

Myanmar in Crisis: Navigating Humanitarian Aid Challenges

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Summary

Humanitarian needs have surged in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup sparked a civil war, while a severe earthquake on March 28, 2025, compounded the crisis. Subsequently, some 22 million people required aid. Relief delivery has been challenging, however, as the junta has tried to restrict, monitor and direct aid. This report analyzes how international aid actors can best respond to these challenges. The report shows how the restrictions imposed since the coup have limited aid operations and it finds that following the earthquake, the junta appears to have eased restrictions on international aid in disaster areas under regime control. Yet, the military continues to block aid and to attack civilians in areas beyond its control, where most people in need reside. Another challenge is posed by sharp international aid cuts, which have weakened aid provision. The report recommends that international actors maintain attention and funding for the aid response in Myanmar, while they should provide more humanitarian support through national and local civil society that have the capacity to reach communities in restricted areas. International actors can help scale up aid for such areas by taking a contextualized, flexible approach that grants more funding and agency to civil society actors.



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Introduction

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has triggered a civil war involving new and established resistance actors who have removed the army's territorial control in most of the country. Junta rule and conflict have led to a sharp rise in poverty, collapse of the healthcare system, and displacement of millions of people, creating one of the world's worst and most overlooked humanitarian emergencies.¹ To make matters worse, a severe earthquake on March 28, 2025, caused widespread devastation in central Myanmar. The disaster attracted international pledges of support but raised concerns that the embattled, isolationist junta would reject or obstruct international help.²

In recent years, the junta has prioritized its military survival and repressive control of society over the needs of the Myanmar people. The regime has tried to restrict, monitor and direct aid delivery for communities, especially in conflict areas where needs are greatest. The international aid system in Myanmar has been heavily curtailed by the restrictions, while national and local civil society have fallen back on supply and financial transaction networks beyond regime control to provide critical aid.³ The earthquake in central Myanmar created a new situation as urgent needs surged among communities in both junta- and resistance-controlled areas, while the disaster also prompted an increase in international aid after years of flagging attention.

This report examines the restrictions and hurdles for aid delivery created by military rule and polarization due to a revolutionary struggle for democracy and minority rights. The report provides fresh insights into the regime's response to aid operations following the earthquake. The report focuses on recommendations for international actors to expand support for national and local civil society aid operations. This recommendation echoes calls for substantive 'localization' of aid in the current debate on the 'humanitarian reset' at the United Nations. This analysis is based on a comprehensive review of reports on Myanmar's compounded crisis and a limited number of key informant interviews with Myanmar and international aid actors, a political analyst and a human rights researcher, and a major resistance organization.

Needs in Myanmar's postcoup conflict and earthquake

Myanmar has long experienced armed and political conflict. Ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) were formed decades ago to demand political autonomy for minorities repressed by the military-dominated state, while the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi led a nonviolent struggle for democracy focused mainly on the Burman majority. A democratic opening in 2011 allowed many people to enjoy limited freedoms, economic growth, and two general elections that were won by the NLD. The party then formed a civilian government that had to share power with

¹ Latifi and Goldberg 2025

² Horsey 2025

³ Dunant, Nwe, and Aung 2025; Harvey et al. 2023



the military. Myanmar's vibrant civil society was able to expand social services and activism, while gaining support from the influx of international aid and development

actors. However, civil society advocating for strong political change, such as greater minority rights, remained under severe state pressure.⁴

Figure 1. Myanmar's states and regions. (Source: MIMU).



⁴ La Ring, Khin Sandar Nyunt, Nist Pianchupat, Beyerle 2020



The 2021 coup abruptly closed this era, creating a shared sense of outrage and unprecedented inter-ethnic solidarity across Myanmar's diverse society, which helped launch the Spring Revolution. This movement included nationwide protests and other nonviolence, such as a civil disobedience campaign among tens of thousands of government health care and education workers. The movement led to the creation of the National Unity Government (NUG), comprising ousted NLD lawmakers, numerous civil society networks, and EROs from the Karen, Karenni, Kachin and Chin minorities. The NUG has extensive popular support and claims legitimacy to rule based on the NLD's 2020 election mandate and its broad coalition.⁵ The NUG created a parallel state administration and a roadmap to establish a federal democracy for Myanmar's diverse population groups.

A brutal junta crackdown on the movement escalated tactics among protestors, tens of thousands of whom formed local People's Defense Forces (PDFs) to maintain the revolution. In central Burman-majority areas, the PDFs remain fragmented though many are nominally led by the NUG. The four EROs seized much of their ethnic states on Myanmar's borders together with some PDFs (Figure 1). Another, separate alliance of three EROs in Rakhine and Shan States also confronted the army. The diverse resistance forces have managed to overstretch the army and it lost control of most of the country. The army, nonetheless, retains air superiority and a vast arsenal of heavy

weaponry procured from Russia and China to protect its hold on most cities and large parts of the main road network.⁶

In conflict zones, the army's indiscriminate counterinsurgency and air strikes regularly target communities, causing many civilians to suffer violence, displacement, and large-scale burning of villages and towns. Humanitarian needs in conflict areas have soared and army rule has led to a broad increase in poverty and economic collapse, while climate change also had further impacts.⁷ Shortly before the earthquake, on 13 March 2025, UN rights experts already warned that some 19.9 million people needed of humanitarian aid such as education, health care, shelter and protection; this included food aid for some 15.2 million people (nearly a third of Myanmar's population). Food insecurity is particularly dire in Rakhine State, where some 2 million residents face famine as the regime cut off all trade to the region to stifle an ERO offensive. Some 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) are in conflict zones, with about a third residing in central Myanmar's Sagaing Region where numerous Burman PDFs operate.⁸

The crisis worsened when a 7.7-magnitude earthquake struck central Myanmar on 28 March 2025, killing an estimated 3,800 people, injuring some 5,100 others and leaving 116 missing (Figure 2).⁹ It destroyed tens of thousands of homes, hospitals and religious buildings, while severely damaging roads, bridges, airports, telecommunications

⁵ Chew and Jap 2024, see p. 65-66 for survey indicating strong public trust in NUG.

⁶ Su Mon 2024

⁷ Kim et al. 2024

⁸ OHCHR 2025a

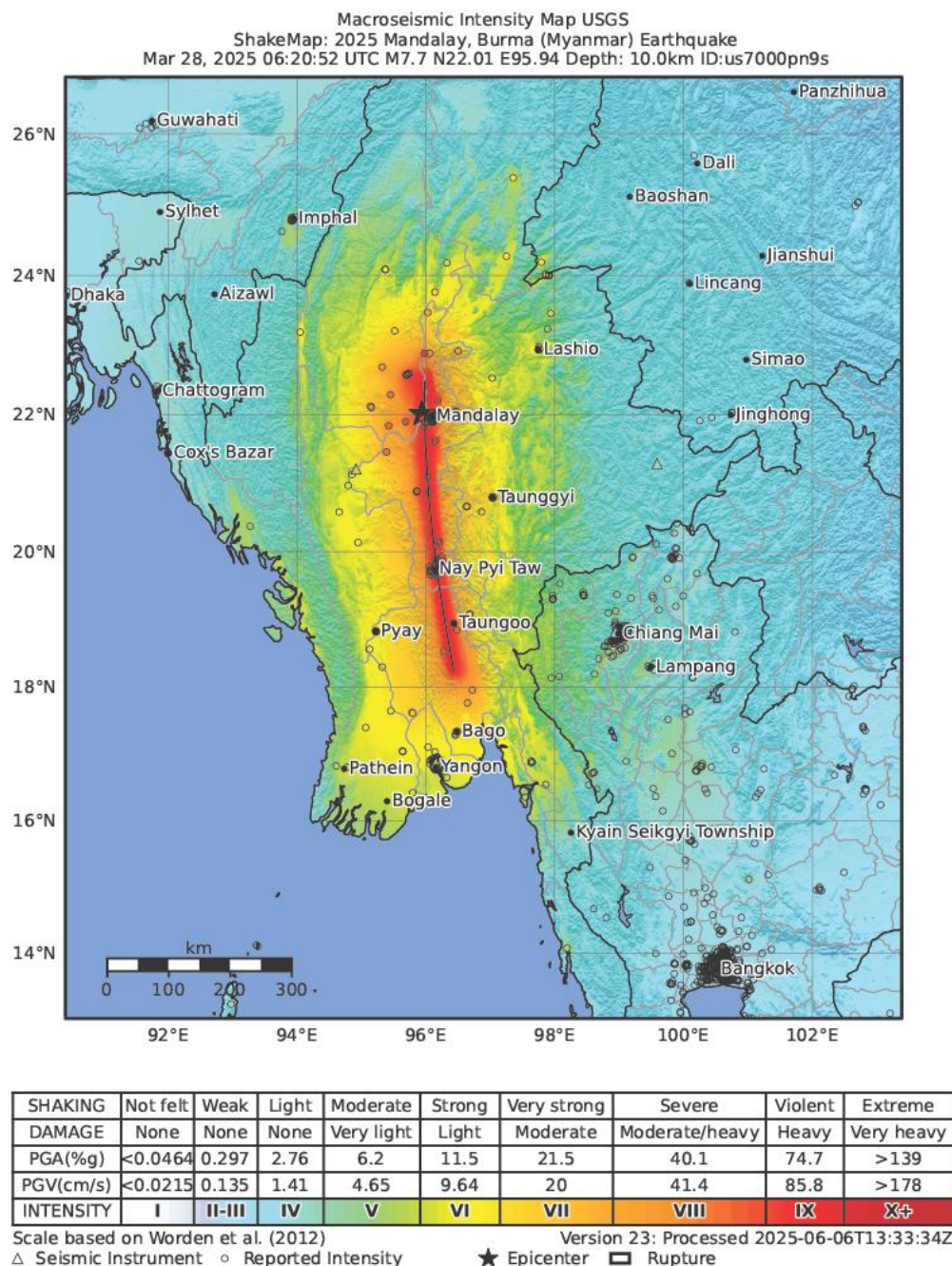
⁹ OCHA 2025b



and power networks. The epicenter was in the south of the Sagaing Region, and tremors leveled much of Sagaing City and Mandalay, Myanmar's second-biggest city of 1.6 million people. It also badly impacted the military-designed capital Naypyidaw and parts of Shan State, Bago and Magway Regions. The

quake most heavily impacted urban areas under junta control, while large rural areas controlled by resistance forces also suffered extensive damage.

Figure 2. Myanmar earthquake intensity map (source: USGS).





The UN estimates the earthquake caused 2 million people to newly require aid, including some 200,000 new IDPs whose homes were destroyed, while another 4.3 million people experienced the double burden of conflict-induced needs and the quake's impact.¹⁰ The UN-coordinated 2025 Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) was adjusted following the disaster. The HNRP estimated almost 22 million people now require humanitarian support and its aid delivery target—which intends to help the population in most urgent need—was raised from 5.5 million people prior to the disaster to 6.7 million people. To support this population, however, aid actors must navigate the challenges of military rule and conflict.

Junta restrictions on aid

Soon after the coup, the junta clamped down on local civil society and international actors, imposing specific measures to restrict, monitor and direct aid delivery. The 2022 Organization Registration Law requires both civil society and international organizations to register and disclose information on staff, funding sources, projects and areas of operations. It bans contact with “unlawful organizations” and includes fines and imprisonment for failure to comply.¹¹ The requirements pose risks for aid operations and barriers for partnerships between local and international actors. Authorities often deny or are slow to process travel authorization requests, while officials try to direct aid to areas under regime control. Likewise, international organizations may

struggle to renew their required Memorandum of Understanding or visa applications for foreign staff.

Other regime interventions after the coup have impeded aid logistics as they caused chaos and a decline in finance, trade and economy. Inflation has spurred a rise in food prices and the cost of aid provision. The formal banking system has become severely disrupted by regime restrictions (such as adherence to official currency exchange rates that are much lower than black market rates), and by international sanctions and monitoring requirements on transfers with Myanmar imposed following the coup. International organizations are reliant on the formal banking systems and severely hindered by its disruption, while local aid actors have fallen back on informal financial transaction systems.¹²

The regime has used its restrictions to block aid for communities in conflict areas, most commonly by denying aid actors travel authorization for these areas. On the ground, military roadblocks further restrict aid, while the regime also cuts off trade and shuts down telecommunications networks in conflict areas. This approach is part of the military's longstanding ‘four-cuts’ counterinsurgency that removes funds, food, information, and recruits in resistance areas. Aid workers who enter conflict zones run the risk of detention, seizure of supplies and attacks by the military. Hundreds of arrests of Myanmar aid workers have been reported since the coup. Additionally, the regime has ruthlessly targeted government health care and education workers who refused to work

¹⁰ Dunant, Nwe, and Aung 2025; OCHA 2025a, p.9

¹¹ Kamal and Fujimatsu 2024

¹² Harvey et al. 2023



under its rule, prompting many to flee. The subsequent collapse of healthcare facilities greatly impeded the emergency response to the quake in regime-controlled areas.¹³

Following the earthquake, regime leader Min Aung Hlaing made a broad appeal for international assistance and announced a temporary ceasefire. The NUG and EROs also announced temporary ceasefires to allow for humanitarian operations. However, in resistance areas, including in earthquake-affected areas, the regime continued its attacks as it has done since the coup, killing scores of civilians and aid actors in aerial attacks. Some resistance forces have also continued attacks on army bases. In earthquake-affected areas under its controls, the army has been notably absent; troop deployments to control aid operations have been limited nor were no soldiers deployed to help with relief efforts. The regime has focused its resources instead on the impacted government facilities, civil servants, troops and their families, especially in the capital Naypyitaw.¹⁴

The regime, nonetheless, welcomed the surge in international aid funding. Dozens of UN agencies, INGOs and foreign governments were able to send emergency and recovery teams, and relief supplies to Myanmar after the earthquake. The regime has largely refrained from obstructing access for international aid operations in areas it controls, though this is in part due to its absence, and it has not changed its rules and

procedures. Long processing times for registration remain common, as are reports of monitoring and confiscation of aid, which concerns local aid actors who wish to avoid the regime.¹⁵ International media trying to cover the earthquake have been denied entry. The regime has reportedly also refused to recognize the aid needs of tens of thousands of IDPs who fled conflict zones for Mandalay City and were subsequently impacted by the earthquake.¹⁶ In conflict zones, the regime largely continues its stringent blockade on aid, trade and telecommunications, which has hindered aid delivery and news about the earthquake's impact in resistance areas like Sagaing Region.¹⁷

The regime's response of largely affording aid access to several million people in earthquake-affected areas under its control has eased initial concerns that the isolationist military would resist international aid, as occurred during the 2008 Cyclone Nargis.¹⁸ The then-ruling junta waited three weeks until strong international pressure caused it to grant adequate aid access to Ayeyarwady Delta, where some 140,000 people were killed. The fact, however, that the current regime continues to block aid and attack in conflict zones, including areas impacted by the earthquake, shows it continues to politicize aid for communities that it suspects of links with the resistance. As most of the roughly 22 million people in humanitarian need in Myanmar reside in conflict areas, gaining access to these areas remains a key

¹³ Harvey et al. 2023

¹⁴ Dunant, Nwe, and Aung 2025; Nachemson 2025

¹⁵ Nachemson 2025; Worley 2025; interview with human rights researcher, 13 May 2025.

¹⁶ The Irrawaddy 2025

¹⁷ DVB 2025

¹⁸ Horsey 2025



challenge for aid actors to address and international actors should continue to press the regime on this issue.

Domestic aid actors critically important

Since the coup, national and local civil society organizations, including many grassroots “mutual aid” groups, have delivered much of the aid in Myanmar. These actors broadly include various NGOs and national civil society organizations and networks, including influential women’s organizations. Volunteer-based health care and welfare organizations are central to civil society in Burman communities, following a Buddhist practice called *parahita*. In minority areas, extensive ethnic civil society and faith-based organizations support welfare and minority rights where they operate adjacent to EROs. Numerous civil society organizations are also based in neighboring Thailand and to a much lesser extent in India, Bangladesh and China. There, they support refugees and use cross-border networks beyond regime control to bring aid supplies, services like mobile health clinics, and cash support into Myanmar’s resistance areas and beyond. Many new networks emerging out of the Spring Revolution protest movement enhanced this civil society capacity, such as the striking government workers who have organized health care and education networks that operate underground and in resistance areas.

Myanmar’s diverse domestic aid actors and international aid organizations have

responded to the challenges created by army rule with approaches that range from avoiding the regime to trying to work within its bounds. Overall, UN agencies and INGOs in Myanmar are limited to working under the regime’s conditions, while most national and local actors avoid the regime and often use informal networks to gain aid access to restricted communities.¹⁹ Some national NGOs have also managed to take a mixed approach where they remain registered with the regime and thus can work more easily with the UN and international aid actors, yet they may also cooperate with informally operating local grassroots actors to deliver aid.²⁰ International-local partnerships can allow resources of the former to be channeled through the networks of the latter to increase aid delivery to hard-to-reach communities, but, as will be discussed, such cooperation faces hurdles and has ample scope to increase.

Most Myanmar civil society groups were established during prior decades to help communities suffering from neglectful army rule and conflict. These civil society actors developed a capacity to navigate repression and to use informal networks and cross-border networks to meet humanitarian and welfare needs among communities.²¹ The traditional *hundi* transaction system, long used by migrant worker to send remittances to families in rural areas, has been central to these efforts and operates through a network of multiple, trusted intermediaries who are beyond regime’s monitoring of the banking system.²² When the crackdown on the Spring Revolution began and the junta’s civilian services were shunned or collapsed,

¹⁹ Kamal and Fujimatsu 2024; Harvey et al. 2023

²⁰ Kamal and Fujimatsu 2024, p. 3–4

²¹ Harvey et al. 2023; McCarthy 2023

²² Tin Maung Htwe 2025, p. 3



these local aid actors had the public trust and informal transaction networks to help communities, especially in remote areas and hotbeds of resistance. Most local aid actors operate independently, though some are aligned with the popular movement and coordinate with governance authorities of the NUG, EROs, and PDFs.

Civil society aid actors are largely supported by community donations, extensive diaspora funding and international crowdfunding by numerous online charities, but these actors often struggle to maintain or scale up aid without sustainable funding.²³ Such small organizations often lack the capacity access to international support as they cannot meet demanding compliance requirements for gaining donor funding. Myanmar NGOs, however, have formed several larger networks that have the organizational capacity to attract international funding, which they can channel onward to grassroots aid organizations in local communities. This includes, for example, the Local Intermediary Actors Network of 14 NGOs. Myanmar civil society has called for direct international funding to such networks, arguing that the networks and their grassroots partners are best placed to deliver aid to Myanmar's hard-to-reach communities.²⁴

Armed resistance groups are also important providers of aid and governance in Myanmar but have so far struggled to gain international support. Some EROs have civilian authorities that provide extensive aid, education and healthcare services in border areas, while

they consult and coordinate with ethnic civil society. Following the coup, many Burman civil society actors and health and education officials fled to minority areas where they began to organize networks that closely cooperate with these ERO departments.²⁵ In Southeast Myanmar, the civilian departments of an ethnic Karen ERO and a new a resistance coalition in Karenni State have drawn the interest of some international actors. Yet, aid support for such civilian authorities remains very limited and sensitive due to a lack international recognition.²⁶

The NUG has developed a state administration with hundreds of civil servants that guides the PDFs in establishing local governance committees and that coordinates local aid and health care actors. The NUG has, for example, reported that 106 hospitals, and 808 fixed and 192 mobile clinics were operational in 2024, offering emergency and long-term treatments in its areas.²⁷ Following the earthquake, the NUG set up an Emergency Coordination Committee that reportedly raised \$3 million for aid delivery. The NUG, however, has a limited organizational presence in Burman areas as it is based with the EROs or in exile and lacks funding for aid delivery. Despite its parliamentary mandate, the NUG has gained little recognition in international settings, which has made many international aid actors reluctant to cooperate with it.

²³ Humanitarian Advisory Group and Australian Red Cross 2023, p. 32

²⁴ Myanmar Local Humanitarian Network, et al. 2022

²⁵ Vrieze 2024

²⁶ Aung Zaw 2024; Worley 2025; interview with political analyst 4 April 2025

²⁷ OHCHR 2025b



International aid constrained and underfunded

Following the coup, many INGOs left Myanmar or moved operations to neighboring countries. The remaining humanitarian system of UN agencies and INGOs has accepted the junta administration as the “de facto authorities” whose framework is to be formally accepted. UN agencies insist they do not cooperate nor coordinate with the regime, though UNICEF in August 2023, controversially, still allocated \$3 million for “government-led” projects to help disabled children and provide water and sanitation facilities.²⁸ This approach of engaging the regime caused a decline public distrust of the UN in Myanmar.²⁹ Meanwhile, top UN officials rejected a proposal in 2023 by the NUG and EROs to the UN Special Envoy for Myanmar to work together on cross-border assistance, as UN officials appeared to defer politically sensitive aid initiatives to ASEAN, which has failed made progress on the issue.³⁰

Bound by junta restrictions, international actors’ aid operations have gained little access to communities in conflict areas. A 2024 UN assessment of 251 townships with communities in need found 37 percent had “extreme constraints” and 50 percent “moderate constraints.” Consequently, prior to the earthquake international aid was frequently delivered to urban and peri-urban areas under regime control.³¹ The UN-led aid system has, furthermore, been affected by worsening funding shortfalls that result from

the demands of growing humanitarian crises globally and an international trend of governments cutting aid support. The lack of UN access has also given international donors pause. Consequently, the 2024 Myanmar HNRP \$1 billion budget appeal was only 40 percent funded. This was before the cuts to USAID, which was Myanmar’s largest bilateral donor in 2024, providing \$240 million and a third of the HNRP budget. Other donors are unable to fill the funding gap as they are also revising their aid budgets and priorities.³² Sweden was Myanmar’s sixth largest donor in 2024 totaling \$42 million in aid, half of which was for humanitarian operations.³³

USAID was also an important supporter of Myanmar’s national and local aid actors, funding these organizations directly or through international intermediaries. Border-based civil society in Thailand has been forced to cease or sharply reduce humanitarian aid and healthcare programs that supported tens of thousands of refugees and people in Myanmar. An initial assessment of USAID’s cuts expected various detrimental effects on nutrition, protection and health indicators in Myanmar, while there could be significant spillover effects to neighboring countries, for example through an increase of communicable diseases like HIV/Aids and the spread of drug-resistant varieties of TB and malaria.³⁴ The assessment warned of an upcoming “existential threat” to local aid networks as they lack financial reserves to weather the shortfalls. The immediate nature of the USAID cuts

²⁸ Butler 2023

²⁹ Aung Zaw 2024

³⁰ Worley 2024

³¹ OCHA 2024a

³² ACAPS 2025

³³ Sida 2024

³⁴ ACAPS 2025, p. 7



weakened the response capacity of international and local aid actors just weeks before the earthquake struck.

Following the earthquake, the 2025 Myanmar HNRP budget appeal was revised upward to \$1.3 billion and its aid target raised to 6.7 million people, which represents 30 percent of 22 million people in need—a low percentage compared to UN responses in other crisis.³⁵ The disaster generated a surge in international aid and relief operations by foreign governments, UN agencies and INGO, but only part of the funds were pledged to the multilateral aid system. Central UN bodies, the EU, UK, Australia, Japan, and other governments offered about \$93 million for aid delivery under the UN humanitarian system.³⁶ By late June 2025, the HNRP had only received 14 percent of its budget appeal to meet its relatively modest target.

Meanwhile, other foreign governments saw in the earthquake an opportunity to engage the regime and provided extensive bilateral aid. China and Russia, which have long been supportive of the regime, as well regional governments such as India and Thailand, provided relief support through cooperation with the regime. Bilateral aid cooperation can afford the military opportunities to bolster its authority and administration, and to distribute foreign aid to sites it prioritizes, such as the capital Naypyidaw.³⁷ China pledged a massive \$137 million in support and sent aid convoys across its borders into

Myanmar.³⁸ China's aid support comes at a time when it has pressured some EROs to accept a ceasefire with the army. Beijing has become concerned over the regime's collapse, as it would threaten its strategic economic projects, cross-border trade, and stability along its border with northern Myanmar.³⁹

Increase international support for local aid actors

Since the coup, Myanmar civil society aid groups have called on international aid actors to adjust their approach and raise their support for local aid networks as these are less costly and have greater access to conflict-affected communities.⁴⁰ Activists and domestic aid actors also called for international pressure the regime for access and avoiding aid that brings support or legitimacy to the regime. With the junta losing control over most of Myanmar, some local civil society also urged international aid cooperation with the NUG and some EROs. UN rights rapporteurs have repeatedly echoed the calls, saying they offer the best way to address urgent needs.⁴¹

Faced with these calls and continuing restrictions, international aid actors and institutional donors have gradually increased support for aid provision through national and local civil society. Since 2023, the UN-led response plan has developed a “localization strategy” to improve support for and consultation with local aid actors.⁴² Civil

³⁵ Latifi and Goldberg 2025

³⁶ Eleven Media 2025

³⁷ Dunant, Nwe, and Aung 2025

³⁸ Reuters 2025

³⁹ Myanmar Now 2025

⁴⁰ LIAN and MRN 2024; Myanmar Research Network 2025

⁴¹ OHCHR 2025a

⁴² OCHA 2024b



society organizations said, however, this has yet to produce a marked change in procedures and increase in funds that can strengthen domestic aid actors. Budgets for UN and INGO operations in Myanmar continue to dwarf their support for localized and cross-border aid. While international actors are reluctant to disclose details of support for domestic aid actors as it remains sensitive with the regime, a 2023 report estimates only about \$5.5 million (or 1 percent of the HNRP budget) went directly to domestic aid actors and some \$30 million via the pooled Myanmar Humanitarian Fund.⁴³ Localizing aid has developed slowly as many international actors are unwilling to risk their relations with the regime by partnering with local actors whose more informal operations may run afoul of junta restrictions.

Moreover, there is a reluctance to adapt international funding compliance systems to the needs of local aid groups, as these are meant to ensure effectiveness, transparency and reduce fiduciary risks of donor support.⁴⁴ Following the earthquake, international aid operations have played a key role in addressing urgent needs in impact zones under regime control, yet local aid actors remain critical to accessing conflict zones where most of the population in need resides. Amid the growing international aid support following the disaster, civil society

has stepped up its calls for greater localization.⁴⁵ They argue their demands are in line with global reform commitments under the 2016 Grand Bargain agreement, which is supposed to shift resources and decision-making power from international to local aid actors.⁴⁶ The Local Intermediary Actors Network and the University of Melbourne's Myanmar Research Network have listed specific recommendations to make direct funding mechanisms for local partners more flexible and grant more decision-making power to local responders.⁴⁷ They note current compliance requirements are often "top-down, rigid" and create hurdles for funding and unequal power relations for domestic aid actors.

Moreover, requirements can violate 'do no harm' principles as some increase risks for local partners in Myanmar's repressive environment and volatile conflict. Some international actors, for example, require local groups to register with the regime and maintain official organizational bank accounts.⁴⁸ Whereas civil society groups urge international actors to also accept unregistered aid groups and alternative banking arrangements and the hundi system, as these modes of operations are more safe and effective for local actors. Other international requirements to reduce fiduciary risks also create risks for local actors

⁴³ Humanitarian Advisory Group and Australian Red Cross 2023, p. 31, p. 47

⁴⁴ Décobert and Wells 2025; LIAN and MRN 2024

⁴⁵ Myanmar Research Network 2025; Progressive Voice 2025

⁴⁶ International actors' dominance of the aid system's funding and priorities has long been criticized. The 2016 Grand Bargain entails reform commitments to localize and strengthen local and national aid actors' ability to respond. Its 68

signatories include 25 governments (including Sweden), 27 NGOs, 12 UN agencies and other major aid actors like the Red Cross movements. Progress on the implementation of the voluntary commitments has been very slow, however (Décobert and Wells 2024).

⁴⁷ LIAN and MRN 2024

⁴⁸ See an overview of recommendations by Myanmar Research Network 2025.



and beneficiaries, such as when records must be kept of aid beneficiaries though these documents can be obtained by the regime and endangers aid actors and recipients. Civil society urge more equal risk sharing and international funding for secure communication and data storage systems that help meet donor compliance.

Furthermore, international donors often prefer to use INGOs as intermediaries that can channel support to small local aid organizations that have limited administrative capacity. These INGOs handling onward dispersal of funding and compliance reporting and keeping a substantial share of the funding for their intermediary role. However, several Myanmar civil society networks argue that they should be acting as such intermediaries, as they have the organizational capacity and experience in handling compliance requirements, while they have the best knowledge and connections to support grassroots aid actors operating in hard-to-reach communities.

Such Myanmar networks include the Local Intermediary Actors Network, the Joint Strategy Team of 10 NGOs operating in Kachin State and northern Shan State, and border-based networks in Thailand such as The Border Consortium. The head of one such network said localization and funding of domestic intermediaries was gaining interest among international donors in recent years due to local civil society's greater cost-effectiveness, access and trust among

communities. "It requires a high level of contextual understanding for donors... [and] to accept higher fiduciary risks. But then, these operations would carry much lower overhead costs [than international operations] because of the efficiency of local actors," he said in an interview.

The discussion in Myanmar is part of a global debate on humanitarian reform through localization that has recently intensified. Following sharp funding cuts to the international aid system the UN's Emergency Coordinator called for an as yet undefined "humanitarian reset," prompting civil society from the Global North and South to insist this reset should center on localization to improve effectiveness, inclusivity and accountability of aid.⁴⁹ Civil society in various countries have been developing new approaches for effective localization, with a recent study, for example, highlighting new models of local intermediaries who can facilitate funding flows between international organizations and grassroots groups.⁵⁰ Various studies have analyzed the advantages as well as challenges in localizing aid in protracted crises and conflict settings, such as in the case of the Syrian civil war, where regime restrictions and security constraints forced international actors to almost completely localize aid.⁵¹ Studies of the Syrian crisis response offer valuable lessons for Myanmar and include a warning against superficial localization that largely failed to grant decision-making power to Syrian local civil society.⁵²

⁴⁹ Joint statement from civil society representatives 2025

⁵⁰ Posada et al. 2025

⁵¹ Barter and Sumlut 2023; Humanitarian Advisory Group and Australian Red Cross 2023; Van Voorst and Hillhorst 2017

⁵² Khoury and Scott 2024, p. 10



Concluding remarks

This report has analyzed the challenges for aid actors in Myanmar where a civil war and a severe earthquake on March 28, 2025, have caused surging humanitarian needs among communities in regime- and resistance-controlled areas. Since the 2021 coup, military rulers have attempted to restrict, monitor and direct aid delivery by local civil society and international actors, with the regime particularly focused on preventing communities in conflict areas from receiving aid. Following the earthquake in central Myanmar, the junta, by and large, did afford international aid access to several million people in heavily impacted areas under its control, which eased initial concerns that the isolationist military would resist international aid following the disaster.

However, in conflict areas, including central areas impacted by the earthquake, the regime continued its harsh restrictions on aid and attacks on civilian communities. Gaining access to conflict areas remains a key challenge for aid actors in Myanmar as most of the 22 million people in humanitarian need reside there. International aid cuts pose another challenge and have left the UN-coordinated aid system in Myanmar increasingly underfunded. The rise in international aid support following the earthquake still falls far short of needs and may prove temporary. To meet these challenges, this report suggests that international actors should remain committed to supporting the aid response in Myanmar and maintain pressure on the regime to improve aid access, while they should also engage neighboring countries to find aid solutions.

The report further recommends that international aid actors recognize that operating under the regime's conditions severely curtails their access to conflict areas, while the opening for international aid in earthquake zones under regime control may close again. Therefore, UN agencies, INGOs and foreign donors should speed up the ongoing process of localization of aid and support the expansion of national and local aid operations, as recommended by Myanmar civil society groups and UN human rights offices. These domestic aid actors have developed trusted, cost-effective aid operations that can bypass regime restrictions and reach remote and conflict-affected communities.

To this end, international actors should take a highly contextualized approach that entails more equal risk-sharing and more flexible funding requirements for national and local civil society networks, as well as grassroots aid groups. More funds could be provided to these actors directly or via the Myanmar Humanitarian Fund and other pooled funds mechanisms. Foreign governments and international aid agencies should form a group that promotes a comprehensive strategy to rapidly expand localization in Myanmar and develop a more structured approach in cooperation with local civil society. Furthermore, international actors should explore opportunities for aid cooperation with credible civilian authorities of armed resistance groups, as these provide important forms of governance across huge swathes of Myanmar and have extensive public support.



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