INTERNATIONAL NGO APPROACHES TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN MYANMAR

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rural poverty is a significant issue in Myanmar, with almost one third of the rural population living below the absolute poverty line. According to the Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar (2009-2010) Poverty Profile, the incidence of poverty is almost twice as high in rural areas as compared to urban centers, with almost 85 percent of the poor being rural. There are thus significant gaps between rural and urban dwellers, with, for example, 75 percent of rural dwellers only having a primary or less, compared with just 37 percent of urban dwellers. Other data from the survey highlights other significant poverty needs: for example, some 66 percent of the rural population do not have electricity, 47 percent suffer moderate to severe malnutrition, 35 percent lack access to safe drinking water, and 25 percent lack access to healthcare.

This paper presents analysis of new primary research data into the work of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in Myanmar, identifying strategies and approaches which maximize rural, community-level development effectiveness in this context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty key practitioners between 2009 and 2011. Most were country directors or program managers with INGOs based inside Myanmar. A number of local NGO leaders, managers of INGOs working into Myanmar through partnerships, representatives of bilateral donors and journalists were also interviewed. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in Myanmar, were around one hour in length, and were recorded and transcribed. A Delphi panel discussion was also used in Yangon during December 2009 to confirm preliminary findings. Results are presented phenomenologically, with direct interview quotations shown in italics (in contrast to no italics for quotations from the literature).

Half the participants agreed to allow some responses to be on the record, and these are referenced by name, agency and date. All other references to interview data are anonymous, as participants’ requests. The key finding of this research is that while INGOs find that rural development in Myanmar faces many difficulties, they insist that effectiveness is not as heavily restricted by domestic politics as is commonly perceived by those outside the country, particularly for activities addressing extreme poverty in rural communities outside conflict zones, provided they deploy appropriate sensitivity to the operational context.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section has introduced the paper. The next section will explore effective INGO approaches to rural community development, according to the dominant ideas of participation, equity, sustainability, and active citizenship. The third section will explore relationships with other stakeholders, including partnerships with civil society, engagement with officials, and concerns and conditionalities of donors. The final section will offer some conclusions from this research.

2. APPROACHES TO RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Participation

Participation is a central concept in development theory, having “come widely accepted as the minimum requirement for successful and sustained development outcomes.” The UNDP, for example, has long argued that participatory approaches are crucial to any successful human development. Similarly, the World Bank and the United Nations have also emphasized the role of participation in development. The UNDP, for example, states that participation is “a fundamental principle of development assistance” and that it “can lead to better development outcomes.”

Highly participatory “processed,” “human-centered,” and “integrated” programs are not just possible in rural Myanmar, but have been effective in creating ownership and empowering communities.

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This model revolves around concepts of empowerment, ownership, and partnership, all ideas seeking to redress power imbalances. In that sense, participation has a political dimension. INGOs in Myanmar are able to imagine their world differently, and are enabled to take action to change their circumstances. An implicit assumption behind such shared decision-making is that participation will, over time, lead to increased political participation by the marginalized poor, and thus democratization. Conversely, denying participation is said to reflect the nature of authoritarianism and repression. Marginalization of the poor and of isolated regions makes this particularly relevant for rural development; however it also follows that political power is often an obstacle to participatory development, whether at the national or local level.

This observation raises many questions about the possibility of fully implementing participatory development approaches in a politically restricted space like Myanmar. The former Chair of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Philip Alston, remarked that it is quite unrealistic to expect fully participatory development to succeed in a country which is fundamentally authoritarian in nature.

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This paper presents analysis of new primary research into the work of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in Myanmar, identifying strategies and approaches which maximize rural, community-level development effectiveness in this context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty key practitioners between 2009 and 2011. Most were country directors or program managers with INGOs based inside Myanmar. A number of local NGO leaders, managers of INGOs working into Myanmar through partnerships, representatives of bilateral donors and journalists were also interviewed. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in Myanmar, were around one hour in length, and were recorded and transcribed. A Delphi panel discussion was also used in Yangon during December 2009 to confirm preliminary findings. Results are presented phenomenologically, with direct interview quotations shown in italics (in contrast to no italics for quotations from the literature). About half the participants agreed to allow some responses to be on the record, and these are referenced by name, agency and date. All other references to interview data are anonymous, as participants’ requests.

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Nonetheless, interviewees felt this fear of the authorities is more immobilizing in the political arena, and perhaps more in urban and peri-urban areas, than in rural village-level development, and thus that fear and scepticism can usually be overcome in rural development. Process is critical, though, and requires leadership and a demonstration of approval by local authorities.

They need the door opened for them by local senior authorities, village or regional, to give them permission before they’re willing to move forward... They 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.

Such approval is often provided by a key individual in the village, someone confident in their position, such as a headman or former headman with high-level relationships, who endorses the process and is able to motivate and inspire others. It is entirely dependent on good relationships with local officials, something often more easily obtained by local partner organizations than international agencies, and which thus varies greatly from official to official. Local partners may need to spend “a lot of time talking to local officials to convince them this is good for the community and not a threat.” In other instances this is undertaken by key community members, rather than deliberate engagement or policy by INGOs or others: many communities have learned that, “If you don’t liaise with the authorities, then the authorities will follow up on what you have been doing anyway, so you might as well try to do the right thing.”

Some informants spoke of having included officials in projects in such a way that they considered they had helped the work, and could take some credit for the results, although this resulted in pressure for infrastructure projects, being tangible outcomes local authorities could take more easily take credit for.

Most INGO respondents suggest they emphasize high levels of participation even more strongly in Myanmar than elsewhere. Most pointed to high levels of voluntarism, 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 once official approval was demonstrated.

For a few, it is a deliberate effort to build highly democratic grass-roots practices, to prepare the way for a more democratic national future.

Equity

Equity is a fundamental element of effective participatory development, requiring the marginalized be specifically empowered to contribute to decision-making processes through redress of inequalities. Equity is usually emphasized in terms of gender, and gender is a significant issue in Myanmar. More broadly, though, it requires the participation of people across the community.

There is evidence that...good accountability processes can safeguard against such elite capture of community-driven development.

Building equity and genuine participation in such a deeply fractured society requires time and deliberate effort to empower the voices of women, minorities, and the marginalized.

The result of living under such a system of strict hierarchy is that they are not used to being able to have a say in the development of their own village. In other words, any Hope International Development Agency is possibly the INGO most directly addressing these concerns in Myanmar. They argue, Westerners characterize 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 threat of violence to maintain social control... It is in the family, it is in community organizations, it is in religious organizations, and of course it is in the military.

Sources:

2. Source 41, Burmese national with a UN agency, personal interview (July 2009).
8. Wells, Tamas, Paung Ku Project—Save the Children, Project Manager, personal interview (June 2009).
9. Source 20, INGO program manager, personal interview (9th July 2009).
10. Agldland, Brian, Care International, Country Director, personal interview (9th July 2009).
11. Agldland, interview.
nature, suggesting that often “this would guarantee a draconian response from the government.”

The findings of the fieldwork research are therefore somewhat surprising. Politically imposed regime policies and conflict which can contribute to participation often not being implemented well in Myanmar. NGOs tend to be more useful in rural Myanmar, but have been effective in creating ownership and empowering communities to assess their needs, prioritize issues, and design their own solutions.

This finding—that highly participatory development in Myanmar—and counterintuitive given the strongly authoritarian government. One interview respondent commented: “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.”

Other studies, by Skidmore and Fink, add to the question. Their research investigated the psychological impact of military rule on the Myanmar people, and concluded that the population have developed an aversion to risk taking.

Equitable development needs to try new things and are disempowered in decision-making. This perception is further mirrored in Aung San Suu Kyi, a 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. The interview respondents noted: “People here are not willing to try things outside areas that are safe.”

Certainly, “fear is a significant component of the landscape here... it is very real.” 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... There is a real fear of being clamped down on.”

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Building equity and genuine participation in such a deeply fractured society requires time and deliberate effort to empower the voices of women, minorities, and the marginalized. The result of living under such a system of strict hierarchy is that they are not used to being able to have a say in the development of their own village. Hope International Development Agency is possibly the INGO most directly addressing these concerns in Myanmar. They argue, “Westerners characterize 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 threat of violence to maintain social control... It is in the family, it is in community organizations, it is in religious organizations, and of course it is in the military.”

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Interviews with local leaders, community members, and NGO managers have shown that the potential for increased participation and accountability is high, but the barriers to achieving this are substantial. The key to overcoming these barriers is strong leadership and a commitment to working with communities in a way that respects their needs and aspirations. There is evidence that good accountability processes and capture of community-driven development.

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Effective participatory development requires village development committees include the voices of women, the poorest and most vulnerable, ethnic minorities, and all political views. However, even when allowed onto a participatory development committee, most poor villagers defer to local headmen, religious leaders, or local regime or military officials. They may also lack the genuine participation. Equity demands a delicate balance in which those with connections to the regime, and village religious leaders also have a voice, without dominating or being completely sidelined. Dealing with the root-causes of authoritarianism and marginalization are therefore essential, and empowerment must facilitate transformation that results in people living in more mutually respectful relationships. This requires concerted effort in Myanmar, but several INGO respondents insisted it is possible in Myanmar. Villagers require assistance to develop good negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making, overcoming the propensity for elite capture, before such development can be effective.

There is evidence not only from interviews respondents, but also in the literature, that good accountability processes and highly democratic decision-making can safeguard against such elite capture of community-driven development, despite the presence of elites on committees.8

Sustainability

Sustainable human development requires economic and social sustainability of human development, and thus that means is in place to ensure improvements in poverty eradication, livelihoods and equity continue beyond the project cycle. Local and regional authorities, even when

they are fully supportive, have very limited resources and capabilities. In an environment where donor conditionality restricts international agencies from capacity-building local officials, sustainability of communities are equipped to maintain development themselves. A number of agencies in Myanmar thus have a deliberate goal of building equitable, participatory village development committees into genuine, sustainable community-based organizations (CBOs), able to continue the process of community empowerment and sustainable development long after the involvement of the international or local agency. They assess this as effective in rural Myanmar. Indeed, we have proven on the ground that the poor, if given opportunity, can fully participate in prioritizing 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 organizations.9

Part of the reason for the effectiveness of this approach appears to be, rather than people living 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.10 However, capacity development of village committees into CBOs takes considerable time. While the approach and program of each agency is different, agencies interviewed suggested that in just five years they have gone to ten years to develop a functioning CBO in a rural community. Two other INGO leaders suggested they believed it could be achieved in as little as three years if it was made the central focus of the intervention, and done intensively with a facilitator living within the community.11 Success in such a venture, they found, “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.” 12

Active Citizenship

Active citizenship is widely seen as the logical conclusion of highly participatory development, when communities and local NGOs own their development initiatives, advocate for themselves, and hold authorities accountable to sustain development.13 Active citizenship involves, “strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens (especially poor communities are equipped to participate in exacting greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials and service providers… to ensure that those with the power to affect lives are held to account for their actions.”14 This is often achieved by adopting a rights-based approach (RBA) to development. An RBA views poverty as the direct result of disempowerment and exclusion, and seeks to assist the marginalized poor in asserting their rights to a fair share of existing resources, services, and power, an approach which is thus explicitly political.15

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, one might suggest that the effective programs be incorporated into a learning depended on the degree of active citizenship and an RBA. However, most respondents felt that this level of empowerment put individuals and communities at risk, violating the principle of ‘do no harm’. In an environment which already poses many risks because of the highly politicized context; respondents from organizations that have experimented with RBA in their global approach to development, advocate on behalf of communities in Myanmar rather than empowering them as active citizens themselves.16 They argue that poverty itself is a violation of human rights, which needs to be addressed as a priority to other civil, political, or economic rights.17

The International Labor Organization (ILO), with its mandate to work against forced labor, already spends most of its time advising citizens of their rights under existing Myanmar law. They suggest that existing national laws provide a reasonable framework for many rights, 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. Success in such political forms of advocacy to hold public officials accountable requires a state that tolerates protest and criticism, which has a free media, and an accessible and functioning legal system operating under rule-of-law.18 Without these, and given the vested interests and authoritarianism involved, and the degree of disempowerment and poverty of rural communities, villagers in Myanmar are particularly reluctant to challenge even local authorities. Speaking about local NGO and CBO networks, Dorning lamented that, “If we can’t do here, would it be possible in other countries is... they could become political in themselves, they could lobby for their own constituency.”

Most INGOs discourage any politicization of their work in villages or by local partners. Instead, apart from communities actively living a learned dependency, and being reluctant to challenge even local officials through legal and political means, INGOs themselves assume the role of advocacy on behalf of communities. Indeed, some INGOs avoid even using the term empowerment in their communication with the government, for fear of misinterpretation.19 At least some local NGOs express the view that “instead of advocating for political rights, international organizations should be strengthening at the grassroots level strengthening the capacity of society.”20

This finding is consistent with research in places where active citizenship may put people in danger. For example, Clarke examines work with illegal Burmese workers in Thailand and concludes that active citizenship is now a reality. Often public participation could endanger lives, and where people do not have the supporting legal and political mechanisms for such a role.21 In such situations, Marshall, Steven, “ILO’s Form, personal interview (22 June 2009).

Clarke, “Under the Radar.”


Nyanu-Musembali, Celestine, and Andrea Connwell. What is the ‘Rights-Based Approach’? All About? (University of Sussex, unpublished).

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8 Tumbian, interview; Win, Chaw Su, Ofsan, Coordinator Strategic Programmes, personal interview (13 July 2009).

9 e.g. Tegenfeldt, interview (2009), Win, interview; Tumbian, interview.

10 Labonte, Julien, and Robert S. Chase. “Who is at the Wheel When Communities Drive Development?” World Develop- ment 37 (2009): 239-31; Platteau, Jean-Philippe, and Fritzen, Scott A. “Can the Design of Management Services, and Power, an Approach which is Thus Explicitly Political. 4

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Dealing with the root-causes of authoritarianism and marginalization are therefore essential, and empowerment must facilitate transformation that results in people living in more mutually respectful relationships. This requires concerted effort in Myanmar, but several INGO respondents insisted it is possible in Myanmar.65 Villagers require assistance to develop good negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making, overcoming the propensity for elite capture, before such development can be effective. There is evidence not only from interview respondents in this literature, that good accountability processes and highly democratic decision-making can safeguard against such elite capture of community-driven development, despite the presence of elites on committees.66

Sustainability

Sustainable human development requires economic and social sustainability of human development, and thus that means are in place to ensure improvements in poverty elimination, livelihoods and equity continue beyond the project cycle.67 Local and regional authorities, even when 68 Tumboi, interview; Win, Chaw Su, Oxfam, Coordinator Strategic Programmes, personal interview (13th July 2009).
69 e.g. Tegenfeldt, interview (2009), Win, interview; Tumbian, interview.
73 They are fully supportive, have very limited resources and capabilities. In an environment where donor conditionality restricts international agencies from capacity-building local officials, sustainability of communities are equipped to maintain genuine participation. A number of agencies in Myanmar thus have deliberate goal of building equitable, participatory village development committees into genuine, sustainable community-based organizations (CBOs), able to continue the process of community empowerment and sustainable development long after the involvement of the international or local agency. They assess this as effective in rural Myanmar.

We have proven on the ground that the poor, if given opportunity, can fully participate in prioritizing 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 organizations.74

Part of the reason for the effectiveness of this approach appears to be that, rather than people using the literature in a theoretically sound manner, 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.75 However, capacity development of village committees into CBOs takes considerable time. While the approach and program of each agency is different, agencies interviewed suggested that in their experience it takes between seven and fifteen years76 to develop a functioning CBO in a rural community. Two other INGO leaders suggested they believed it could be achieved in as little as three years if it was made the central focus of the intervention, and done intensively with a facilitator living within the community.77 Success in such a venture, they found, “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.” 78

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Active citizenship is widely seen as the logical conclusion of highly participatory development, when communities and local NGOs own their development initiatives, advocate for themselves, and hold authorities accountable to sustain development.79

Active citizenship involves, “strengthening the voice and capacity of citizens (especially poor communities) to participate in exacting greater accountability and responsiveness from public officials and service providers” [to ensure] that those with the power to affect lives are held to account for their actions.” 80 This is often achieved by adopting a rights-based approach (RBA) to development. An RBA views poverty as the direct result of disempowerment and exclusion, and seeks to assist the marginalized poor in asserting their rights to a fair share of existing resources, services, and power, an approach which is thus explicitly political.81 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, one might suppose that the involvement of civil society organizations (CBOs) is an essential feature of active citizenship and an RBA. However, most respondents felt that this level of empowerment put individuals and communities at risk, violating the principle of ‘no harm’. In an environment which already poses many risks because of the highly politicized context; respondents from organizations that have adopted the RBA as their global approach82 to development, advocate on behalf of communities in Myanmar rather than empowering them as active citizens themselves.83 They argue that poverty itself is a violation of human rights, which needs to be addressed as a priority to other civil, political, or economic rights.

The International Labor Organization (ILO),84 with its mandate to work against forced labor, already spends most of its time advising citizens of their rights under existing Myanmar law. They suggest that existing national laws provide a reasonable framework for many rights, 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. Success in such public forms of advocacy to hold public officials accountable requires a state that tolerates protest and criticism, has a free media, and an accessible and functioning legal system operating under rule-of-law.85 Without these, and given the vested interests and authoritarianism involved, and the degree of disempowerment and poverty of rural communities, villagers in Myanmar are particularly reluctant to challenge even local authorities.86

Speaking about local NGO and CBO networks, Dorning lamented that, “If 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.” 87 Most INGOs discourage any politicization of their work in villages or by local partners. Instead, apart from communities actively living a lifestyle in keeping with a learned dependency on cooperation from local officials through lines of relationship, INGOs themselves assume the role of advocacy on behalf of communities. Indeed, some INGOs avoid even using the term empowerment in their communication with the government, for fear of misinterpretation.88 At least some local NGOs express the view that “instead of advocating for political rights, international organizations should be putting their weight at the grassroots level strengthening the capacity of society.”89

This finding is consistent with research in places where active citizenship may put people in danger. For example, Clarke examines work with illegal Burmese workers in Thailand and concludes that active citizenship may put people in danger. For example, Clarke examines work with illegal Burmese workers in Thailand and concludes that active citizenship may put people in danger. For example, Clarke examines work with illegal Burmese workers in Thailand and concludes that active citizenship may put people in danger. For example, Clarke examines work with illegal Burmese workers in Thailand and concludes that active citizenship may put people in danger.
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Local Communities

Thus, surprisingly, INGOs have found that making their poverty alleviation and community development programs more participatory in rural Myanmar than in comparable contexts in other countries, increases their effectiveness—despite the obstacles, from international opinion and stereotypes, that INGOs face. These deriving from the international community, not the Myanmar government. 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 policies 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.

What frustrates INGO managers at least as much as the international constraints and difficulties are the restrictions on aid funding and mandates by the international community, which they believe do not reflect the real needs of people. When contrasting the restrictions stemming from the Myanmar government and local officials with those deriving from the international community, respondents almost uniformly state that the restrictions on aid funding and mandates by the international community to the authoritarian and strongly hierarchical local government in Myanmar is a considerable obstacle. From the perspective of the international community, the regime is... difficult to deal with and do things I find abhorrent, but they are not always as bad as the picture that is usually painted. People outside the country ‘garnish the lily’ and that is equally obnoxious and extremely unhelpful.

Relative to some other countries there are no restrictions here, but there are restrictions 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.

As a result many INGOs find the need for continual advocacy directed towards their own boards, donors, country offices, and governments, to contest the stereotypical perceptions of the in-country context. A typical view from INGO country managers is that, ‘I have a huge advocacy responsibility inside [my organisation] ... We don’t get enough money ... political oppression is not the issue, there is a huge humanitarian need that is not covered. The sanctions are a disaster ... [I must lobby] the board ... we must also build a more structured advocacy towards donors and donor countries. There is a huge responsibility. NGOs have to build advocacy towards donors and donor countries.

3. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

There are a range of other stakeholders with interests in rural community development in Myanmar, not least of which being the international community, local officials, and other local civil society. Because of the political tensions both inside and outside the country, expanding the humanitarian space for work in Myanmar can be complicated. Obtaining funding and mandates is complex, as can be gaining access to communities from local officials and advocating on their behalf. Several INGO country coordinators interviewed spoke of being confronted by the level of extra complexity affecting access and funding when they arrived in Myanmar from postings in other developing countries. Expanding the humanitarian space involves overcoming a range of obstacles, from international opinion and stereotypes, to restrictions on aid funding, and under various sanctions policies, to reluctance on the part of the Myanmar government to issue visas and travel permits, to the attitudes of local officials.

International Donors

When contrasting the restrictions stemming from the Myanmar government and local officials with those deriving from the international community, respondents almost uniformly state that the greatest constraints on their humanitarian efforts to alleviate extreme poverty come from the international community, not the Myanmar government. 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 policies 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.

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Local Officials

Having said this, INGOs working in Myanmar certainly do also find working with the Myanmar government restrictive, and it is not possible for INGOs to operate in Myanmar without in some way working with government officials. One participant colourfully described it as, “dancing with the devil, but not holding hands.” The reason behind access restrictions, 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.

Almost universally INGOs suggest the most essential factor facilitating access is relationships and trust built with individual officials, both at the township and ministry levels. Decision-making in government departments is based on personal politics. Once trust is built with senior officials within a department, INGO staff will have good access to various officials under him and to local communities.

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.

In a working paper examining how development agencies are able to operate in the difficult environment of Myanmar, Professor Mark Duffield argues that the most important 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. Such a role requires advocacy on behalf of communities, and attempts to hold local officials to account. While agencies do engage in both these roles, many INGOs regard engagement with officials as a less productive role than containing or confrontation, and engagement to be a more productive approach towards advocacy and accountability than confrontation.

Advocacy

It is widely agreed that sustainable change is not going to occur in Myanmar through village-by-village interventions alone, but will require major policy change to address, for example, deprivations in education, healthcare and infrastructure, and to secure things like farmer’s property rights and access to rural finance. Several INGO country directors are therefore adamant that, “Advocacy is really the main thing we need to do.” Yet, most INGOs are “particularly hesitant to pursue fully rational advocacy strategies that would do a better job of addressing more complex overall development in any sense.”

Given that power in Myanmar is personal, INGOs have found personal advocacy in Myanmar to be most effective. One respondent spoke of “silent advocacy,” by which she meant private discussions with officials away from public spotlight. The Myanmar Red Cross similarly speaks of “informal advocacy” or “situation sensitive advocacy.” Indeed, “the word ‘advocacy’ itself, in some cases, makes people afraid.” Oxfam prefers to speak of “building relationships”, and notes that success is very dependent upon the individuals

Sources

21 Duffield, Mark. On the Edge of ‘No Man’s Land’: Chronic Emergency in Myanmar (Bristol: Department of Politics, University of Bristol, 2008). Working paper sponsored by the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Yangon.

22 Lancelot, Anne, Médicins Du Monde, Country Representative, personal interview (14 July 2009).

23 Source 15, INGO country coordinator, personal interview (July 2009).

24 Source 10, INGO country director, personal interview (July 2009).

25 Source 20, interview.

26 Tha Hla Shwe, interview.

27 Tunbain, interview.
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Thus, surprisingly, INGOs have found that making their poverty alleviation and community development programs more participatory in rural Myanmar than in comparable contexts in other countries, increases their effectiveness—despite the attitudes of respondents almost uniformly suggest that the greatest constraints on their humanitarian efforts derive from the Myanmar government. INGOs in Myanmar have found personal advocacy more effective than the international community in achieving their goals. 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 policies 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. What frustrates INGO managers at least as much as they do is the government’s personal policy and difficult officials are the restrictions on aid funding and mandates by the international community, which they believe are the result of false stereotypical perceptions. 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.

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Given that power in Myanmar is personal, INGOs have found personal advocacy in Myanmar to be most effective. One respondent spoke of “silent advocacy,” by which she meant private discussions with officials away from public spotlight. The Myanmar Red Cross similarly speaks of “informal advocacy” or “situational sensitive advocacy.” Indeed, “the word ‘advocacy’ itself, in some cases, makes people afraid.” Oxfam prefers to speak of “building relationships”, and notes that success is very dependent upon the individuals

58 Source 21, interview.
59 Source 15, interview.
60 Source 30, interview.
61 Source 5, interview.
62 Source 50, interview.
63 Source 17, interview.
64 Source 12, interview.
65 Source 20, interview.
66 Source 21, interview.
67 Source 30, interview.
68 Source 21, interview.
69 Source 21, interview.
70 Source 21, interview.
71 Source 21, interview.
72 Source 21, interview.
73 Source 21, interview.
74 Source 21, interview.
75 Source 21, interview.
76 Source 21, interview.
77 Source 21, interview.
78 Source 21, interview.
79 Source 21, interview.
80 Source 21, interview.
Advocacy on behalf of communities, INGOs have found, is most effective when approached through engagement with officials in ways that allows INGOs to explore needs and issues together with officials, without confrontation and in a no-blame fashion. Such an approach adopts methods described in the literature for involving elites in poverty alleviation, even when their vested interests lie elsewhere, looking to identify and find ways to meet needs together.85 “It is more like seeking support or seeking to supplement what the community has already done to help themselves.” World Vision explained this advocacy as “reporting needs to the government, so they know and so they can support us by sending their technical people.”86 This takes a considerable investment into the relationship with local officials, and is time-consuming on the individual officials involved. Effectively, this approach seeks 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 least.87

INGOs offer ample evidence that such advocacy often does achieve good outcomes at the local level, depending on the given officials. The widespread use amongst agencies is that the goals of saying... rights-based, the... relationship with the authorities and appealing for assistance non-confrontationally, rather than confronting with talk about rights and duties or some form of civil action. INGOs have found many officials at the township level genuinely concerned about many development issues, including poor development projects, as building of local NGOs for development projects, as well as assistance for community leaders. They are not alone. Many INGOs in Myanmar would prefer to focus on technical cooperation or capacity building of local NGOs for development projects, as they do in other countries, but they find local NGOs lack capacity in terms of scale, governance, and things like evaluation skills.

We absolutely want to build local capacity of local NGOs, CBO, 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.88 A common criticism made by local NGOs is that large INGOs “try to be implementers, not in any sense of true partnership.” They have a fear of large international agencies rolling over the really good local initiatives stemming from local agencies, simply using them to implement their deals with officials. Many INGOs invest significant time and personnel into government relations.89 Transparency is a key: many INGOs acknowledge they are even more transparent [than usual]. The entire thing of the INGO stake… to 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 us as an advocacy of us working with them [and] spreading that message that international aid, that it can really bring development and improvement.90

To facilitate this engagement, many agencies adopt a two-levelship-level officials to local training. One bilateral donor spoke of its positive experience providing technical assistance and training for township-level officials in the fight against Avian Flu. It “found ministries to be very professional and motivated... [with] no leakage of money.”91 Another INGO respondent suggested that, rather than less problems to 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.92

This is not the experience of all agencies, with one smaller agency recently discovering that almost a third of a project funding to one rural location had been misappropriated by local elite once they became aware of funding flows. However, overall, Western concerns about corrupt officials appears overstated.

But political forces on both sides work against partnership and active engagement. One respondent expressed frustration at the inequalities they had to face, “the money was flowed to an NGO with hindsight to be effective aid may well be an outcome of relational approaches.”93 This conception of accountability and partnership appears particularly apt in Myanmar, where agencies need to overcome the local manifestation of strained relations between the Myanmar government and the international community before they can operate effectively.

INGOs with the greatest ease of access to rural communities therefore are those that have strong relationships with authorities, both local and at the departmental levels, built largely through transparent

85 Win, interview.
86 Source 40, interview.
87 For example, Hossain, Naomi, and Mick Moore. Arguing for the Poor: elite and poverty in developing countries (University of Sussex: Institute of Development Studies, 2002).
88 Source 24, interview.
89 Source 12, interview.
90 Source 6, interview.
91 Source 31, interview.
92 Source 19, personal interview (July 2009).
93 Source 1, bilateral donor personal interview (July 2009).
94 Source 31, interview. Source 16, INGO country representative, personal interview (June 2009); Source 50, former editor, Myanmar Times, personal interview (March 2009).
95 Ebyen, Rosalind, Naik, Abber, and Andrea Comwall Conceptualising Empowerment and the Implications for Pro Poor Growth (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Study, University of Sussex, 2008).
96 Source 13, interview.
97 Source 14, Director, small INGO based outside the country, personal interview (October 2011).
98 e.g. A gland, interview; Griffiths, interview; Tegenfeldt, interview (2009); Parnell, David, World Vision International Senior Director, East Asia Region, personal interview (8th July 2011).
99 Lancost, interview.
100 Source 31, interview.
101 Source 14, Director, small INGO based outside the country, personal interview (October 2011).
102 Source 31, interview.
103 e.g. A gland, interview.
104 Source 24, interview.
105 Source 41, interview.
109 Lancost, interview.
110 Doming, interview.
involved. Each of these informants emphasizes the need for advocacy to be non-confrontational. 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 that they have not developed an advocacy strategy that uses a whole range of tools and techniques to progress exactly the same messages in a very different way.36

Advocacy on behalf of communities, INGOs have found, is most effective when approached through engagement with officials in ways that allows INGOs to explore needs and issues together with officials, without confrontation and in a no-blame fashion. Such an approach adopts methods described in the literature for involving elites in poverty alleviation, even when their vested interests lie elsewhere, looking to identify and find ways to meet needs together.37 “It is more like seeking support or seeking to supplement what the community has already done to help themselves.” World Vision explained this advocacy as “reporting needs to the government, so they know and so they can support us by sending their technical people.”38 This takes a considerable investment into the relationship with local officials, and is one that many of the individual officials involved. Effectively, this approach seeks 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 least last.9

INGOs offer ample evidence that such advocacy, often does achieve good outcomes at the local level, depending on the given officials. The widespread among agencies is that the goals of saying, that the rights-based approach are better pursued by politicians with officials is complex. 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.40 On the other side, many officials are deeply suspicious of the motives of INGOs and their donors, or are not interested in partnership for fear of the strings attached or how this would be perceived by higher level authorities.41 Nonetheless, most respondents suggest that, at least at a township level, most local authorities are open to partnership and assistance.

Eyen et. al argue that mutual accountability in international development is not so much about parties holding each other to account for performance against pre-established objectives, as about the messy complexity of relationship and process with mutual responsibility. Much of the new aid flow with sights on being effective aid may well be an outcome of relational approaches.42 This conception of accountability and partnership appears particularly apt in Myanmar, where agencies need to overcome the local manifestation of strained relations between the Myanmar government and the international community before they can operate effectively.

INGOs with the greatest ease of access to rural communities therefore are those that have strong relationships with authorities, both local and at the national level, built largely through transparent dealing with officials. Many INGOs invest significant time and personnel into government relations. Transparency is a key: many INGOs acknowledge they are even more transparent (than usual)… the emphasis being on 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 us as really advocates rather than try to control us and spread that message that international aid, that it can really bring development and improvement.43

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This is not the experience of all agencies, with one smaller agency recently discovering that almost a third of their project funding to one rural location had been misappropriated by local elite once they became aware of funding flows.45 However, overall, Western concerns about corrupt officials appears overstated.

But political forces on both sides work against partnership and active engagement. One respondent expressed frustration at the inequalities they had to face: “My甘肃 got paid to travel out expenses for low-paid civil servants attending training when they do pay for all other participants.” Attempting partnership with local officials within donor’s conditions limits partnership to “basically co-opting local officials into INGO projects,” rather than generating genuine partnership.46 Another respondent found that township officials who were open and interested in partnership were quickly moved to another area.47 These forces and obstacles building higher cooperative relationships with local officials. Nonetheless one key Burmese worker with a UN agency argued that the political change the outside world is looking for in Myanmar demands INGOs find ways “to allow them [officials] to own the changes at the village level.”

Thus, despite the obstacles, many INGOs expressly indicate that if they were given more freedom, they would work with local officials more frequently and more widely, to ensure sustainability of development outcomes.

Civil Society

It has long been recognized that INGOs need to move from being service providers to equal partners with civil society in facilitating development.48 Strengthening civil society is essential to promoting self-help and overcoming both paternalism and dependency.49 As a result, capacity building and local organizational development are primary objectives for many development agencies globally.50

However, a good many INGOs who ascribe to this ethos globally still implement most of their programs directly through paid staff in Myanmar. For example, while the global practice of Care International is to minimize the number of their own staff and work primarily through local partners, in Myanmar they have a large staff and directly implement ninety-five percent of their programs.51 They are not alone. Many INGOs in Myanmar would prefer to focus on technical cooperation or capacity building of local NGOs for development projects, as they do in other countries, but they find local NGOs lack transparency in terms of scale, governance, and things like evaluation skills.52

We absolutely want to build local capacity of local NGOs, CBO, 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.53

A common criticism made by local NGOs is that large INGOs “tend to be poor implementers, not in any sense of true partnership.”54 They have a fear of large international agencies rolling over the really good local initiatives stemming from local agencies, simply using them to implement their own programs directly through paid staff. This is an area of concern for many.

36 Win, interview.
37 A Smith, interview.
38 For example, Hossain, Naomi, and Dick Moore. Arguing for the Poor: Elite and poverty in developing countries (University of Sussex: Institute of Development Studies, 2002).
39 Source 24, interview.
40 Tumbare, interview.
41 Source 6, interview.
42 Source 31, interview.
43 Source 41, interview.
47 A Smith, interview.
48 Source 24, interview.
49 Source 24, interview.
50 Source 9, interview.
51 Source 31, interview.
52 Source 14, Director, small INGO based outside the country, personal interview (October 2011).
53 Source 14, Director, small INGO based outside the country, personal interview (October 2011).
54 e.g. Auld, interview; Griffiths, interview; Tegenfeldt, interview (2009); Pursell, David. World Vision International: Senior Director, East Asia Region, personal interview (8th July 2011).
55 Lancelot, interview.
56 Source 1, interview.
57 Source 31, interview.
58 Source 14, Director, small INGO based outside the country, personal interview (October 2011).
59 Source 4, interview.
own programs. Some organizations, such as Oxfam, ActionAid, and the Burnet Institute, for example, have made conscious decisions to implement almost all of their programs through local partnerships and build local capacity, rather than coming in from outside, but developing a shared culture, ideals and beliefs takes time and the development of their programs is much slower.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented an analysis of new primary research data into the approaches of INGOs in rural development in Myanmar. It has demonstrated that while INGOs find rural development efforts in Myanmar face many difficulties, effectiveness is not as heavily restricted by domestic politics as is commonly perceived by those outside the country. Restrictions by the international community, on the other hand, are felt acutely by INGOs working on the ground. Engaging with local officials is often not easy, but INGOs find it imperative and would like broader mandates to engage and partner with local officials more frequently and more widely, to ensure sustainability of development outcomes. Engaging with local civil society is also limited, due to the limited capacity of most local organizations.

Thus, due to the restriction of the Myanmar context, most INGO rural development programs are more likely to be more directly implemented by the INGO, with less involvement of local NGO partners and less engagement with local officials and government departments than these same organizations would usually consider ideal in more open contexts.

However, at the same time, INGOs have found that poverty alleviation and community development programs can be particularly effective in rural villages, avoiding many of the dependency issues found in other countries. Somewhat surprisingly though, given the authoritarian and strongly hierarchical context, INGOs find highly participatory approaches and a strong emphasis on equity and local community sustainability to be keys to effectiveness, provided the right relationships with local officials can be secured. Thus, many INGOs emphasize participation, equity, and local sustainability more strongly in Myanmar than in other contexts in which they work. Nevertheless, they are particularly cautious about politicization of their programs, and therefore largely abstain from empowering communities for active citizenship, preferring to advocate on their behalf than potentially put individuals and communities at risk.

The Twelfth Five Year Plan (2011-2015) for Guizhou Province, one of China’s poorest regions, was announced last year. The Plan sets out to resolve a surplus of growing “social contradictions” in Guizhou, such as low levels of industrialization, uneven regional development, a lack of rural-urban integration, growing rural poverty, growing population pressure on natural resources, “old ways of thinking and problem-solving” and so on. Perhaps the most attention-grabbing solution to these problems is the Plan’s call to more than double Guizhou’s railway lines by 2015 (with much of the expansion in high-speed rail), and to triple the current amount by 2020. One of the goals of the intensified railway investment is to solve the transport ‘bottlenecks’ that constrict to keep the province isolated and impoverished, but the Plan also calls for another, more direct, solution to the region’s persistent rural poverty: speeding up urbanization. By 2020, the Plan contends, half of Guizhou’s population should be urban, implying that the faster rural people become urban people, the faster Guizhou’s poverty problem and rural-urban income gap, will be solved. Urbanization will be achieved, according to the Plan, by speeding up rural to urban migration and by “urbanizing the countryside.”

Officially, then, the problem with rural poverty is “the rural” itself. But privately, many officials in Guizhou go further than this; the problem, they often point out in conversations with me, is really “the peasant.” “The only way we can fight poverty,” one told me once, “is to turn peasants into urbanites.”

Yet, while the government is busy trying