Managing Humanitarian Aid: 
The Importance of the “Cultural Context” in Disaster Response Operations in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT
This article contributes to an overall understanding of the challenges faced by humanitarian aid international non-government organizations (INGOs) in specific culturally context-sensitive regions of Myanmar. This research is based on a review of literature, relevant case study analysis, and on ten semi-structured interviews with the humanitarian activists of the Myanmar Diaspora in Canada. The author investigates the following research question: To what extent does “cultural context” play a crucial role in managing humanitarian aid during disaster response operations in a given affected area, and how does it consequently link to the challenges of humanitarian aid INGOs in Myanmar? Based on the findings, a culturally appropriate framework will be introduced for the efficacy of humanitarian aid INGOs when implementing disaster response operations in Myanmar.

KEYWORDS
Disaster Response Operations, Humanitarian Aid INGOs in Myanmar, Managing Aid

INTRODUCTION
Myanmar is ethnically very diverse, with about 135 ethnic groups making up its population of approximately 54 million people (Myanmar Population and Household Census, 2014). It is described as one of the world’s most disaster-prone countries given its exposure to multiple hazards, which include floods, cyclones, earthquakes, landslides, and droughts. Myanmar ranks second out of 187 countries in the 2016 Global Climate Risk Index and ninth out of 191 countries on the Index for Risk Management (World Bank Report, 2018). A pertinent example is cyclone Nargis of May 2008, which turned out to be the most devastating natural disaster in the history of the country, resulting in a loss of 140,000 human lives (UNOCHA, 2019).

Moreover, aside from its vulnerability to natural disaster, Myanmar continues to face significant humanitarian challenges related to the recent crisis in Rakhine state, the large-scale displacement of people, an ongoing armed conflict in some parts of the country, and inter-communal tensions. The United Nations (UN) 2018 Interim Humanitarian Response Plan indicates that there are 43 INGOs and 8 UN organizations that are providing humanitarian aid and development activities in affected regions of the country. However, whether humanitarian operations have positively or negatively

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impacted Myanmar is underreported. On the other hand, a backlash against INGOs arose in post-2012, and suspicions about misappropriation of aid resources and mismanagement of funds seem to have become more controversial after the aid agencies plunged themselves into the Rakhine crisis under the agenda of humanitarian violations (Jacobs, 2017; Myo Oo, 2017).

Another interesting point is that this backlash and mistrust of the INGOs was exposed after the military regime era, although this is not something scholars and observers often highlight in regard to the perception of locals in relation to past INGOs. For example, according to past empirical studies in Myanmar, the aid is perceived as a “donation” [ahlu] in the Buddhist sense (Brac de la Perriere, 2010), and the donor is regarded as a “master of donation” [ahu shin] (Boutry, 2008). In addition, according to South et al., (2011), based on the findings of studying INGO operations in the Delta region in the aftermath of the Nargis cyclone, the beneficiaries in the Delta region would not voice any discontent regarding INGO action because they were afraid of being excluded from the distribution lists or of being identified as members of problematic villages in relation to the donation (humanitarian aid).

Notably, in 2017 aid operations were severely disrupted in conflict areas. This disruption entailed the following: refusing travel visas to most INGOs and some UN agencies; a marked unwillingness of the locals to do any business with aid agencies (Arkin, 2017); and the public accusations that INGOs were backing terrorists and encouraging a war in the Rakhine State (Holmes, 2017). On the other hand, the INGO forum of Myanmar (2017) portrayed the people of Myanmar as being anti-INGO and violent towards aid workers. Why were Myanmar citizens’ skeptical attitudes toward INGOs portrayed in such a negative manner during the post-democracy period?

Existing literature discusses the implications of humanitarian operations in disaster response from the intertwining perspectives of organizational politics and patterns (Hilhorst, 2002), effective supply chain management approaches (Van Wassenhove, 2006), and the context of local-national-led holistic and inclusive planning (Perry, 2007). However, there has been little attention paid to analyzing the performance and quality of humanitarian assistance via the context-sensitive approach. Some scholars have examined the success criteria and critical success factors (Khang & Moe, 2005; Diallo & Thuillier, 2005; May-Kyawt, 2006) in developing countries, in addition to introducing the appropriate life-cycle-based frameworks (Khang & Moe, 2005, 2008) via a project management perspective. Nevertheless, the challenges and behaviors that contemporary NGOs face from sector-specific areas such as the humanitarian sector, the educational sector, and the infrastructural sector have been understudied.

In fact, the ultimate impact of long-term aid projects -- regardless of whether they positively or negatively affect the ‘poor’ and recipient countries -- are underreported. This article discusses this previously neglected area of concern with three objectives in mind. First, the article addresses the “disaster” in the context of Myanmar and highlights the current debates about managing aid resources and behavior of humanitarian aid INGOs during disaster response operations in the affected area. Second, the author attempts to answer the research question: “to which extent, does the ‘cultural context’ play a crucial role in managing humanitarian aid during disaster response operations in the affected area, and how it consequently links to the challenges of humanitarian aid INGOs in Myanmar”.

Third, a culturally appropriate framework will be introduced for the efficacy of humanitarian aid INGOs in Myanmar based on two case studies (Nargis cyclone and Rakhine crisis) and findings from semi-structured interviews with the humanitarian activists of the Myanmar Diaspora in Canada.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data collection and analysis were conducted in two stages. In the first stage, secondary research was done by drawing materials from and engaging in, relevant literature and analysis of relevant two case studies (Nargis Cyclone and Rakhine Crisis) on humanitarian aid projects. Additionally, the author analyzed past empirical studies of INGOs in Myanmar by different scholars during the military regime era and post-democracy period of Myanmar. In the second stage, a qualitative method of analysis
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