

# Older people and Cyclone Nargis

A study of the situation of older people 100 days on



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**HelpAge International** has a vision of a world in which all older people can lead dignified, active, healthy and secure lives. We work to ensure people everywhere understand how much older people contribute to society and that they must enjoy their right to healthcare, social services and economic and physical security.

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Coordination: Deepak Malik, HelpAge International

Researcher : Ko Lwin, Myanmar Marketing Research and  
Development Research Services (MMRD), [www.mmrdrs.com](http://www.mmrdrs.com)

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HelpAge International-Asia/Pacific

6, Soi 17, Nimmanhemmin Road

Suthep, Muang

Chiang Mai 50200 Thailand

Tel: +66 53 225 440

Fax: +66 53 225 441

Email: [hai@helpageasia.org](mailto:hai@helpageasia.org)

**[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)**

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## Foreword

Cyclone Nargis has had a devastating impact for millions of people in the Ayeyarwady Delta and southern Yangon Division region of Myanmar. Among the affected are around 700,000 people over 55.

This study was carried out with approval and explicit interest of the Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement.

Older people are often the missing element in relief and rehabilitation efforts. This study, however, shows that they can become a vital link in supporting communities rebuild their lives, livelihoods and communities. Their life-acquired wisdom and calmness certainly instills a distinctive sense of hope, of confidence in the future. Ensuring that the particular challenges and needs of this group of persons are addressed is critical to ensuring a successful relief and recovery programme for all affected population.

**Richard Blewitt**  
Chief Executive  
HelpAge International

## Executive summary

In order to understand the situation of older people affected by Cyclone Nargis that struck Myanmar in May 2008, HelpAge International with the support of its partner YMCA and the Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement carried out research in July 2008 in three affected townships: Kyiak Lat, Dedeye, and Pyapon. This publication, based on the research, reveals that older people are highly dependent on the care and support of immediate family members. The extensive damage to the environment, shelter, and livelihoods and the death of family members has weakened the security system that previously existed for older people. These are some of the key findings of the study:

**Access to emergency relief:** Nearly all of the older people surveyed noted that relief work was ongoing in their villages. 65 per cent of participants in the survey were the poorest of the poor. Fewer than 10 per cent of those surveyed stated that there was specific attention to older people in the relief effort, 70 per cent claimed to have difficulty eating standard relief foods. 36 per cent of older people had received food items, 26 per cent clothing, and 5 per cent health care, overall 82 per cent had lost their household assets.

**Food security:** 73 per cent of the respondents noted that prior to Cyclone Nargis, they had purchased food from markets; however, only 45 per cent were able to do that afterwards. Most were reliant on the food supplies of international NGOs (50 per cent) and local NGOs (9 per cent). With food in short supply, older people's coping strategies included reducing the size of meals (35 per cent), skipping meals (32 per cent), not eating at all on some days (11 per cent), or going to relatives' homes (15 per cent).

**Shelter:** 7 per cent of older people live alone. Most houses in the villages were makeshift (various materials) or bamboo construction (75 per cent) and thus susceptible to damage. 79 per cent of the respondents indicated that their house had been destroyed. However, their housing situation had already improved although most reconstruction was not permanent. People have already made some temporary shelters, but still no household has been rehabilitated.

**Healthcare:** Before Cyclone Nargis, 30 per cent of the respondents were free of significant illnesses, but that number decreased to 2 per cent after the cyclone struck. The most frequent increased health complications were jaundice, diarrhoea, malaria, respiratory problems, and skin infections. 66 per cent of older people carry a disability; of which 45 per cent have sight problems and 35 per cent have mobility problems.

**Livelihoods:** 60 per cent of respondents have no productive assets, and only 25 per cent have access to land. 50 per cent of the older people engaged in farming noted that they were unable to harvest their rice crop. 56 per cent of older people engaged in farming have no seeds to plant for the upcoming year, and 64 per cent lost the cattle they use for rice cultivation. Many granaries that stocked rice for consumption during the year were also destroyed (47 per cent) or damaged (34 per cent).

The main problems for older people in order of priority are; healthcare; food aid; home care; nutrition; economic security and psychological support.

While relief efforts have helped to ease the situation, there is more to be done to support full recovery. HelpAge International has four main recommendations to ensure older people are considered in emergency response programmes:

- Address the felt needs of older people
- Include older people explicitly in relief and recovery programmes
- Include the needs of older people in future assessments
- Engage HelpAge International to support you to mainstream older people's needs



## I. Introduction

Cyclone Nargis left a wake of destruction in the Ayeyarwady Delta of Myanmar in May 2008. It was the greatest single natural disaster in Myanmar's history. HelpAge International responded to the disaster, working with its local partner, YMCA, to deliver relief supplies to the communities affected and to vulnerable older people in particular. HelpAge International continues to support the welfare of older people, both directly through its local partner and indirectly by advocating for the inclusion of older people in the programmes of the government and relief organisations on the ground.

### Rationale

This study, 100 days after the cyclone struck, provides a picture of the situation of older people in the affected areas, as well as documents the impact of the response on older people. This publication is also meant to inform government authorities and relief agencies of best practices on how to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of older people in the affected areas. HelpAge International undertook similar work in Aceh, Indonesia following the tsunami (Older People in Aceh, Indonesia 18 Months After the Tsunami, HelpAge International 2006).

### Methodology

The field research for this study was carried out through Myanmar Marketing Research and Development Research Services (MMRD), an experienced research organisation in Myanmar. The research was a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools applied by six teams in 30 villages. Vulnerable older people were identified through PRA exercises in the target area. Sixty focus group discussions and 120 informant interviews were held at the village level to learn of the personal impact and needs of older people. A survey with 600 older people participants was conducted to document the impact of the cyclone and the existing needs and concerns of older people, and case studies were developed to illustrate the common conditions older people faced in the aftermath of the disaster. Analysis of the research was jointly undertaken by the six team leaders and the research coordinator at MMRD.

There are a few limitations of the research, including location, time, and prior data. The location was 30 villages in three townships: Kyiak Lat, Dedeye, and Pyapon. These three townships are not necessarily representative of the areas with the greatest damage, and thus the findings of the research may not fully capture the severity and degree of its impact on older people.

### Impact of Cyclone Nargis

The people in the path of Cyclone Nargis were largely unaware and ill-prepared for the ensuing storm that struck on 2 and 3 May. Subsequently 84,530 people were reported killed by the storm, with another 53,836 reported missing.<sup>1</sup> The cyclone and storm surge along the peninsula destroyed 450,000 homes and an additional 350,000 were damaged. Some 75 per cent of health facilities in the affected area were destroyed or severely damaged, along with 4,000 school facilities.

The long-term damage to the natural environment and livelihoods was also considerable. Over 600,000 hectares of agricultural land were flooded and crops destroyed. About 50 per cent of draught animals were killed, and an unknown number of fishing boats, food stocks, and livelihoods implements were lost. This has left households extremely vulnerable – in June, 55 per cent of households in the

'Nargis hit my hut and it was totally destroyed. I have nothing; no tools, no household items. But I have many kids. My burden is big. My work is all that I have at the moment.

I want to prove to my children that their father is one of the good fathers. If I am still alive, life must be alive. Nargis can destroy our properties. But Nargis cannot destroy our hope. Given assistance to stand on our own feet, we can show that we are not so vulnerable.'

U Sein Thaug, 61  
Htein Wine village  
Pyapon township

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the damage, see *Post-Nargis Joint Assessment, July 2008*, undertaken by the Government of the Union of Myanmar, ASEAN and the UN.

affected area reported having only one day or less of food stock available, making the survivors reliant on the relief provisions of the government and relief agencies. The cyclone hit an important region in Myanmar for agriculture and fishing, resulting in an economic loss estimated to be 2.7 per cent of projected 2008 GDP.

### **Older people in emergencies**

HelpAge International has supported a number of initiatives to mainstream ageing into the policy, planning and implementation of humanitarian aid programmes.<sup>2</sup> The research and experience of HelpAge International in emergencies has historically shown a lack of attention by aid programmes to the vulnerabilities and capacities of older people. There has been recent progress, however, with ongoing HelpAge International partnerships with aid agencies in Darfur, Sudan and in Aceh, Indonesia, resulting in improved dignity, livelihoods and welfare of older people.

The focus of these partnerships and interventions is to ensure older people are 'protected as a vulnerable group, have equitable access to vital services and are recognised as rights holders and legitimate actors'.<sup>3</sup> Older people represent a valuable asset to communities and society, and it is critical that these assets be recognised and protected to enable communities to prepare for and recover from natural disasters.



<sup>2</sup> HelpAge International 2006, *Older people in Aceh, Indonesia 18 months after the Tsunami*, page 4.

<sup>3</sup> [www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org) (8 August 2008)

## II. Findings

### Socio-economic characteristics of respondents

Older people (aged 55 and older) account for 11.8 per cent of the population in Myanmar.<sup>4</sup> The average life expectancy at birth in Myanmar is 61. Older people in Myanmar, like most Asian countries, receive a considerable amount of respect in their communities, live with their immediate family members, and are expected to share their wisdom, knowledge and skills with younger generations.

The majority of the respondents in the survey were aged 70 and older (44 per cent), which explains the limited amount of engagement in income-generating activities and high levels of dependency. Only 21 per cent of the respondents had completed primary education, and illiteracy among the survey group was significant (20 per cent). The average household size with older people was 4.56, as compared to the national average of 5.2 persons. 6.8 per cent of the respondents lived alone. Most older people had few productive assets – 60 per cent indicated they had no productive assets. Of those with assets, cultivated land (25 per cent) and boats (24 per cent) were the most common form of assets.

The study also ranked poverty among the respondents based on criteria developed by the communities. This assessment noted that 63 per cent of the respondents are among the poorest, 29 per cent are among the poor, and 8 per cent are moderately well-off.

### Impact of the cyclone

#### Access to emergency relief

Nearly all of the respondents of the survey noted that there was ongoing relief work in their villages. However, direct relief to older people themselves was lacking – fewer than 10 per cent of those surveyed stated that there was specific attention to older people in relief. 36 per cent of older people indicated they received food items, 26 per cent indicated they received clothing, and 5 per cent indicated they received health care. Typically, relief supplies are provided to families (including older people), and thus older people may benefit from the emergency distributions. Nevertheless, greater attention in emergencies needs to account for the special needs of older people, and subsequent direct benefits to support psycho-social and health needs, as well as to restore livelihoods.

*For our health and survival, we all need to get medical care, small loans for food, clothing and shelter, job opportunities and nutrition – Older woman, 72, Kan Saik Village*

#### Food security

Rice, fish and fish-based products are the staple food of older people in Myanmar. As a result of the damage to paddy fields, home gardens and fishing equipment, the food resources were disrupted. 73 per cent of the respondents noted that prior to Cyclone Nargis, they purchased food from markets; however, as a result of loss of purchasing power and available food supplies, only 45 per cent reported being able to acquire food from the markets. Most were reliant on the food supplies of international NGOs (50 per cent) and local NGOs (9 per cent). With food in short supply, older people's coping strategies included reducing the size of meals (35 per cent), skipping meals (32 per cent), not eating the whole day (11 per cent), going to relatives' homes (15 per cent) and going to the religious leader (6 per cent).



'There are ten people in my family. Only three work as casual labourers, and three are students. My husband and my son both had a stroke. I have difficulty in seeing. We are all disabled. we need some assistance.'

Daw Saw Kyi, 69  
Kanseik Village  
Dedeye Township

*I was shameful when I was standing in line to get the food from the donor. I never thought that this would happen in my life. I had to live by begging for food. Am I a beggar, I asked myself. I felt sad. I really hated this cyclone that destroyed my life. However, I have to depend on the food aid until the next harvest of my rice field. – Older man, 67, Pyapon Township*

### **Shelter**

Most houses in the villages were makeshift (various materials) or bamboo construction (75 per cent) and thus susceptible to damage. Only 22 per cent were constructed mostly of wood. Thus, it is not surprising that 79 per cent of the respondents indicated that their house had been totally destroyed, and only 13 per cent indicated their house was partially damaged. Rebuilding makeshift and bamboo houses is not too time-consuming or difficult. Older people noted that their housing situation had already improved, with 55 per cent indicating their shelter had been somewhat rebuilt and another 38 per cent indicating that reconstruction was taking place. However, of the reconstruction taking place, only 14 per cent of older people indicated that they considered it to be a permanent shelter. Other temporary structures can be used only this rainy season. They need to rebuild for permanent shelter.

*My son-in-law held me in his arms, and we ran to a granary house. But the heavy winds flattened it. We ran to the monastery, the biggest and strongest building in our village. The wind was pulling off the metal sheets. I was shaking with fear. I was in shock. – Older woman, 75, Thaukya Village*

### **Healthcare**

The impact on health among older people in the target villages was also evident. Before Cyclone Nargis, 30 per cent of the respondents did not suffer from any significant illness, but that number decreased to 2 per cent after the cyclone struck. The most frequent increased health complications were jaundice, diarrhoea, malaria, respiratory problems, and skin infections. There was also an increase in reported mental health problems, and 7.5 per cent of older people indicated they needed psycho-social support. 4.5 per cent of the respondents indicated that a family member had died as a result of the cyclone. 66 per cent of older people carry a disability; of which 45 per cent have sight problems and 35 per cent have mobility problems.

*I have high blood pressure. Before Nargis, we had no problem with our livelihood. Nargis took all of our wealth. I am still alive, but my life is dead. After Nargis, my wife became disabled from a stroke. Now we are surviving because our community provided some food for us. – Older man, 72, Pyapon Township*

### **Livelihoods**

Older people often support their families through engagement in income generating activities. 23 per cent of the older people were found to be the primary bread owners for the family, mostly through a combination of casual labour (50 per cent), poultry farming (36 per cent), agriculture (33 per cent), home gardening (22 per cent) and small scale businesses (13 per cent). In this target area, agriculture was a primary source of income, and when Cyclone Nargis struck it was the harvest time of summer rice. 50 per cent of the older people engaged in farming noted that they were unable to harvest their rice crop. In addition, there was a significant



loss of seed, with 56 per cent of older people engaged in farming indicating they have no seeds to plant for the upcoming year. 64 per cent lost the cattle they use for rice cultivation. Granaries that stocked rice for consumption during the year were also destroyed (47 per cent) or damaged (34 per cent). Home gardens and poultry raising were also a loss for most respondents, who will need both seeds and chickens in order to reestablish these activities. Most of the younger old people (55 to 70 years old) have shown their interest in keeping themselves active by engagements in economic activities if supported.

*My son cultivated the summer rice. All of it has been destroyed by Nargis. We depend on food that the donor has provided.*

*At present, there is a food shortage. Do you know when an INGO will provide food for us. – Older woman, 63, Kyiak Lat Township*

### Expressed needs of older people

All of the older people expressed their desire for the establishment of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) in their communities to support their recovery. The area of greatest need was health care (74 per cent), followed by food aid (59 per cent), home-based care (41 per cent), nutrition support (39 per cent), income-generation (36 per cent), and counselling (24 per cent).

*Nutritious food, a permanent house, mosquito net, blanket, warm clothes and a mattress – these are the things I need.*

– Older woman, 70, Htain Wine Village

*We need medicine and medical care for older people who are suffering from paralysis, eye problems, joint pains and weakness from ageing. – Older woman, 65, Kadar Village*



### III. Conclusion

The most vulnerable older people that participated in this survey show high levels of dependency on family and communities. Aside from the losses of deceased family members, the greatest impacts from Cyclone Nargis are the household and community losses of arable land, rice seed, granaries, and markets, as well as direct losses of supplemental livelihood activities, decreased health status, and adequate shelter.

As noted by the respondents, thus far few direct interventions to support the welfare of older people have been conducted by relief agencies in the target area. Older people, while indirectly benefiting from aid programmes to households, also require specialised attention in emergency responses that take into account their human rights and recognition of their vulnerabilities and capacities.

Much can be done to support older people in Myanmar affected by the cyclone. The main priority areas for intervention based on the survey and HelpAge International's global experience are:

- Addressing, in specific programmes, the priority needs of older people, including their needs for healthcare support for their chronic illnesses, their needs for appropriate and adequate food, and their needs for livelihood support for better income security.
- Including visible older people in all relief and early recovery programmes, using village older people's committees to support such programmes. Use intergenerational and age-friendly approaches in all programmes, enhancing the role of older people in both giving and receiving care in their homes and communities.
- Ensuring that any future assessments include explicit attention to the needs and reality facing older people in the delta. Ensure older people explicitly are part of any longer-term disaster risk reduction programmes.
- Mainstreaming older people in responses is both realistic and achievable. But this requires building capacity, monitoring delivery and involving older people and their communities in the relief and recovery programmes.

'I am willing to work. I have to support my family. As you are aware, this region is favorable for duck raising. If I raise 100 ducks, I can collect 50 eggs per day. The farm gate price of eggs is about 90 kyats. The net profit of duck raising is about 2,000 kyats (about \$2) per day. It will cover the cost of my living and health care expenses.'

U Aye Maung, 86  
Kadar Ywama Village  
Dedeye Township

U Aye Maung is the oldest person in the village. But he is still strong, healthy and energetic. When Nargis hit, his house was totally destroyed. He was saved by his son-in-law. Casual labour is his main source of income, and he has to rely on his physical stamina for uprooting, ploughing and harrowing.



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## Selected resources

### **Mainstreaming age-friendliness: A recapitulation of the collaborative efforts between HelpAge International and the British Red Cross Society in Aceh, Indonesia**

This report documents the story of the unique collaboration that took place in the aftermath of the Tsunami, between the British Red Cross and HelpAge International. It details the need for collaboration, and the process in which this was achieved.

### **Older people's associations in community disaster risk reduction: A resource book on good practice**

This resource book aims to strengthen the capacity of organisations working with older people in planning and implementing age-sensitive responses to disasters. It highlights good practice in utilising Older People's Associations for community-based disaster risk reduction

### **The impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami on older people: Issues and recommendations**

This report describes the impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami on older people in four severely affected countries - India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The report is based on a rapid-assessment survey carried out during the initial relief phase following the tsunami.

### **Older people in Aceh, Indonesia 18 months after the tsunami: Issues and recommendations**

This publication centres on the situation of older people in Aceh, Indonesia, and provides a selective assessment of ongoing rehabilitation programmes regarding the inclusion of older people over the first 18-month period of crisis intervention.

### **Age-friendly community health services in Aceh, Indonesia**

This publication focuses on the status of older people in Aceh, Indonesia in the context of rehabilitation programmes carried out during the two years following the tsunami disaster, and on opportunities to improve health care for them through community-based services.

### **Establishing and working with older people's associations in Cambodia: A practical guideline**

This publication provides practical guidelines for establishing and working with older people's (OPAs) associations in Cambodia. It includes information on forming an OPA, encouraging participation, OPA activities and networking.

### **AgeNews Asia/Pacific**

This regional newsletter aims to highlight issues of ageing and the rights of older people in every four months.

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### HelpAge International-Asia/Pacific

6 Soi 17, Nimmanhemin Road

Suthep, Muang

Chiang Mai 50200 Thailand

Tel: +66 53 225 440 Fax: +66 53 225 441

Email: [hai@helpageasia.org](mailto:hai@helpageasia.org)

### HelpAge International

PO Box 32832

London N1 9ZN, UK

Tel: +44 20 7278 7778

Fax: +44 20 7713 7993

Email: [hai@helpage.org](mailto:hai@helpage.org)

[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)



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