

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	672
Land:	Myanmar
Kilde:	The New Humanitarian
Titel:	As war dynamics change localization is now vital for effective aid in Myanmar's Rakhine
Udgivet:	29. november 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	1. februar 2024

As war dynamics change, localisation is now vital for effective aid in Myanmar's Rakhine

Many international actors appear to be using the word as a pretext for maintaining a presence, without meaningfully changing the way they work.



Resistance forces have made [sweeping gains](#) in Myanmar, prompting [forecasts](#) of a possible junta demise. But with the intensifying war, humanitarian needs are also rapidly rising, making it imperative that international aid groups more effectively back the community groups that are the backbone of the response effort.

An [informal ceasefire](#) officially came to an end in Myanmar's western **Rakhine State** on 13 November, when the Arakan Army, one of the nation's most powerful ethnic armed groups, launched [coordinated attacks](#) on military outposts.

****Rakhine State:** In 1989, Myanmar's military government changed the English spelling of Arakan State to Rakhine State. But many among the state's largest ethnic community self-identify as Arakanese, which is associated with descendants of an Arakan kingdom that dominated the region from 1430 to 1785.*

The attacks are part of a larger [operation](#) that began on 27 October. Known as Operation 1027, it represents the full-scale entry of the Arakan Army and its allies into the countrywide uprising against military rule that emerged following the February 2021 coup.

A UN [report](#) published last week counts 335,000 displaced across the country since late October, bringing the total to more than two million. It also describes severe challenges in responding to the

crisis amid ongoing fighting, roadblocks, telecoms disruptions, cash and commodity shortages, and the rising costs of goods.

In Rakhine, where the military has carried out near-daily air and artillery strikes in civilian areas since the fighting resumed, 17 civilians have already been killed and 57 wounded as of 28 November, [according to](#) data collected by Radio Free Asia. Local emergency responders say 130,000 people have also been newly displaced in seven townships in northern and central Rakhine, as of 29 November.

In addition to successive waves of violence over the past decade that have left more than 200,000 people in situations of protracted displacement, a devastating [cyclone](#) hit the state's central coast in May, destroying thousands of homes. During this time of growing emergency, it is imperative that international donors and organisations recognise the access, flexibility, and efficiency that local responders can offer, and support us to lead.

Since establishing my own civil society organisation in 2013, I have observed dramatic changes in Rakhine State's humanitarian landscape.

Back then, months after state-sponsored intercommunal conflict had left devastating rifts between the state's Rakhine and Rohingya people, my colleagues and I used our own savings to run community-based art, sports, and civic education activities, while UN agencies and international NGOs established a multimillion-dollar humanitarian [response](#).

They made little effort to partner with local organisations in the process. There was a general perception that we didn't have the capacity to meet their operational standards, and that those of us who are ethnic Rakhine would be unwilling and unable to work inclusively with the Rohingya or other minorities.

This approach not only overlooked organisations like mine that were interested in working across diversity, but also exacerbated intercommunal resentments among the Rakhine public. Most international support was going to the Rohingya, and while international organisations [justified](#) this on the basis of need, many Rakhines perceived it as biased.

In 2014, Rakhine ultranationalist mobs [attacked](#) international offices and staff houses, forcing many of their staff to evacuate. It was then that international organisations began reaching out to local civil society organisations, in time realising that many did, in fact, have the capacity to partner with them and could also offer them greater access and trust among local communities.

A shift toward locally led responses accelerated from there. Civil society grew stronger during the country's transition to semi-civilian rule, while international humanitarian access dwindled as the military committed genocide against the Rohingya and then [war crimes](#) in its attempts to destroy the Arakan Army.

Then the coup happened, and the military not only scaled up its attacks on civilians, but also on humanitarian channels. It [blocked](#) the movement of relief items, destroyed supplies, and [attacked](#) aid workers. Since October 2022, its [NGO registration law](#) has required organisations to submit detailed information about their activities and prohibited any communication with resistance actors.

Local and international organisations have on the whole responded very differently to these obstacles.

While international NGOs have generally continued to identify the military as the de facto authority, local organisations have taken a more flexible approach, engaging with resistance actors and other stakeholders in order to meet needs on the ground. Many of these resistance groups have their own humanitarian mechanisms and have increasingly [demonstrated](#) the capacity and will to [coordinate](#) with outside relief efforts and [respect international law](#).

In Rakhine State, where the Arakan Army now [claims control](#) over more than two thirds of the territory – and has its own travel authorisation process through its Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office – a flexible approach is particularly relevant.

Localisation is a ‘buzzword’ in Rakhine

In a [paper](#) recently published by the Center for Humanitarian Leadership, a research and advocacy organisation, independent analyst Adelina Kamal calls on traditional actors to rethink their approaches to aid in Myanmar and support locally led responses centred around “humanitarian resistance”.

Kamal argues that these approaches – which break down the barriers between human rights, humanitarianism, development, and peace – have “significant operational advantages” over traditional aid responses, including greater access, the acceptance of local populations, and data that reflects ground realities.

In my own experience, local organisations are able to respond more quickly and with fewer bureaucratic constraints than international NGOs and UN agencies.

Staff of international organisations – both locals and expatriates – are often working remotely, or evacuated with a few months’ advance salaries during crises and emergencies. They are slowed by a raft of laborious processes and procedures: coordination meetings, needs assessments, contingency planning, developing minimum standards, waiting for the military’s travel authorisations, fund transfers.

Despite the clear benefits of transitioning to a locally led response, international organisations haven’t done nearly enough in this regard, even though [localisation](#) has become a buzzword in Rakhine State.

Some civil society leaders joke that – having only been allowed to chew the bones of international donor funds in the past – they might at last be able to get a fair share of the meat. In reality, however, international actors appear to be using the word more as a pretext for maintaining a presence in Rakhine State, without meaningfully changing the way they work.

This limited progress toward localisation was particularly evident in May, when [Cyclone Mocha](#) barrelled into the Rakhine coast.

International aid was [incapacitated](#) by junta blockades, whereas local groups and the Arakan Army conducted evacuations and led the response despite limited international funding and support. Considering the current humanitarian emergency, there is no time to lose in putting lessons learned into practice.

To effectively support a localised response, there are several actions that international actors should immediately take.

Among them, they should work through larger civil society networks and consortia that are able to reach communities across the state in spite of military blockades. They should also support a bottom-up approach designed and led by local organisations rather than donors. This will also help to ensure that the response is relevant to the context and incorporates local practices and wisdom.

Third, donors should work to eliminate the intermediary role of international agencies in the coordination process, and instead directly communicate with local organisations, seek out our feedback, and invite us to participate in the budget allocation process.

Fourth, they must use flexible modes of transferring funds, such as through hundis, local services, and agents, in order to ensure that programming can proceed smoothly despite disruptions to the formal banking system.

Local organisations are already the backbone of humanitarian responses across Rakhine State.

We have shown that we are capable of adapting to the ground situation, reaching diverse communities, and addressing both short-term and long-term needs. During this time of renewed emergency and beyond, international organisations and donors must practise truly equitable and inclusive partnership.

This article was written with support from Emily Fishbein, a freelance journalist and researcher focusing on Myanmar. Edited by Ali M. Latifi and Andrew Gully.

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