



POLICY BRIEF MYANMAR | JANUARY 2024
Protracted Displacement Economies

Beyond Humanitarian Assistance: Recognising Mutual Aid and Community Support among Internally Displaced People in Myanmar

Cover photo: Bright Star Maternity Bag Project. Read more at <https://thr5ve.org/initiatives/bright-star-maternity-project>

OVERVIEW

Around the world, humanitarian responses to protracted displacement are being recognised as inadequate. Policy interest is shifting from short-term humanitarianism to more sustainable, locally-based practices. Our project, *Protracted Displacement Economies, spanning five countries*,¹ investigates the move from a traditional humanitarian model towards more diverse approaches. Our focus is not just on displaced people themselves, but a whole 'displacement-affected community'. Our findings suggest that mutual aid and community support are important, but often overlooked. Informal groups and intermediaries, including monks and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), are coming to the fore. Gender matters, but in unforeseen ways, including women as breadwinners, entrepreneurs and volunteers.

KEY POINTS

- › Beyond formal humanitarian interventions, there are a wealth of informal support practices and local and trans-border mechanisms existing in Southeast Myanmar, which can be strengthened, leading to more sustainable support in the mid-term.
- › Humanitarian aid interventions need to be supported by complementary development actions to reverse the growing humanitarian needs and build the resilience of displacement-affected communities.

1 Funded by Global Challenges Research Fund, UKRI

Myanmar Context

Myanmar is facing complex challenges exacerbated by a military coup in February 2021. Since then, over 2.3 million [UNHCR, January 2024]² people have been forcibly displaced within Myanmar, with another 5-8 million driven into exile, mostly into neighbouring countries. The ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar military and resistance forces has seen repeated indiscriminate shelling of - and air attacks on - civilian communities repeatedly undertaken by the Myanmar military regime, which in turn has led to significant civilian displacement. The impacts of COVID-19 and climate change have further strained communities. Local actors, including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and EAOs, have taken key roles in promoting livelihoods, human rights, and community survival. Long-established EAOs have established significant social service and governance systems and administrations. Faith-based, ethno-linguistic and kinship networks are crucial for social capital, improving communities' coping mechanisms.

Research Locations and Methods

Research was undertaken in three locations across Southeast Myanmar, illustrating different modes of displacement, and varying economic strategies and coping mechanisms. These areas include Taw Oo (Toungoo) District of the Karen National Union (KNU), located in northern Karen State; Myaing Gyi Ngu, located in central Karen State; and New Mon State Party ceasefire zones, located across southern Mon State.

Research comprised a quantitative component of 464 household surveys, carried out in each of the three areas. Qualitative data collection involved semi-structured interviews, comprising a first round of 157 interviews across three locations, and 74 interviews a year later. Ten Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 24 semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted engaging businesswomen, local authorities, CSOs and EAO members.

Research Findings

Our research documents how beyond formal humanitarian intervention, there are a wealth of informal support practices and local and trans-border mechanisms existing, which when further strengthened, could lead to more sustainable support in the mid-term. This is further illustrated in the displacement stories. <https://www.displacementeconomies.org/our-focus/core-methods/film-stories-without-borders/>

2 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/105901>

The Importance of Local and Grassroots Actors

Myaing Gyi Ngu is an internally displaced persons (IDP) settlement, which is under the control of the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), which operates under the Myanmar Army. Local Karen nationalist monks strongly influence the area and provide support, including food donations and land parcels, to residents. Limited job opportunities in Myaing Gyi Ngu lead to most residents doing casual labour in addition to the 'voluntary labour' for the monks. There are serious underlying protection issues in relation to the vulnerabilities of this particular population. People displaced during earlier conflicts in the 1990s settled in this town, and some of them are now financially self-sufficient.

UN agencies and INGOs have initially been pivotal in supporting the population, offering crucial assistance in infrastructure development, electricity access, and food items. The aftermath of the Myanmar coup however, impacted both international and local organisations' ability to provide aid. Despite challenges, community-based organisations like the Committee for Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) exhibit significant resilience to support the displaced community. Vocational training and livelihood projects aim to reduce dependency on emergency aid.

NMSP Ceasefire Zones have experienced relative stability since the NMSP agreed to a ceasefire with the military government in 1995.³ Educational and healthcare services are provided by NMSP and Mon CSOs, creating a secure environment for local Mon communities, including long-term resettled refugees. Land provision to resettled IDPs and refugees is a significant effort by NMSP. The Mon National Education Committee, successfully delivers education services. NMSP and CSOs address challenges with international funding, diaspora support, and projects aimed at youth empowerment, livelihood development, and gender equality. The shift from humanitarian to development support has been marked, with local NGOs collaborating with international partners. Livelihood challenges include limited job opportunities and weak market connections. Migration to Thailand for better opportunities is common, but formal channels remain limited, leading to undocumented migration flows.

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District: Taw Oo District is under KNU administration, but the human security situation since the coup has been characterised by widespread violence. The KNU, perceived as protecting villagers, provides basic health and education services. The district has been affected by multiple displaced populations. Residents temporarily flee to towns, other villages or hiding sites in the mountains, returning to resume livelihood activities once

3 <https://covenant-institute.com/2020/07/reflections-on-the-1995-new-mon-state-party-ceasefire/>

situations stabilise. Different waves of IDPs can sometimes lead to tensions between the host communities and more recently arrived IDPs.

In Taw Oo, external support has historically been limited, but organisations, including the KNU, CSOs, and local NGOs, now

actively promote development with some international funding. The KNU, partner CSOs and churches deliver essential services, emphasising community self-protection through food sharing, information exchange, and mutual assistance. Faith-based, especially Christian Church support is vital, providing emergency assistance, microfinance, and vocational training.

“
I wouldn't say everything is perfect in this village,
but we take care of one another,
and I know everyone here. ~ (Mon area, ID 8)
”

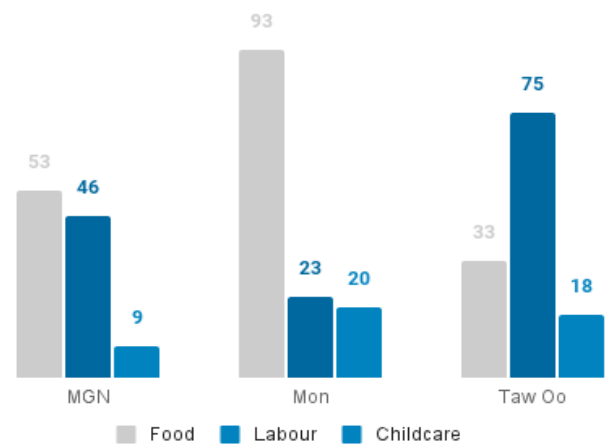
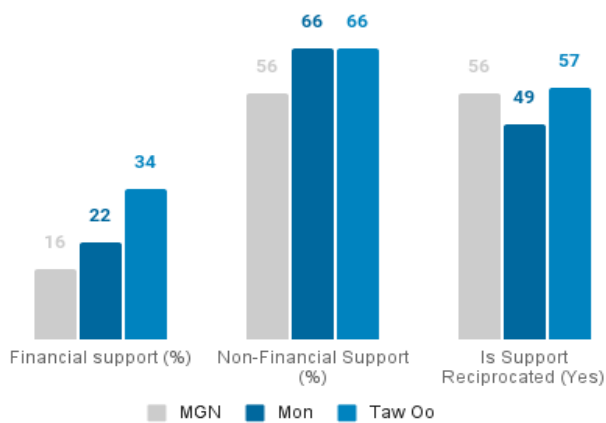
Mutual Aid

There is strong evidence of mutual aid being extended between IDPs across all locations. Based on the quantitative data, 57% of households in Taw Oo mention reciprocal support, followed by 56% in MGN and 49% in the Mon area. This support typically takes the form of non-financial assistance, including food, labour, or childcare, as indicated in the graphs below.

displaced individuals in the Taw Oo District. Despite this support, changing circumstances, such as rising food prices, can lead to tensions between different segments of the population.

Figure 1: Support given to neighbours

Figure 2: Type of in-kind support given to neighbours



In MGN, long-term IDPs provide financial and non-financial support, creating a close-knit community. Recently-arrived IDPs offer non-financial assistance to others, fostering mutual understanding and solidarity. In the NMSP area, a strong sense of community exists, with villagers primarily sharing non-monetary resources, guided by cultural practices and shared responsibility. In Taw Oo, too, reciprocal support is crucial for displaced communities' resilience. There, host communities with their own displacement histories play a significant role in offering empathy, shelter, and support. Christian churches also contribute to efforts for the well-being of

Remittance support plays a crucial role in our research area. Support for IDPs in the Taw Oo area, for example, comes from the overseas Karen community. Those who are now residing abroad send donations to the village, both in terms of remittances to families, as well as more broadly through diaspora philanthropic organisations. In addition, some of the diaspora community donates through church networks, particularly on Christmas and Karen New Year (NK 3; NK 14). Some individuals living abroad support elderly people with small amounts of money, reciprocating the help they received from them during their own youth. Some contribute to the village's development, such as the construction of a church hall (NK 14, NK 15, NK16).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the protracted humanitarian crisis since the military coup in February 2021, humanitarian aid interventions need to be supported by complementary development actions to build the resilience of displacement-affected communities.

Support for Mutual Aid Networks

Recognize and support existing community-based, reciprocal aid practices, particularly non-financial support mechanisms. Facilitate the formation and strengthening of community groups, ensuring they have the resources and capacity to provide mutual assistance.

Encourage the formation and strengthening of social welfare, youth, and women's groups at the village level, and create a supportive network for financial assistance and resource sharing.

Support financial inclusion for displacement affected communities

In the absence of the formal financial sector in conflict-affected and hard to reach areas in Myanmar, support financial inclusion programmes through community based-saving and loan schemes, which can stimulate economic growth and contribute to broader social development. Ensure that such programmes are implemented in partnership with local organizations and networks, who own the trust of local communities and have the capacity to manage funds effectively and extend benefits to a broader segment of the population.

Invest in agriculture value chain development

Support local agricultural innovation through peer-to-peer learning, and economic resilience initiatives that focus on skill-sharing, resource pooling, market analysis and value chain development. In the MGN area, this includes development of textiles such as traditional dresses. Facilitate partnerships between local businesses and displaced individuals to create economic opportunities.

Strengthening Local Initiatives and Systems

Emphasise the importance of local governance actors and social service providers, including the KNU, and NMSP, CSOs, and local NGOs, in delivering humanitarian aid and development initiatives. Ensure that external support builds and strengthens ethnic systems, thereby enhancing the capacity, capability, accountability, and responsiveness of basic service functions. Encourage partnerships that empower local organisations and communities to lead in addressing their own needs.

Sustain Faith-Based Support

Acknowledge the vital role of faith-based organisations in providing emergency assistance and supporting social development activities. Encourage collaboration between these organisations and other stakeholders for community development.

Engage Previously Displaced Individuals to support others

Tap into the knowledge and experience of individuals who have previously experienced displacement. Support initiatives that further enable them to contribute to the well-being of newly displaced people.

Strengthen Gender-Responsive Policies

Establish initiatives and support existing women organisations that support female entrepreneurship, providing training, access to capital, and market linkages for women engaged in income-generating activities.

Enhance Donor Coordination and Flexibility

Advocate for a nuanced approach in donor funding, recognizing the importance of local organisations in responding to the unique needs of IDP communities.

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