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Contextualisation of International Development Principles to Difficult Contexts: A Case Study of Myanmar

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1. INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is a poor developing country with significant humanitarian needs. At least half the population live in extreme poverty (Steinberg 2006), and some reports estimate the proportion living on less than US$1/day is as high as 90% (WHO 2008). Government investment in education ranks amongst the lowest in the world (UNICEF 2003), while expenditure on public health is just US$0.661/capita/pa (MoH 2008).

Yet despite the need, aid is severely restricted by some of the toughest sanctions in the world, measures aimed at pressuring an authoritarian military government into democratisation. The unintended adverse humanitarian impact of these restrictions has been widely published, and has resulted in many major agencies either not being present (e.g. IMF, WorldBank and ADB) or operating under a limited mandate (e.g. ILO, UNDP). In addition, official development assistance to Myanmar is the least of any of the 50 UN least developed countries, at just 1/20th the average assistance given to these nations (ICG 2008).

INGOs working in Myanmar therefore face the complexities of significant need, restricted resources and mandates, an authoritarian military government, and deep reservations by international donors and governments. This is a "complex political and bureaucratic environment" (ICG 2008), a "politically delicate situation" (EC 2007), within which many aspects are "nearly impossible to

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1 The WHO statistical database (2009) lists this figure as <$US1. This figure is from the Myanmar Ministry of Health report Health in Myanmar (2008: 8), converted from Kyat into US$ at the exchange rate quoted by The Irrawaddy (http://www.irrawaddy.org) for February 2007. Vicary (2007) puts the figure at $0.09.

2 For example, see most International Crisis Group reports from the last decade (e.g. ICG 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2009), Hadar (1998), Ochlers (2004), Holiday (2005), Seekins (2005), Horsey (2009), Pedersen (2009), and many others.
understand" (Allen 2009). "Few states in the contemporary world present the complexities that characterize Burma/ Myanmar" (Steinberg 2006).

There have been many studies of Myanmar politics, and of the pros and cons of sanctions. But while this body of research often mentions the humanitarian impact of the political stalemate, there has been virtually no research examining how INGOs adapt to attempt to alleviate poverty more effectively within this context. A working paper by Duffield (2008)\(^3\) does seek to examine how INGOs operate in Myanmar. However, it does not document a methodology and does not appear to have an interview basis. It concludes that INGOs create space to operate in Myanmar by applying "the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and transparency ... more widely than normal." In other research which might appear to be related, the OECD (2007b) have published principles for good international engagement in fragile states.\(^4\) However, Myanmar is not a typical fragile state and the central objective, to "build effective, legitimate, and resilient state institutions, capable of engaging productively with their people to promote sustained development," is not a current objective in Myanmar. Other research on development in fragile states is equally not applicable.\(^5\)

This paper goes well beyond Duffield and the OECD report, presenting analysis of recent primary interview research within Myanmar by the author. I have previously presented findings on how INGOs create the space to operate in the political context created by the Myanmar government, sanctions and restrictions on funding, particularly in terms of gaining access and funding (Ware 2009). This paper won't cover this ground again. Instead the research question being addressed in

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\(^3\) Mark Duffield, Professor of Development Politics, University of Bristol, was sponsored by the UN Resident Coordinator/ Humanitarian Coordinator and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

\(^4\) The OECD (2007b) Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations include: Take context as the starting point; do no harm; focus on state building; prioritise prevention; recognise links between political, security and development objectives; promote non-discrimination; align with local priorities; coordination between agencies; act fast … but stay engaged long enough; and, avoid pockets of exclusion.

this paper is how INGOs contextualise their implementation of project-based interventions to be most sensitive to the context of Myanmar.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section 1 has introduced the paper, and Section 2 details the methodology of the research. Section 3 explores the way INGOs contextualise the way they work with officials, donors and civil society, under the ideas of partnerships, capacity building, advocacy, rights-based approach, and accountability. Section 4 explores the way INGOs contextualise the way they work in local communities, under the ideas of participation, equity, sustainability, context sensitivity, and active citizenship. Section 5 presents some conclusions from this research.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore this research question, forty-seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with key practitioners. Most were country directors or program managers with INGOs and UN organisations based in Myanmar. A number of local NGO leaders were interviewed, as well as leaders of INGOs based outside the country who work in Myanmar through partnerships with or without official approval. In addition a couple of representatives from major donor organisations and journalists were interviewed. A majority were non-Burmese, reflecting the make-up of senior INGO and UN organisation staff. Faith-based organisations have been included where a significant focus of their work is on development, and UN organisations are also referred to under the definition of INGO.

Chain referral sampling (snowball sampling) was used to both identify and access relevant respondents. Purposeful selection was most relevant given the partly hidden nature and small number of people qualified to be interviewed (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). Semi-structured interviews were preferred given the respondents are elites (Odendahl & Shaw 2001), and emergent design (naturalistic inquiry) methodology allowed the interviews to adapt the questions as the research process evolved (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Maykut & Morehouse 1994).
In the highly politicised context of Myanmar, interviews were all prefaced with a discussion of the interviewer’s background experience, desire to be as non-political as possible, and 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. This methodology is informed by an understanding that interviews are conversations within a context (Denzin & Lincoln 2008), that outcomes are influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer and interviewee, and that to generate candid and natural responses an interviewer should interact with participants to build rapport and be open to revealing personal views that create shared meaning (Fontana & Frey 2008).

Interviews were around 1 hour in length and guided by a loose schedule of open-ended questions. They were conducted face-to-face in Myanmar and Thailand during June-July 2009, and in Australia immediately preceding and following these dates. Most interviews were recorded and fully transcribed; others, at the discretion of interview participants, were not recorded and the researcher worked from notes. While this research is not intentionally political, some responses may have the potential to impact the ongoing work of agencies. All interview responses are therefore treated anonymously, and referenced throughout this paper only by number (1 to 47).

One limitation of this research methodology is that INGO leaders and project managers are being asked to both describe their operation and self-assess effectiveness. While the limitations of self-assessment are recognised (e.g. Sen 1987), this issue is dealt with in part by the chain referral sampling methodology. Participants were asked to refer other potential participants on the basis of both effective development programs and insight into the context. The frequency of referrals back to some key participants based on their perceived effectiveness by a number of leaders in other organisations (and a lack of referrals to others) was used alongside self-assessments of effectiveness in analysing the importance of the views of particular key informants.
Data is analysed and interview responses are compared and contrasted under categories representative of the development ideas and approaches participants most frequently emphasised in their responses. Interview responses are presented phenomenologically, to explore the way in which participants implementing the most effective development approaches see the issues and their work. The aim of this paper is to offer the perspective and voice of key development practitioners working in Myanmar about the contextualisation of their development interventions in Myanmar which they believe make their efforts at poverty alleviation and development most effective in that context.

3. INGO CONTEXTUALISATION OF WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY, NGOS AND OFFICIALS

INGOs approach working with civil society, local NGOs and officials quite differently in Myanmar than they would in most other countries, and find need to limit some of these activities in the Myanmar context. This can be linked directly to restrictions stemming from both the domestic and international political environment.

This research has analysed this aspect of INGO work under the ideas of partnerships, capacity building, advocacy, rights-based approach and accountability. Broadly, it has been found that partnerships with civil society and local NGOs are complicated by the fact that most such organisations are very new and/or are not registered within Myanmar—making capacity building essential, but finding suitable candidates and building organisational capacity great challenges. In the interim, many INGOs resort to directly implementing programs themselves. Partnering with or building the capacity of government officials, ministries and departments is a far more complex, and while a few agencies describe successes and benefits the danger of being seen to associate too closely with the regime is very strongly felt. Some see a rights-based approach as not relevant in Myanmar, and overall the most effectively reported approach is to pursue rights-based and
advocacy goals through relationships with the right authorities and appealing for their assistance, person to person, in ways closer to the literature on involving elites rather than via active citizenship. In this process, INGOs attempt to build trust by being even more transparent than usual with officials, but often less open and transparent than usual with each other, their smaller donors, or the media.

3.1 Partnership

*With 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), however in Myanmar a good many INGOs implement most of their programs directly through paid staff. Where they do partner, a common complaint from local NGOs suggests INGOs "see the local partners as their implementers, not in any sense of true partnership" (8). While "there is recognition from the international community that they don't have enough interaction with local groups" (8), local NGOs often lack capacity in terms of scale, governance, evaluation skills, and so on. The fact that most local organisations are not registered is an additional obstacle to forming partnerships.

The capacity and development of civil society in Myanmar has been constrained for a long time (ICG 2001; Liddell 1997; Steinberg 1997), however over the last 5 years or more "there has been the development of a very active civil society at what we call below-the-radar level, so not registered, not big, but very active" (10, also Lorch 2007). The response to Cyclone Nargis clearly demonstrated how strong this "informal" civil society now is in Myanmar (CPCS 2008).

When INGOs partner with local organisations, they are as or more likely to partner with FBOs (more often Christian) than secular NGOs, because they are more likely to have some sort of registration or have organisation, scale, and governance more in keeping with Western requirements. This is true even of partnerships by non-faith-based INGOs.
With Officials

Partnering with government officials, ministries and departments is a far more complex issue. On the one hand donors, boards and the international community as a whole have applied sanctions and restricted mandates that prevent funds flowing to anyone connected to the regime. This can make partnership even with the lowest township-level civil servants problematic, because the line between civil service and military is blurred. On the other hand "the regime believes INGOs are not just there to do a specific task, but to organise politically against the regime." (45) Some officials and departments don’t want input, are not interested in partnership because they don’t want the strings which they feel are attached to aid, and don’t feel they can control aid. But most respondents suggested that, at least at a local township level, most local authorities do want help.

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. Many UN and INGO leaders do not agree. One respondent believes the key obstacle to effective 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. This view makes capacity building the civil service essential, and restrictions on partnering with cooperative officials and ministries a point of great frustration for many INGOs. Several agencies noted that if they were given the freedom, this would be something they would definitely do more of:

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. (4)

Respondents with less restriction on their funding describe the positive impact on relationship building that comes from contributing to worthy projects run by senior officials or departments, or actively including officials in projects. However, funding restrictions make this "very frustrating for us
and for them." (6) Western concerns about corruption seem ill-founded in this context: "I have had less problems with corruption in Burma than in Laos or Thailand ... there is definitely less corruption when it comes to aid because most locals are concerned about the poverty of the people." (27)

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. So you have to tread a fine line." (6) Many of the leaders of INGOs who self-assess their work in Myanmar as more effective also felt the need to defend themselves against being labelled "regime apologists."

3.2 Capacity Building

Strengthening civil society is seen as essential in promoting self-help and overcoming both paternalism and dependency in development (Frantz 1987). As a result, capacity building and local organisational development are emerging as primary objectives for many development programmes, not just the means to an end; "Instead of local organisation being the means for sustaining projects, projects are now seen as means for strengthening local organisations." (Pettit 2000)

Many INGOs in Myanmar, particularly the larger ones and those specifically targeting health, would like to be doing either technical cooperation or capacity building of local NGOs, even of government departments, as they do in other countries. Identifying and building capacity of potential partner organisations has therefore become a "conscious decision" and "high priority". They find the greatest challenges are finding suitable candidates and building the organisational capacity of local unregistered organisations, rather than the technical skills development. Assistance with attempts at registration is also important. Partnering with smaller unregistered organisations is 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" (9). Nonetheless, Burmese nationals and local NGOs interviewed definitely want to see more of these capacity building partnerships.
At the higher level, building the capacity of government agencies and departments, and strengthen state institutions and civil service is widely seen as essential for sustained economic development (e.g. ESCAP/ADB/UNDP 2007). However, restrictions on mandates and funding severely limit this. A few UN agencies, such as the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) have sufficient mandate and good relationship to work in very close partnership and capacity build Myanmar government departments. But most agencies, whether UN or INGO, don’t have such a mandate or funding.

3.3 Rights-Based Approach

The definitions of a "Rights-Based Approach" (RBA) varies greatly, but usually sees poverty as the direct result of disempowerment and exclusion, and seeks to empower rights-holders (usually citizens) to hold duty-bearers (usually national governments) to account under international human rights legislation. In particular it seeks to assist marginalised poor people assert their rights to a fair share of existing resources and power, making the process explicitly political (ACFID 2009; Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall 2004).

RBA is a contentious topic amongst the interviewees. Some see 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 – yet keeping the "do no harm" principle in mind they largely struggle to find a way to proceed. 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 note that even when people understand their legal rights, only a few are brave enough to exercise them.6

Many interviewees agree an RBA is less feasible in Myanmar, since "the law is in the mouth of the generals; there is nothing down on paper, no real rule of law." (8) Some see it as just not relevant in

6 Personal interview with Steve Marshall, Myanmar Liaison Officer of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 29th June 2009.
Myanmar because neither the people nor military leaders believe there are rights – needs and responsibilities yes, but not rights. But others suggest that many ministers and key officials are actually already aware of human rights principles, are concerned, and are trying to improve on them... but they have very little budget in which to operate ... criticism is not helpful when these officials genuinely are concerned. Question is, how can we help them? (26)

Central to the problem is that international governments and agencies regularly couch their most stinging rebukes in human rights language, to the extent the Myanmar government believes human rights allegations being exploited to destabilise the state and are being raised for political advantage more than out of genuine humanitarian concern (e.g. see NLM 2009). They argue that the upshot of the work of human rights activists is that the Myanmar people are further denied their human rights by restricting the right of the country to develop (e.g. see U Soe Tha 2007). Interestingly, Pedersen (2009) agrees that "poverty has emerged as the most acutely felt constraint on human rights for the majority of people across the country," putting the obligation on the West, not just the Myanmar government.

There is a view from at least some LNGOs that "instead of advocating for political rights, international organisations should start working at the grassroots level strengthening the capacity of society." (27) Overall, those who assess their work as most effective believe RBA goals are better pursued by building relationship with authorities and appealing for assistance non-confrontationally, rather than talking about rights and duties.

3.4 Advocacy

Respondents point to a wide range of policy change/development, showing that advocacy can work in Myanmar. Significant steps have been made with the Myanmar government through advocacy in areas such as human trafficking, drug control, disability strategy, sustainable forestry, and HIV-
Malaria-TB prevention (Allen 2009). The ILO has even been asked to draft trade union legislation for Myanmar. However, progress seems as related to the issue as it does to the methodology and approach, with items related to security or involving a large budget make less progress. For example, despite much advocacy increases to health and education spending have been minimal. Not all departments, ministries and offices are equally open either.

It is widely agreed that sustainable change is not possible through village-by-village interventions without concurrent and significant policy change. "[Advocacy] is really the main thing we need to do" (10), yet most INGOs are hesitant to pursue broad advocacy strategies. Several INGOs acknowledged a lack of understanding of government processes and decision making as a cause, while those citing the greatest success argue there is enormous space for advocacy. "Most organisations ... don’t engage and negotiate boldly enough behind closed doors." (15) Yet these same organisations implied the vulnerability of such work by seeking strong assurances of anonymity for these answers!

However, the method employed for advocacy is very different in Myanmar than most contexts. Indeed, "the word 'advocacy' itself, in some cases, makes people afraid." (6) We can't work in an advocacy-based way." (12)

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. (25)

Advocacy must be non-confrontational. One respondent spoke of "silent advocacy." Many preferred to speak of dialogue. 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. One respondent explained,
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. (6)

Such influence must be person to person. While this approach is unlike most of the literature and practice on advocacy, it is strikingly similar to the methods recommended in the literature for involving elites in poverty alleviation, even when their vested interests lay elsewhere (e.g. see Hossain & Moore 2002).

3.5 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 are attempting to overcome the virtual breakdown in relationship between the West and the Myanmar government.

INGOs claiming the greatest freedoms and best relationships with authorities seek to be highly transparent with Myanmar officials than they would elsewhere

    even more transparent [than usual] ... 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 (10)
However, there is concern by some that,

    INGOs here seem to be less open to information sharing [with other INGOs] than we found them in [other country], as if they mimic the government and become less transparent themselves. (10)

Local journalists concur, suggesting that since the purge in the military leadership in 2004, INGOs have a much greater reluctance to go on record and talk about their activities, that they prefer to remain more 'under the radar.'

And in terms of accountability to donors, many respondents readily agreed that they maintain a very low publicity profile overseas (in donor countries) of their Myanmar work. "Caution is wise" when it comes to publicising projects outside the country. In part this is a recognition of the government's sensitivity that portrayals of poverty are exploited by opponents. But it does highlight the complexity of accountability towards donors.

4. INGO CONTEXTUALISATION OF WORK IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

INGOs approach working in local communities by increasing their effort towards a number of development principles, again clearly linked to the domestic-international political context of Myanmar. The ways in which INGOs contextualise their work in local communities has been analysed under ideas of participation, equity, sustainability, active citizenship and context sensitivity. Broadly, effective INGO programs place additional emphasis on highly participatory development, aiming for long term sustainability through by encouraging the development of community-based organisations. However, in order to do no harm, most organisations feel the need to take an advocacy role on behalf of communities and limit active citizenship, elsewhere widely seen as the logical conclusion of highly participatory development. Equity in participation is a major concern of organisations, but emphasis is equally placed on equity between ethnicities, religions and political persuasion as it is on equity between genders. Sensitivity to the local context involves efforts at
peace-building such as initiatives on ways to negotiate differences and strengthen both bonding and bridging social capital, as well as working with and through religious beliefs and organisations, and use of local language and culture.

4.1 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). "Empowerment happens when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently" and take action to change their circumstances (Eyben et al. 2008).

The limitations of the context mean participation is not always implemented well in Myanmar. "In reality most [participatory committees] are just user groups that stop at the end of the project, leaving again a vacuum." (34) Nonetheless, more effective INGOs programs are highly participatory "process-led," "human-centred," and "integrated", programs that create ownership by empowering communities to assess their needs, prioritise, and design their own solutions.

This finding is counter-intuitive, given the strongly authoritarian context in Myanmar. One 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. (26)

Recent anthropological research by Skidmore (2003, 2004) and Fink (2001) adds to the question. This research investigated the psychological impact of military rule, and concluded that people have an aversion to risk trying new things and are disempowered in decision making. This perception is further mirrored in Aung San Suu Kyi's (1995) writing. While interviewees felt this is more acute in the political arena than village-level development, they corroborate that people are "not willing to try things outside areas that are safe." (43) "Fear is a significant component of the landscape here."
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." (18)

Invitations to participatory development are therefore "often meet with scepticism from village leaders ... worried what this will mean for their relationship with local authorities ... [and] for the population that is the same thing ... sceptical." (11) A process is critical to overcome this fear and scepticism. It is greatly helped if a key individual in the village gets involved early, someone confident in their position (e.g. a headman or former headman), who is able to motivate and inspire others. Even then,

People will come together, but they’re not used to making decisions for themselves ... 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. (6)

Good relationships with local officials is key, and where possible to include those authorities in projects in such a way that they could consider they helped the work. This approach does, however, lead to a predominant focus on infrastructure-related projects, which are tangible outcomes the authorities can more readily take credit for.

Many respondents indicated they are emphasising a high level of participation more strongly in Myanmar than their organisations do elsewhere. For some it is a deliberate effort to build highly democratic grass-roots practices, to prepare the way for a more democratic national future. However most 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.
4.2 Equity

Equity is fundamental to participatory development, and requires the disempowered be given input into decision making processes. This is usually emphasised in the context of gender, to counterbalance gender bias in both development organisations and most societies, but more broadly "requires the voices of women, the young, the old, and landless, disabled, and other marginalised groups [alongside] the voices of traditional leaders, religious leaders, and landowners." (Clarke 2009)

Respondents emphasised that religious and ethnic backgrounds are important factors requiring deliberate effort. Likewise

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. (7)

It is essential the approach reduces suspicion between groups and builds participation that "demonstrates that this is not just for one ethnic group or one religious group" (2), nor people of one political view. Respondent corroborate that effective programs in Myanmar deal with the root causes of exclusion and authoritarianism, building inclusiveness and training in decision-making skills based on equity and mutual respect.

For example, agencies find villages often choose regime-appointed SPDC/USDA members as part of the village development committee. While some agencies view this with concern, those assessing their work as most effective were more inclined to see this as a positive, as a sign of broad representation, provided genuinely participatory processes still facilitated all members of the community having a voice. Concern was expressed where INGO have their own idea on politics and discriminate against these people. There is evidence in the literature that such unequal power distribution within villages must be carefully monitored (Labonne & Chase 2009; Platteau & Gaspart
2003), but that accountability processes and highly democratic decision-making processes are significant factors safeguarding against elite capture of community-driven development (Fritzen 2007).

4.3 Sustainability

A number of INGOs/NGOs have a deliberate goal of building equitable, participatory village development committees into Community Based Organisations (CBOs), able to continue the process of community empowerment and sustainable development long after the involvement of the INGO/NGO. They assess this work as effective in Myanmar:

We have proven on the ground 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. (27)

However, this takes time. The agencies involved indicated that their experience showed it takes between 7-15 years to develop a functioning CBO in a village community, although one leader suggested it could be achieved in as little 3 years if it was made the deliberate central-focus of the intervention and done intensively with a facilitator living in the community much of the time. It was also noted that success, "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." (27)

A couple of these agencies, well spoken-of by other respondents, focus their community-led development primarily if not solely on self-reliant development: empowerment to be able to use only the resources and capacity already available within the community to address their needs.
4.4 Active Citizenry

Active citizenship is widely seen as the logical conclusion of highly participatory development, when communities so own their development initiatives that they 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. However, respondents were very conscious that empowerment and awareness-raising of rights must work in a way that will 'do no harm,' that will not put people or communities at risk, and noted that communities are very reluctant to challenge authorities or talking about issues relating to higher-levels of authority. "What we can't do here," noted one interviewee, "and what would be possible in other countries is ... They could become political in themselves, they could lobby for their own constituency." (9)

One respondent candidly noted, "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" (32). Most INGOs don't encourage any politicisation of their work in villages or of their local partners that would see them lobby regional- or national-level officials for their own needs, cause or constituency. Most effective community initiatives do, however, actively seek cooperation from officials at a township level, through lines of relationship. A few are also becoming adept at using the government's own language to build political capital, while maintaining a good relationship with the government.

This finding is consistent with research in the literature. Clarke (2009), 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 Clarke argues for realistic expectations,
questioning whether active citizenship should always be a goal for community-development practitioners. He concludes that active citizenship may not be a 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, and that in such situations INGOs should assume such a role on their behalf.

4.5 Context Sensitivity

Myanmar is "a deeply fractured society," (18) and ethnicity has become the major division in the society today (Steinberg 2006: 25). Development approaches in such a context need to be sensitive to mitigate existing fault lines within society and build conflict prevention (Carment & Schnabel 2001; ConflictSensitivity.org 2004). Many agencies therefore see peace-building efforts as extremely significant; "Without peace we cannot have sustained development." (20)

[This is] a country that has a long, deep and broad history of violence – 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 ... I would describe this country [as] a resource rich country with a very poor population that has a problem with relationships ... we cannot just focus on the removal of the military hierarchy. (7)

Some of the development initiatives who self-assessed as most effective thus delve into how people see each other, how they relate to each other, ways to negotiate differences, and work to strengthen both bonding and bridging social capital within communities. This is the primary focus of several well-respected organisations, and part of the program of others. Some also seek to facilitate high-level peace-negotiations where possible.
Development processes will also only be truly successful if they take into consideration the cultural and spiritual dimensions of people's lives (WFDD 2001). "Faith can be a form of social capital" and can help build social capital (Candland 2000). A number of respondents agree, arguing many INGOs too readily bypass local faith based organisations (FBOs).

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 ... international agencies ... [for] fear of [proselytisation] ... want to separate it so much that it becomes artificial for local communities. (8).

LNGOs emphasise the need for FBOs to be approached as partners, as part of the community, as part of the leadership of the community, and as organisations who are trying to help their society but often don’t understand development principles. "There is a big role being played by faith based organisations, taking up a very big and challenging role – especially after 1988." (27) While FBOs often aren't registered, they are more likely to be tolerated or trusted by authorities than most other non-registered civil society groups, and their leaders have higher cultural status. Steinberg (1997) observed that local FBOs have historically been the most prevalent civil society in Myanmar.

Some agencies report that,

It is much harder to work with the sangha [Buddhist monks]. We have tried it. If the concept of participatory development is weak within the church structure, then within the sangha it is a lot more alien." (12)

Nonetheless, the type development partnering with FBOs which self-assessed as most effective "has representatives from both the Buddhist and Christian communities .... But that is difficult." (12)

One final comment from several agencies is regarding the insights gained into the culture through learning the language. While language-learning is not an expectation or priority for most agencies, those who do speak highly of the advantage it creates:
Being able to speak Burmese language ... when we meet with the 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 ... and 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, authorities, whoever. (5)

Respondents with the longest association with Myanmar have observed that "it takes several years to be accepted by officials." (27) 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." (34) 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." (27) One might also add, so they have time to learn the language well.

5. CONCLUSION

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 to development, 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 rights and 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 more 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 are 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.

INGO development activities within local communities are likewise contextualised, but in this instance often by tweaking and intensifying their effort in relation to a number of key development approaches rather than limiting activity. Again, this is clearly the result of the domestic-international political nexus embroiling Myanmar. Broadly, 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. Capture of such community-led development by powerful groups is likely unless power imbalances based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion and political affiliation are clearly addressed, so equity concerns embrace but extent well beyond gender equity issues. The goal of a number of effective INGOs in community participatory development is long term sustainability by encouraging the development of village community-based organisations. However, in order to do no harm most INGOs feel the need to take on advocacy roles themselves, and feel active citizenship in terms of empowering communities to advocate with authorities on their own beyond the local level may not be possible or desirable. Most INGOs feel they should assume this role for the time being.

Sensitivity to the local context involves efforts at peace-building, at building social capital, and in conflict sensitive development. INGO leaders also felt development must take the people’s religion particularly seriously, so while often a cause of division and conflict it should be employed as an avenue of strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital. They therefore advocate deliberate inclusion of local FBOs, religious leaders and religious institutions. INGO leaders who are more fluent in Burmese language and/or who have been in the country longer also highlight the importance a personal understanding of 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 before taking on their role.
This paper summarises the major insights obtained from key development practitioners working in Myanmar as to the types of contextualisation which makes INGO development interventions most effective in that complex context. The insights from their experience provides something of a blueprint for other organisations working in or hoping to work in Myanmar, and offers hope at the prospect of incremental change and effectiveness in alleviating the worst impacts of 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 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.
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