



MYANMAR COUNTRY REPORT

THE STATE OF THE
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM 2026

ACRONYMS

CBO	Community-based organisation
CSO	Civil society organisation
EAO	Ethnic armed organisations
FGD	Focus group discussion
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HDP	Humanitarian–development–peace (nexus)
HNRP	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KSDF	Karenni State Development Fund
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SAC	State Administration Council (Myanmar military junta)
SOHS	The State of the Humanitarian System
ULA/AA	United League of Arakan/Arakan Army
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



Caption: Distribution of
supplies to communities
affected by the
2025 earthquake

Credit: Nyan Corridor researcher

3. THE SIZE, SHAPE AND PERFORMANCE OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

Myanmar's humanitarian system has undergone profound transformation since the 2021 military coup. It was consistent across interviews with aid providers and facilitators that what was once a conventional international architecture centred on UN agencies and INGOs has fractured into a fragmented, multi-tiered ecosystem shaped by armed conflict, restricted access, unprecedented funding shocks and the enduring strength of community-based response. With an estimated 22 million people in need – the vast majority residing in territories that are affected by conflict or controlled by EAO (OCHA, 2025a) – the formal international system reaches only a fraction of those requiring assistance, while local civil society, diaspora networks and faith-based organisations have become the primary lifeline for millions.



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3.1 Architecture of the system

The humanitarian architecture in Myanmar operates across distinct layers, each with different geographic reach, accountability structures and operational logic. Two are examined here – the formal international system and the broader ecosystem of local actors – with the understanding that they function in parallel and often without structured operational coordination.

The formal international system

At the apex of the formal system UN agencies, alongside a reduced cohort of INGOs, maintain operations primarily from Yangon, border areas and SAC-controlled urban zones. However, since 2021, these actors have steadily withdrawn from active conflict areas (Sida, 2025). For instance, aid providers in Chin State, Karenni, northern Rakhine and much of Sagaing Region reported that UN agencies and most INGOs are largely absent from field-level operations. In the areas

controlled by the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), UN and INGOs do not have a physical presence, but instead operate and collect data through CSOs and other trusted local intermediaries.

Recognising these structural gaps, OCHA introduced an area-based coordination model across five operational hubs, replacing the previous cluster system. However, LHNAs interviewed noted that the Area Humanitarian Coordination Teams (AHCTs) are not deeply involved in decision-making. Additionally, the structure applies primarily to SAC-controlled areas, while the majority of people in need are in EAO-controlled territories outside this architecture. This gap between formal coordination structures and operational realities has had direct implications for local and national humanitarian actors, as they shoulder the bulk of the response but remain largely excluded from the decision-making processes that shape it.

'Local partners are critical in any part of the response – Myanmar in particular – because many of the UN agencies and NGOs might not get access to certain areas, and local partners have a much broader network and reach. So ensuring that we really continue and strengthen empowerment of local organizations.'

Representative of a local NGO, Rakhine

Local civil society, faith-based organisations and community structures

Beyond the formal system, a dense web of local actors constitutes the operational backbone of humanitarian response in areas affected by conflict.

'NGOs and UN Agencies currently do not have access to the ground. Previously, they could work directly on the ground. Now, they can only work with partner organizations. They connect and work particularly with local CSOs and CBOs who are the frontline responders. There is coordination among these organizations. It's essential to coordinate with [INGOs] because our funding depends on international organisations. The funding flows from them.'

Local NGO representative, Rakhine



A dense web of local actors constitutes the operational backbone of humanitarian response in areas affected by conflict.

Local actors operate with greater legitimacy and community trust. While they face their own set of restrictions – including taxation by EAO, SAC surveillance and security risks – they are less bound by the compliance frameworks that typically apply to INGOs and UN agencies. This distinction matters because performance must be understood in relation to the structural conditions each actor faces. National CSOs, CBOs, faith-based institutions, EAO-linked governance bodies and diaspora networks together fill the vacuum left by the formal system's withdrawal. The Rohingya community, for example, survives largely through transnational remittances and community charity groups formed by diaspora and Yangon-based business networks, according to some local aid providers. However, only a small fraction of humanitarian funding is channelled through these

local actors. In Chin State, one aid provider estimated that approximately 75–80% of all humanitarian support reaches communities through diaspora groups and religious organisations.

Two examples further illustrate locally led coordination structures in resource mobilisation and crisis response that have emerged outside the formal system. The first is the Karenni State Development Fund (KSDF), a pooled fund of approximately US\$4–5 million, governed by a committee drawn from Karenni civil society and governance bodies. Disbursements are informed by humanitarian needs assessments conducted by the Department of Humanitarian Assistance. The KSDF represents an explicit donor choice to fund local governance structures directly, bypassing UN pooled funding mechanisms – a politically significant departure that raises both hopes and questions about replicability. The second example is the Myanmar Earthquake Response Coordination Unit (MERCUCU), which emerged as another locally led coordination system in the aftermath of the March 2025 earthquake, bringing together CSOs, volunteer networks and local firms into a networked response structure.



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3.2 The humanitarian caseload

OCHA estimates suggest only 4–5 million people can realistically be targeted, out of the 22 million people across Myanmar requiring humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2025a).

Uneven coverage and structural gaps

Both geographically and demographically, coverage remains uneven. Interviews



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consistently suggested that areas in conflict zones and under EAO control receive little to no formal assistance, including most of Chin State, northern Rakhine, large swaths of Sagaing Region, parts of Karenni and Kachin. More accessible areas – typically junta-controlled zones near main roads – receive more assistance. These distribution patterns reflect logistical expediency rather than need: for instance, aid recipients and facilitators reported that established camps near roads and safe corridors are visited repeatedly, while remote settlements and IDPs staying with relatives or in scattered housing (a common form of displacement in Karenni and central Myanmar) are systematically overlooked.

A significant share of humanitarian assistance arrives with

predetermined parameters – fixed quantities, modalities approved by donors or headquarters, and sector-specific mandates – that do not correspond to actual community needs at the time of delivery. In earthquake-affected Inlay (Southern Shan), respondents described how international organisations arrived after the immediate crisis had passed and distributed items that were no longer needed, including rice to people who were not even earthquake-affected, because that is what had been approved. Tensions between equal-share and vulnerability-first targeting compound this problem: equal distribution across households reduces social friction but fails those with acute needs, while needs-based targeting is undermined by weak data systems and gatekeeping by local authorities or armed actors.



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The funding shock and its consequences

The global humanitarian funding contraction has hit Myanmar with particular severity. The suspension and eventual elimination of USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance programmes resulted in an estimated 55% funding cut in 2025 (ALNAP, 2026). This has had cascading effects, for instance in budgets being cut and most operations suspended. One aid provider in Chin state estimated that approximately 80% of humanitarian operations were affected, and a respondent from the Chin Human Rights Organization confirmed over 40 staff positions in the organisation had been cut.

The cuts further exposed the system's dependency on international funding; organisations also lost the institutional scaffolding underpinning integrated programmes. In Karenni, the International Engagement Committee (IEC) channel alone served approximately 50,000 people through USAID funding, but by mid-2025 aid providers we spoke to were anticipating severe food shortages that could affect a significant proportion of IDP camp populations.

These cuts compound a pre-existing pattern of politically concentrated funding. Aid providers in Rakhine reported that, historically, the Rohingya crisis attracted disproportionate international donor attention – driven by its global visibility and diplomatic profile – while other areas affected by crisis, such as Karenni, Chin, and Sagaing, received a fraction of comparable support despite significant levels of need.

3.3 Performance evaluation

Against the backdrop of rising needs and shrinking resources, the performance of the humanitarian system in Myanmar in terms of timeliness, quality, coordination and efficiency has deteriorated noticeably over the 2022–25 study period. Several structural and operational failures have recurred across all geographic areas, while

a small number of positive practices offer evidence of what works when systems align.

Timeliness and access

Delays in humanitarian assistance have been nearly universal across areas in Myanmar affected by conflict. Across Karenni, Chin and Rakhine, respondents described assistance arriving one to three months behind schedule, often after needs had shifted or acute crises had passed.

'The aid for May can only be delivered in June. [The World Food Programme] said they have to collect the money to get a sufficient amount, so it takes time.'

Aid facilitator, Rakhine State

These delays are primarily driven by physical barriers: road blockades, military checkpoints and continuous airstrikes, seasonal flooding and fuel shortages that restrict movement of humanitarians and raise transport costs sharply. For example, in Karenni, some roads that were passable in 2023 are now entirely closed.

'... overall, access has become harder than before ... we can no longer pass through. The main issue is the disruption in the flow of goods. It's gradually tightening. One day the road is open, the next it's closed again. That creates a lot of worry. If goods can't get through, food prices may spike. Then we're left wondering how we're going to manage.'

Aid recipient, Pekon, South Shan State

Several respondents noted that some actors – in Karenni and other townships – have adapted to this by shifting to cash transfers in place of in-kind goods. However, this modality also faces constraints such as international transfer systems being disrupted by Myanmar's currency instability, mobile payment restrictions, and stringent policies where some organisations require authorised individuals to physically withdraw cash, which creates security risks.

'There are delays. Even with cash support from Save the Children, the funds arrived two or three months late because of currency exchange issues and K Pay withdrawal problems.'

Aid provider, Karenni State

Quality and relevance

Aid recipients and facilitators consistently felt that aid quality is highest when organisations consult community committees about their most urgent needs before distributing, and when local partners have flexibility to adapt what and how assistance is delivered.

While there has been a noticeable shift to cash-based assistance to reach communities that in-kind goods cannot, this transition creates its own problems with regards to coverage and effectiveness: in areas with active conflict and restricted market access, particularly northern Rakhine and Chin, cash recipients cannot

reliably purchase the goods they need. In Chin State, cash assistance is immediately absorbed by debt repayment and informal EAO taxation, leaving families with little to live by.

'We now face a new challenge. Each family is required to contribute 90,000 MMK1 per year to the CDF Thantlang. The amount is the same for families in the village as it is for families in IDP [camps]. For some families, when they receive cash from [NGOs] they immediately repay borrowed money or settle debts with local shops. Today, they receive the funds, and by the end of the day, that money is spent.'

Camp committee representative, Thantlang

This means cash assistance may be sustaining survival rather than building any form of resilience. However, this debt spiral dynamic is not captured in standard performance monitoring – meaning that reported distribution figures may indicate successful delivery while the actual impact on household welfare remains severely limited.



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Coordination

Coordination functions best at the local level, where long-standing personal and professional relationships and tacit knowledge compensate for weak formal systems. In Karenni, for example, experienced coordinators who have worked in the state for over a decade maintain informal networks that track which organisations are operating where and connect resources to gaps. This relational

coordination, sustained through Starlink connections (although unstable and unreliable), in-person visits and trust-based information-sharing, has proven more effective than formal coordination structures according to aid providers and facilitators.



Long-standing personal and professional relationships and tacit knowledge compensate for weak formal systems.

At the national level, the OCHA-led area-based coordination model represents a genuine effort at reform, with explicit recognition that the previous cluster architecture was too burdensome. However, as subnational actors consistently noted, its effectiveness is constrained by the fact that the country team mainly makes decisions and that these sometimes do not reflect the priorities of communities and local issues.

'Local issues receive only five to ten minutes of agenda time, and the entire structure operates around SAC-controlled areas rather than the territories where most of the humanitarian work is actually happening.'

Aid provider, Rakhine

1 Approximately US\$10.

The Humanitarian Reset discussions – around resource pooling, single eligibility systems and lighter coordination – were acknowledged by UN respondents but remain at a consultative stage within Myanmar.

'In the long run, the UN mechanisms will only be able to reach the cities and areas under SAC control. They won't be able to access areas under the control of the resistance groups or the mixed-control areas. But saying that doesn't mean the UN is bad – their presence does bring some benefits for us. Because if they are present in the cities, we can work under their umbrella and move around more freely in urban areas.'

CSO representative, Yangon

Box 1: In focus – the earthquake response

The March 2025 earthquake response reveals both the possibilities and limits of the current humanitarian system with particular clarity. In Nay Pyi Taw, where damage was visible, access relatively easier and political constraints somewhat reduced, the early response was faster and better coordinated than the conflict response – driven overwhelmingly by local communities and domestic civil society networks mobilised through digital platforms and diaspora fundraising.

'When the earthquake occurred, people seemed more aware of the situation, and more aid flowed in.'

Aid Facilitator, Nay Pyi Taw

In Sagaing, however, where fighting resumed within days of the earthquake, with SAC airstrikes launched as early as the day after the disaster, the response closely mirrored conflict response constraints. There were access limitations, low-profile operations and severe gaps in longer-term support – including gaps in transitional shelter for the displaced, psychosocial services for those traumatised by the earthquake and adequate water sanitation and hygiene infrastructure.

'After the earthquake, no one could respond effectively. If the administrative side had gone systematically to the field to check, it would have been more organized. But they only gave to nearby people, convenient people. The elderly did not receive assistance. People mostly helped each other.'

Aid recipient, Sagaing

In both areas, as one national actor summarised, 'long-term support was almost nonexistent in all earthquake-affected areas'. The pattern recurred of locally led first response followed by delayed and often misaligned international support.

A system under strain

Funding shocks, access restrictions, and the physical and political barriers created by multi-front conflict have progressively narrowed the operational envelope of the formal system in Myanmar. The result is an increasing concentration of formal assistance in areas accessible to international actors (typically SAC-controlled urban centres and areas adjacent to border crossings), while communities in areas affected by conflict and controlled by EAO are served primarily, and often exclusively, by local actors who are themselves overstretched, underfunded and operating under constant security risk. This research shows a pattern of growing reliance on diaspora funding across several areas, particularly Chin State and Karenni. This dependency, which respondents noted is itself showing signs of donor fatigue among diaspora communities, represents a further structural vulnerability in an already underfunded response.

