the country in a different direction, and to convince them that improved relations are possible if they do so. (TNI 2010:10)

It has been argued for some time that Western policy towards Myanmar, particularly the US sanctions policy, is "too crude, blunt, and one dimensional" (Holliday 2005), and needs to develop a more nuanced approach. The Obama administration has responded by increasing humanitarian aid to Myanmar and adding additional diplomatic ‘practical engagement’ to the pressure of economic sanctions (Steinberg 2010a). This has the full endorsement of the NLD and democratic opposition parties, and has involved a doubling in humanitarian funding from US$17 million in 2009 to US$37 million in 2010 and 2011 (USAID 2011). This is positive first step towards the major increase and "recasting of major power engagement" Holliday (2011a:172) and others call for.
The Asia Society’s (2010a) recommendation paper to the Obama administration, which was part of this decision-making, argues that “there are now many more opportunities to engage effectively in humanitarian and community development programs than there were in the past” (Asia Society 2010a:36), and that aid agencies now have productive relationships with mid- and lower-level civil servants. While opposing budgetary support for the regime, they recommend significantly increased humanitarian funding as well as capacity building of the technical skills of civil servants, particularly in ministries involved in economic management, and the governance skills of elected politicians. If adopted these would constitute significant new directions in US policy.

Australia and the UK have likewise responded to reform by announcing similar increases in humanitarian funding. In February 2010, well before the 2010 elections, Australia announced an increase in aid budgets from around A$30 million in the 2009/10 budget to $50 million in 2012/13 (Smith 2010). The UK followed suit in February 2011, announcing the largest increase, from £32 million in 2010/11 to £185 million in 2014/15 (Buncombe 2011). Australia has also already announced a broadening of the mandate according to which the aid budget can be allocated, indicating that aid projects must begin engaging lower-level officials (Moore 2011).

At some stage into the future, Burma will have a civilian Government, which will face great challenges. At some stage into the future, the regional and international community will be asked to help in the rebuilding of Burma’s economic and social structures. Australia’s view therefore is that the international community must help prepare Burma for the future. Burma’s capacity cannot be allowed to completely atrophy to the ultimate disadvantage and cost of its people. The international community needs to start the rebuilding now.


Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD initially took a hard line on sanctions, and a cautious stand on aid:

It makes little political or economic sense to give aid without trying to address the circumstances that render aid ineffectual. No amount of material goods and technical know-how will compensate for human irresponsibility and viciousness.


Nonetheless, the NLD position on aid has always been nuanced enough to reject aid for the government while supporting strictly humanitarian aid (ICG 2002). In 1999 Suu Kyi clarified that humanitarian aid should be delivered to those in need so long as it is not channelled through government structures, is properly monitored, and is distributed
equally to all in need, irrespective of political views. The NLD claims it has never opposed purely humanitarian aid (Aung San Suu Kyi 2010). Early in 2011 the NLD called for discussions with the US, EU, Canada and Australia on how and when sanctions might be modified "in the interests of democracy, human rights and a healthy economic environment" (Mizzima 2011).

These moves constitute solid first-steps towards the major increase and "recasting of major power engagement" Holliday (2011a:172) and others call for. Analysis of sanctions and humanitarian aid funding by international relations theory, development theory and contemporary political philosophy all concur with the calls of INGOs throughout this research for increased intervention to help alleviate extreme poverty. "Poverty has emerged as the most acutely felt constraint on human rights for the majority of people across the country" (2009:2), while "aid has, arguably, emerged as our best tool for promoting better governance and human rights in Burma" (Pedersen 2009:1).

Aid will not save Myanmar. Yet, because of the limited social, political and economic links between Myanmar and the outside world, aid has assumed unusual strategic importance as an arena of interaction among the government, Myanmar society and the outside world. Indeed, considering the failure of twenty years of isolation, a normalisation of aid relations may present the best available opportunity for the international community to promote change in Myanmar. (ICG 2008:31)

Continued restricted aid levels and mandates only diminish the capacity of the general population, undermine reform, and fuel regime suspicion.

[What is] urgently needed is a total rethink of aid policies aimed at enhancing humanitarian access to a population with less support than any needy citizenry on earth ... Building bridges into Burma remains the essential task, both to open a closed and fettered nation to diverse voices and influences, and to provide a helping hand for what is only ever going to be a difficult transition to democracy.

(Holliday 2009:29)

On the other hand, further significant expansion of the humanitarian space through increased funding and mandates, as the INGOs in this field research call for, expresses sensitivity to both the domestic and international socio-political context. Such a move offers the opportunity to alleviate extreme poverty, test the sincerity of new government’s reform, strengthen the ability of local authorities to provide basic needs, while socialising officials to the benefits of cooperation with international actors, and capacity building civil society, starting a process of bottom-up democratisation.
Chapter NINE: Conclusions—Contributions and Findings

[The international community should] educate itself to the complexities that are Burma/Myanmar and some possible avenues for alleviating its problems. So when the time comes, and it surely will, outside communities will be able to appreciate the nuanced issues and step forward with the sensitivity necessary to help intelligently, in contrast to many less effective responses in the past. We on the periphery should minimally follow the physicians' code: do no harm. (Steinberg 2010b:xxxii)

This thesis has examined the manner in which INGOs operate in Myanmar, as a case study exploring context-sensitive development. Myanmar offers an interesting and illustrative example for this study, being a difficult political context for development due not to collapse of state institutions, but to international isolation and internal conflict, with significant post-colonial sensitivities and multiple actors each with competing strategic concerns. Myanmar presents a confluence of significant need with restricted access and resourcing, limited mandates, a suspicious authoritarian government, and deep reservations by international donors and governments based in part on shallow understandings and misconceptions.

This thesis has examined how INGOs contextualise their operations and projects out of sensitivity to the socio-political context they face in this so-called pariah state, in order to maximise development effectiveness in Myanmar and to use this insight to help further define the role of INGOs in participatory context-sensitive development more generally.

9.1 Socio-Political Context-Sensitive Development

9.1.1 INGO Role in Context-Sensitive Development: Extension of Participatory Development Approach

The results of the fieldwork research, presented in Part C of this thesis, have clearly demonstrated that the socio-political context in Myanmar has had a significant impact on
the best practice implementation of international development principles and approaches by INGOs, in order to maximise development effectiveness. This research has documented the contextualisation INGOs have made to interventions in local communities, relationships with other stakeholders, and expanding the humanitarian space.

Not all INGOs are as equally sensitive to socio-political context. The research outcomes presented in Part C represent those approaches which the broader INGO community have assessed as being most effective within this context, based on several separate stages in assessing effectiveness. Firstly, interview participants were asked to self-assess the effectiveness of approaches they talked about during the interview. While there are serious limitations to self-assessment, it is significant that there were several instances of INGOs providing an honest assessment that this is what they are doing, but it is not being very effective or does not appear to be working well.

To address personal bias, self-assessments were then correlated with snowball sampling referrals. At the end of each interview participants were asked to refer other organisations or individual development professionals they perceived to be good examples of effective context-sensitive development programs in Myanmar. The frequency of referral to particular organisations and individual leaders was taken as a proxy measure of effective context-sensitive approaches. Findings based on these self-assessments and referrals was then confirmed using the Delphi method, in which preliminary findings were presented to a forum of INGO country representatives, with feedback and discussion following. Selected follow-up interviews were also undertaken. In this way, less effective approaches have been discarded and approaches perceived by the INGO community in Myanmar to be the most effective and context-sensitive are the ones that have been documented.

An extension of current models of the roles that different development actors play in socio-political context-sensitive development was proposed at the end of Chapter Two, based on a combination of the participatory development model and social change theory. Figure 1 on page 86 diagrams the findings that each actor needs empowerment to innovate within the level of context they are embedded, but should primarily act as facilitators to empower those embedded at more local-levels of context, only stepping in to assist with contextualised decision-making at a lower level when other socio-political factors prohibit the empowerment of these actors. Thus local communities should act as
primary decision-makers at the micro-level of development, local NGO or civil society partners at meso-levels, and INGOs at more macro-levels.

The most complex factors requiring sensitivity in many contexts are cultural. 'Culture-sensitive development' has therefore been discussed at length over the past several decades, with the participatory development model providing the conceptual basis for empowering communities and INGO or civil society actors embedded within the local knowledge systems to direct highly context-sensitive decision-making. Another factor commonly creating great complexity for development is conflict, whether continuing violence or immediate post-conflict situations, which in the worst cases manifest as failed states. The issues are highly political, and the literature demands great context-sensitivity by the INGO, not just the local partner. However, apart from manifestly conflict or failed state contexts, INGO context-sensitivity to socio-political factors at this more meso-macro level is not well documented.

The significant innovation of this extended participatory model presented in this thesis is conceptualising INGOs as comprised of two discrete actors: in-country INGO staff who have a field-orientation; and, INGO head office staff with a policy, branding and global practice orientation. Tension between these two sets of actors in most INGOs is clearly drawn in the literature, but usually examined from an organisational management perspective. This thesis applies this distinction to the issue of empowerment for participatory development, and concludes that much of this tension is derived from the fact that recognition of the need for contextualisation at this level is largely neglected in the development literature.

This extended model therefore suggests that context-sensitive development requires significant empowerment of INGO in-country staff by INGO head offices, to facilitate their innovation based on local knowledge of in-country socio-political factors in the same manner as empowerment of local communities and partners is emphasised by the participatory-empowerment model. In effect, this extension conceptualises post-colonial sensitivities and national-international power dynamics as forms of conflict, significant towards development effectiveness even if remaining non-violent. INGO in-country staff are the actors most embedded in such a national-international context.
Context-sensitive development therefore requires the empowerment of senior in-country INGO staff to gain in-depth understanding of the political, cultural and historical context, and the decision-making ability to deviate from organisational norms and approaches as required to make the most contextual responses. It requires their empowerment to both innovate context-sensitive solutions to complex stakeholder relations, as well as to innovate context-sensitive ways to facilitate the innovation of communities and local partners. This empowerment of INGO in-country staff must be sufficient to overcome the normalising forces within large organisations, often manifesting within INGOs through things like monitoring, evaluation and reporting procedures, as well as the rotation of staff on short-term contracts.

The variation in effectiveness and context-sensitivity reported by different INGOs during this fieldwork research suggests different levels of such empowerment by the different organisations. It is notable that the personnel most commonly recommended during the snowball sampling were commonly those who had been in the country longest, and had the deepest historical, political and cultural understanding. Many, however, had been forced to change organisations in order to stay within the country after contract periods had expired. This suggests that facilitating deeper understanding of the context and culture by senior national and foreign in-country staff is an important key to empowering all INGO in-country staff to innovate and facilitate more context-sensitively, and suggests expatriate INGO managers should remain in-country longer.

However, one of the reasons the participatory development model advocates the devolution of responsibility for contextualisation to local communities and partners is the propensity for the power relations inherent in the INGO-LNGO and INGO-community relationship to undermine their empowerment and decision-making. Further empowerment of INGO in-country staff poses the risk of INGOs reasserting too much control over local development, at the expense of the empowerment of local partners and communities. There remains, therefore, a need for greater theorisation and discussion around the limits on the role of INGOs in innovation, along the lines called for by Radcliffe (2006b), to ensure maximal empowerment of both local partners and communities and INGO in-country staff.
9.1.2 **Extension of Conflict-Sensitive Development: Importance of Historically-Informed Understandings**

This thesis has also explored the relevance of 'conflict-sensitive development' ideas to Myanmar, finding in particular that firmly grounding development in a historically-informed in-depth understanding of the socio-political context, as emphasised in the literature, is extremely relevant to Myanmar. The Conflict Sensitivity consortium (2004) define conflict as, "two or more parties [who] believe that their interests are incompatible, express hostile attitudes or take action that damages other parties' ability to pursue their interests." Most conflict is thus not currently violent.

Conflict-sensitive development recognises that development has the capacity to contribute proactively to conflict prevention and peace-building if the root causes of conflict are understood and explicitly addressed, while careless development can exacerbate conflict by fuelling long-held fears and provoking unintended negative reactions. The relationships between the Myanmar government and both the democratic opposition and ethnic minorities are both clearly marred by substantial conflict. However, this thesis has also shown that the relationship between the international community and actors within Myanmar also require a conflict-sensitive approach, with hostility between the international community and the Myanmar regime often expressed by efforts towards regime change and stubborn isolation respectively. In that sense, this research has extended the application of conflict-sensitive development ideas to an internationally isolated state, a so-called 'pariah' state, by enlarging the context to embrace the conflict with the international community. The international community, particularly the West, should not be seen as an impartial mediator but as a political actor within a significant, ongoing conflict.

Sensitivity to context requires understanding historical and contemporary socio-political factors in-depth, as well as the interaction between them and development interventions. It requires acting upon this understanding in ways that either align with these factors, or always keep them clearly in mind, respecting the views and processes embodied by them, including these national and international political tensions. It must therefore commence with a detailed analysis of the context, its causes, all actors, and their dynamic interaction. Interventions must be based on an in-depth understanding of the political, economic,
socio-cultural and historical context, and the structural and proximate causes of conflict, including the triggers provoking fears and reactionary responses.

A thorough examination of the historical origins of the conflicted politics in and surrounding Myanmar identified three major historical narratives contributing to the values and strategic concerns of the major contemporary actors. These narratives relate to major historical timeframes, and continue as residues, as it were, resonating within and helping to shape all sides of the contemporary socio-political context. These narratives are: 1) traditional ideology and values about power, rulership and political legitimacy derived from the patterns of the pre-colonial, monarchical period; 2) post-colonial sensitivities and security fears aggravated by the colonial experience and history of interaction with the West; and, 3) the enduring impact of the political and economic crises of the nationalist struggle for Independence, WWII and the subsequent civil war.

Considering the first of these, regimes of the last two decades (and beyond) have acted out of a polity derived in large part from traditional Burman ideology about power, rulership and political legitimacy, ideas which were the central organising patterns of monarchical rule prior to colonialism. These values were described in this research in terms of seven perceptions about power and political legitimacy that still resonate in polity today. While most readily observable in the actions of the regime, they are also often evident throughout the contemporary social structure. These perceptions include: zero-sum ideas about personalised, centralised power; the importance of controlling or eliminating rivals; and, the legitimacy derived from demonstrating order and control, as well as non-dependence on external powers. These perceptions suggest development approaches that are more likely to be resisted and others that may gain ready acceptance. They highlight, for example, that advocacy and the capacity building of state institutions with independent powers are likely to be resisted until there has been a significant shift in mindset. They also suggest, however, that political leadership has a moral responsibility for reformation and provision, and therefore that most regime officials almost certainly have intrinsic political and personal motivations favouring provision of welfare, poverty alleviation and development under the right circumstances. A well thought-through constructive engagement strategy is therefore likely to have considerable success, even if traditional zero-sum perceptions of power continue to dominate the ruling elite's ideology.
The colonial experience and history of interaction with the West has been a thorny issue, fuelling distrust of the West by many political elite today. The form of colonial administration, as well as the approach to ethnic politics and economic development which offered little benefit to the Burmese people, underscored the fierce Burmese priority on independence from foreign domination and fanned ethnic differences into almost intractable issues. The economic crisis and violent ethnic-civil conflict at Independence only exacerbated these, and cemented the leading role of an authoritarian military apparatus. Foreign support for communist and ethnic rebellions inflamed Burman fears of foreign intervention and created a siege mentality which still widely persists within the strategic concerns of the military hierarchy.

Conflict-sensitive development seeks to ensure ‘human security’, defined as freedom from both fear and want, and thus seeks to reduce the reasons for fear. Conflict-sensitive development requires consolidation of relationships between actors, and strengthening of institutions capable of containing and transforming conflict. The literature has shown that agencies working in conflict areas need to focus on building and sustaining constructive relationships between actors, focus on addressing political and socio-economic inequalities, and that capture of development by one actor undermines effectiveness.

These narratives suggest that some development approaches, such as a strongly rights-based approach led by Western agencies, are likely to provoke strong post-colonial reactions, and are unlikely to be fruitful without significant improvement in the relationship between the regime and the international community. They also suggest that, in such a contested context in which the international community is also partially implicated, blaming the current political, economic or humanitarian situation solely on governance failures by the regime is highly provocative. A more sympathetic examination of the complexity of the political and economic trauma within the country should evoke a less self-righteous approach, which this research into the approach of INGOs in Myanmar has demonstrated to be far more conducive to evoking change.

This research has shown that a deep understanding of historical factors such as these that have shaped the fears, sensitivities and notions of the state held by the different political actors, offers significant explanatory power about approaches that provoke negative reactions and effective alternative development approaches.
Igboemeka (2005) found in her study of the perceptions of development agencies about aid effectiveness in Myanmar that external actors do not recognise or reflect in-country understandings of the context sufficiently well, and that a more thorough understanding of the challenging socio-political context is required by all actors. This research has verified that insufficient analysis of the socio-political dynamics and conflicting ideology significantly undermines development effectiveness.

### 9.2 How INGOs Operate Context-Sensitively in Myanmar

This research has drawn out many of the key adaptations INGOs make to this socio-political context, particularly by those responding conflict- and context-sensitively to the sorts of dynamics and factors outlined. This thesis thus documents INGO context-sensitive development implemented to improve effectiveness within Myanmar. The contextualisation described by INGO participants relates directly to restrictions stemming from this conflicted domestic and international politics, particularly to Myanmar government polity and problems within the international community's approach towards the country.

#### 9.2.1 Context-Sensitive INGO Development in Communities

INGOs contextualise their development activities within local communities in Myanmar primarily by tweaking and intensifying effort toward a number of key outcomes, rather than by limiting community empowerment. This is a significant finding given the authoritarian and restrictive governance which is widely considered by those outside the country to be a severely limiting factor. Broadly speaking, context-sensitive INGO development places additional emphasis on highly participatory development, creating a process to overcome not-insignificant obstacles of fear and scepticism, and allowing a greater timeline to elicit genuine involvement. It seeks approval and involvement of local officials and elite, while safeguarding against capture by such powerful groups through very deliberate emphasis on equity. It therefore directly addresses power imbalances based on a diverse range of marginalising factors, including gender, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and age, and seeking transformation in the way in which people see
each other, building social cohesion and developing community consensus decision-
making processes. Sensitivity to the local context thus involves efforts at peace-building,
at building social capital, and in conflict-sensitive development.

Highly participatory development in this format is seen as very relevant and effective in
Myanmar, perhaps even more so than in many other contexts. The end-goal of many
INGOs in community participatory development is long-term local sustainability by
capacity-building the emergence of village-level community-based organisations.
However, in order to ‘do no harm’ most INGOs feel the need to help these emerging local
civil groups to remain in cooperative relationship with officials, depoliticising community-
level development. Most INGOs therefore take on most advocacy with regional and
national-level officials themselves. In this sense, INGOs feel that active citizenship, in
terms of empowering communities to advocate with authorities on their own may not be
possible or desirable at this stage, and assume this role for the time being.

INGO leaders also felt development must take the people’s religion particularly seriously,
so while often related to division and conflict, opportunities to employ it as an avenue of
strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital should be utilised. They therefore
advocate deliberate inclusion of local FBOs, religious leaders and religious institutions in
community development and in capacity building work.

INGO leaders who have been in the country longer also highlight the importance a
personal fluency in Burmese language provides, and thus advocate much longer terms for
senior appointments by INGOs to the country, with a budget to become fluent in the
language as well as history and culture before taking on their role.

9.2.2 Context-Sensitivity in Stakeholder Relations

INGOs likewise approach working with other development stakeholders, including civil
society, local NGOs, officials and other INGOs, quite differently in Myanmar than they
would in most other countries, finding the need to limit or seriously adapt most of these
activities because of the conflicted macro-level socio-political context.
Contextualisation in these interactions has been explored in this paper through the development approaches of partnership, capacity building, advocacy, a rights-based approach, and accountability. It was shown that after long being suppressed, "informal" civil society has become quite strong in Myanmar over recent years. The need to partner with and build the capacity of this sector is widely recognised within the INGO community, however efforts are complicated as much of this civil society is unregistered (and difficult to register), and lacks both the scale and organisational capacity required for effective partnership with many INGOs.

Globally, partnership and capacity development usually also emphasise work with government departments and harmonisation with government objectives. However, partnership with officials is heavily restricted by both domestic and international politics and so capacity development even of local officials is rarely undertaken in any significant manner. Nonetheless, most INGOs speak of the need for such civil service capacity development, and where cooperative work has been attempted, those involved speak highly of the outcome.

A rights-based approach to development, defined as holding the government to account for human rights publicly by a public educated in their rights, is inherently political. The government's domination of the political space in Myanmar has therefore meant such an approach has not been effective in this format, and is not considered the most effective approach by many INGOs. It remains a contentious question amongst INGOs, however. Many INGO informants insist that a non-confrontational strategy of advocacy towards the same rights and goals can be very fruitful—by non-confrontational these leaders speak of dialogue away from media and mass mobilisation, referring to a process more reminiscent of strategies for mobilising elite involvement through an exploration of needs together in a no-blame fashion. To avoid exposing civil society to undue risk, this sort of advocacy is primarily undertaken by INGOs directly with government officials, although some local civil society groups are independently commencing interesting initiatives as well.
9.2.3 Context-Sensitivity and Negotiating the Restricted Humanitarian Space

INGOs seek to build strong personal trust with officials, given access to the humanitarian space to operate and effectiveness in advocacy are built on the quality of such relationships. In a context where domestic and international political will is particularly low they largely do this by attempting to be absolutely transparent with government officials and donors, to an extent often well beyond levels of accountability which they would usually undertake in other countries. To attempt to expand the humanitarian space sufficiently to fulfil their mandates regarding poverty alleviation, INGOs therefore also direct significant advocacy towards their own donors, governments and boards.

The insights documented in this research offer something of a blueprint for organisations working in Myanmar, and the prospect of incremental change and effectiveness in alleviating poverty in Myanmar. More broadly, this research highlights the clear need for development practitioners to understand the local context and be ready to adapt global development approaches to specific contexts, for every unique context. Myanmar simply highlights this need because of an acutely difficult context. This research thus highlights the lack of substantive research into the socio-political contextualisation of development, and the tendency of the international and academic community to espouse a global ideal without sufficient emphasis on contextual alternatives and adaptations in implementation.

9.3 Socio-Political Context as the Basis of INGO Adaptations to Context

These adaptations to the development approaches adopted by INGOs are clearly in response to the complex socio-political context, and I would argue are contributors to the current national reform agenda. The first INGOs re-entered the country in the early 1990s, with steady growth in numbers and the scale of projects until the rapid expansion in response to Cyclone Nargis.

Highly participatory development as a response to the marginalisation and fear many poorer people felt under military rule, particularly those from ethnic minorities, has helped alleviate some of that fear and empower the voice of the poor. It has also been a
means of building a broad-based foundation for social change that reassesses traditional beliefs about power, authority and legitimacy. Grass-roots democratisation and widespread participation in development processes has required reconciliation, and INGOs have emphasised equity. While not a driver of national socio-political reform, these are a necessary compliment to it. By addressing grievances and inequalities at the community level and being engaged in larger-scale peace initiatives, INGOs have sought to support and model the national reconciliation which is hopefully now being embarked upon. And by often approaching development through more humanitarian rather than rights-based principles, INGOs have not only gained additional access to poor communities but have helped build trust between the Myanmar government and the international community. Non-confrontational INGO advocacy on behalf of communities and issues has not only achieved positive outcomes on particular issues, but has challenged the preconceptions of Myanmar officials who had inherited the suspicions and fears of the past and expanded the space for civil society.

Context-sensitive development has therefore met both the immediate needs of the people whose poverty is being address by INGO programs, while also smoothing the way for larger social change through this sensitivity.

9.4 Further Research

At the conclusion of this study, there remain several areas requiring further research. These include the need for further theorisation around the roles of various actors in context-sensitive development, particularly the role of INGOs in innovation or in advocating or facilitating innovation in a manner which does not devalue local knowledge or disempower local communities or partners, compromising the strengths and gains made by the participatory model.

Another key area of further research is to examine the areas of similarity and divergence in context-sensitive development between multiple politically-isolated or difficult contexts. For example, a comparative study of how context-sensitive development works under the same ideas of participation, equity, sustainability, active citizenry, sensitivity to culture, partnership, capacity building, rights, advocacy and accountability across a
number of difficult states, such as perhaps Zimbabwe, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and even North Korea, would make a very interesting and illuminating study.

Another interesting research question would be to examine the extent to which context-sensitive development, as described in this thesis, offers an antidote to the common critique that most INGO development is still steeped in imperialistic and neo-colonial ideas.

A further fascinating area to explore in future research, in the context of the rapid reform now under way, is the expanding space for advocacy and active citizenship, documenting up-to-date practice as well as helping chart the way forward for more effective societal participation in national reform.

One final extension of this research would be to consider the impact of the socio-cultural context on development in Myanmar. Within a participatory development framework, this understanding would relate even more strongly to the work of LNGOs than INGOs, but would likely be significant in such a traditional culture as Myanmar with its highly hierarchical view of relationships and the very significant role of religion in the lives of most people. For example, a study of the role of religious doctrine and institutions in facilitating (and sometimes obstructing) development in Myanmar would be both fascinating and highly practical. Clarke (2011), for example, has documented the contribution religious doctrine and practice has had on development at a generalised, global level. Localising such a study to the actual and potential contribution of Buddhist teaching and institutions (as well as their Christian and Muslim counterparts), would be a particularly interesting study.
Appendix ONE: Schedule of Interview Prompt Questions

A. Preliminary Introduction

Description of the Research

Background statements on the Researcher

Consent form

Privacy/Confidentiality Policy

B. Personal Details

What is the nature and extent of your involvement with Burma/Myanmar?

Do you have any specific qualification which gives you additional authority to speak on Burma/Myanmar?

C. Political Context

Describe your view on the current political context.

How would you describe Myanmar politically today?

What are your thoughts on the following:

i. Military/regime

ii. People’s attitudes towards the military/regime

iii. Local Dissidents/Opposition/Democracy Advocates

iv. Prospects of Change

v. Authoritarianism in Myanmar c.f. elsewhere

vi. Unity / ethnic divisions within the country, and prospects for peace / conflict in the absence of military rule?

What do you see as the psychological impacts on the people of military rule and current government policies? (Is there an urban/rural difference?)

i. Motivation and willingness for development

ii. Readiness or aversion to ‘risk’ trying new things
iii. Learned helplessness and dependence-disempowered?

iv. Community action groups and collective thinking?

v. Restrictions on free association of groups of people—people’s response?

vi. People’s perceptions of their freedoms & restrictions? Their desires for more or less “freedom” and what does that mean to them?

vii. Impact on daily lives of people?

D. Context of Development

How would you describe the level of development in Burma today?

i. Basic social services: income level, education, basic health care, nutrition, water & sanitation?

ii. Comparisons to neighbouring or other countries?

iii. Current opportunities for people and communities to improve these themselves?

iv. Current opportunities for organisations to improve these?

How would you describe the level of poverty in Burma today?

i. How would you quantify or illustrate it?

ii. Comparisons to neighbouring or other countries?

iii. Regional differences?

E. Associations, NGOs and Civil Society

In your experience, who is working in Myanmar? What are they doing?

i. Government sponsored associations

ii. Local NGOs and Civil Society

iii. INGOs
F. Undertaking Community Development in Myanmar

Describe (briefly) the history of debate or issues faced by your organisation in deciding to engage in Myanmar when Aung San Suu Kyi has requested organisations don’t and many other organisations have abstained.

Have you been involved with or do you have intimate knowledge of any specific community development projects in Myanmar? I would like to explore the most significant of these individually, one at a time. For each project:

i. Description of project:

ii. What were the principle aims?

iii. How well did the project achieve these aims? In the short term? Long term results?

iv. Was there any sense in which you felt the project was undermined, or good work was undone by something or someone during or after completion of the project?

v. Did the project produce any unexpected consequences, positive or negative, for partners or participants?

vi. What were the principle issues, difficulties, problems encountered? How were they dealt with?

vii. How was the project managed in the country? Did the organisation partner with nationals in the implementation? Who? Did the organisation have staff on the ground in the country? What was the division of responsibility between foreign and national partners? How well did that work?

viii. What was the relationship like with the Myanmar government, and local authorities? Was there any formal agreement? Do you have an MOU as an organisation, a project? How well did that work? Were there issues or hiccups along the way? How and to what extent were they solved?

ix. Did the project strengthen or strain relationships between INGO / national partners and national government / local authorities?

x. What did you do differently with this project because this was done in Myanmar? In other words, if you were implementing this in another country, what would you (or your organisation) do differently?

xi. If widely-held key principles for INGO development work are things like community participation (in identifying projects, decision making and implementation), empowerment (avoiding dependence), sustainability, working with the poorest, equity and overcoming gender bias, separation of religion & development, etc. :-}
Appendix 1: Schedule of Interview Prompt Questions

a. To what extent did this project implement these principles?

b. How appropriate did you find these principles in working in Myanmar?

c. Are there any other principles or modifications to the above you feel are necessary for effective community development work in a Myanmar context?

In your experience, what are the key issues / obstacles to effective community development work by INGOs in Myanmar? How do you see these issues / obstacles being different or similar for Myanmar as for other developing countries?

In your experience, how are these issues / obstacles best dealt with? In your view, who (organisations, projects, workers) has dealt with these most effectively?

G. Referrals

Can you name or describe the work of any nationals (organisations or people) coordinating effective community development work in Burma? What makes their work particularly effective? Can you provide me with a contact?

Can you name or describe the work of any foreign (organisations or people) coordinating effective community development work in Myanmar? What makes their work particularly effective? Can you provide me with a contact?

H. Confidentiality

Do I have approval to publish your name, or do you require use of a Pseudonym?

Do I have approval to publish your institution / organisation details?
Appendix TWO: List of Interview Participants

Just over half the interview participants agreed to allow their name and organisational details to be published, and agreed for some of their interview remarks to be quoted in an identifiable form. These individuals and their organisational affiliation are listed below. Almost all, however, made some remarks which they asked to only be used anonymously. In addition, many other interview participants only participated on the precondition of anonymity. Thus, two lists follow. The first is the partial list of participants who agreed to be identified in the research. The second is a list of all interview participants, with their anonymous reference number for any anonymous source material.

List of Interview Participants who gave Consent to be Identified:


Allan, David. 2009. Director, Spectrum (LNGO), former country coordinator of World Concern (INGO). Personal interview (recorded), 6pm Thursday 16th July 2009, Yangon.

----. 2011. Director, Spectrum (LNGO), former country coordinator of World Concern (INGO). Personal interview (recorded), 8pm Thursday 27th June 2011, Yangon.


Appendix 2: List of Interview Participants


Herzbruch, Birke. 2009. NGO Liaison Officer, *Local Resource Centre*. Personal interview (recorded), 1pm Thursday 16th July 2009, Yangon.


Appendix 2: List of Interview Participants


Wells, Tamas. 2009. Project Manager, *Paung Ku Project (Save the Children)* (INGO). Personal interview (recorded), 4pm Tuesday 7th July 2009, Yangon.

----. 2011. Project Director, *Paung Ku Project (Save the Children)* (INGO). Personal interview 1pm Wednesday 22nd June 2011, Yangon.


Appendix 2: List of Interview Participants

List of all Interview Participants (Anonymous Sources)


----- 2011. Country Representative for an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), June 2011, Yangon.


Source 8. 2009. Regional Director of an international FBO working into Myanmar through partnership with a local company. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Bangkok.


----- 2011. Regional Director for an INGO. Personal interview July 2011, Bangkok.

Source 10. 2009. Regional Manager for an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Bangkok.

Source 11. 2009. Regional Director of an international development FBO working into Myanmar through partnerships. Personal interview (recorded), August 2009, Chiang Mai.

Source 12. 2009. Regional Director of an international development FBO working into Myanmar through partnerships. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Chiang Mai.

Source 13. 2009. Regional Director of an international development FBO working into Myanmar through partnerships. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Chiang Mai.

Appendix 2: List of Interview Participants


Source 16. 2009. Senior Advisor to an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), June 2009, Yangon.

----. 2011. Senior Advisor to an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), June 2011, Yangon.


Source 27. 2009. Liaison with an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.


----. 2011. Project Manager with an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), June 2011, Yangon.


Source 30. 2009. Director of a NGO / former country coordinator for an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.

----. 2011. Director of a NGO / former country coordinator for an INGO. Personal interview June 2011, Yangon.
Source 31. 2009. Former country representative for an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), March 2009, Melbourne.

Source 32. 2009. Director of a local development FBO working under a company registration. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.

Source 33. 2009. Director of a registered PNGO. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.

Source 34. 2009. Director of a registered PNGO. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.

Source 35. 2009. Project Manager with a registered PNGO. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.

Source 36. 2011. Director of a registered PNGO. Personal interview (recorded), June 2011, Yangon.


Source 40. 2009. Director of an unregistered PNGO. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.


Source 42. 2009. Deputy Head of a UN agency. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.


Source 45. 2009. Project Manager with a UN agency. Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.

Source 46. 2009. Liaison with an INGO. Personal interview (recorded), June 2009, Yangon.


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