

Myanmar/Burma:

Local agencies and Global donors

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International aid agencies are generally keen to elicit beneficiary participation, do 'capacity building' and support local partners. However, this is easier said than done, and local communities and organisations can suffer by contact with international agencies, or at least be excluded from potential benefits.

Relationships often run one-way in terms of power dynamics, with international agencies using local groups to get access to populations, and gain credibility with donors. In Myanmar, CBOs and national NGOs sometimes enter into partnerships with internationals in order to access donor funding. Big donors (including Multi-Donor Trust Funds) seem unable to provide substantial funds to local/national NGOs, unless they have international partners.

There are several reasons for this situation. Demands for accountability (e.g. to Western taxpayers) make big aid organisations risk-averse, and generally only willing to work with local agencies they have a track record of partnership with; donors are concerned that local agencies are often poor at administration and difficult to manage; big aid agencies have to satisfy auditors that their implementing partners are competent and legally registered; funding guidelines are applied bureaucratically rather than pragmatically.

Due to such bureaucratic limitations and considerations, donors often find it difficult to supply the relatively small amounts of money which local organisations require (especially start-up CBOs). The structure and culture of many international organisations makes it difficult for them to be flexible and creative in relation to local groups. Furthermore, donors have legitimate concerns about working with some local organisations (e.g. those perceived as close to conflict parties, or unfamiliar with internationally recognised sectoral best-practices, or not very good at reporting). Often however, bureaucratic requirements force local actors to try to conform to procedures that are not practicable or realistic, given the situation on the ground. For local actors, there is a danger of being forced to choose between being locked out of access to funding, and/or having to change their priorities and

ways of working, in order to fit into donors' pre-conceived, generic notions of what constitutes 'professional aid work'.

These are concerns in areas of Myanmar where international agencies do not have access, but communities are working on the ground as are CBOs and national NGOs. In the context of ceasefires recently agreed between the government and several non-state armed groups, international aid agencies expect to gain improved access to conflict-affected areas. An influx of foreign aid risks distorting local priorities, overwhelming limited local capacities, and marginalising local agency. Another variation is that enterprising local civil society and political leaders become adept at responding to donors' requirements, providing access to populations and establishing themselves as 'gatekeepers' – without necessarily eliciting real participation on the part of affected communities.

One solution would be to insist that donor mechanisms are flexible enough to allow CBOs to apply independently for relatively small amounts of funding, and also encourage national NGOs (and/or national NGO consortia) to apply directly for larger amounts of money. Donors should commit to directly funding locally initiated projects, so that national agencies are not dependent on international partners. This could be promoted through joint needs assessments, with national NGOs, CBOs and (most importantly) affected communities consulted from the outset, in terms of methodology, and participating in needs assessments and peace and conflict analyses. This would require forums where community members and CBOs could talk about local needs and priorities, existing activities and programs, capacities and requirements for capacity-building, and ways of addressing these issues. Concept Notes produced in this way should be processed quickly by donors. If proposals are accepted at the Concept Note stage, donors should commit to (or facilitate others to) helping local partners produce full proposals and ensure relevant capacity to implement, monitor and report on the projects.

Substantial local input into joint needs assessments and program planning would contribute towards shared understandings of needs and geographical focus. This would promote 'aid harmonisation', avoiding unnecessary duplication. Likewise, well-designed multi-agency approaches (and Trust Funds) could promote greater strategic coherence, shared ownership of programs and more predictable funding.

International NGOs can help here, with their capacity-building expertise. At the same time, donors should simplify their requirements, including reducing the complexity of proposal formats. Donors may also need to accept higher project-management costs, in order to allow for institutional development and the creation of long-term partnerships with local agencies.

Such changes require political will, and that donor agencies establish incentive structures and organisational cultures which reward flexibility and appropriate risk-taking. Donors need to balance the risks of possibly reduced aid effectiveness, incurred by working with less ‘professional’ local partners, against the opportunity-costs of not supporting Myanmar civil society at this important moment of social-political change in the country.

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Local to Global Protection (L2GP) is an initiative intended to document and promote local perspectives on protection in major humanitarian crises. So far, community oriented studies have been carried out in Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe.

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