



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

4. LOCALISATION, RESISTANCE HUMANITARIANISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF LOCAL HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE

This section examines four defining features of Myanmar's humanitarian moment: the gap between rhetoric and reality in localisation, resistance humanitarianism, divergent local governance in Karenni and Rakhine, and the fractured HDP nexus.

4.1 Localisation: still rhetorical, increasingly forced

This research finds that in Myanmar, the global commitment to localisation through



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directing decision-making power, funding and accountability towards local and national actors collides with the reality of local actors simultaneously being the most effective responders, the most exposed to risk and the least supported by the system. This has created what several respondents described as 'forced localisation': a situation where local actors are expected to cover areas international organisations have withdrawn from or cannot access, without commensurate funding, protection or institutional support. This is localisation as risk transfer, rather than power transfer. While international workers are not without risk in Myanmar, respondents consistently expressed that the physical, legal and institutional risks borne by local humanitarian workers are disproportionately higher.

The funding and power asymmetry is reflected in local organisations' struggle to access pooled funds such as the KSDF as the compliance requirements demand that they partner with INGOs rather than receive direct grants. Another constraint is formal registration as a prerequisite for funding, which tends to exclude local organisations operating in conflict or EAO-controlled areas that cannot be registered with Myanmar's military-controlled state without compromising their legitimacy or safety.

'How can a SAC-registered organization address vulnerable communities in rebel-controlled regions? If international organizations are to work effectively, they must reevaluate their practices.'

Chin State respondent

Local and mutual aid: historically foundational, currently essential

Mutual aid in Myanmar predates the international humanitarian system (Junli, 2026). It is rooted in community-based responses to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and has repeated through every subsequent crisis. This research emphasises that local communities, religious institutions and diaspora networks are consistently first responders – a pattern now intensified by post-coup conflict and international withdrawal.

'In the current revolution period, what we are doing is "Resistance Humanitarian". The UN calls it "Humanitarian Resistance". But what we are doing is different – we take the lead. The localization [the international community] are calling for and the localization we are calling for are different. In their view, they frame it as: we locals have a great need for capacity. But for us, we already have the ability to do these things – we just want to directly take over.'

National civil society leader

4.2 Resistance humanitarianism: aid as solidarity and survival

The term 'humanitarian resistance', used by Hugo Slim and others to describe humanitarian action in repressive contexts (Slim, 2022),² has been inverted and reclaimed by Myanmar local actors (Junli, 2026). Where the international framing situates humanitarians as neutral providers of assistance resisting obstruction, across multiple interviews local actors described humanitarian action as an expression of political solidarity, communal survival and moral participation in a struggle against state violence. They call this 'resistance humanitarianism' and they insist it is not a deviation from humanitarian principles, but a contextually grounded adaptation of them.

This reframing challenges the neutrality principle. For communities living under bombardment, displacement and systematic deprivation, the notion of impartiality between a military junta conducting airstrikes on civilian settlements and the populations it is targeting is experienced not as principled action but as morally evasive. Local humanitarian workers navigate this tension in practical, everyday ways: they may share food with armed resistance groups when asked, because they regard them as community members and kin rather than armed combatants.

2 Slim, Hugo. (2022). Humanitarian Resistance: Its Ethical and Operational Importance. Humanitarian Practice Network. https://gisf.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Humanitarian-resistance_NP_web.pdf

Some humanitarian actors prioritise vulnerable communities in resistance-controlled areas without framing this as a violation of humanitarian principles. To access these populations, they operate under aliases and deliberately conceal organisational affiliations. The Chin Human Rights Organization, for example, one of the most locally recognisable organisations in Chin State, deliberately makes its brand invisible at the field level as a practical adaptation to operating across contested territory.

Resistance humanitarianism is not a uniform stance. Some local actors maintain a strict position of non-engagement with all armed actors; others coordinate openly with resistance forces on logistics and access; still others provide direct material support to People's Defence Forces while distributing aid to civilian IDPs. The variation reflects the heterogeneity of local contexts: in Karenni, where the resistance enjoys broad community legitimacy, the boundary between humanitarian and political-military action is often permeable; in Chin State, where multiple overlapping armed factions compete for territorial control, navigating this boundary requires daily negotiation.



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'In the current situation after the coup, we have to take sides. Sometimes, when we go to the IDP camps with food supplies, young [People's Defence Forces] would ask, "Please give us some for our food as well". Honestly, according to the humanitarian Code of Conduct, we are not allowed to give them, but we did give. Because they are our brothers and sisters.'

Aid provider, Karenni



In practice, strict adherence to neutrality often means accepting that many people in need will go unserved.

International actors are watching this landscape with discomfort. Representatives of UN agencies consulted for this study noted that any engagement with non-state armed actors – including coordination on access, use of their transport or provision of any benefit – risks violating their code of conduct and triggering donor sanctions. Yet, similarly to local actors, not involving them in aid delivery meant they couldn't provide assistance to people who needed it. This creates a tension in principled humanitarian action in Myanmar: in practice, strict adherence to neutrality often means accepting that many people in need will go unserved.

4.3 (Re)configuration of local humanitarian governance: Karenni and Rakhine compared

Respondents in Karenni and Rakhine reported that across territories affected by

conflict, local political authorities have – increasingly since 2021 – moved to institutionalise humanitarian governance, establishing dedicated departments, coordination bodies and resource management structures. Whether this represents the first time such dedicated humanitarian governance structures have been established within resistance governance in Myanmar, or builds on earlier precedents, warrants further historical research. Two cases, Karenni and Rakhine (Arakan), are examined here – see Case study A and Case Study B. These were selected because they represent contrasting approaches – consultative civilian governance versus military-led coordination – and because the primary data collected for this study was richest in these two areas. The comparison is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive; other areas such as Chin State and Sagaing have distinct dynamics that merit separate analysis. The two cases illustrate sharply divergent approaches with important implications for aid effectiveness, accountability and civil society space.

Karenni's model is not without tensions. The overlap between humanitarian, administrative and political-military authority creates risks of aid being instrumentalised for political purposes, and CSOs navigating multiple lines of authority face competing demands. Nonetheless, the model is characterised by relative inclusivity, professional capacity and a consultative orientation that distinguishes it from other emerging governance experiments.

The contrast between the Karenni and Rakhine cases illustrates a broader pattern: where resistance governance is characterised by civilian leadership, professional humanitarian expertise and openness to civil society input, it tends to produce more effective and accountable coordination. Where governance is dominated by military command structures and political-ethnic calculation, humanitarian space narrows and already-marginalised groups (in this case, the Rohingya) face compounded exclusion. It is important to note from the outset that both models exist entirely outside the formal international coordination architecture, which continues to operate as if the system it governs reaches these territories.

CASE STUDY A: Karenni – consultative local humanitarian governance

The Karenni Interim Executive Council (KIEC) has established the Department of Humanitarian Assistance and Rehabilitation (DoHR), staffed largely by former NGO and CSO professionals. The DoHR coordinates with local civil society, EAO-affiliated structures and international actors. As of early 2026, the DoHR is conducting a systematic humanitarian needs assessment to inform resource allocation.

The KSDF is governed by a committee that includes two representatives each from the Karenni Consultative Council (KSCC), the Karenni State Interim Parliament (KSIP) and KIEC. Both local CSOs and government departments can apply competitively for funds based on sector needs. This structure reflects a deliberate donor choice to fund democratic-oriented, civilian governance structures directly, bypassing UN pooled mechanisms.

CASE STUDY B: Rakhine (Arakan) – centralised control under ULA/AA

The ULA/AA has established the Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO), headed by a senior AA official with close ties to the AA leadership. The HDCO requires all organisations operating in AA-controlled areas (which now encompasses most of Rakhine State) to obtain approval. In practice, this means that INGOs and UN agencies are entirely excluded from direct field operations because they cannot legally coordinate with non-state armed groups under their own governance frameworks. They operate instead through local CSOs and CBOs that have been re-registered or renamed to obscure their international affiliations.

The AA also exercises direct influence over aid distribution, including last-minute political interventions in aid plans. In some areas, the AA determines distribution which CSOs in Rohingya areas reported was allocated in the ratio of 70% to Rakhine communities and 30% to Rohingya populations. This reflects ethnic-political considerations rather than humanitarian need. Rohingya respondents in Sittwe reported that a UN agency had cut off rations due to military blockades, leaving IDPs surviving on one meal per day; some community members described facing starvation. The humanitarian corridor demanded by both Rohingya and Arakan civil society leaders has not materialized due to security concerns.

4.4 The HDP nexus: fragmented, contested, but locally pursued

The HDP nexus – the analytical and operational framework linking emergency response, longer-term development investment and peacebuilding – was already a contested concept in Myanmar before the 2021 coup. In the current context, the formal HDP nexus has collapsed at the national level, while local variants are being constructed from below, often without international recognition or support.

The formal nexus: blocked by political constraints

Interviews with UN representatives suggested that coordination across the HDP dimensions is severely constrained. Coordination was also described as operating through the 'traditional setup: cluster-by-cluster at national and subnational levels', creating 'information black holes' where even coordination among UN country and regional teams is fragmented.

The political situation limits any meaningful dialogue with Myanmar's de facto authorities, while the fragmentation of humanitarian operations across SAC- and EAO-controlled territories makes joint planning structurally impossible. Attempts to build alternative mechanisms that could facilitate access and coordination across conflict lines without requiring the junta's consent have yielded limited operational results.

'Without a stable political environment, it is extremely difficult to coordinate and deliver effective responses. If political stability were restored, many of the current challenges could be addressed more systematically and sustainably. Ultimately, the core issue lies in political stability.'

National actor, Nay Pyi Taw

Local nexus practice: self-organised, underfunded

Where the formal nexus has stalled, some local actors are pursuing development-oriented programming within humanitarian constraints. In Karenni, camp-level education committees have maintained schools, trained teachers and constructed learning spaces throughout the conflict period, a continuous education provision that bridges humanitarian and development functions without formal nexus framing. In Sagaing, for example, one respondent described a small livelihoods programme enabling war-displaced farming households to achieve food sufficiency within six months of support, with potential for surplus. Religious institutions have likewise maintained health clinics, water systems and community economic networks that function as development infrastructure.

These practices share common characteristics: they are community-embedded and relationship-based; they integrate humanitarian, social protection and development functions without sectoral silos; they depend on local financing (diaspora, community contributions, religious endowments) that is unrestricted and flexible; and they are largely invisible to the international system's tracking and reporting frameworks. The humanitarian system's failure to recognise, connect to and fund these initiatives represents a significant missed opportunity, both for the communities they serve and for the system's own transition out of permanent humanitarian dependence.

The post-election outlook and a path forward

The junta's staged elections in late 2025 and early 2026 have not altered the fundamental political landscape (OCHA, 2025a). Respondents expressed low expectations for post-election improvement in the humanitarian outlook.

