

NGO statement regarding the Nargis Cyclone response
On the occasion of the international conference in Yangon, Myanmar
25 May 2008

Our heartfelt sympathies are with the people of Myanmar as they recover from the devastating consequences of Cyclone Nargis, and we welcome this conference as a significant step to ensure that the people affected by this catastrophe are reached with timely and appropriate assistance.

Complementing the efforts of the Government of the Union of Myanmar, there are more than 20 international non-governmental organisations and dozens of local organisations currently working to provide assistance to people affected by Cyclone Nargis. The NGOs have collectively provided life-saving assistance to nearly 1m people. However, we can do more to ensure that all those who need assistance receive it quickly. We believe that urgent attention to the following five points will make a real and lasting difference to the efforts of all parties:

1. *Build on existing mechanisms that are proven to work:* We welcome the announcement that a mechanism may be established to harness the collective strengths of: the Government of the Union of Myanmar, the Association of South-east Asian Nations, and the United Nations in a humanitarian response to Cyclone Nargis. We strongly urge that this mechanism uses existing structures established under the auspices of the Inter-agency Standing Committee. It is particularly important to ensure that coordination is organised around recognised “clusters” of activities, and that NGOs are involved meaningfully in decision-making and coordination structures that compliment the roles of the Government, ASEAN and the UN. This is one of the main lessons learned from past humanitarian responses around the world.
2. *Improve the efficiency of humanitarian experts by enabling them to travel where they are needed.* Many international NGOs have decades of experience in dealing with these kinds of situations, and they can mobilise significant resources to help the people of Myanmar. However, it is vital that NGOs are able to deploy a small number of recognised humanitarian experts into the affected areas to support the relief and reconstruction efforts. There are internationally-recognised codes of conduct for these personnel, and reputable humanitarian organisations go to great lengths to ensure that their personnel respect these principles.
3. *Start planning now for a 2-3 year response:* While we must all work urgently to provide life-saving assistance to those people affected by the cyclone, immediate consideration must also be given to rebuilding people’s lives and livelihoods. Children must be helped to return to school, farmers must be helped to plant their fields, and labourers must be helped to find employment. We must all plan now for a prolonged humanitarian response that will last years, not months.
4. *Draw on ALL existing capacity:* We must harness the experience, skills and resources of everyone who can contribute. NGOs, private companies and local self-help groups have already demonstrated their respective capacities to help survivors of the cyclone. We must build on these strengths, as well as mobilise the skills and resources of other responsible humanitarian agencies that were not operating in Myanmar prior to the cyclone. There are a number of NGOs with proven track records in south-east Asia that could be mobilised as a matter of urgency.
5. *Use the response to Cyclone Nargis to reduce the impact of future storms.* We hope that Cyclone Nargis is a once-in-a-lifetime event. But, experts predict that tropical storms are likely to become more frequent in some parts of the world. Some international NGOs have world-class expertise in helping people and governments to reduce the impact of future storms. We urge that this experience be mobilised in the early stages of the Nargis relief efforts.

In summary, although Cyclone Nargis has already killed tens of thousands of people, there are hundreds of thousands of other people who need urgent assistance. It is not too late to save them. There are many NGOs with the experience and skills to help do this. We just need the resources and the access to make it happen.