CONTEXT SENSITIVITY BY DEVELOPMENT INGOS IN MYANMAR

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Myanmar is a difficult country for international non-government organizations (INGOs) to operate in effectively. It has significant humanitarian needs but the domestic and international political environments hamper effective assistance. On the one hand, agencies working in Myanmar face a sometimes obstructive, and often inept, authoritarian government which is suspicious of both their motives and those of international donor governments. On the other hand, aid and development resources and mandates are heavily restricted by international donors disturbed by allegations of human rights violations and concerned that satisfactory policy preconditions for macro-economic development are not in place. This is a "complex political and bureaucratic environment" (ICG 2008), a "politically delicate situation" (CEC 2007), in which the tension in Myanmar’s relations with the international community is as large a contributor to the difficulty in delivering humanitarian assistance as Myanmar’s domestic policy, capability, and will. The result for INGOS is restrictions on access, funding, and mandates.

This chapter presents analysis of new primary research data collected from INGOs working inside Myanmar between 2009 and mid-2011. In particular, it looks at their contextualization of common development
approaches in order to maximize programme effectiveness. The key finding is that INGOs believe that although operating in Myanmar is difficult, their effectiveness is not as heavily restricted as is commonly perceived by people outside the country, provided they deploy appropriate sensitivity to the operational context. This is particularly true for activities that address the impact of extreme poverty in communities, but also applies in areas such as advocacy and capacity-building for the emerging civil society.

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, few studies examine INGO effectiveness or how INGOs adapt to attempt poverty alleviation in Myanmar. This research goes well beyond previous studies by Inwood (2008), Igboemeka (2005), and Duffield (2008), presenting analysis of a much larger number of more recent primary interviews within Myanmar. I have previously presented findings from this research regarding the ways INGOs create space to operate in spite of Myanmar government restrictions and the restrictions imposed by the international community on funding and mandates (Ware 2011). Without covering this ground again, this chapter explores how INGOs contextualize their implementation of international development principles to be most sensitive to the particular circumstances in Myanmar. (A more detailed presentation of these findings has also recently been published; see Ware 2012.)

The remainder of this chapter presents the results of this fieldwork with INGOs in Myanmar. The first section explores the ways INGOs contextualize their relationships with other development stakeholders, including officials, donors, and civil society, through consideration of ideas on partnerships, capacity-building, rights-based approaches, advocacy, and accountability. The following section considers the ways INGOs work sensitively in local communities according to ideas of participation, equity, sustainability, and active citizenship. The chapter ends with some conclusions from this research.

**CONTEXT SENSITIVITY IN RELATIONS WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS**

**Partnership and Capacity Building — with Civil Society and NGOs**

It has long been recognized that INGOs need to move from being service providers to being equal partners with civil society in facilitating
development (Paldron 1987). Strengthening civil society is essential for promoting self-help and for overcoming both paternalism and dependency (Frantz 1987). As a result, capacity-building and local organizational development are primary objectives for many development agencies globally (Pettit 2000).

However, a good many INGOs who ascribe to this ethos globally, in Myanmar still implement most of their programmes directly through paid staff. 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 95 per cent of their programmes (Agland, Care 2009). Care International is not alone. Médecins du Monde, as another example, directly implement projects in Myanmar to an extent they would not do in other countries, using international staff to run their own HIV/AIDS clinics and programmes.

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 ... (Lancelot, MDM 2009).

Many INGOs in Myanmar would prefer to focus on technical cooperation or building the capacity of local NGOs, as they do in other countries, but the limiting factor is the lack of capacity of local NGOs in terms of scale, governance, and abilities such as evaluation skills. Some organizations, such as Oxfam, ActionAid, and the Burnet Institute, for example, have made conscious decisions to implement almost all their programmes through local partnerships and to build local capacity rather than coming in themselves from outside, but developing a shared culture, ideals, and beliefs takes time, and the progress of their programmes is much slower.

A common criticism made by local NGOs is that where large INGOs do form partnerships with local organizations, they often "see the local partners as their implementers, not in any sense of true partnership" (Dorning, Burnet 2009). They have a fear that large international agencies will roll over the really good local initiatives that stem from local civil society, using the local organizations simply to implement their own programmes. Oxfam deals with this in part by working with a range of "project partners", while focussing on developing more significantly the capacity of innovative "strategy partners" (Win, Oxfam 2009).

The capacity and development of civil society in Myanmar has long been constrained by government policy (ICG 2001; Liddell 1997; Steinberg
1997). However, over the last five to ten years a very active civil society has emerged at what many describe as below-the-radar level: not registered, not big, but very active (Lancelot, MDM 2009; Lorch 2007). The response to Cyclone Nargis clearly demonstrated the resurgence of this “informal” civil society (CPCS 2008), and since Nargis there has been a large push for partnerships between local and international implementation agencies (Dorning, Burnett 2009). Identifying and building the capacity of potential partner organizations has therefore become a high priority, with the greatest challenges for most INGOs being to find suitable candidates and build the organizational capacity of unregistered organizations, rather than to develop technical skills.

The fact that most local organizations are not registered is an additional obstacle to partnerships. Partnering with smaller unregistered organizations 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” (Lancelot, MDM 2009). Nonetheless, Burmese nationals and local NGOs that were interviewed indicated that they definitely want to see more of these capacity-building partnerships.

**Partnership and Capacity Building — with Officials**

Building the capacity of government agencies and departments, and strengthening state institutions and civil service, are widely seen as essential for sustained economic development (see, for example, ESCAP/ADB/UNDP 2007). A few UN agencies, such as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), have sufficient mandate and a relationship that is good enough to partner with and build capacity in Myanmar government departments (Imai, FAO 2009), but most agencies, whether UN or INGO, lack such a mandate or funding.

For most INGOs, any partnership with government officials and departments is complex. On the one hand, restrictions applied by donors, boards, and the international community to prevent funds flowing to persons connected with the regime often include officials down to the township (local government) level (Source 1, 2009). On the other hand, many officials are deeply suspicious of the motives of INGOs and their donors (Source 16; Source 31; Source 50, 2009), or are not interested in partnership because they don’t want to be controlled by the strings attached
to aid (Lancelot, MDM 2009). Nonetheless, most respondents suggest that, at least at a township level, most local authorities are open to partnership and assistance.

Many agencies actively invite township-level officials to training. One bilateral donor spoke of their positive experience providing technical assistance and training for township-level officials in the fight against avian flu. They “found ministries to be very professional and motivated ... [with] no leakage of money” (Source 1, 2009). Nevertheless, political forces on both sides work against partnership. One respondent expressed frustration at inequalities they had to perpetrate by not being allowed to pay travel expenses for low-paid civil servants to attend training, when they do pay these expenses for all other participants (Agland, Care 2009). Another found that township officials who were most open and interested were quickly moved to another area (Source 24, 2009).

One INGO implemented a three-way partnership in a community-level livelihood programme, between themselves, a local implementing partner, and a government agency (Source 25, 2009). They provided funding, strategy, and training, while the local partner handled all direct implementation and funding. No funding went to the government, and despite the strained nature of such a relationship, they concluded that including officials in the partnership promoted healthy dialogue and coordination. However, another INGO attempting a similar partnership expressed frustration that such approaches almost co-opt local officials into INGO projects, rather than generate genuine partnership (Agland, Care 2009).

Closer partnership with officials requires access to funds with little in the way of restrictions, something most organizations don’t have. The Leprosy Mission International, however, describe in glowing terms the positive outcomes they have had partnering with the right officials (Griffiths, TLMI 2009). For them it began when Cyclone Nargis struck. They quickly realized that the Department of Social Welfare was going to be overloaded with administration of new project applications, so they rang the department and asked what additional equipment they needed to process the administrative mountain they faced. The Leprosy Mission International provided computers, printers, photocopiers, and generators. While they did this with the motive of ensuring that people with disabilities were cared for after the cyclone, they found the strengthened relationship most empowering for their work. They were subsequently invited to help
write a protection plan for people with disabilities, and to work with the department on disability access in Naypyitaw. They have now also been asked to help draft disability legislation for the new parliament (Griffiths, TLMI 2011). They argue:

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

Western concerns about corruption in partnership with officials appear ill-founded. One source gave a comparison:

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

One key Burmese worker with a UN agency argued that INGOs finding ways to partner with officials is an essential component of facilitating the political change the outside world is looking for in Myanmar: “We need to allow them to own the changes at the village level. Only international agencies can offer that; the local people can’t” (Source 41, 2009). However, building such partnerships requires “more time and effort building relationships [with officials] than in other countries” (Tumbian, WV 2009).

Thus, despite the obstacles, many INGOs expressly indicate that if they were given more freedom, then partnership and capacity-building with officials and government agencies would be something they would do more frequently.

Duffield (2008) argues that the main role of INGOs in Myanmar is to “push back, contain or modulate the effects of unchecked, arbitrary personal power” by all connected to the regime. Clearly many UN and INGO leaders do not agree. Steve Marshall, the ILO Liaison in Myanmar, argues that one key obstacle to effective development work in Myanmar is the absence of a cohesive civil service which can implement the high-level policy initiatives agencies are currently negotiating with senior officials
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(Marshall, ILO 2009). This view sees building the capacity of the civil service as essential. It is clear that restrictions on partnerships with officials cause great frustration for many international agencies. Given the emphasis on partnerships for poverty alleviation in President Thein Sein’s inauguration speech (NLM, 2011) and subsequent signs of policy development around this goal (U Myint 2011), INGOs are increasingly thinking that this is the right time to explore capacity-building partnerships with the civil service (Herzbruch, LRC 2011).

The danger, of course, in building a close relationship with government officials is that “you may be perceived from the outside as being too close; you have to tread a fine line” (Source 15, 2009). In talking about this, many INGOs’ leaders felt the need to defend themselves against being labelled “regime apologists”.

Rights-Based Approach

The definition of a “Rights-Based Approach” (RBA) to development varies greatly, but it usually views poverty as the direct result of disempowerment and exclusion, thus seeking to empower rights-holders (citizens) to hold duty-bearers (national governments) to account under international human rights legislation. In particular, the RBA seeks to assist marginalized 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).

Given the already highly politicized context, the RBA is a contentious topic amongst INGOs in Myanmar. Several organizations interviewed have adopted the RBA as their global approach to development, yet in order to “do no harm” and not put people at risk, until 2011–12 these organizations worked in Myanmar in a more reserved way, advocating for basic services on behalf of communities, arguing that poverty itself is a violation of human rights (for example, Source 24, 2009). The ILO, with their mandate to work against forced labour, already spend most of their time advising citizens of their rights under existing Myanmar law. They suggest that existing national laws provide a reasonable framework in many areas, and that raising the awareness of rights under these laws is a critical part of development. However, even when people understand their legal rights, very few are brave enough to exercise them (Marshall, ILO 2009).
Many interviewees felt a rights-based approach was not appropriate in Myanmar since “the law is in the mouth of the generals; there is nothing down on paper, no real rule of law because what is written can always be manipulated” (Source 16, 2009). Some see the RBA as built on concepts that are not relevant in Myanmar, given that neither the people nor the military leaders believe there are rights: “needs and responsibilities yes, but not rights” (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). Others suggest that many ministers and key officials are 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 officials genuinely are concerned” (Source 31, 2009).

Inescapably, part of the issue of talking about rights in Myanmar is the fact that the international community regularly couches the most stinging of their rebukes in human rights language, to the extent that the Myanmar government believes human rights allegations are being exploited to destabilize the state, and are being raised for political advantage rather than out of genuine humanitarian concern (for example, see NLM 2009). They argue that the end result of human rights activism is that the Myanmar people are further denied their human rights because of restrictions on the right of the country to develop (for example, see Soe Tha 2007). Interestingly, Pedersen (2009) agrees in part, suggesting that “poverty has emerged as the most acutely felt constraint on human rights for the majority of people across the country”, thus putting rights obligations in part back on the West, not just on the Myanmar government.

There is a view from at least some local non-government organizations (LNGOs) that “instead of advocating for political rights, international organizations should start working at the grassroots level strengthening the capacity of society” (Source 41, 2009). Overall, those who assess their work as most effective believe RBA goals are better pursued by building relationships with authorities and appealing for assistance non-confrontationally, rather than talking about rights and duties.

**Advocacy**

INGOs point to a wide range of policy change and development to show that advocacy can work in Myanmar. Allan (2010) describes advances in areas such as human trafficking, drug control, disability strategy, sustainable forestry, and HIV-Malaria-TB prevention. The Leprosy
Mission points to recent invitations for various INGOs to assist in drafting legislation surrounding disability, the elderly, and the protection of women and children as wins for advocacy (Griffiths, TLMI 2011), while President Thein Sein's apparent enthusiasm for the alleviation of extreme rural poverty could also be taken as an advocacy win. However, progress seems as much related to the particular issue involved as it is to the methodology and approach: items related to security or involving budgetary reallocations make less progress, while changes related to technical matters or local needs are more likely to succeed than calls for policy change. For example, despite much advocacy, increases to health and education spending have been minimal.

It is widely agreed that significant progress in development requires major policy change. "It [advocacy] is really the main thing we need to do" (Lancelot, MDM 2009). Yet most INGOs are "particularly hesitant to pursue fully rational advocacy strategies that would do a better job of leading to more complete overall development in any sense" (Source 30, 2009). Several INGOs acknowledged a lack of understanding of government decision-making processes as one cause of this, particularly once decisions need to go higher than regional or ministry level (Source 18; Source 25, 2009). One UN informant argued that, "Most organizations ... don't engage and negotiate boldly enough behind closed doors. When we push back non-confrontationally, but boldly, they generally move closer to a consensus or compromise solution" (Source 42, 2009). Yet interviewees from these same organizations implied the vulnerability of such work by seeking assurances of anonymity for these comments.

Most advocacy in Myanmar is personal and non-confrontational. One respondent spoke of "silent advocacy" (Source 20, 2009), by which she meant private discussions away from the public spotlight. The Myanmar Red Cross speaks of "informal advocacy" or "situation-sensitive advocacy" (Tha Hla Shwe, MRC 2011). Oxfam prefers to speak of advocacy as "building relationships", and notes that success is very dependent upon the individuals involved (Win, Oxfam 2009). Indeed, "the word 'advocacy' itself, in some cases, makes people afraid" (Tumbian, WV 2009).

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

The most effective approach appears to be through exploring needs and issues together with officials, with no confrontation and no blame, looking for ways to meet needs together, particularly at the community and township level. "It is more like seeking support or seeking to supplement what the community has already done to help themselves" (Source 24, 2009). World Vision explained this advocacy as "report[ing] needs to the government, so they know and so they can support us by sending their technical people" (Tumbian, WV 2009). Effectively, this approach adopts methods described in the literature for involving elites in poverty alleviation, even when their vested interests lie elsewhere (e.g. see Hossain and Moore 2002).

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 (Source 6, 2009).

One respondent emphasized that many officials at the township level are genuinely concerned about many of the same issues as development agencies. Advocacy that directly criticizes concerned individuals who are hamstrung by small budgets is not helpful (Source 31, 2009).

**Accountability**

Eyben (2008) argues 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 what proves with hindsight to be effective aid may well be an outcome of relational approaches." This conception of accountability appears particularly apt in Myanmar, where agencies need to overcome the strained relationship between the West and the Myanmar government in order to operate effectively.

INGOs with the greatest ease of access have strong relationships with authorities, built largely through highly transparent dealings with officials. Many invest significant time and personnel in developing and
maintaining relations with government officials (for example, Agland, Care 2009; Griffiths, TLMI 2009; Purnell, WVI 2011; Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). Transparency is a key: many INGOs are

even more transparent [than usual] ... The entire thing that is at stake ... is to build trust.... So we are absolutely transparent in everything we do ... we are trying really to build trust with them, that they see the value of us working with them [and] spread that message that international aid ... can really bring development and improvement (Lancelot, MDM 2009).

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

Interestingly, however, given the level of transparency in direct relationships with officials, INGO reports that are delivered to higher levels of authority are not always as transparent. One INGO country director complained that officials “have literally said to me, use [your figures and information] where you want and when you want, but please, could you report it like this and like this” (Source 18, 2009).

Another explained:

We tell [departmental contacts] exactly what we are doing and ask for their advice on what to put into our written reports — people in the department advise back what to write up and what not to write up. It creates more trouble for them if we report everything (Source 20, 2009).

Similarly, at least one INGO leader voiced concern that “INGOs here seem to be less open to information sharing [with other INGOs] than we found them in [another country], as if they mimic the government and become less transparent themselves” (Source 18, 2009). One longer-term journalist concurred, suggesting he had noted a much greater reluctance for INGOs to go on record and talk about their activities after the purge in the military leadership in 2004, and that since then they preferred to remain more “under the radar” (Goddard, MT 2009). Following the unprecedented relief cooperation in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, this tendency seems to have improved significantly with, for example, eighteen agencies cooperating very openly in an impact study after the March 2011 earthquake, and recent inter-agency discussion of salary scales for local staff (Herink, WV 2011). Still, it is interesting that these comments were made a full year after the cyclone.
In regard to accountability to donors, many respondents readily agreed that they maintain a very low publicity profile about their Myanmar work in donor countries. “Caution is wise” when it comes to publicising projects outside the country, and some country directors are particularly careful to advise visitors from other parts of their organization not to include anything in their promotional materials that would upset either the Myanmar government or people outside Myanmar. In part, this is in recognition of the government’s sensitivity that portrayals of poverty may be exploited by opponents, but it also highlights the complexity of accountability towards donors.

**CONTEXT SENSITIVITY IN WORK WITHIN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

**Participation**

Participation is a central concept in development theory, having “become widely accepted as the minimum requirement for successful and sustained development outcomes” (Clarke, 2009). “Empowerment happens when individuals and organized groups are able to imagine their world differently” and take action to change their circumstances (Eyben et al. 2008).

Political limitations, access issues, and regional conflict mean participation is not always implemented well in Myanmar. One Burmese manager in a UN agency complained that participatory committees set up for most projects “are just user groups that stop at the end of the project, leaving again a vacuum” (Source 41, 2009). Nonetheless, many other more highly participatory “process-led”, “human-centred”, and “integrated” programmes in Myanmar have created ownership and empowered communities to assess their needs, prioritize, and design their own solutions, often resulting in the emergence of genuine community-based organizations (CBOs).

This finding — that highly participatory development works well in Myanmar — is counter-intuitive given the strongly authoritarian government. 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 (Allan, Spectrum 2009).
Anthropological research by Skidmore (2003, 2004) and Fink (2001) highlights another factor that needs to be taken into account. Their research investigated the psychological impact of military rule in Myanmar, and concluded that people develop an aversion to risk trying new things and are disempowered in decision-making. This perception is mirrored in Aung San Suu Kyi’s (1995) writing. “People here are not willing to try things outside areas that are safe” (Goddard, *Myanmar Times* 2009).

Certainly, “fear is a significant component of the landscape here ... it is very real” (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). There is “a lot of fear of doing new things, or of being seen to be taking the lead on things or pushing things forward ... there is kind of a status-quo culture ... There is a real fear of being clamped down on” (Wells, Paung Ku 2009). Invitations to become involved in participatory development, therefore, “often meet with scepticism from village leaders ... worried what this will mean for their relationship with local authorities” (Source 20, 2009). “People will come together, but they’re not used to making decisions for themselves ... some of that is due to political repression, and some of it is due to the people just being really poor” (Agland, Care 2009).

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

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 (Agland, Care 2009).

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 (Griffiths, TLMI 2009).

Good relationships with local officials are often ensured by local partner organizations, who can spend “a lot of time talking to local officials to convince them this is good for the community and not a threat” (Source 20, 2009). In other instances, developing such relationships is a learned skill that is utilized by key community members, rather than the result of deliberate engagement or policy by INGOs or NGO partners: “If you
don’t liaise with the authorities, then the authorities will follow up what you have been doing anyway, so you might as well try to do the right thing” (Allan, Spectrum 2009). Where possible, it can be fruitful to include officials in projects in such a way that they can consider they helped the work and can take some credit for the results — although it can result in pressure to implement infrastructure projects, tangible outcomes that local authorities can easily take credit for.

Most INGO respondents suggest that they emphasize high levels of participation more strongly in Myanmar than 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 (Source 24; Source 41, 2009). 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 programmes particularly suitable in Myanmar (Source 24, 2009; Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009; Tumbian, WV 2009; Wells, Paung Ku 2009).

**Equity**

Equity is a fundamental element of effective participatory development, and requires that the disempowered be given the opportunity to provide input into decision-making processes. Equity is usually emphasized in terms of gender, but more broadly “requires the voices of women, the young, the old, and landless, disabled, and other marginalized groups alongside the voices of traditional leaders, religious leaders, and landowners” (Clarke 2009). Equitable development, therefore, also needs to be sensitive to mitigation of fault lines within society which drive exclusion and marginalization (Conflict Sensitivity 2004; Carment and Schnabel 2001).

Equity is a significant issue in Myanmar. “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” (Source 20, 2009). Building equity and genuine participation in such a “deeply fractured society” (Wells, Paung Ku 2009) requires time and deliberate effort to empower the voices of women, minorities, and the marginalized.

Hope International Development Agency is possibly the INGO that most directly addresses these concerns in Myanmar. Its representative argues:

[Westerners] characterize this country as a peace-loving Buddhist people who have the misfortune to be ruled by some military thugs.... I see
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this, in contrast, as a country that has a long, deep and broad history of violence, and the use of violence and the threat of violence to maintain social control.... It is in the family, it is in community organizations, it is in religious organizations, and of course it is in the military (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009).

Consequently, most poor people defer to village leaders, religious leaders, or to local members of the regime-connected Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) or of the military, for example, rather than offering genuine participation. Dealing with the root causes of authoritarianism and marginalization is essential for improving equity in development; empowerment must facilitate personal transformation that results in people coming to see one another in more mutually respectful relationships (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). It must help communities develop good communication, negotiation, mediation, and consensus decision-making skills.

In order to improve equity, it is essential not only to address gender issues, but also to reduce suspicion between groups and build participation that demonstrates development is not just for one ethnic, religious, or political group (Tegenfeldt, Hope 2009). For example, one INGO reported coming under pressure several years ago to exclude known supporters of the National League for Democracy (NLD) from eligibility for its microfinance loans (Source 31, 2009). The Myanmar Red Cross came under similar pressure at one point to exclude NLD supporters even when taking blood donations (Tha Hla Shwe, MRC 2011). However, Western INGOs sometimes equally discriminate against members of the regime-affiliated USDA (Salai, Swissaid 2009). It was not uncommon for villages to choose USDA members as part of village development committees, and INGOs were often very concerned about their political affiliation. Given that the USDA has since been converted into the Union Solidarity Development Party, the new ruling party in Myanmar, their concerns were well founded. Clearly, if the election of USDA members was due to deference by community members out of a sense of hierarchy and power, this would be reason for concern.

There is evidence in the literature that good accountability processes and highly democratic decision-making can be a safeguard against elite capture of community-driven development, despite the presence of elites on committees (Fritzen 2007; Labonne and Chase 2009; Platteau and Gaspart 2003). In the same way that INGOs must strive to ensure that committees include women as well as some of the poorest and most
vulnerable persons in a community, several respondents were adamant that the principles of equity also mean USDA members must not be excluded simply because of political affiliation (for example, Win, Oxfam 2009). Likewise, considerations of equity mean that village and religious leaders should also be included in participatory processes, not completely sidelined (Tumbian, WV 2009).

**Sustainability**

In an environment where international agencies are restricted in building the capacity of township officials, it is difficult to ensure that officials are able to maintain village-level development. Sustainable development therefore requires that communities should be able to maintain their own development themselves, beyond the life of the project. A number of agencies thus have a deliberate goal of building equitable, participatory village development committees into community-based organizations, able to continue the process of community empowerment and sustainable development long after the involvement of the international or local agency. These agencies assess this strategy as having been effective in Myanmar:

> We have proven on the ground that the poor, if given opportunity, can fully participate in prioritizing their needs and 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 (Source 41, 2009).

Part of the reason why this is possible appears to be that, rather than most 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” (Wells, Paung Ku 2009).

However, it takes considerable time to develop the capacity of village committees so they can become firmly-based CBOs. While the approach and programme of each agency is different, agencies interviewed by the author suggested that in their experience it takes between seven (Source 41, 2009) to fifteen years (Tumbian, WV 2009) to develop a functioning CBO in a village community. Two other INGO leaders with prior experience of just-commencing programmes 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 (Source 24, 2009; Source 30, 2009). It was also noted that success in such a venture "depends largely on whether committee members are assigned by the village, or whether people with a real heart, spirit and genuine leadership character are brought into the committee" (Source 41, 2009).

**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 to account to sustain development (Clarke, 2009). Given the surprising finding that, despite the high degree of authoritarianism in the country, the most effective development programmes in Myanmar are strongly participatory and inclusive, one might suspect effective programmes may also incorporate a high degree of active citizenship.

Respondents were very conscious that empowerment must do no harm and not put people or communities at risk. They are also very aware that most Burmese are very reluctant to challenge authorities at any level (Goddard, *Myanmar Times* 2009), or even to talk about issues they perceive as relating to higher levels of authority (Wells, Paung Ku 2009). Indeed, there is "a lot of evidence that the government views the people as the enemy, that they fear the public, and fear the public doing too much" (Long, *Myanmar Times* 2009).

Speaking about local NGO and CBO networks, Dorning lamented that, "What we can't do here, but would be possible in other countries is ... they could become political in themselves, they could lobby for their own constituency" (Dorning, Burnet 2009). Most INGOs discouraged any politicization of their work in villages or of their local partners, and most attempts even to facilitate local NGOs in lobbying donors and international authorities were unsuccessful. Instead, apart from communities actively seeking cooperation from local officials through lines of relationship, INGOs largely assume the role of advocacy on their behalf. Indeed, some INGOs avoid even using the term "empowerment" in their communication with the government (Source 6, 2009).

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

However, since the recent elections and inauguration of the new president and parliament, there appears to be a decided change in the level of local advocacy and active citizenship. Local NGOs have become far bolder in using the public civil space to engage in public debate of policy issues, something previously heavily restricted. For example, discussion of the Kachin State hydroelectricity dams is becoming common even in Yangon; local groups have organized regular seminars in Dawei calling for corporate social responsibility in relation to the deep-sea port; and the Ayeyawady River Awareness campaign by a Yangon-based group is using media and art to raise issues of watershed and environmental management within the Ayeyawady basin (Wells, Paung Ku 2011). This is a new level of locally-led active citizenship within the country, and something INGOs have yet to significantly engage with.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has documented many of the complexities INGOs face in implementing their development programmes sensitively in Myanmar in order to facilitate greater effectiveness. While there is broad consensus that poverty in Myanmar is largely the result of governance failures, the difficulties faced by INGOs relate to restrictions stemming from both the Myanmar government and the international community. Nonetheless, despite the complexity and difficulties, if INGOs operate with appropriate sensitivity to the context, their effectiveness is not as heavily restricted as is commonly perceived by those outside the country. This is particularly true for projects that directly address the impact of extreme poverty on communities, but also applies in areas such as advocacy and developing the capacity of the emerging civil society.

This chapter has summarized the major insights obtained from key development practitioners working in Myanmar about the types of
contextualization that make INGO development interventions most effective. The insights from their experience provide something of a blueprint for other organizations working in Myanmar, and offer hope for incremental change and effectiveness in alleviating the impact of extreme poverty in Myanmar. More broadly, this research highlights the clear need for development practitioners to be ready to adapt global development approaches to local circumstances. It points to the lack of substantive research into the contextualization of development, and the tendency of the international and academic community to espouse a global ideal without sufficient emphasis on alternatives and adaptations in implementation.
APPENDIX 1
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I conducted semi-structured interviews in person with fifty key practitioners between 2009 and 2011. Most were country directors or programme managers with INGOs and UN organizations based in Myanmar. I also interviewed a number of local NGO leaders, as well as leaders of INGOs who work into Myanmar through partnerships, and a couple of representatives from bilateral donor organizations and journalists. A majority of those interviewed were non-Burmese, reflecting the make-up of senior INGO and UN organization staff.

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in Myanmar and Thailand, after Cyclone Nargis and the referendum in 2008 but before the 2010 elections were scheduled. Interviews were around one hour in length, and were guided by a loose schedule of open-ended questions. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. The initial data analysis was verified using a Delphi panel discussion in Yangon during December 2009, with a number of follow-up interviews conducted during June 2011.

All respondents have been given an anonymous reference number (Source 1-50), while about half the participants agreed to allow at least some of their responses to be on the record. The latter are noted by in-text citations providing author, agency, and date.

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Long, Douglas. Editor, Myanmar Times. Personal interview (recorded), 8 July 2009, Yangon.


Source 30. Director of local NGO / former country coordinator for an INGO. Personal interview, July 2009, Yangon.

Source 31. Former country representative (faith-based INGO). Personal interview (recorded), March 2009, Melbourne.

Source 41. Former senior manager (Burmese national with a UN agency). Personal interview, July 2009, Yangon.

Source 42. Field Coordinator / Deputy Head (UN agency). Personal interview (recorded), July 2009, Yangon.

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