

MARIANA CIFUENTES, PhD

Director, Social Programme Design & MEL, Cross-Sectoral Programme Leadership

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PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Mariana Cifuentes is a senior development professional and social researcher with 17+ years of experience leading international programmes at executive level. She combines deep technical expertise in social inclusion, participatory methodologies, and qualitative data analysis with the breadth to work across cross-sectional areas such as monitoring, evaluation and learning. She is at her best convening and leading multi-disciplinary teams of technical experts to design and implement complex projects, building in the flexibility to innovate and adapt through learning processes during implementation, and driving programmes toward measurable development impact.

She has held senior roles with the British Council, ActionAid, GHD, UN OCHA, and the Rockefeller Foundation, working across Southeast Asia, Melanesia, and East Africa. Since 2018 she has operated at executive level, managing multi-donor portfolios up to €2.5M. She is the executive director of the Wellbeing Innovation and Technology (WIT) Fund, a Dutch-registered NGO (RSIN 869596020) supporting Myanmar conflict-affected communities with psychosocial support.

CORE SKILLS & QUALIFICATIONS

- **PhD in International Development** (Erasmus University Rotterdam); research MPhil (University of Sussex); BA Economics (Universidad de las Americas).
- **17+ years** of progressive management responsibility in international development, humanitarian action, and human rights across Southeast Asia, Melanesia, East Africa.
- **Executive leadership** since 2018: Founding and directing organisations, building governance structures, and leading multi-disciplinary teams in humanitarian and development contexts.
- **Strategic fundraising & donor portfolio management:** Securing and managing multi-donor funding (EU, DFAT, LIFT, Rockefeller Foundation).
- **Gender equality and social inclusion (GESI):** Designing and mainstreaming gender-responsive frameworks into legal reform, social protection, peacebuilding, and humanitarian programmes; participatory methodologies for measuring women's agency.
- **10+ years of MEL leadership:** Managing MEL systems, and national-scale evaluations for large donor-funded programmes; policy uptake across DFAT, UNDP, and national governments.
- **Conflict-sensitive & peacebuilding programming:** Sustaining programme delivery through active conflict and political transition (Myanmar 2018–2024); trauma-informed and community-driven approaches.
- **Stakeholder engagement & civil society partnership:** Building and managing cross-border networks across Myanmar–Thailand, PNG–Fiji–Solomon Islands, and East Africa; strategic liaison with UN agencies, governments, INGOs, and academia.
- **Languages:** English (Fluent), Spanish (Fluent), Portuguese (Conversational), French (Basic).
- **Software & digital:** Airtable, Canva, Google Analytics, KoBo Toolbox, Microsoft Office Suite, Trello; Digital security protocols for civil society organisations.

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT, FUNDRAISING & GRANTS

The Wellbeing Innovation & Technology Fund (Netherlands), August 2026 – Present, *Executive Director & Founder*

- **Lead:** Founded a Netherlands-based intermediary working in partnership with established Myanmar organisations to strengthen mental health and psychosocial support for people affected by conflict, displacement and disaster.
- **Role:** Set the fund's strategy, governance and partnership model across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, leading a small core team alongside an alliance of Myanmar organisations and wellbeing specialists.
- **Scope:** The WIT Fund brings evidence-based MHPSS content onto the digital platforms people already use; and, we support local organisations to identify donors, strengthen proposals and navigate the compliance requirements, with programme design and delivery decisions remaining in local hands.

YayGyiYar Centre for Positive Change (Myanmar), June 2025 – July 2026, *Director & Co-Founder*

Key impact: Organisation that integrates psychosocial education with conflict transformation. This integrated approach fosters personal and group-based emotional resilience and strengthens local capacities for peaceful coexistence.

- **Co-founded and co-lead** a peacebuilding and mental health organisation supporting conflict-affected communities in Myanmar; full responsibility for governance, operational structuring, and resource mobilisation.

- **Built a growing cross-regional network** of MHPSS and conflict transformation practitioners. Established a partnership with UNFPA to deliver psychosocial support in Myanmar.

Exile Hub, Dec 2024 – June 2025, Senior Advisor

Key Impact: *Senior advisory support on fundraising strategy and cross-border alliance building.*

- **Advised on fundraising strategy** to support the protection of Myanmar human rights defenders in high-risk contexts.
- **Developed an analytical framework** for cross-border feminist network partnerships, incorporating social risk analysis and protection safeguards.

MyJustice, British Council Myanmar, Nov 2020 – March 2024, Senior Technical Advisor – Strategic Engagement & Communications | MEL Lead

Key Impact: *Components delivered improved legal aid, digital security and human rights information for poor and vulnerable people across 6 regions and states; MEL framework-maintained impact evidence through active coup conditions.*

- **Managed communications and digital rights advocacy platform, MEL and gender components**, while ensuring that digital safeguards were embedded across a national legal reform programme operating through the 2021 military coup.
- **Designed and led three independent programmatic evaluations** (implemented by Innovation for Poverty Action), developing MEL frameworks tracking social inclusion outcomes across 6 regions and states.
- **Adapted safeguarding and communications strategies** to maintain programme continuity and stakeholder protection under extreme operating conditions, including conflict and political repression.
- **Led quarterly organisational learning events** and managed external stakeholder communications for civil society organisations, ethnic communities, and government counterparts.

ActionAid Myanmar, Nov 2018 – Nov 2020, Director of Programme Quality & Research

Key Impact: *Supported learning and research components of a large feminist grassroots organisation.*

- **Led programme quality and research** for a feminist INGO reaching 3.8 million people across Myanmar in 2020, designing participatory-governance strategies that included minorities in basic service provision.
- **Built participatory monitoring tools** to measure women's agency and integrate voices of Indigenous and displaced communities into programme quality systems.
- **Ensured inclusive safeguarding approaches** for the most marginalised groups, including conflict-displaced and ethnic minority communities.

Save the Children Myanmar, June 2016 – June 2018, Technical Consultant

Key Impact: *Evaluation findings directly informed Myanmar's national social protection strategy; education framework scaled nationally. Contributed to evidence-based interventions in maternal and child nutrition for +200K beneficiaries in Chin State; embedded community voices of Indigenous and displaced populations into health programmes.*

- **Provided technical oversight** to two of Myanmar's social protection programmes, delivering cash transfers in health and education.
- **Monitored a maternal health programme** covering 11,588 women across 338 villages, demonstrating sustained reductions in food insecurity and improved maternal and child nutrition outcomes.
- **Co-designed an education cash transfer evaluation framework** subsequently scaled to the national level, in a country with a 35% childhood stunting rate — one of the highest in Asia-Pacific.
- **Coordinated with UNICEF, the Global Fund, and the World Bank** to translate findings regarding maternal out of pocket expenses into public policy recommendations for a national roll-out projected to reach 2.25 million beneficiaries.

UN OCHA – Myanmar Humanitarian Fund, April 2016 – June 2016, Humanitarian Fund Grants Administrator

Key Impact: *75% reduction in grant processing time directly improved humanitarian response speed for conflict-affected and disaster-affected populations.*

- **Managed grant processing** for the Myanmar Humanitarian Fund (total mechanism: USD 80M+ since 2007), reducing civil society processing time by 75%.
- **Coordinated strategic planning sessions** between humanitarian partners and key stakeholders, accelerating life-saving funding to UN agencies and local NGOs.

IPAR – Kenya, Grant from Rockefeller Foundation, Jan 2005 – Dec 2007, Team Leader – Participatory Youth Research Project

Key Impact: *Demonstrated replicable model for youth-led participatory governance linking diverse religious communities to development planning and sexual violence reduction.*

- **Led a Rockefeller Foundation-funded participatory youth research project**, uniting Kenyan Christian, Catholic, and Somali Muslim youth networks in local government advocacy for World Bank-funded infrastructure aimed at reducing sexual violence.
- **Facilitated participatory governance processes** integrating youth and community needs into Nairobi local government decision-making — a replicable model linked to World Bank development planning.

MONITORING, EVALUATION & LEARNING EXPERIENCE

GHD – Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (DFAT), Sept 2015 – Feb 2016, Deputy Team Leader – National Evaluation, Family & Sexual Violence Units

Key Impact: 100% national adoption of recommendations; directly strengthened institutional FSV response across PNG's police constabulary.

- **Led data collection and analysis** for a national evaluation of police Family and Sexual Violence Units across PNG using gender-sensitive, survivor-centred methodologies.
- **All six major evaluation recommendations** were adopted nationally by the PNG Police — a significant outcome in a country where an estimated 70% of women experience rape or assault in their lifetime.

International Rescue Committee (IRC), Myanmar, Dec 2014 – June 2015, MEL Adviser – Peace & Security Project

- **Developed a participatory MEL design** for a flagship peacebuilding intervention during Myanmar's democratic transition, embedding conflict-sensitive and do-no-harm principles into monitoring design.
- **Collaborated with the Karen Human Rights Group** (Nobel Peace Prize laureates) to ensure community-led accountability in peace and security programming.

Government of PNG & Australian Government (DFAT), Oct 2013 – March 2014, Evaluation Team Leader

- **Led a national evaluation** of school grant impacts on primary education quality in PNG; all recommendations directly incorporated into DFAT policy decisions on education aid.

PNG–Australia Law & Justice Partnership (PALJP), GHD, Aug 2012 – Oct 2013 Deputy Evaluation Leader

- **Evaluated 18 years of Australian infrastructure investment** in PNG's justice and law sector, producing findings that fed directly into national justice reform debates and informed future DFAT aid strategy.

Save the Children – Somalia Education Programme, Oct – Dec 2004 Evaluator

- **Conducted final evaluation** of a DFID-funded education project for nomadic communities in Beledweyne (Somalia–Ethiopia border), including extensive fieldwork and community consultations.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Exile Hub – Rethinking Myanmar's Feminist Networks, June 2025 – Ongoing Researcher

- **Analysed how Myanmar's feminist networks have evolved and reorganised in exile** since the 2021 coup, applying a decolonial lens to examine collective resilience and transnational solidarity.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Myanmar, Feb 2015 – Feb 2016, Lead Researcher – Public Sector Reform

- **Led institutional research** on Myanmar's civil service transformation during democratic transition; report presented at ASEAN.
- **Findings directly contributed** to the Civil Service Reform Strategic Action Plan 2017–2020 and UNDP's Gender Equality in Public Administration study covering 630,441 women civil servants.

IOM – South–South Labour Migration (PNG, Fiji & Solomon Islands), Jan 2012 – Dec 2013, Lead Researcher

- **Coordinated a regional study** across three Melanesian countries, producing policy recommendations for a South–South migration agenda.

UNESCO – Education for All Global Monitoring Report, June 2002 – March 2004, Research Officer

- **Assessed global progress towards Education for All objectives**, with a focus on community-level initiatives in Latin America and Africa.

EDUCATION

PhD in Development Studies (Social Policy, Kenya), 2007–2012, *International Institute of Social Studies (ISS)*, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

Master of Philosophy in Development Studies (Deliberative Research Councils in Brazil), 2000–2002, *Institute of Development Studies (IDS)*, University of Sussex, UK

Bachelor of Arts in Economics (Microeconomics of Fertility Decisions of Young Mexican Working Women), 1994–1999, *Universidad de las Américas*, Puebla, Mexico

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS & VOLUNTEERING

- **Chair of Board (Volunteer)**, YayGyiYar Centre for Positive Change, May 2025–July 2026
- **Board of Directors (Volunteer)**, Exile Hub, Dec 2024 – Dec 2025
- **Leadership Academy (Volunteer)**, Bridging Changes, Thailand, 2024
- **Affiliated Researcher**, South East Asia Research Initiative (SEARI), University of Canterbury, New Zealand, 2021–2025
- **Affiliated Researcher**, McMillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, 2012–2014
- **Volunteer**, Miss Koch, Kenya, 2004–2010

PUBLICATIONS

Cifuentes, M. (2022). 'Myanmar: From Hybrid Democracy to Violent Autocracy', in J. Ockey and N. Talib (Eds.) *Democratic Recession, Autocratization, and Democratic Backlash in Southeast Asia*, pp. 249–267. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

'Better Services for All: The Impact of LASDAP in an Informal Settlement in Nairobi', in T. Kibua and M. Mwabu (eds), *Decentralization and Devolution in Kenya: New Approaches*, pp. 235–64. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.

ActionAid-Myanmar (2020). *Community-Led Development in Kayah: Challenges and Lessons from Collective Community Leadership*, C.D. Crumpton & M. Cifuentes (Eds.). Yangon, MM: ActionAid-Myanmar.

ActionAid-Myanmar (2020). *Strengthening Rural Community Development in Chin State, Myanmar*, C.D. Crumpton & M. Cifuentes (Eds.). Yangon, MM: ActionAid-Myanmar.

Crumpton, C.D. & Cifuentes, M. (2020). *Lessons from Participatory Bottom-Up Planning Processes in Chin and Kayah States, Myanmar*. Yangon, MM: ActionAid-Myanmar.

Crumpton, C.D. & Cifuentes, M. (2020). *Research Brief: Learning from the Community-led Development Processes in Chin and Kayah States, Myanmar*. Yangon, MM: ActionAid.

Crumpton, C.D., Cifuentes, M., Soe, P.P., Tun, S.K.T., Bialobrzeski, E. & Roche, J. (2021). *Assessing Grassroots Governance-Building in Myanmar: Applying a Multi-Dimensional Analytic Approach*. *Asian Journal of Public Administration*, awaiting publication.

Cifuentes, M. (2016) *Perception Survey on Ethics, Equal Opportunities, and Meritocracy in the Myanmar Civil Service*. UNDP, Myanmar.¹

DFAT (2016) 'Evaluation of the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Family and Sexual Violence Units'.²

Cifuentes, M. and Au, R. (2013) 'South-South labour migration in Papua New Guinea: Which workers are filling the gap?' *ACP Observatory on Migration (ACPOBS)* 10/2013: 1–44.³

Cifuentes, M. (2012) 'Negotiating social policies in Kenya: Aid, ethnicity and redistribution', PhD Thesis. The Hague: Ipskamp Drukkers B.V.

Cifuentes, M. (2012) 'Two Sides of a Public-Policy Innovation: The Kenya Education Reform', *Administrative Culture* 13(1): 67–84.

Cifuentes, M. (2008) 'Better Services for All: The Impact of LASDAP in an Informal Settlement in Nairobi', in T. Kibua and M. Mwabu (eds), *Decentralization and Devolution in Kenya: New Approaches*, pp. 235–64. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.

¹ See at: http://www.mm.undp.org/content/myanmar/en/home/library/democratic_governance/perception-survey-on-ethics-equal-opportunities-and-meritocracy-.html

² See at: <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/png-family-sexual-violence-units-evaluation.pdf>

³ See at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/south-south-labour-migration-papua-new-guinea-which-workers-are-filling-gap>

- Cifuentes, M. Kiura, C., Rutere, S., Obonyo, R. (2007) 'Manual for Citizen Involvement in Participatory Planning in Kenya', Institute of Public Policy and Analysis (IPAR) Working Paper 2007(1).
- Cifuentes, M. (2005) 'Good practice and quality education: Three NGOs initiatives in Latin America', background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005 'The Quality Imperative'. 2005/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/14.
- Coelho, V., Pozzoni, B. and Cifuentes, M. (2005) 'Participation and public policies in Brazil', in J. Gastil and P. Levine (eds) *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 165-74. Wiley: Jossey-Bass.⁴
- Coelho, V., Araujo, A. and Cifuentes, M. (2002) 'Deliberative fora and the democratisation of social policies in Brazil', *IDS Bulletin* 33(2): 1-16.⁵

⁴ See at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08c8c40f0b649740012ae/participation_and_public_policy.pdf

⁵ See at: https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/8653/IDSB_33_2_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2002.tb00022.x.pdf;jsessionid=AA7772D253C33244CA61B24D96953A77?sequence=1