



MYANMAR COUNTRY REPORT

THE STATE OF THE
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the generosity of the 65 women and men across Myanmar who gave their time and trusted us with their experiences. They came from diverse ethnic, geographic and professional backgrounds, aid recipients, community leaders, humanitarian workers and system-level actors, and spoke with candour under conditions that carry real personal risk. Their voices are the foundation of everything that follows. Our nine local researchers conducted interviews across some of the most difficult and dangerous areas in Myanmar. Their commitment, local knowledge and care for the communities they worked with shaped the quality of this research in ways no methodology can fully capture.

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ABOUT NYAN CORRIDOR

[Nyan Corridor](#) is a Myanmar-focused research and capacity-building organisation committed to producing locally grounded knowledge to inform policy, humanitarian action and social change. Its work focuses on humanitarianism, governance, conflict, community resilience and the experiences of communities affected by Myanmar's ongoing political and humanitarian crises. Nyan Corridor works closely with local researchers, civil society organizations, community-based actors and emerging governance institutions across Myanmar. It combines rigorous research with sustained engagement with communities and frontline actors, helping bring locally generated evidence and perspectives into national and international policy discussions. Nyan Corridor also leads the Humanitarian Observatory Myanmar (HOM).

ABOUT ALNAP

[ALNAP](#) (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance) is a global humanitarian learning network made up of over 100 NGOs, UN agencies, Red Cross/ Crescent Movements members, donors, funders, networks, academics and think tanks. It exists to help the sector learn and improve, by drawing on shared experience to understand what is working, where challenges remain, and what needs to change.

This report is one of a series of country case studies in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Myanmar, Palestine, Poland and Ukraine, and Sudan to supplement [The State of the Humanitarian System 2026](#). While distinct from the global SOHS report, these outputs draw on the same country-level data, with a specific focus on national findings. They are intended to inform national and regional audiences and stakeholders, and to contribute to context-specific discussions on the humanitarian system.

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Disclaimer: This report was wholly authored by our research partner. The contents, conclusions and recommendations contained herein reflect the opinion of the authors and their interpretation of the data collected in each country, not necessarily those of ALNAP.

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About ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report

Humanitarian action can be a lifeline to people experiencing the worst that conflict and disaster can inflict. For over a decade, ALNAP's [State of the Humanitarian System report \(SOHS\)](#) has provided a unique, evidence-based understanding of the system and how well it works for affected people. Based on a huge body of evidence including exclusive research with crisis-affected people and practitioners, SOHS addresses key questions about performance and effectiveness in areas such as hunger and mortality reduction, as well as giving a comprehensive picture of funding, resource flows, staffing and organisations. Consultations with people affected by crises were central to the research from the outset, and shaped the focus of the report.



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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

KEY FINDINGS

Theme	Key finding
A fractured system	Myanmar's formal humanitarian architecture – United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and the cluster system – has contracted sharply since 2021, largely withdrawing from territories affected by conflict and controlled by ethnic armed organisations (EAO). Local civil society, diaspora networks and faith-based organisations have become the primary responders for millions of people that the formal system cannot reach. Furthermore, the suspension of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programmes eliminated a critical funding stream for Myanmar, devastating local organisations dependent on US-funded channels.
Localisation in name only	Despite global commitments, localisation has not translated into equitable funding or decision-making power for local actors. Capable local organisations – many operating in areas where international actors appear to have withdrawn – struggle to access resources directly.
Resistance humanitarianism and principled action	Local actors have developed a distinct practice of 'resistance humanitarianism' – aid shaped by solidarity, survival and moral engagement with a population under systematic state violence. This challenges the conventional interpretation of neutrality and requires the humanitarian system to develop more contextually grounded approaches to principled action.
Divergent local governance	Two contrasting models of local humanitarian governance are observed. In Karenni, a consultative and civilian-led model offers an alternative for accountable local governance and access; in Rakhine, we see how military-dominated governance can entrench ethnic exclusion and narrow the humanitarian space.
Humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus: stalled	Formal nexus linkages appear to have collapsed at the national level. Local actors are building nexus-oriented programming organically – through education continuity, community livelihoods and religious institution-based services – but with little international recognition, funding or coordination.

Key message: Myanmar's humanitarian crisis is not primarily a problem of insufficient coordination or operational protocols. It is a problem of political authority, access and recognition. The communities bearing the heaviest burden are served – sometimes exclusively – by local actors operating outside the line of sight and protection of the international humanitarian system. An international system that cannot see, fund and learn from these actors will continue to measure its performance against standards that bear little relation to the lives of the people it claims to serve.

Report structure:

Section 1 establishes the crisis context and humanitarian response landscape in Myanmar. Section 2 describes the methodology for this study. Section 3 analyses the size, shape and performance of the humanitarian system, covering its architecture, the scale of the caseload versus actual reach, and the system's performance on timeliness, quality and coordination. Section 4 looks in depth at four defining features of Myanmar's humanitarian moment: 1) the gap between the rhetoric and reality of localisation; 2) the emergence of resistance humanitarianism; 3) the divergent local governance models of Karenni and Rakhine; and 4) the fractured state of the HDP nexus. Section 5 synthesises findings and sets out actionable learning considerations for donors, UN agencies, INGOs and the wider humanitarian community.

The findings in this report reflect perspectives from humanitarian actors, community facilitators of humanitarian aid and people receiving aid, unless specifically stated otherwise.



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

Credit: Nyan Corridor researcher

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The crisis context

Myanmar is experiencing one of the most complex and multidimensional humanitarian crises in the world. The military coup of 1 February 2021 set in motion an accelerating cycle of armed conflict, economic collapse and mass displacement that has fundamentally altered the lives of millions of people across the country (International Crisis Group, 2026). By the start of 2026, nearly one-third of Myanmar's population required humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2025a).

The crisis is driven by intensifying armed conflict between the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) or Tatmadaw, also referred to as the State Administration Council (SAC) or military junta, and a broad coalition of EAOs and People's Defence Forces. In the first half of 2025, Myanmar ranked second globally for conflict intensity and fourth most dangerous country for civilians, with more than half of the population exposed to active hostilities (OCHA, 2025b).

Displacement has reached catastrophic levels. Approximately 4 million people are internally displaced, many having fled multiple times – living in informal shelters, displacement camps or with host families, with severely limited access to basic services (OCHA, 2025a). Among the most acutely vulnerable are the Rohingya, with approximately 550,000 remaining in Rakhine, who are subjected to systematic discrimination and restrictions on movement (ibid.).

On 28 March 2025, a 7.7-magnitude earthquake struck central Myanmar near Sagaing and Mandalay, followed minutes later by a 6.7-magnitude aftershock. The disaster damaged over 40,000 homes, nearly 2,000 schools and approximately 70 health facilities (OCHA, 2025b). Official figures recorded at least 3,400 deaths, though the real toll is likely higher owing to communication blackouts (ibid.). The earthquake compounded an already alarming humanitarian crisis: an additional 2 million people were pushed into urgent need, bringing those requiring immediate assistance to 6.3 million and deepening a food crisis already affecting 8.5 million people (OCHA, 2025a).

The 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) for Myanmar (ibid.) highlights how economic collapse is



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compounding the humanitarian toll. The 2021 coup triggered a banking crisis, cash and foreign currency shortages, and rampant inflation that drove poverty back to 2015 levels and pushed millions out of their livelihood activities. Public services – such as health, education, and water, sanitation and hygiene – have deteriorated severely or collapsed in large parts of the country. More than a third of school-age children are out of school, with the highest out-of-school rates among displaced and stateless children. The health system has endured over 1,800 incidents of violence since the coup, with 441 health facilities damaged, destroyed or rendered non-functional. The direct human toll on health and humanitarian workers has been equally severe: 160 health workers have been killed and 40 kidnapped since 2021.

Myanmar's crisis is distinctly gendered. Women, girls and individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer and other gender identities (LGBTQ+) face disproportionate protection risks. These include gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, forced marriage and trafficking, and they face access barriers compounded by discriminatory norms and documentation constraints (UNHCR, 2025; UNHRC, 2024; UNFPA, 2025).

1.2 Humanitarian response

The Myanmar humanitarian response is coordinated through the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), which provides strategic direction across the cluster system (OCHA, 2025a). The principal framework guiding the response is the HNRP, an annual planning instrument issued under the Humanitarian Programme Cycle. The 2026 HNRP – issued in December 2025 – identifies 16.2 million people in need across 227 townships (approximately two-thirds of the country), and targets 4.9 million people for life-saving and protection assistance, prioritising 2.6 million people in the most severe need. The total financial requirement stands at US\$890 million, of which US\$521 million is prioritized (ibid.).

Access constraints represent one of the most severe operational challenges in Myanmar. Interviews with UN agencies and local and international actors consistently revealed that these constraints arise from SAC-imposed registration requirements for humanitarian organisations, particularly those operating in resistance-held areas. They risk administrative and criminal penalties, and they face bureaucratic constraints on the movement and supply of goods and on telecommunications. These constraints have, therefore, meant that access to areas that are affected by conflict and hard to reach has been structurally limited for international actors especially, resulting in a response that is access-driven rather than needs-based. This reflects a historical pattern with junta-controlled areas receiving disproportionately higher levels of international assistance, as they are more accessible (Sida, 2025).



Local and national humanitarian actors ... have become the primary conduit for assistance across large areas of the country.

In response to these constraints, local and national humanitarian actors, including Myanmar civil society organisations (CSOs), mutual aid networks and community-based responders, have become the primary conduit for assistance across large areas of the country beyond the reach of international actors. Recognising this reality, the HCT has been developing a localisation strategy to strengthen local and national ownership and decentralise decision-making within the response architecture (Naw et al., 2025).

Chronic underfunding has severely constrained the reach of the response (Bloem et al., 2026). The 2024 HNRP received only 39.6% of required funding, leaving an estimated 1.4 million people who were identified in the most severe need without any assistance (OCHA, 2023). The scale-back of US humanitarian funding in early 2025 and reductions from other donor governments and funding streams during the 2022–2025 period intensified the pressure across an already underfunded response, forcing difficult prioritisation across sectors and partners (Sida, 2025).

1.3 Why Myanmar for the 2026 SOHS?

Myanmar was selected for in-depth primary research for the 2026 SOHS because it represents a paradigmatic polycrisis: protracted armed conflict, political collapse, economic breakdown and the March 2025 earthquake are layered atop one another. It raises fundamental questions about humanitarian action under contested governance and the dilemmas for actors operating within the traditional scope of the neutrality principle.



Protracted armed conflict, political collapse, economic breakdown and the March 2025 earthquake are layered atop one another.

Myanmar is also a critical test of localisation in practice, with local actors serving as de facto first responders yet receiving insufficient recognition or direct resources.

With the HNRP consistently underfunded and major donor withdrawals in 2025, Myanmar illustrates the gap between humanitarian need and the system's actual capacity to respond – making it a barometer for the global humanitarian system at a moment of unprecedented strain.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Karenni State during the formative phase of the overall SOHS study to inform the research about what people affected by crisis prioritised. The data from these FGDs was also used to refine the research instruments. Primary data collection relied exclusively on 65 in-depth interviews conducted across five geographic areas – Karenni State, Kayin State, Rakhine State, Sagaing Region and Chin State, and at the system level – selected to reflect geographic diversity, variation in conflict intensity, and distinct demographic and protection profiles.

Three respondent types were purposively selected: aid recipients (individuals affected by crisis who received or were eligible for humanitarian assistance); aid facilitators (local CSOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) mediating delivery and sometimes recipients of aid themselves); and aid providers (INGO, UN and Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement staff). System-level representatives from the HCT, cluster leads and major donors were also interviewed. While these categories are used to organise the data, they overlap in practice, and perspectives are treated as such throughout the analysis.

Table 1: Interviews by state/region

State/region/level	Number of interviews
Karenni	10
Chin	12
Rakhine	6
Rohingya area*	6
Sagaing	10
Nay Pyi Taw	10
System level	11
Total	65

*Note: *Data on this population is highlighted explicitly due to their historical marginalisation and the operational constraints in accessing them.*

Table 2: Interviews by respondent type and gender

Respondent type	Male	Female	Total
Aid recipients	5	12	17
Aid facilitators	20	7	27
Aid providers	13	3	16
System-level key informants	4	1	5
Total	42	23	65

Research team

Ten researchers, led by a National Research Lead, conducted the study. Local knowledge, trust networks, gender-conscious respondent mapping and attention to communication security were central to the approach. The team sought to maintain gender balance in respondent selection; while the overall sample skews male respondents (reflecting access constraints, security limitations and the predominance of men in aid-provider roles in Myanmar), deliberate efforts were made to include women as aid recipients and facilitators, particularly in Karenni and Chin State. Most interviews were conducted remotely by phone or secure virtual platforms. Regular team debriefings supported quality control and researcher wellbeing.

Data analysis

Transcripts were coded in MAXQDA using the SOHS analytical framework. This was supplemented with locally derived codes to accommodate Myanmar-specific dynamics, including the contested governance landscape, the role of ethnic resistance organisations in service delivery, and the acute access and security constraints shaping the response.

Limitations

Telecommunications disruptions in Rakhine, Chin and Karenni affected connectivity and interview depth. Communication windows were restricted – particularly for respondents in Sittwe camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), where connectivity and safety limited interview duration and depth. Geographic coverage gaps remained in some of the most inaccessible areas affected by conflict. The predominance of remote interview modalities may have reduced data richness, though established researcher trust relationships mitigated this to the extent possible.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for humanitarian research in settings affected by conflict and approved by ODI Global's Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained orally from all participants and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Interview codes were used throughout in place of identifying information. Given the acute security environment, particular care was taken to protect respondents' identities through secure communication platforms and the omission of identifying details.



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.



Performance must be understood in relation to the structural conditions each actor faces.

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



Established camps near roads and safe corridors are visited repeatedly, while remote settlements and IDPs staying with relatives or in scattered housing are systematically overlooked.

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.



Equal distribution across households reduces social friction but fails those with acute needs.

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.



Cash assistance may be sustaining survival rather than building any form of resilience.

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



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

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.

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.

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



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.

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.



[Local humanitarian workers] may share food with armed resistance groups when asked, because they regard them as community members and kin rather than armed combatants.

'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.

5. CONCLUSION AND LEARNING CONSIDERATIONS

5.1 What the system must recognise

Myanmar's humanitarian crisis is not primarily a problem of insufficient international coordination, funding mechanisms or operational protocols. It is a problem of political authoritarianism, access and recognition. The communities bearing the greatest burden of displacement, violence and deprivation are being served, sometimes exclusively, by local actors who operate outside the international system's line of sight and without its protection. These actors have developed sophisticated humanitarian practices, governance and cross-border financing networks that deserve recognition not as capacity-building initiatives but as the system's real operational core.



[Local] actors have developed sophisticated humanitarian practices, governance and cross-border financing networks that deserve recognition not as capacity-building initiatives but as the system's real operational core.

5.2 From system performance to system reality

Formally, Myanmar has a humanitarian architecture with OCHA-led coordination: a cluster system in transition to area-based models, UN agencies present in Yangon and border hubs, and a HNRP setting targets for the people in need. In practice, the system reaches a fraction of that number, is structurally absent from most territories affected by conflict, and in 2025 was further weakened by the largest funding shock in the global humanitarian system's recent history. The USAID cuts eliminated the primary funding channel for many of the most capable local organisations, precisely at the moment when the international system most depends on these actors.



What persists is a decentralised, community-driven ecosystem ... that is more geographically extensive, more trusted and more agile than the formal system it supplements.

What persists is a decentralised, community-driven

ecosystem – diaspora networks, faith-based institutions, resistance-aligned civil society and emergent local governance bodies – that is more geographically extensive, more trusted and more agile than the formal system it supplements. Its weaknesses are real but can be addressed. The international system's current approach, passively channelling support through INGO intermediaries while maintaining compliance frameworks designed for a different context, does not address them.

5.3 Recommendations

Table 3: Recommendations by stakeholder

For whom	Recommendation
International donors	Fund local and resistance-aligned governance structures directly where they demonstrate accountability, civilian orientation and community legitimacy. Create flexible funding pathways for all eligible actors, even those operating in contested areas. Ensure that withdrawing from high-risk areas without commensurate risk-sharing is accompanied by protection guarantees and adequate resource transfer to local partners who are absorbing the burden.
UN agencies and OCHA	Acknowledge formally that the humanitarian coordination architecture currently governs only a fraction of the humanitarian response landscape. Strengthen the area-based model by granting local coordination bodies substantive decision-making roles, beyond consultation. Ensure compliance and due-diligence requirements are inclusive of the most active local actors. Develop a Myanmar-specific framework for principled engagement with non-state armed actors to enable access negotiations without triggering sanctions.
INGOs	Transition from an intermediary model to genuine partnership: share decision-making authority and overhead resources with local partners, not just sub-grant execution. Advocate with donors for direct funding to local actors, even where this reduces INGO programme budgets. Invest in localisation of risk management, supporting local actors to develop their own security protocols rather than requiring conformity with internationally designed frameworks that do not fit the context.

For whom	Recommendation
Humanitarian community (collective)	Grant formal legitimacy to the Inclusive Humanitarian Forum (IHF) and comparable locally initiated coordination mechanisms as recognised platforms for cross-frontline dialogue. Support the establishment of clear, time-bound humanitarian corridors with multi-party monitoring, including engagement with relevant countries. Introduce explicit ceasefire and access monitoring expectations in humanitarian planning documents, with actionable consequences for violations.
Research and advocacy	Document and disseminate evidence on resistance humanitarianism as a principled practice to build the normative case for adapting international humanitarian law and donor policy to protracted conflict contexts. Develop participatory monitoring frameworks that capture the reach and quality of local humanitarian networks, making visible what current reporting systems cannot see.

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