



Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Myanmar

Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach,
and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid



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SCORE reports

Under the CORE research programme, supported by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), Humanitarian Outcomes is studying how aid reaches people in hard-to-access emergency contexts. In partnership with GeoPoll, the project conducts remote telephone surveys of crisis-affected people on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the aid response and the access challenges in their areas. Combined with key informant interviews with humanitarian responders and other contextual research, the survey results help to identify the humanitarian providers and practices that have achieved the greatest presence and coverage in difficult environments.

This SCORE report presents findings from a mobile telephone survey of crisis-affected people in Myanmar conducted by GeoPoll for Humanitarian Outcomes in December 2022. The survey garnered 501 responses (251 men and 250 women) across all 15 regions and states. Humanitarian Outcomes researchers also conducted remote interviews with 21 anonymous key informants among national and international humanitarian organisations working in Myanmar, donor government representatives, and external experts. Additionally, in cooperation with a regionally-based researcher, the team obtained first-hand information from interviews and consultations with the staff of 10 local organisations undertaking a range of relief and development activities within Myanmar.

Full survey results and additional information on the SCORE research methodology, including an interactive dashboard of response data, are available at www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core

ACRONYMS

APHR	ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights	IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
AWSD	Aid Worker Security Database	IDP	internally displaced people
DEMAC	Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination	MIMU	Myanmar Information Management Unit
EAO	ethnic armed organisation	NLD	National League for Democracy
FATF	Financial Action Task Force	NUG	National Unity Government
FTS	Financial Tracking Service	OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
HRP	humanitarian response plan	PDF	People's Defense Force
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross	SAC	State Administration Council
		WFP	World Food Programme



Summary

Since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, multifactional armed conflict has escalated and spread to most of the country, creating a protracted humanitarian crisis in a highly constrained operational environment where formal humanitarian aid is tightly controlled and relegated to a shrinking portion of the country.

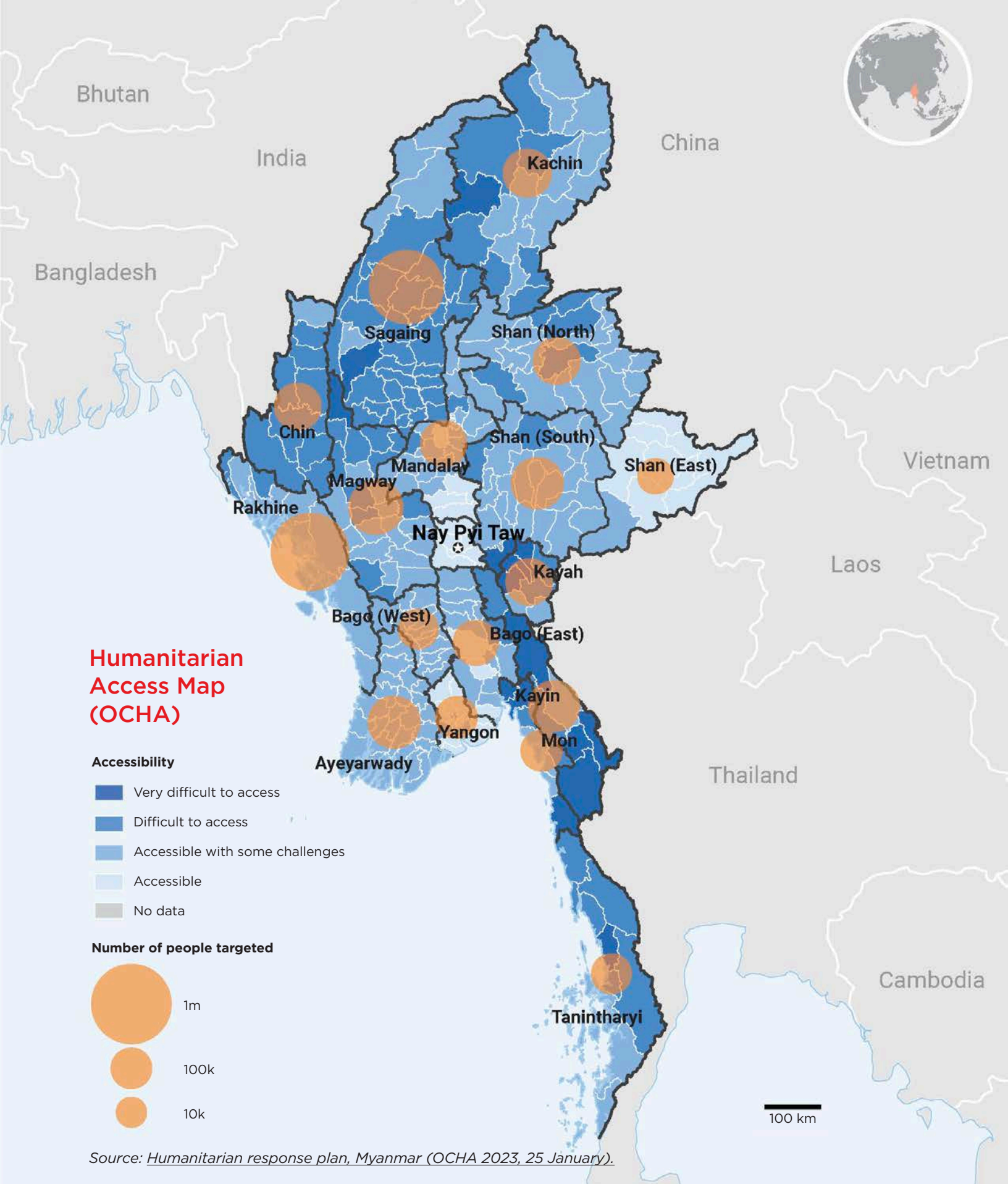
As the international aid actors debate the ethics of operating in junta-controlled areas and grapple with deficits of funding and information, rural communities in Myanmar have managed to prevent dire outcomes through highly localised, informal, and community-based aid.

The results of a survey of affected people across the country, and interviews with national and international aid actors, show that, in contrast with many other access-constrained conflict contexts:

- in most regions, the primary aid providers are community volunteer groups and local businesses, with international aid entities and national NGOs much less present
- working through local civil society groups, often covertly, local organisations have been able to maintain some access to populations in conflict-affected and non-junta controlled areas
- in these low-profile and highly localised aid models, the use of cash and cooperation with commercial actors are key to delivering assistance under the radar. This is reflected in a higher than usual percentage of cash and vouchers reported by survey respondents among the types of aid they received.

To some unquantifiable degree, some of these localised efforts receive support from the formal aid sector's international-national-local organisation supply chains. However, most formal international humanitarian response is limited to junta-controlled areas and official camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), and international organisations are currently prevented from providing an independent, impartial response across the country. At the same time, low-profile networks for the movement of cash and goods throughout the opposition-held and contested areas are fuelled by diaspora and solidarist organisations operating from across the Thai border.

The ethical dilemma faced by international aid actors is real and has created a heated debate as to the right course of action, and whatever the decisions taken by individual agencies to work with the formal or informal/cross-border response, millions of people currently depend on both sets of efforts, while millions more are going without any assistance. Donors and formal aid actors have an opportunity to increase support for the informal response, which appears to have more scope for scaling up – but this would have to be done in a more flexible way than their typical monitoring and compliance systems demand. Agencies choosing to remain registered with the authorities to work in junta-controlled parts of Myanmar must be transparent about their operational limitations and vigilant about the potential for their programmes to be exploited for military objectives.



The post-coup crisis in Myanmar: Escalating violence, population displacements, and military repression

In February 2021 Myanmar's military, commonly referred to as the Tatmadaw, attempted to seize power from the democratically elected government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, sparking major civil unrest. The ensuing mass protests, boycotts, and strikes were met by a brutal crackdown in which military violence – previously targeted mostly at ethnic minority groups like the Rohingya – was now also trained on the majority Bamar people. The NLD along with ethnic groups formed the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) in April 2021, which is operating as a parallel government, and mobilised the People's Defense Force (PDF) as a fighting arm. In addition, many long-established ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) have ended ceasefires to fight against the Tatmadaw, some of them aligning themselves with the NUG and others not, along with hundreds of smaller, local militias that emerged after the coup. The resulting complex ecosystem of political and ethnically-based actors and interests has completely upended the prior framework for peacebuilding in the country.¹ One observer marvelled at how the fighting “is so atomized by region, almost by townships”.

The UN estimates that 1.1 million people have been displaced since the coup, bringing the total number of IDPs to 1.5 million at the beginning of 2023, a figure that is expected to rise to 2.7 million over the course of this year.² A 2022 report noted that many newly displaced people “remain in overcrowded displacement sites, jungles, forests, or hard-to-reach areas, with limited access to essential services”.³ In eastern Myanmar, Amnesty International reported that people were abandoning displacement camps and had “ventured further into forest areas and caves”.⁴

In addition to displacing people, indiscriminate attacks by the Tatmadaw in civilian areas, including with heavy artillery and airstrikes, have caused major fatalities, property damage and disruption to daily life and livelihoods, as well as traumatising the civilian population. Compounding these hardships, in the past two years Myanmar has endured soaring inflation, the continuing impact of COVID-19, and natural shocks such as floods.⁵ There are shortages of food, fuel, and other essential items.^{6,7}

¹ International Crisis Group. (2022). *Myanmar's coup shakes up its ethnic conflicts*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmars-coup-shakes-its-ethnic-conflicts>; Hein, By Ye Myo. (2022). *One year on: The momentum of Myanmar's armed rebellion*. Wilson Center. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/ASIA_220519_1YearOn-BRIEF_V1r2.pdf; Maizland, L. (2022). *Myanmar's troubled history: Coups, military rule, and ethnic conflict*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya>. For a more historic overview, see: Buchanan, J. (2016). *Militias in Myanmar*. Asia Foundation. <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Militias-in-Myanmar.pdf>

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023, 15 January). *Humanitarian needs overview. Myanmar*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>; OCHA. (2022, 3 December). *Myanmar humanitarian update No. 24*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-24-3-december-2022>

³ OCHA. (2022, 2 September). *Myanmar humanitarian response plan 2022 mid-year report (1 January to June 30)*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-response-plan-2022-mid-year-report-1-january-june-30>

⁴ Amnesty International. (2022). *Bullets rained from the sky: War crimes and displacement in eastern Myanmar*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/5629/2022/en/>

⁵ Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU). (2022). *Climate, environmental degradation and disaster risk in Myanmar*. MIMU analytical brief. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/climate-environmental-degradation-and-disaster-risk-myanmar-mimu-analytical-brief-may-2022>; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). (2022). *Myanmar: Flood - final report, DREF n° MDRMM017*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-flood-final-report-dref-ndeg-mdrmm017>

⁶ USAID. (2022). *Burma and Bangladesh - Regional crisis response*. Fact Sheet #6. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/burma-and-bangladesh-regional-crisis-response-fact-sheet-6-fiscal-year-fy-2022>

⁷ World Food Programme (WFP). (2022). *WFP Myanmar situation report, September 2022*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/wfp-myanmar-situation-report-september-2022> and OCHA (2023, 15 January). *Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>

Health and education services have been severely curtailed. Only 35% of schools in Chin State and 18% of schools in Kayah State have re-opened for the school year, which started in June 2022.⁸ Community-led schools in areas outside the control of de facto authorities lack basic supplies and facilities, and most teachers are unpaid volunteers. OCHA finds that “over 4 million (half of the school-aged children in Myanmar) have not accessed education for two full academic years”.⁹

Assessing the numbers of people in need, always a fraught exercise in conflict-driven crises, is especially difficult in Myanmar given the low humanitarian access and presence on the one hand, and near total media and internet blackout imposed by the junta on the other. Nonetheless humanitarians estimate that in total, approximately 17.6 million people – 33% of the population – require humanitarian assistance.

Widespread needs and severely constrained humanitarian access

Insecurity and ever-tightening junta restrictions have meant that the programming presence of formal aid organisations (those registered with the de facto authorities) has declined at the same time the need for humanitarian assistance has surged. Humanitarians have a longstanding presence in Myanmar, given the decades-long armed conflict in the country and previous emergencies, most notably the 2017 Rohingya crisis and Cyclone Nargis in 2008. The formal sector has mounted a country-wide response plan every year since 2014, and for many years prior to that was working in smaller, regional emergency responses and development work.¹⁰

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as at December 2022, there were 66 international NGOs, 88 national NGOs, 10 UN agencies, and 36 civil society organisations working in the country, which, on the face of it, would appear to be a reasonably robust aid presence relative to other conflict-affected countries (Figure 1).¹¹ However, it is unclear how many are involved in active programming, which groups have physical presence outside urban centres, and which still remain operational considering recent registration issues.

⁸ UNICEF. (2022). *Myanmar country office humanitarian situation report, No 9*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/unicef-myanmar-humanitarian-situation-report-no-9-1-31-october-2022>

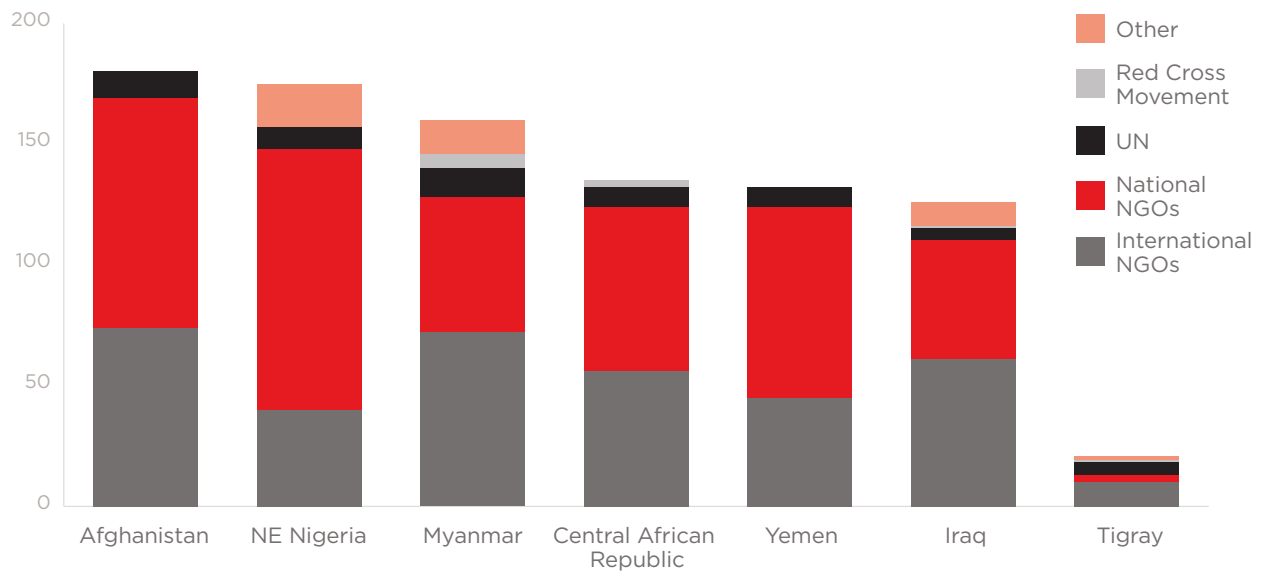
⁹ OCHA (2022, 2 September).

¹⁰ One of the largest ever coordinated relief responses in Myanmar was in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

¹¹ OCHA HDX. (2022). *Myanmar operational presence*, 28 December 2022. <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/myanmar-operational-presence>

Figure 1: Comparative operational presence, 2021-2022

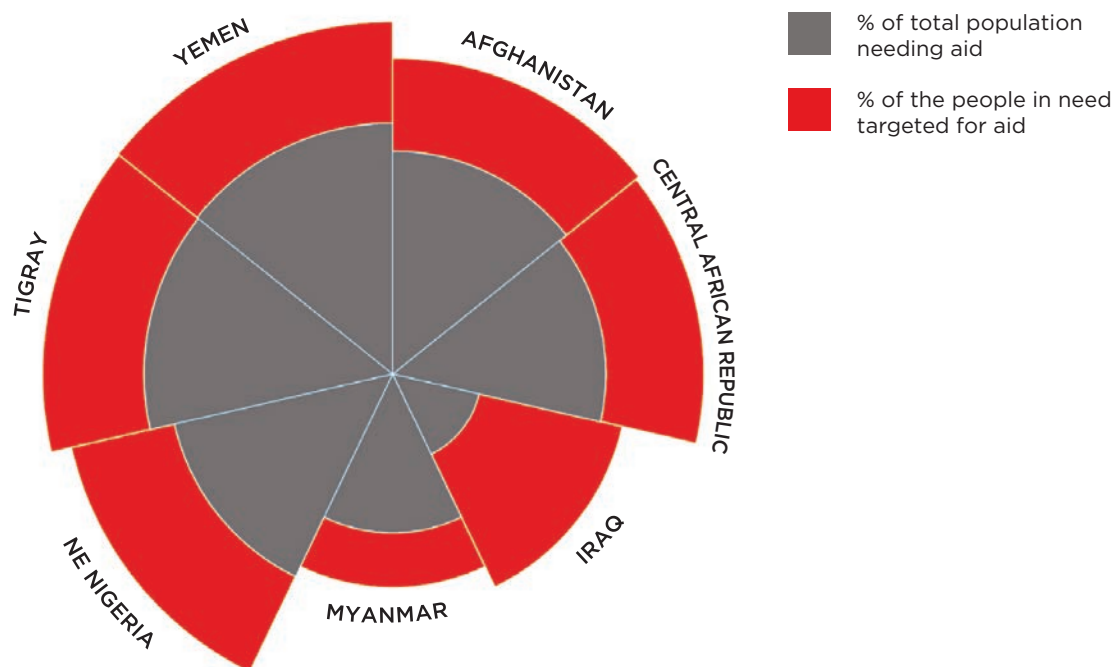
Organisational partners by type



Data source: Operational presence (OCHA HDX 2020-2021).

More importantly, the percentage of people in need targeted by the response is quite low (Figure 2). Of the estimated 17.6 million people in need, the Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for January 2023 set a target of 4.5 million people to assist – a much smaller percentage than in other humanitarian emergencies studied under the CORE programme.¹²

Figure 2: Comparative coverage of needs



Data source: OCHA (2021-2022). Humanitarian Response Plans

¹² OCHA. (2023, 25 January). Humanitarian response plan. Myanmar. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023>

For an emergency of this scope and scale, the coordinated response is thin on the ground, and its movements tightly controlled. The humanitarian operational presence data (3Ws) can be misleading in this regard. While the HRP documents an increase in “operational partners” (from 190 to 219) since the beginning of 2022, its phrasing raises questions around how many of the organisations are actively programming:

“At the start of 2023, 219 operational cluster partners *stand ready* [italics added] to provide life-saving assistance to people in need, a significant increase from the 130 partners operational in quarter 1 of 2022.”¹³

The mixture of organisations that are capable of programming versus those currently operational in 3Ws data makes the picture of humanitarian presence unclear and, when viewed against the information from interviews with aid organisations, likely overstated.

The HRP also reports that in 2022 the response was able to reach 3.9 million people out of 6.2 million targeted for assistance. However, the bulk of this assistance was concentrated in the Yangon and Rakhine provinces, in areas authorised and controlled by the de facto authorities. The report states, “This assistance has not been as multi-sectoral or as weighted towards new conflict areas as planned due to gross under-funding and heavy access constraints.”¹⁴ Geographically and sectorally skewed aid delivery is common to access-constrained conflict environments, but the extent of this in Myanmar would seem to call for a rethink of humanitarian strategy. When 80% of aid is limited to the areas controlled by one belligerent, it cannot be considered impartial de facto. When it is primarily food aid, and very few other needs are being met, it cannot be considered effective.

Political constraints

Decades of military rule in Myanmar – and continual conflict and tension with forces of democratic opposition, even during the short-lived tenure of the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government – have meant that Myanmar has long been an access-constrained environment for humanitarian aid. But since the coup, aid groups say, the obstacles have significantly increased. The de facto authorities have placed heavy restrictions on civilians and aid organisations, including curtailment of the movement of people and goods. Humanitarian organisations operating in areas controlled by the Tatmadaw must obtain travel authorisations for any movement of staff or materials, and their requests are frequently denied. Arrests and detentions of humanitarian workers and seizures of relief supplies have disrupted operations, and international organisations have found it increasingly difficult to get visas and visa renewals for international staff. Many international aid staff currently working on Myanmar are now based outside of the country.

A new registration law for NGOs introduced in late October 2022 was a particular blow to aid organisations’ ability to operate. The new law entails arrest and fines for unregistered aid providers and for the first time extends the registration requirement to national as well as international organisations. Many national organisations are unable or unwilling to register, needing to maintain a low profile to work safely or because they do not want to extend any legitimacy to the junta. International NGOs are also facing difficulties in renewing registrations that were in place before the military takeover. The new law poses additional risks for partnership modalities between international and national organisations, and some organisations have called it an “existential threat” to their programming presence in the country. Even before the passage of the registration law, movements were already heavily policed, as reported by

¹³ Ibid, p.7

¹⁴ Ibid., p.7.

Fortify Rights, citing examples of arrests and arbitrary detentions in Kayah State. According to a local aid worker they quote, “They stop everyone and every vehicle.”¹⁵

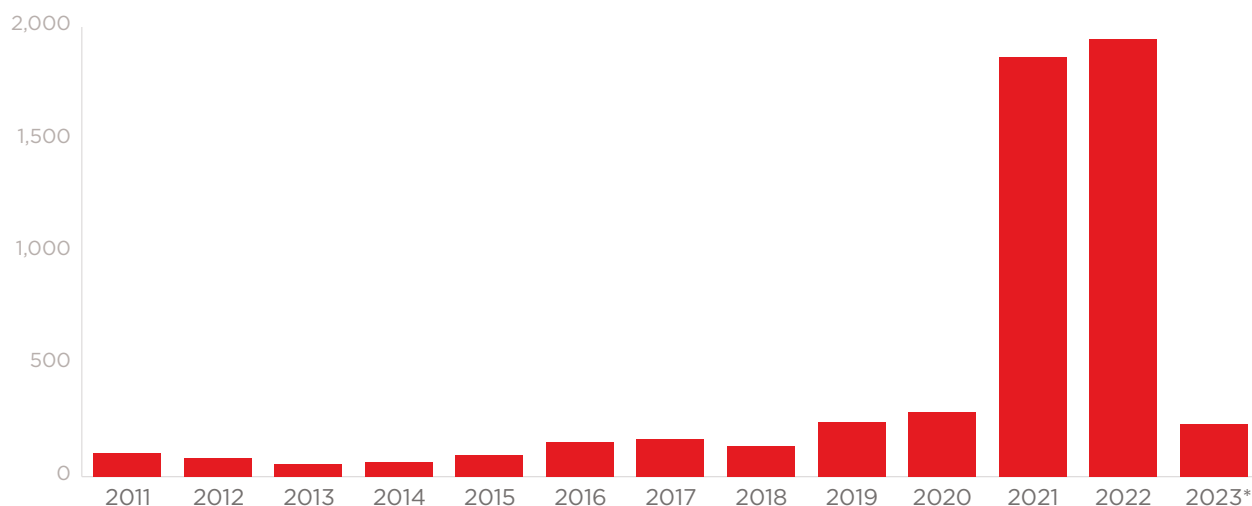
Another tool in repression has been the control of communications, with the de facto authorities periodically shutting down phone lines and blocking internet access for the population. For instance, telecommunications in Sagaing, including internet services, have been shut down in most townships since mid-September 2021.¹⁶ For aid agencies, these blackouts impede necessary communications with their staff and partners. Many also express concerns around the security of data relating to humanitarian activities that could potentially be used to put aid recipients and staff in danger.

Finally, the operating environment for aid has been made more difficult by banking restrictions and limited cash availability. In October 2022, the intergovernmental watchdog agency, Financial Action Task Force (FATF), put Myanmar on its blacklist, with the result that international transfers are now subject to increased monitoring and restrictions. For aid groups this means delays and additional costs in maintaining cash flows.¹⁷

Insecurity risks

Violence against civilians, including attacks on aid workers, has ratcheted up significantly in the last two years. Direct and collateral violent incidents increased by over 500% between 2020 and 2022.¹⁸ In 2022 alone, the highest year of recorded violence, ACLED reports that 3,841 violent incidents affected civilians and that 1,947 incidents specifically targeted them (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Incidents of targeted violence against civilians, 2011-2023



Note: *Data for 2023 is partial. Data source: Data export tool (ACLED 2023). <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>

In terms of violence against aid workers specifically, a big rise in shootings and bodily assaults has resulted in more aid worker victims in the last two years, according to the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD). All of the victims were national aid workers (2011-2023): 17 worked for international organisations (including the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and international NGOs), and 47 for local or national organisations. Since 2021,

¹⁵ Fortify Rights. (2021). *Access denied: The Myanmar military junta's deprivation of lifesaving aid in Karenni (Kayah) State*. <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-rep-2021-11-10/>

¹⁶ OCHA (2022, 2 September).

¹⁷ Global NPO Coalition on FATF. (2022, 3 November). *Myanmar put on the FATF blacklist*. <https://fatfplatform.org/news/myanmar-put-on-the-blacklist/>

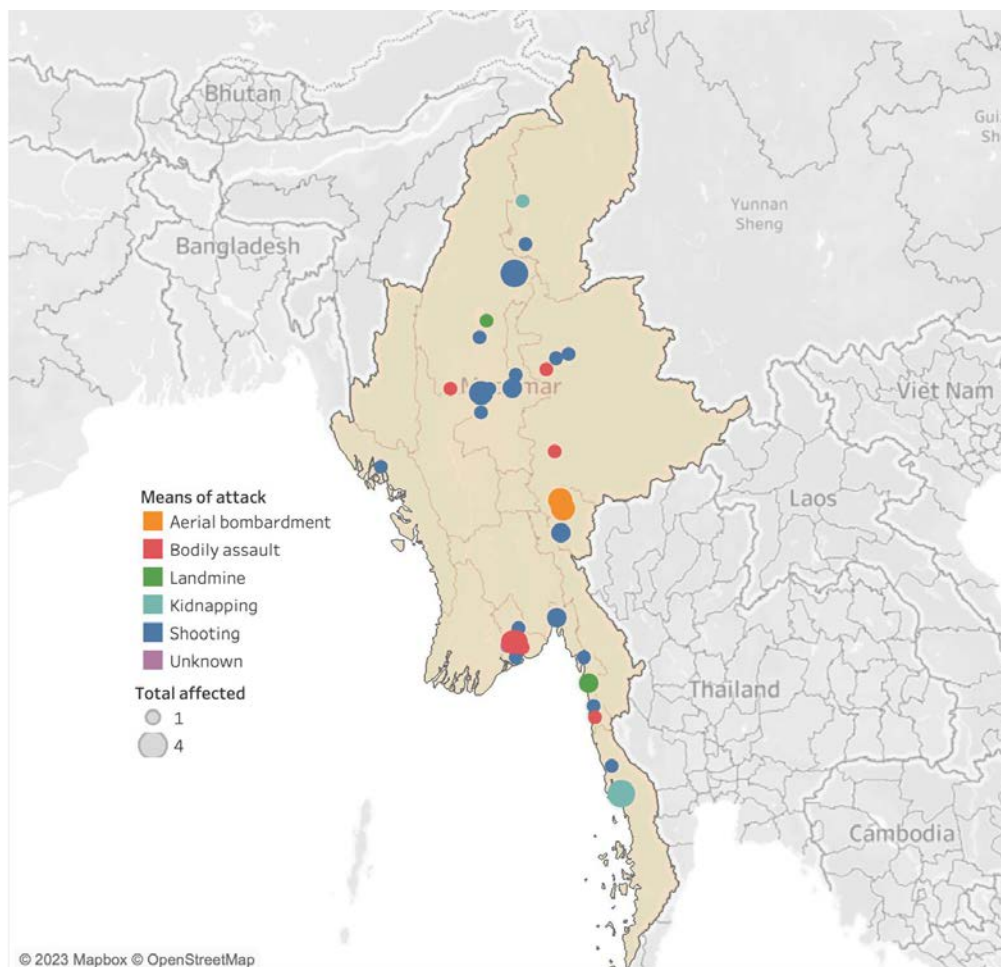
¹⁸ ACLED. (2023). *Data export tool*. Myanmar data retrieved 7 March 2023. <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>

29 aid workers have been killed in Myanmar, 18 seriously wounded, and 5 kidnapped.¹⁹ Given the controls on information communications, it is likely that the numbers fail to capture all incidents affecting local aid workers, low-profile operations, and volunteers. Frequent media reports also document the regular arrest of aid workers and their indefinite detention, which are not captured systematically by the AWSD or ACLED.

Since 2021, most of the attacks on aid workers were perpetrated by the Tatmadaw or its aligned militias (16) followed by the PDF, EAOs and other anti-Tatmadaw militias (3).²⁰ The increase in shooting incidents and landmine use may speak to the increase of Myanmar's military weapon production since the coup, including locally manufactured small arms ammunition, which has contributed to human rights violations against protestors and resistance movements.²¹

Whereas before the coup most violence against aid workers occurred in Rakhine and Shan States, in the ensuing years, incidents were reported in 8 states across the country, including Yangon (7), Sagaing (6), Mon (5), Mandalay (4), Shan (4), Kayah (3), Tanintharyi (2), and Kachin (2). Looking at a larger subset of data, ACLED shows that, since 2021, targeted violence against civilians (including aid workers) has been highest in Sagaing with over 1,000 events since 2021. The second most violent area is Mandalay.

Figure 4: Attacks on aid workers 2020-2023



Source: Aid Worker Security Database (Humanitarian Outcomes 2023a).

¹⁹ Humanitarian Outcomes. (2023). *Aid worker security database*. Retrieved 7 March 2023 from <https://aidworkersecurity.org/>

²⁰ In 13 incidents, the perpetrator is unknown.

²¹ Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M). (2023). *Fatal business: Supplying the Myanmar military's weapon production*. <https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SAC-M-REPORT-Fatal-Business-ENGLISH-1.pdf>

Reports by Insecurity Insight and Physicians for Human Rights have documented violence against, and obstruction of, health care as well. They estimate that between February 2021 and May 2022, 564 health workers were arrested, 126 raids took place on hospitals, and 36 health workers were killed. They found that the Tatmadaw and aligned forces committed the vast majority of attacks on health care.²²

The restriction of formal aid to areas controlled by the de facto authorities and to urban areas and displacement camps raises concerns that aid is being instrumentalised as part of a deliberate military strategy of clearance, village burning, killings, and detentions.²³ Depopulating rural areas and forcing displacement into urban and peri-urban areas is part of the de facto authorities' military strategy of curtailing civilian support to armed resistance organisations.

Local, informal, and cross-border aid is reaching some people in areas not controlled by the de facto authorities. This is of necessity low profile and under the radar, and so not possible or necessarily desirable to quantify. The UN Special Rapporteur notes the “enormous bravery, resilience and adaptability” of Myanmar civil society in the delivery of humanitarian assistance – but also the serious risks faced by local groups providing assistance.²⁴

Funding challenges

Finally, insufficient funding has also been cited as a factor in the limits of aid access in Myanmar.²⁵ However, while Myanmar is an underfunded humanitarian response, it is not clear how more funding would address the political and security constraints and solve the access problem.

Occurring amid other, higher-profile emergencies like the war in Ukraine and the recent Syria/Turkiye earthquake, Myanmar does not command much of the international spotlight. Last year, when the HRP funding requirements jumped to US\$826 million (a four-fold increase from previous years due to the escalating crisis) donor contributions rose only slightly, with the result that requirements were only 41% covered.²⁶ This year, the Myanmar HRP appeal for \$764 million looks on track to be similarly underfunded, with just 7.9% coverage to date.²⁷

²² Insecurity Insight, Physicians for Human Rights and the Center for Public Health and Human Rights, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. (2021). *Violence against or obstruction of health care in Myanmar*, February–November 2021. <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/violence-against-health-care-in-myanmar/>; Insecurity Insight. (2022). *Violence against or obstruction of health care in Myanmar v. May 2022*. <https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Violence-Against-Health-Care-in-Myanmar-May-2022-update.pdf>

²³ UN. (2022). *A/77/494: Report of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/a77494-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-right-myanmar>; Amnesty International (2022).

²⁴ UN (2022).

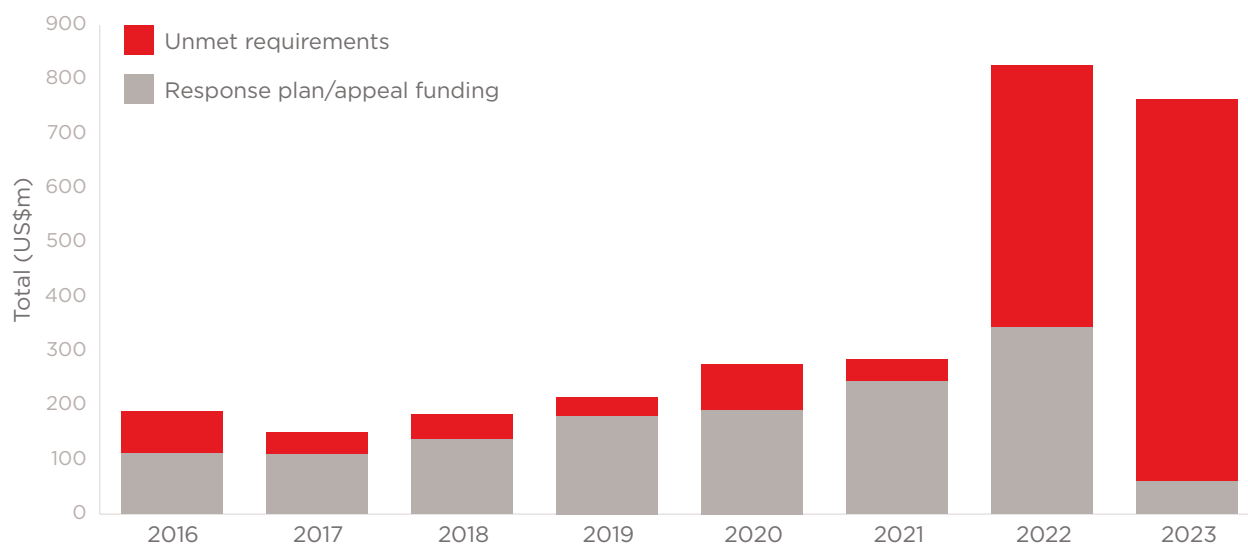
²⁵ On funding, see, for example, OCHA (2022, 3 December).

²⁶ By contrast, on average, HRP requirements over the past seven years have been 58% covered.

²⁷ OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS). (2023, 19 March). *Myanmar humanitarian response plan 2021*. Retrieved 19 March 2023 from <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1046/summary>

Figure 5: Contributions to Myanmar humanitarian response plans, 2016-2023

Trends in response plan/appeal requirements



Source: OCHA FTS, Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan 2022 <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1095/summary>

What all of this has meant for the operational footprint is that most international assistance is concentrated on people in urban areas, in territory controlled by the de facto authorities, and in areas where aid was already concentrated prior to the military takeover. The humanitarian needs of people in other areas, including places newly affected by conflict since 2021, have been largely unmet by formal international assistance.

As the UN reported, “The geographical spread of assistance is heavily weighted towards urban areas, where populations are larger and access is more straightforward, while high needs, harder-to-reach locations are underserved.”²⁸ People that did receive aid were often only reached once, and with just one or two types of assistance, rather than a full package that would cover all their needs. Food made up most the assistance provided.²⁹ Efforts were made throughout 2022 to provide aid in hard-to-reach areas and, by January 2023, OCHA was reporting that World Food Programme (WFP) and its partners were reaching over 450,000 people (79% of a monthly target) in Magway, Rakhine, Kachin, Shan, Kachin, Chin and Kayah with cash, food or a combination.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ OCHA. (2023, 4 March). *Myanmar humanitarian update No. 27*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-27-4-march-2023>

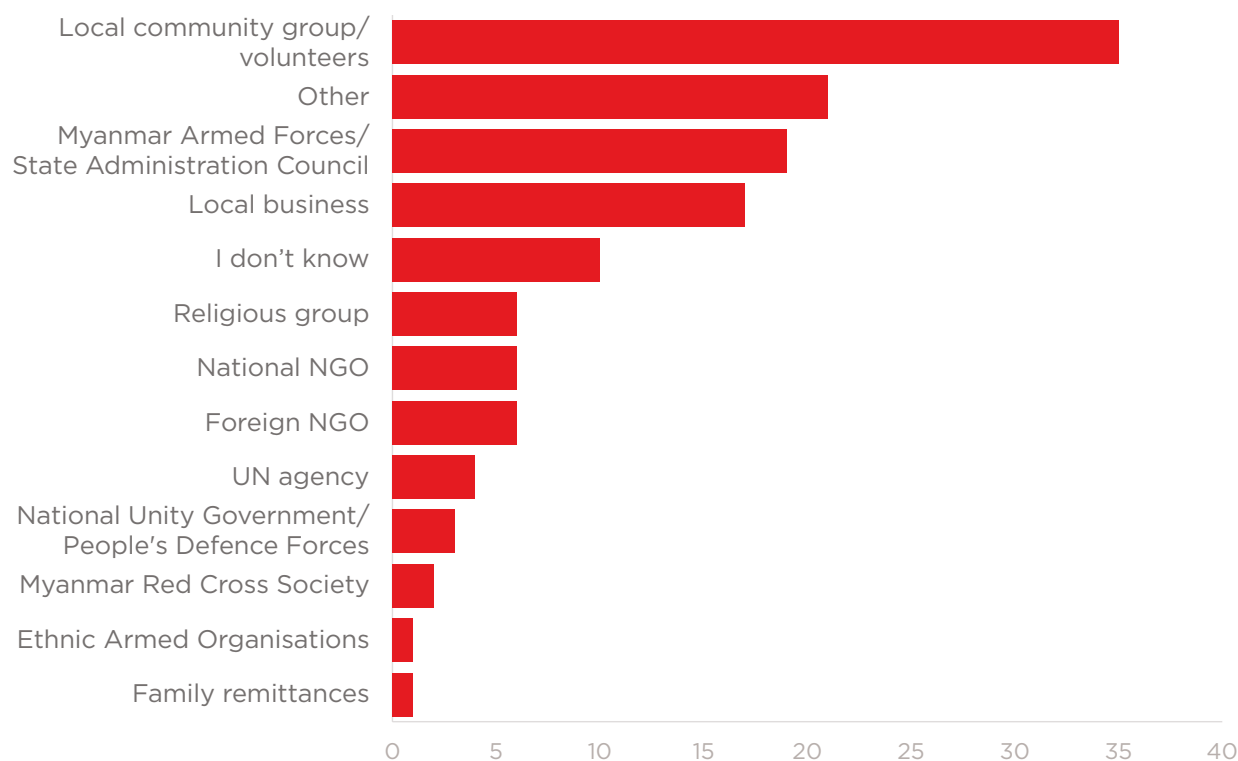
³⁰ Ibid.

Localised aid, cross-border operations, and low-profile access strategies

Local, informal, and some cross-border aid is reaching people in conflict-affected areas in a few ways. International agencies and pooled funds based in Myanmar are partnering with a range of small and large national NGOs that have greater access in conflict-affected areas through low-profile and highly localised approaches – but for reasons of security, these flows are not transparent, and likely represent a small portion of the formal humanitarian aid in Myanmar. Solidarity organisations based outside Myanmar are also supporting cross-border and low-profile aid inside the country. Small local groups also crowdfund and raise resources through the Myanmar diaspora and individual supporters. Reports note an “extensive, active and committed diaspora” that is supporting local community-based organisations and faith-based actors.³¹ The Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar describes how civil society organisations have adapted their structures, operations, and security protocols to respond to threats of arrest, detention, and violence. Many organisations have shifted from a focus on human rights and development to the provision of humanitarian assistance.³²

People surveyed by mobile phone across the country in December 2022 confirmed that most of the aid they receive comes through informal, locally organised efforts from within their communities. Only 6% of aid recipients reported that their aid was provided directly by entities attached to the formal humanitarian sector, including national and international aid agencies, the Red Cross Movement, or national NGOs (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Who provided the aid you received?



Data source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

³¹ Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination (DEMAC). (2022). *Diaspora organizations and their humanitarian response in Myanmar*. https://pro.drc.ngo/media/5fglxwpt/demac_report-myanmar_2022_e-version_single-page.pdf

³² UN (2022).

These results do not preclude the possibility that some of these local community efforts were assisted by low-profile partnership modalities used by the formal sector as mentioned above, but understandably this is not documented or discussed openly by the international organisations. The reach of cross-border aid entities, operating at great risk, is similarly hard to quantify, and the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar report points out there is “almost no coordination between diaspora organisations and the international humanitarian response in Myanmar”.³³

Ten such local organisations interviewed for this study by local researchers operating under strict confidentiality described how they used tactics of avoidance or minimisation of contact with the military authorities to conduct their work.³⁴ These included typical humanitarian low-profile approaches such as removal of signage, and in some cases closing offices and dissolving existing registrations to operate fully under the radar as unregistered entities.

The local organisations described their risk management strategies as falling into three categories, depending on the power dynamics of a given local context: negotiation, evasion, or obfuscation. Those operating in contested areas need to reach out and negotiate with different armed groups for secure access agreements. Where negotiation and communication are not possible, or are too risky, evasive and obfuscatory tactics are used to either minimise contact with the Tatmadaw or to divert attention from operations.

“It is very dangerous. If they [army] find you, they will kill you. So we use many different ways. We go by multiple smaller stages. Sometimes we even arrange it like online shopping, arranging a private company to deliver.”

The aid delivered by these entities also varied depending on the nature of territorial control: for those in SAC-controlled areas, or areas contested between SAC and PDFs, there was a greater reliance on cash-based support or vouchers for local purchase, rather than sending and distributing goods.

“At first, we sent some items there, but it is quite difficult. Now, we get the money and they can buy more locally. Whatever way, it is risky. You can transfer to the shopkeeper, or you can send cash with someone. Now we have these networks, like agents, who arrange the transfers.”

These reports of aid activities going through local merchants corresponds with the (relatively unusual) finding from the SCORE survey that “local business” was one of the top three most impactful aid providers (8).

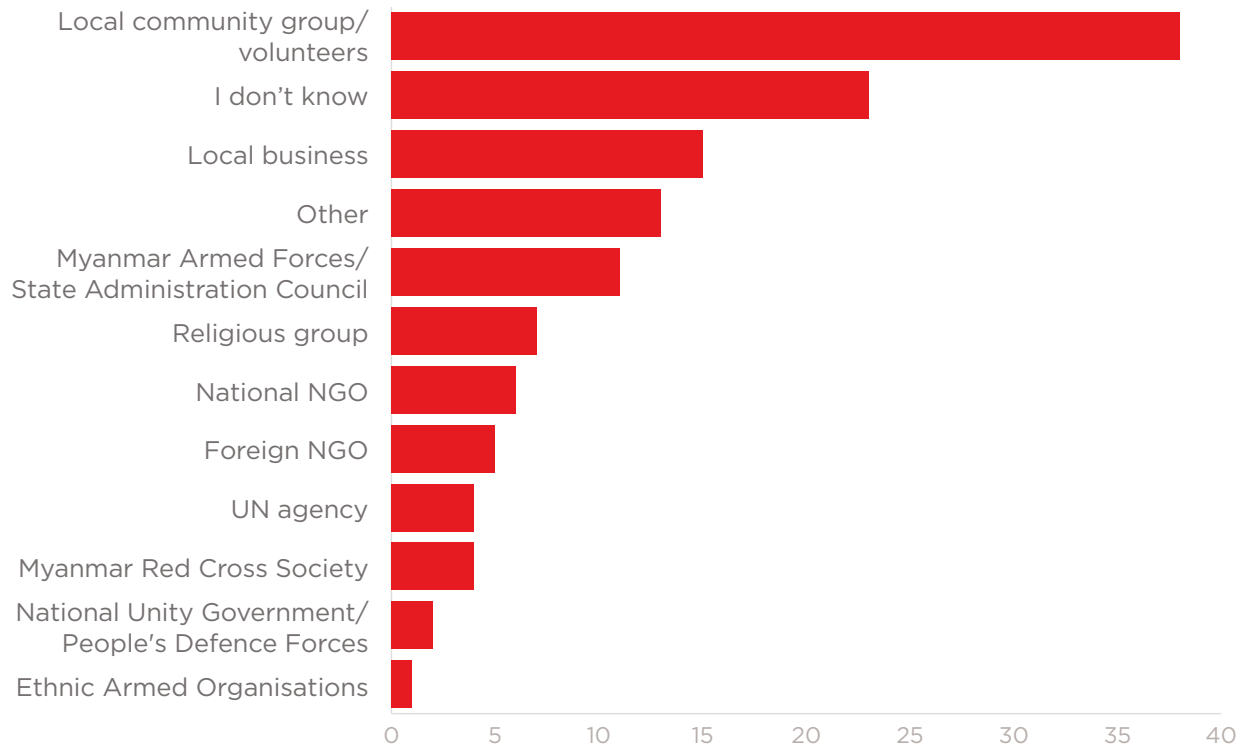
As Figure 7 reflects, EAOs and the NUG also have humanitarian arms, supporting services such as health and education.

The use of dispersed methods, such as individual money transfers, or transfers to local agents, helps reduce the visibility of activities. In EAO-controlled areas, particularly for activities supporting IDPs, there was more direct implementation and distribution, but also often requiring flexibility to navigate international borders, conflict zones, or boundaries of control between opposing forces.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ This section includes information and quotes from these interviews, omitting any identifying information such as names and locations.

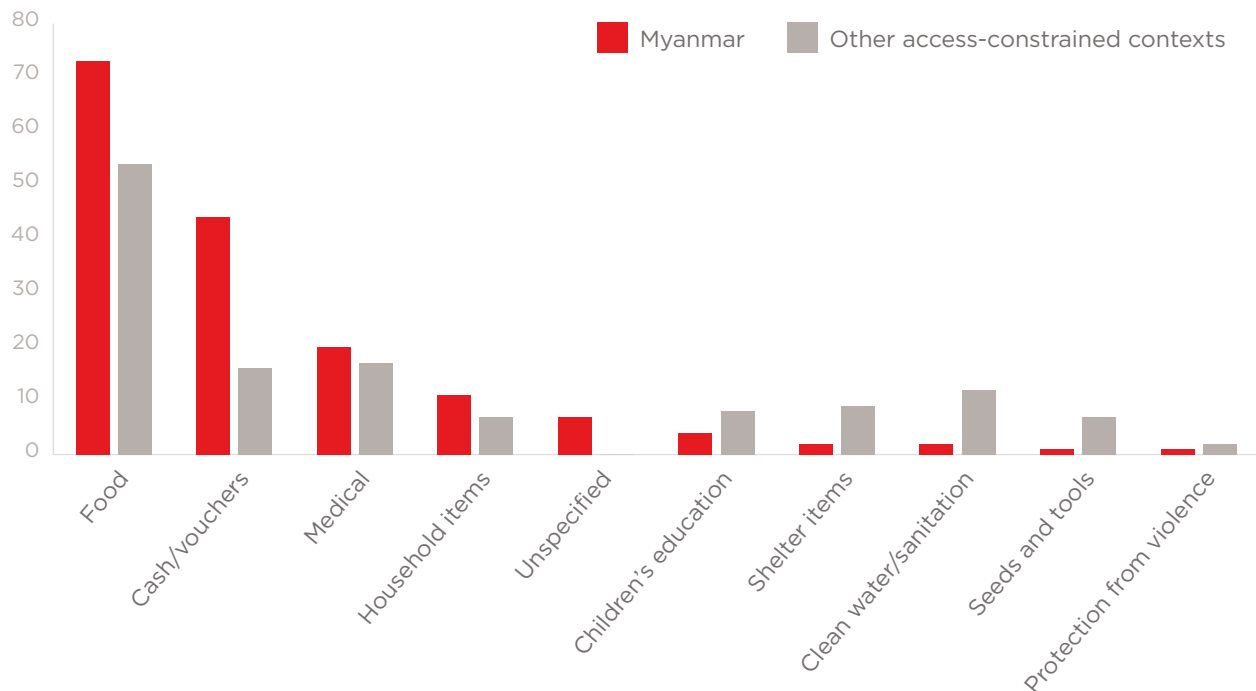
Figure 7: Which type of aid providers have been best able to reach populations in need in the last year?



Data source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

The use of cash assistance through low-profile activities is also reflected in survey responses, as cash/voucher assistance was the second most commonly reported form of aid received, after food (Figure 8).

Figure 8: What type of aid did you, your family, or your neighbours receive?



Data source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

Local groups interviewed reported that they get their funding from local donations, or from diaspora donors, and, in two cases, from the NUG. Very few reported project-based funding from the formal sector, citing major difficulties with both application processes and reporting requirements. Some reported cuts to funding, and challenges with calls for proposals that were either technically infeasible or overly restrictive. There was considerable criticism of donors for their inflexibility, especially in light of how adaptive the local organisations have had to be to make aid possible. Few of the organisations interviewed reported any meaningful contact with UN agencies or international NGOs, although several had well established coordination procedures with EAOs. The presence of UN agencies and international NGOs was seen as minimal, limited to urban areas, and largely restricted to distribution activities to those within easier reach.

“I went to [city] to ask for rice distribution, but I was not able to get it because it was not for people in the [city] on this side, the UN/NGOs don’t dare to come. Now the NGOs that help are in the city only, but the people are in the forest. As the conflict increases, people are pushed further away from the town, into the forest and to the border area. The NGOs stay in the city, but they don’t dare come out, so they can’t help.”

Aid has successfully reached people in areas affected by conflict and across the lines of the conflict through a variety of approaches and strategies aimed at reducing aid’s visibility so as to reduce risks to the staff involved, who could be targeted for arrest, and the people receiving it. Any association with aid creates risks. Having hard copies of reports demonstrating that you are involved in aid, or data on phones or tablets, or being found moving in-kind aid items, could make those providing aid a target for military authorities. Low-profile aid works through cash transfers, working with informal financial service providers to find ways to get cash to people, highly local procurement, pre-positioning and moving goods in very small quantities.

In July 2022, Refugees International estimated that informal cross-border aid from Thailand working through local networks had reached up to a million people since the coup, saying these efforts “offer the most readily available path to mitigating humanitarian suffering in the country”.³⁵ There has been a more than 20-year history of cross-border aid from Thailand which, though not officially sanctioned by Thailand, has been informally permitted at most times. The Refugees International report found that, “For those living in non-SAC military-controlled areas in Karen, Karenni, and southern Shan states, unofficial aid provided by local civil society organisations with links to Thailand has been a vital lifeline”.³⁶ The Karen Peace Support Network reports that, “Karen CBOs [community-based organisations] raising funds from diaspora and international donors, and from February 2021 to July 2022, provided US\$8.7 million dollars of food aid to over 388,000 beneficiaries”.³⁷ It notes that 50% of this funding has come from diaspora donations that cannot be sustained and that “despite the deepening crisis, the level of international donor assistance has not kept pace with the growing humanitarian needs or even the pre-existing aid-delivery capacity of the border based Karen groups”.

For formal agencies seeking to support these efforts, the low-profile approaches create challenges for compliance with donor requirements for accountability, due diligence, and reporting. Very small local groups and civil society organisations may not have the required policies and procedures in place for compliance, and any monitoring and reporting that is done requires special care to avoid putting aid providers and recipients at risk. Local organisations

³⁵ Sullivan, D. (2022). *Paths of assistance: Opportunities for aid and protection along the Thailand-Myanmar border*. Refugees International. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/7/11/paths-of-assistance-opportunities-for-aid-and-protection-along-the-thailand-myanmar-border>; OCHA. (2022, 28 June). *Myanmar humanitarian update No. 19*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-19-28-june-2022>

³⁶ Sullivan (2022).

³⁷ Karen Peace Support Network. (2022). *Border based Karen community groups lead aid response to post-coup humanitarian crisis in Kawthoolei*. https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2022-10-27-KPSN-aid-fact-sheet_en.pdf

run serious security risks if staff are found with documentation or electronic data. Just maintaining organisational bank accounts and moving money through formal systems is increasingly difficult, requiring flexibility in how funds are transferred. All these factors pose challenges in scaling up support from the formal aid sector.

Local organisations interviewed acknowledged the limits of what they are able to do, reporting that they are unable to meet all of the needs of those they are already in contact with, let alone those that come with surges in need arising from ongoing conflict. Since most are reliant on small-scale donations rather than institutional funding, continuity represents a major challenge. It does not help that the local actors “continue to be side-lined and excluded from decision-making processes”, and that, “What they currently need is not capacity building, but funds, inclusion in decision-making, the removal of barriers, and assistance with the mitigation of risk”.³⁸

The access predicament: Should international humanitarian agencies leave Myanmar?

Responding to the post-coup humanitarian crisis in Myanmar has presented a classic ‘do no harm’ dilemma for aid actors in particularly stark form. When the junta restricts the registered aid agencies to work only in areas under its control (specifically urban centres and official displacement camps), it is unarguably instrumentalising aid for military objectives to control populations and curtail civilian support for resistance movements. Were aid agencies to withdraw, however, they would be leaving millions of displaced and other vulnerable people in these areas without badly needed assistance, which would increase their suffering without necessarily changing military tactics of depopulating conflict-affected rural areas. While these are undoubtedly difficult issues to consider, according to observers, no serious discussion has occurred around possible alternatives to the status quo, and the aid response proceeds with ‘business as usual’.

As SAC restrictions increase and the dilemma becomes ever clearer, formal humanitarian aid organisations are adopting different approaches. Some are adapting to the new restrictions while attempting to keep a programming presence in Myanmar and stay registered with the SAC, advocating, to the extent possible, for greater operational space. Some have taken a twin-track approach, continuing to provide sanctioned aid while also undertaking low-profile operations through local partners under the SAC radar. Others have pulled back from a presence in Myanmar and are working from outside the country to support the cross-border delivery to community networks in the non-SAC areas.

The humanitarian neutrality/resistance debate

Meanwhile, the debate on how to navigate this dilemma is becoming increasingly heated and polarised. Some commentators and local actors have argued forcefully that by working in SAC-controlled areas, the donors and providers in the formal humanitarian sector are effectively complicit with the repression and violence of the junta.³⁹ In such clearcut cases of illegitimate force and human rights violation as Myanmar (as in Ukraine), they argue, appeals

³⁸ Karen Human Rights Group. (2022). *Submission on human rights situation in Southeast Burma since the 2021 coup, to the International Parliamentary Inquiry (IPI), ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)*. <https://aseanmp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/KHRG-Written-Submission-for-IPI-APHR.pdf>

³⁹ Kamal, A. (2022, October 19). *Supporting the people of Myanmar: it's about political will*. Humanitarian Practice Network. <https://odihpn.org/publication/supporting-the-people-of-myanmar-its-about-political-will/>

to classic humanitarian neutrality are illogical and misguided. Instead, they are calling for approaches based on solidarity with the NUG. This would mean ceasing aid operations in areas controlled by the SAC in favour of focusing entirely on the cross-border and covert approaches, in the form of supporting a “humanitarian resistance”.⁴⁰

The international aid agencies that are still in Yangon and trying to remain operational argue that aid is still able to reach those most in need and that there is a responsibility to continue negotiating with all parties to the conflict for independent and impartial humanitarian access. If the estimates of people reached by both sides are to be credited, the formal humanitarian sector working mainly in the SAC-controlled areas reached 3.9 million people last year – nearly four times as many as reached by the informal, cross-border based efforts in the NUG-held and contested areas. Even given the arguments that displaced people surviving in the forests and poor rural communities in the non-SAC areas have greater needs than those reached, it is a large number of people to walk away from. In addition, these international organisations are still managing some small amount of low-profile aid delivery to NUG areas through local partners. Finally, some international organisations – specifically the UN agencies and the ICRC – have mandates that would prohibit covert cross-border aid.

A third view rejects the notion of a binary moral choice between the neutrality principle and a resistance orientation in favour of a more utilitarian approach. The diversity and autonomy of actors in the humanitarian system in principle allows for all possible avenues to be taken – with some actors serving in SAC areas, others focusing on cross-border and local aid in NUG and contested areas, and some attempting both – all depending on location, capabilities, and risk threshold. Ideally, a diversity of approaches results in complementarity and effective use of comparative advantage.

Political pressure and humanitarian advocacy

International humanitarian actors continue to advocate with the military authorities for humanitarian access – but with very limited success or traction. Levers for humanitarian diplomacy are limited, given Chinese and Russian support for the SAC and weak influence by Western donor governments. Moreover, the peacebuilding process that existed before the coup has been upended and not yet replaced with a new diplomatic strategy.⁴¹

The UN has reported some small-scale successes. For example, OCHA reports that concerted advocacy efforts helped to secure the first UN access to Kayah State in April 2022, that UNHCR was able to deliver core relief items, and that WFP was able to begin delivering food assistance.⁴² Efforts to expand aid have been discussed by ASEAN, which issued its 5-Point Consensus on addressing the crisis, which included humanitarian aid. However, plans to provide aid through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) have been widely criticised for being too closely associated and cooperative with the military authorities.⁴³

⁴⁰ Slim, H. (2022). *Humanitarian resistance. Its ethical and operational importance*. Humanitarian Practice Network. https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Humanitarian-resistance_NP_web.pdf

⁴¹ As noted by the International Crisis Group (2022), “A first step should be to recognise that the peace process established a decade ago is dead. Donors that have supported it should shift focus to shielding people in conflict-affected areas from war’s effects through rapid disbursement of emergency funding. As access to many areas is difficult, donors will need to work closely with local implementing partners; to avoid overburdening these groups, they should show flexibility, particularly by keeping administrative requirements to a bare minimum.”

⁴² Sullivan (2022); OCHA (2022, 28 June).

⁴³ Human Rights Watch. (2022, 22 April). *Myanmar: ASEAN’s failed ‘5-point consensus’ a year on. Key countries should overhaul approach to junta’s atrocities*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/22/myanmar-aseans-failed-5-point-consensus-year>; ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights. (APHR). (2022, 25 October). *Joint open letter concerning ASEAN’s approach to Myanmar*. <https://aseanmp.org/2022/10/25/joint-open-letter-concerning-aseans-approach-to-myanmar/>

Classic humanitarian neutrality requires humanitarian actors to negotiate with all parties to a conflict. However, the NUG and others interviewed felt that international humanitarian actors had been too one-sided in their humanitarian engagement, negotiating with the SAC but comparatively neglecting the NUG and EAOs. Local organisations were particularly angered by international organisation representatives presenting credentials to the SAC in ways that they feel legitimises the regime.⁴⁴

In the face of widespread human rights abuses by the military authorities, and severe restrictions on humanitarian access, aid agencies also face difficult questions over whether and how to speak out about those abuses. Many have been reticent to engage in public advocacy for fear of further compromising access or being refused permission to operate at all. There are also fears that speaking out could put their national staff in the country at risk. However, since no organisations have been forced to leave Myanmar for speaking out, it raises the question whether organisations have collectively pushed the limits hard enough. Failing to clearly condemn rights abuses and access restrictions also risks organisations being seen by civil society as supportive of the SAC, and so worsening polarisation between local and international aid actors – and undermining the trust needed for effective partnerships.

Considerations

Although it is beyond the scope of this report to adjudicate the morality and efficacy of the different positions and approaches, the research points to two facts that seem important to consider.

1. The operational presence and reach of the formal aid sector in Myanmar is even more limited than the operational data suggests, and is not poised to improve.

As described earlier, there are more international agencies registered than are actively operational, and much of their former programming and presence has been severely curtailed. Reflecting the constraints, the HRP targets only 25% of the population in need to be reached with assistance, and based on the experience of previous years, it is unlikely even this low target will be met. Given the lack of room for expansion and increasing constraints imposed by the authorities, it makes little sense for the sector to focus all of its planning and resource mobilisation efforts on the formal aid response at this moment. Therefore it urgently needs to consider other models and modalities for delivering aid in Myanmar.

2. Localised and informal aid, much of it driven by cross-border entities, is reaching significant numbers of people and has room to further scale up.

The SCORE survey findings, reinforced by the qualitative findings of local researchers as well as other recent literature on the topic, show that people living in rural Myanmar are accessing vital aid, much of it in the form of cash or vouchers, in their own communities by virtue of informal efforts. If nothing else, this amounts to a clear proof of concept and promising avenue to seek to expand. Among organisations supporting local actors in low-profile and cross-border approaches, there was consistent agreement that there is scope to significantly expand the scale of support being provided – both by providing greater support and funding to existing partners, and by expanding the numbers of local groups being supported. This would only be possible, however, if donors and agencies were willing to relax their accountability and monitoring requirements to allow the local organisations maximum flexibility and autonomy.

⁴⁴ APHR. (2022). “Time is not on our side”: The failed international response to the Myanmar coup. https://aseanmp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/IPI-APHR-final-report_Time-is-not-on-our-side_-The-failed-international-response-to-the-Myanmar-coup.pdf; Frontier. (2022, 22 November). *Dancing with dictators: The humanitarian dilemma in Myanmar*. <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/dancing-with-dictators-the-humanitarian-dilemma-in-myanmar/>

Finally, it is worth remembering that the humanitarian system – even the formal sector dominated by international agencies – is not a monolith and is not subject, as a whole, to any single decision. Individual agencies have their own ethical and operational choices to make on where and how to programme. And while donor governments can exercise strategic influence with where they put their money, they too often adopt a diversity of means and options. This is simply to point out that, regardless of the rightness or wrongness of any position, it would not be possible to achieve a unified approach.

Conclusion

There is a case for a rebalancing of the proportions of support being provided through aid agencies operating in SAC-controlled areas to increase the amount of support for low-profile and cross-border efforts that enable local actors to build on their work in conflict-affected areas of greatest need. Some donors are already beginning to support such approaches. Scaling these efforts will require the political will and greater risk tolerance from donors. Specifically, this will mean adapting monitoring and reporting requirements, and allowing for flexibility of plans and approaches to meet changing needs in a fluid environment while not endangering aid providers and recipients.

Some of the more nuanced arguments we heard in the course of this review argued that it should be possible to simultaneously expand the cross-border operations of local groups through under-the-radar support while international agencies remaining in Myanmar continue to meet the very real needs of people in the junta-controlled areas. International agencies that are remaining in Myanmar and that are to negotiate principled access with the SAC need to be transparent about their operational limitations and make a frank assessment of the potential harm their programming could do. They should also consider working more with the NUG and the non-state opposition groups, which are requesting closer coordination on humanitarian action. Finally, there is a need for rigorous conflict sensitivity, and monitoring and analysis, to identify and mitigate risks of aid being diverted or instrumentalised to support military objectives.

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