HPG REPORT | WORKING PAPER

Making Myanmar

Humanitarianism amid revolutionary state-building

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Cover photo: Displaced mother and baby in Kachin. © Dustin Barter

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About this report

HPG's work is directed by our Integrated Programme, a multi-year body of research spanning a range of issues, countries and emergencies, allowing us to examine critical issues facing humanitarian policy and practice and influence key debates in the sector. This paper is part of HPG's 'Collective action in crises: rights, resilience and reform' Integrated Programme. The authors would like to thank HPG's Integrated Programme donors whose funding enables us to pursue the research agenda.

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Contents

List of boxes and figures

Boxes

Figures

Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CSO	civil society organisation
ERO	ethnic resistance organisation
FDC	Federal Democracy Charter
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IEC	Interim Executive Council
IHA	international humanitarian actor
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
KNWO	Karenni National Women's Organisation
KSCC	Karenni State Consultative Council
LNHA	local or national humanitarian actor
MHF	Myanmar Humanitarian Fund
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People's Defence Force
SAC	State Administration Council
UN	United Nations
UWSA	United Wa State Army

Executive summary

> We cannot do a project-based revolution. International actors are very technical, but for us, it's more holistic. (Myanmar civil society interviewee)
>
> Regular international humanitarian response doesn't work in this highly restricted context. (United Nations interviewee)
>
> We are the legitimate government for the people of Karenni State, but often international humanitarian organisations neglect our achievements. Due to their own rigid institutions, they don't recognise that we have been doing much more than the Myanmar state who only oppresses us. (Resistance government interviewee)

This report illustrates the international humanitarian system's continued struggles in Myanmar, a country with contested governance. But the popular revolution is ongoing, gaining unprecedented ground in remaking the state. This has profound implications for humanitarianism. This paper focuses not just on what is, but also what could be, if aid efforts aligned with the population's pursuit of emancipation and ending military rule. Myanmar's pluralism is a central theme, both in terms of governance and the population, where the rights and self-determination of Indigenous People and ethnic minorities are paramount. The needs of this context call into question the application of the humanitarian principles, which have been compromised through the junta's aid manipulation and have dissuaded international humanitarian actors from engaging with resistance actors. The sector's grappling with the principles remains acute (see Moallin et al., 2025) and long-standing across geographies, such as Sudan (see Bottjen, 2024).

This research comes at a time of severe aid cuts and calls for simplifying the humanitarian system. It refutes such a direction, arguing that the sector must instead improve and expand its engagement with political and governance dynamics, which can enhance humanitarian independence from the junta's influence. A failure to do so has rendered, and will continue to render, significant harm across humanitarian settings.

International actors cannot risk failing Myanmar

Myanmar offers a microcosm of critical issues for the humanitarian sector, with global relevance. They are analysed through the examination of state-led crisis response in the post-coup context of widespread junta violence, immense socioeconomic and political upheaval, and a burgeoning revolutionary state-building project. The emerging reality is not simply one of contested governance, but instead a deeper reckoning with the country's British colonial legacy and decades of military rule

since independence. The contemporary reverberations of colonial rule, protracted violent conflict and persistent inequalities are manifestations of structural injustices that the humanitarian sector cannot afford to ignore.

The pluralistic state and Myanmar civil society lead crisis response

Rather than reconfiguring a centralised nation state, resistance actors across Myanmar are creating 'the pluralistic state'. It involves a multitude of actors creating localised and interconnected state entities involved in governance, security, service delivery and other state functions. This process and the engagement of international actors have significant ramifications not just for Myanmar, but also other sites of contested governance, such as Syria and Yemen. It also has major implications for humanitarian actors, who typically eschew issues of politics and governance to instead pursue a blinkered approach to delivering assistance. Such an approach is antithetical to the population's pursuit of emancipation and continues to be detrimental to the needs of Myanmar's affected people.

If the state is being entirely reconfigured, what does that mean for 'state-led' crisis response? The following observations underpin the research and analysis:

1. The junta is illegitimate, as it continues to commit war crimes and unleash unrelenting violence against the population (see Human Rights Watch, 2025). The international community, humanitarian and otherwise, must stop treating the junta as the legitimate state.
2. Myanmar is undergoing a transformative process of state-building, where a diversity of resistance actors are creating a new, legitimate and pluralistic state. In other words, the resistance is redefining the state.
3. The bulk of international humanitarian actors are inadequately engaging with this new pluralistic state reality, proving unable to navigate the country's contested governance and to meet affected people's immediate and long-term needs. This must be urgently addressed.

A consolidated examination of Myanmar's recent history and contested governance landscape illustrates how the contemporary context is part of a much longer arc of resistance and state-building. It highlights that international engagement with the country has always been fraught, particularly through misplaced recognition of and engagement with the junta that marginalised long-standing resistance actors, particularly ethnic resistance organisations. It is essential that contemporary Myanmar is understood within its historical context.

The pluralistic state-building project underway across Myanmar features a diversity of resistance actors and deeper analysis of the Kachin Independence Organisation and Karenni Interim Executive Council. These actors are much more than rebel or insurgent groups – they are locally legitimate and deliver state functions, such as education, health, security and other services. This includes resource allocation to humanitarian response, demonstrating an ability to deliver state-led crisis response. Collectively, they form the pluralistic state, which has emerged in spite, not because, of the international humanitarian and broader aid system. For many parts of the pluralistic state, the current revolution is not just about

ending the junta's role but also asserting Indigenous People's sovereignty and self-determination. International actors need to understand this reality, rather than espouse neutrality that is creating a veil of ignorance.

Myanmar civil society actors form the backbone of the humanitarian response across the country. There is often a symbiotic relationship between civil society actors and the pluralistic state, as the former play an important role in influencing policy and holding the pluralistic state to account. Service provision is not a benign process of meeting humanitarian needs, but instead a pursuit of community justice, particularly for Indigenous People and ethnic minorities. While the international aid apparatus, humanitarian and otherwise, remains largely constrained to being located and operating in junta-controlled areas, Myanmar's civil society actors are highly adept at navigating the country's contested terrain. However, this poses acute security risks for Myanmar civil society actors; despite this, they typically operate without adequate international support.

International humanitarian actors' engagement with the pluralistic state

The following are consolidated findings according to how different groups of humanitarian actors engage with the pluralistic state and the realities of Myanmar's context:

- United Nations (UN) agencies have, with some exceptions, consistently proven unable and unwilling to navigate Myanmar's contested governance realities, as they disproportionately focus on engaging the junta. UN agencies are the primary conduit for aid, yet are ill-suited to the context.
- International non-government organisations (INGOs) in Myanmar are typically pursuing conflict- and governance-ignorant approaches and are disproportionately concentrated in junta-controlled areas. There are pockets of better practice, including work within liberated areas with local and national humanitarian actors (LNHAs). However, most partnerships with LNHAs are out of necessity and low quality, rather than driven by choice and/or solidarity.
- Cross-border INGOs are relatively attuned to the pluralistic state realities and work closely and in solidarity with civil society actors. Operations are nimbler and more aligned with the population's pursuit of emancipation.
- Myanmar civil actors are leading the humanitarian response across most of the country and proving highly adept at engaging the pluralistic state, fulfilling important roles in holding it to account. This includes working across the so-called humanitarian–development–peacebuilding nexus, where the nature of the crisis and revolution is being met with holistic responses.

The following are the main cross-cutting findings:

- International development and multi-mandate actors are far better than solely humanitarian actors at understanding and navigating Myanmar's contested governance dynamics and aligning support with this reality. Consequently, the arbitrary division and siloing of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding assistance is misplaced for Myanmar's context and causing unnecessary harm.

- There is minimal evidence that international humanitarian actors are considering state-led crisis response, as they instead prioritise their own service delivery efforts. Rather than engage with the pluralistic state, the tendency is to avoid it.
- Health and education provisions offer some of the most tangible and important entry points for the pluralistic state-led response, where the international aid system could better align support in an emancipatory direction that contributes towards the resistance-led, state-building project that is underway.
- Long-standing engagement with and understanding of Myanmar underpinned most, if not all, good practices, yet international staff rotations cause significant regression that contributes to the misunderstanding of and inadequate engagement with the pluralistic state.

Recommendations

The following are consolidated recommendations for the various actors – local and international – engaged in Myanmar:

- International actors, political, humanitarian and otherwise, must acknowledge that the pluralistic state is legitimate and leading crisis response across the country (along with Myanmar's civil society). The pluralistic state should be engaged accordingly; international attention should not continue to focus on the junta. This requires overcoming persistent risk aversion that results in practices that favour the junta rather than the pluralistic state.
- International assistance should be aligned with supporting and enabling the pluralistic state-led response. This must include prioritising funding to local and national civil society actors, rather than international agencies. Such support must be accompanied by sufficient operational flexibility and funding support to reduce the acute risks faced by local and national actors.
- The perceived and tangible divisions between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding assistance must be overcome, to instead deliver integrated support and programming. This must include a particular focus on ensuring humanitarian actors engage with and navigate Myanmar's contested governance realities.
- International pressure must continue to be asserted on the junta to stop its ongoing violence against the population. It must also be held to account for decades of war crimes across the country.
- The emerging pluralistic state must continue to improve its accountability and transparency for humanitarian response and broader governance efforts, recognising that this is critical to its legitimacy, domestically and internationally.
- Myanmar's civil society actors should continue to hold the pluralistic state to account, while also encouraging it to take a more active role in crisis response, even when resources are constrained.

1 Introduction

Forming part of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)'s multi-country research agenda on state-led crisis response, this paper addresses a broad array of intersecting issues. The research process raised many questions about what is relevant and where to pull back on certain lines of inquiry. Whereas the current international humanitarian system often has an intentionally blinkered approach that will bypass issues of (contested) governance, justice, inequality, history and many other issues (see Moallin et. al, 2025), this paper has sought to engage with such topics, as they pertain to state-led crisis response (see Bryant and Spencer, 2024). While the other countries studied in HPG's research agenda on state-led crisis response, such as Indonesia and Kenya, have relatively stable governance, this paper's focus on Myanmar illuminates a further range of issues relating to state formation and legitimacy. For this paper, the junta is not considered the state, but rather a violent institution seeking to impose tyrannical rule on a population that rejects it.[1] Instead, as explained in subsequent chapters, this paper acknowledges that there are a multitude of resistance actors creating what we term the pluralistic state.

During the research for this paper, the humanitarian sector underwent existential calamity, owing to sudden and wide-ranging aid cuts, particularly from the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK), which heightened debate about what the sector could and should be doing. The importance of state-led crisis response has attracted increased attention as a necessary direction following the cuts. While a focus on the state requires engaging with political and governance dynamics, dominant narratives have instead centred on 'back to basics' (see Egeland and Msuya, 2024) and what has now become known as the 'humanitarian reset' (Fletcher, 2025). Both offer technical solutions and a narrower humanitarian vision, as funding collapses and many institutions prioritise self-preservation. This paper refutes the desirability of such a direction, instead arguing the need for humanitarian systems and actors to engage with governance, justice, systemic inequalities and related issues. In contexts like Myanmar, this isn't just preferable, it is essential to addressing immediate needs and ensuring humanitarian action ultimately contributes towards addressing the drivers of calamity.

1.1 Contested governance as a global phenomenon

This paper is focused on humanitarian action and the state in a deeply contested Myanmar, yet it has relevance across many settings grappling with related dynamics. Globally, nearly 200 million people live in areas controlled by armed groups (ICRC, 2023), with long-standing contested governance evident in Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and other countries. Further emphasising the importance and fluidity of contested governance, late 2024 witnessed the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. This unexpected

1 Throughout this paper, the terms junta, (Myanmar) military and State Administration Council (SAC) are used interchangeably, as they all refer to the same repressive entity. At the time of writing, the SAC had not yet been dissolved; from 31 July 2025, the SAC was replaced with the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC).

shift has renewed considerations about the role of humanitarian actors and how they intersect with revolution, upheaval and governance. Amid significant optimism, yet uncertainty in Syria, what role should humanitarian actors be playing?

While the humanitarian sector tries to sequester itself from such political dynamics, particularly through claims to the principles of independence and neutrality, its control over significant resources means it is inescapably entangled. This paper grapples with the implications of the humanitarian principles, particularly independence and neutrality, as they relate to Myanmar's contested governance, where the junta systematically blocks international humanitarian actors (IHAs) from engaging with resistance actors. IHAs' compliance has attracted widespread criticism for undermining the humanitarian principles and the legitimacy of resistance actors (see Décobert et al., 2025). This occurs despite the crises in Sudan, Syria and other contexts illustrating the critical importance of engaging all parties to a conflict (see Beals, 2023). Humanitarian action does not exist in isolation, as demonstrated by the expansion of conflict sensitivity into humanitarian approaches, alongside calls for 'nexus' approaches that bridge humanitarian, development and peace programming. Myanmar offers a poignant example.

1.2 Situating humanitarianism in Myanmar

In recent years, Myanmar has attracted extensive analysis across many axes of inquiry, particularly since the 2021 coup. On the humanitarian front, local and national humanitarian actors (LNHAs) have been leading responses in the most difficult-to-reach areas, demonstrating what is possible beyond the internationally dominated system (see Barter and Sumlut, 2023). Despite such leadership, donor practices have been brought into question for the unreasonable expectations placed on LNHAs that exacerbate security risks in a highly insecure environment (see Nwe Hlaing et al., 2024). Donors have also been criticised for failing to 'work coherently and accountably with Myanmar state and non-state actors (Décobert and Wells, 2019: 294). However, this paper acknowledges that many of the best practices by IHAs are the least visible, owing to security and other risks, as the junta seeks to control aid flows and prevent engagement with resistance actors.

As Décobert (2023: 253) highlights, LNHAs are 'striving not only to help their communities but also to shape their country's future'. This has called into question whether international aid partnerships are about 'solidarity or self-preservation and compliance' (see Wells and Maung, 2024). While much attention is directed towards the international humanitarian system, LNHAs, including mutual aid actors, have long been at the forefront of crisis response across the country and in the absence of state services (Fink, 2009). Whereas IHAs emphasise neutrality and attract extensive criticism from resistance actors, in particular for downplaying the junta's atrocities, LNHAs are at the forefront of merging crisis response with broader pursuits of justice and peace (see Décobert, 2025). Amid the ongoing revolution against military rule, this has been termed 'humanitarian resistance' (see Kamal, 2023).

Following the coup, increased attention is also being paid to Myanmar's contested governance realities and renewed state-building. This is critical for understanding state-led crisis response, as examined

in subsequent chapters. Following decades of struggles, the current revolutionary era is creating new opportunities to rethink federalism, particularly around including Indigenous People and ethnic minorities (Ko Ko, 2024). Ethnic resistance organisations (EROs) have played a critical role, not as top-down authorities, but in being responsive to social pressure and in many cases aligning with the post-coup revolution (Brenner, 2025). The Karenni model (see Chapter 4) has attracted particular attention for being a model of inclusive, progressive politics that is demonstrating the potential for grassroots state-building (KCSN et al., 2024). At a time of intense geopolitical contestation, growing authoritarianism and a rollback of rights, including disregard for international humanitarian law, the revolution has global relevance (see Barter, 2025). As Thame (2024: 152) writes, it reflects a 'universal human struggle: for social freedom and political liberation, the predominant response must be solidarity, not non-interference'. Such dynamics are critical for making sense of humanitarian systems and state-led crisis response, where the state itself is not just contested, but undergoing a globally and historically significant transformation.

1.3 Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination

Beyond contested governance and the transformative state-building project underway in Myanmar (analysed in greater detail later) are deeper issues relating to Indigenous People's sovereignty and self-determination. Many Indigenous People and ethnic minorities across Myanmar never ceded sovereignty to the central state and their inclusion within the country's modern borders is a colonial construct. The British colonial legacy persists beyond territory, as its divide-and-rule approach created long-lasting divisions across the country. Since independence (1948), the military has perpetuated such approaches, alongside efforts to impose the dominant ethnic Bamar language and culture, and Buddhism across Myanmar. In response, many long-standing EROs embody pursuits of sovereignty and self-determination, which is also reflected in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UN, 2007). The declaration recognises the historical suffering and injustices stemming from colonisation, while recognising the unique rights of Indigenous People. Although the declaration has limited practical influence in Myanmar, it does reflect a global commitment that should be informing how international actors, humanitarian and otherwise, are engaging with the country and its diverse Indigenous groups.

As captured throughout this report, there are frustrations across Myanmar with how international actors and the humanitarian system engage with the country. This report seeks to elucidate these tensions, while also highlighting the nuances of what is happening. For example, the current revolution represents the popular will of the population to end military rule, but ambitions – from establishing federal democracy to asserting Indigenous sovereignty – are not homogeneous. It reflects 'a multidimensional and multi-sectoral movement' (KCSN et al., 2024). For the humanitarian system writ large and most international actors, humanitarian and otherwise, such dynamics are often ignored under the justification of focusing on meeting immediate needs. Similarly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the incumbent UN Special Envoy and others are pushing for a ceasefire and peace process, despite decades of similar failed attempts owing to the military's violent and oppressive actions (Justice for Myanmar, 2024). Such international perspectives are incompatible with and

rejected by the vast majority of the population in their pursuit of self-determination across Myanmar, in part owing to the military historically using ceasefires to expand its control (see Woods, 2011). This report seeks to foreground the diversity of struggles across the country and how this must inform international engagement, including humanitarian assistance.

1.4 The revolution: definitions, spectra and pluralism

This section provides some definitions and explanations that unpack some of the heterogeneity and complexity across Myanmar. The authors acknowledge that reductionist and over-simplified understandings have rendered significant harm in the country. It is not feasible for the rest of this report to delve into all the diversity across the country, where any process of inclusion and omission is fraught. Whereas the rest of the report focuses on a smaller number of institutions, this section provides some background and explanation. Throughout the paper, effort has been made to provide granularity where feasible and of particular importance, but there are many cases of clustering actors together to make the paper more digestible and concise.

1.4.1 Ethnic resistance organisations

Across Myanmar's borderlands, EROs have existed since the late 1940s in pursuit of ethnic and Indigenous emancipation. There are approximately 25 main EROs of considerably varying sizes and institutional strength, with each ERO controlling different sizes of territory and delivering varied degrees of state services and governance. The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) are some of the more established EROs. In existence for decades, they have ministries and wide-ranging policies, while delivering an array of services. They are a major focus of this report and are typically considered aligned with the nationwide revolution, while being viewed as relatively democratic and inclusive.

Although not a homogeneous group, there is a smaller group of EROs that are more militaristic and top-down in their governance model. The Arakan Army (AA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA) exemplify this – they both control significant and growing territory (in the case of the AA), while providing various state services. The AA supports the nationwide revolution (see Avila, 2025), but has also attracted significant criticism for violent atrocities against Rohingya civilians. The UWSA's role in the revolution is more obscure and its authoritarian rule has attracted criticism, alongside its involvement in the illicit drug trade. Both the AA and UWSA have civilian bodies, but they attract less attention, arguably owing to the primacy of their armed wings.

Finally, there are many other smaller and less well-established EROs, but they still play an influential role across the country. The Ta'ang National Liberation Army has liberated significant territory from the junta, while ethnic Chin EROs oppose military rule, but compete for leadership and governance of Chin communities.

Although this summary only touches the surface, it is intended to highlight that EROs have diverse perspectives and practices. The rest of this paper focuses primarily on the KIO and KNPP as illustrative examples, but this is not intended to portray all EROs as inherently 'good', 'bad' or otherwise. While many EROs face varying accusations of violence against civilians, including forced recruitment, it is important to note most EROs often maintain high degrees of local legitimacy. This is in stark contrast to the illegitimate junta, which systematically targets civilians and has committed atrocities for decades.

It is also important to note that most EROs have formed, to varying degrees, in response to the junta's ethnonationalism that has privileged ethnic Bamar people, culture and language, alongside Buddhism, above other ethnicities and religions. This has commonly been referred to as 'Burmanisation'. The authors acknowledge that the current revolution is seeking to overcome such divisions, while also being conscious that the junta's ethnonationalism has rendered extensive harm on Indigenous People and minorities across the country. Ethnonationalism is also evident, to varying degrees, amongst EROs, which can be exclusionary and a barrier to peace and reconciliation.

1.4.2 National Unity Government

The National Unity Government (NUG) came into existence following the coup and consists of an array of politicians elected in the 2020 election, plus others in political and civil service roles. Although the reach of the NUG is limited in many regards (it doesn't provide the same degree of state services that many EROs provide), it plays an important role as an overarching representative body for the country. The NUG attracts extensive public criticism (see Win, 2025) and was also criticised during interviews for this paper, but there was also recognition of the important role it plays. Aside from representation, it is seeking to provide overarching policy and governance to the many resistance actors across the country.

1.4.3 People's Defence Forces and other resistance actors

Following the coup, People's Defence Forces (PDFs) have proliferated across the country, typically formed at local levels, but with increasing coordination among PDFs more broadly as well as with EROs and other armed resistance actors that are not ethnically based. Although PDFs are often portrayed as small armed entities, they also play a role in localised governance, with many falling under the direction of the NUG. They are not as established and do not provide as extensive an array of services as EROs, but are a significant part of the pluralistic state, particularly in ethnic Bamar areas. Beyond PDFs, there are various other resistance actors, such as Strike Committees and the Civil Disobedience Movement. Youth and religious groups are also a critical part of the resistance. This broad array of resistance actors is not a primary focus of this report, but form part of the whole-of-society resistance against military rule.

1.4.4 Myanmar civil society actors

Myanmar has an astonishing breadth of civil society actors, from community groups and mutual aid networks to large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) managing millions of dollars annually. Some actors represent Indigenous People and ethnic minorities, often having important access to

and influence with EROs, while other actors are more centred on democracy, humanitarian action and other areas. Although this paper is centred on the pluralistic state-led response, civil society actors and their relational dynamic with state entities form a critical part of the picture. This paper focuses on crisis response, but it recognises that many civil society actors are inherently multi-mandate, where humanitarian principles are upheld, but there is also a commitment to social justice (see Moallin et al., 2025). For this paper, the term local and national humanitarian actors (LNHAs) is used when specifying humanitarian-oriented actors. The phrase civil society actors is utilised as a broader term and is intentionally not limited to formalised NGOs, but also inclusive of the many informal networks and groups across the country.

1.4.5 International humanitarian actors

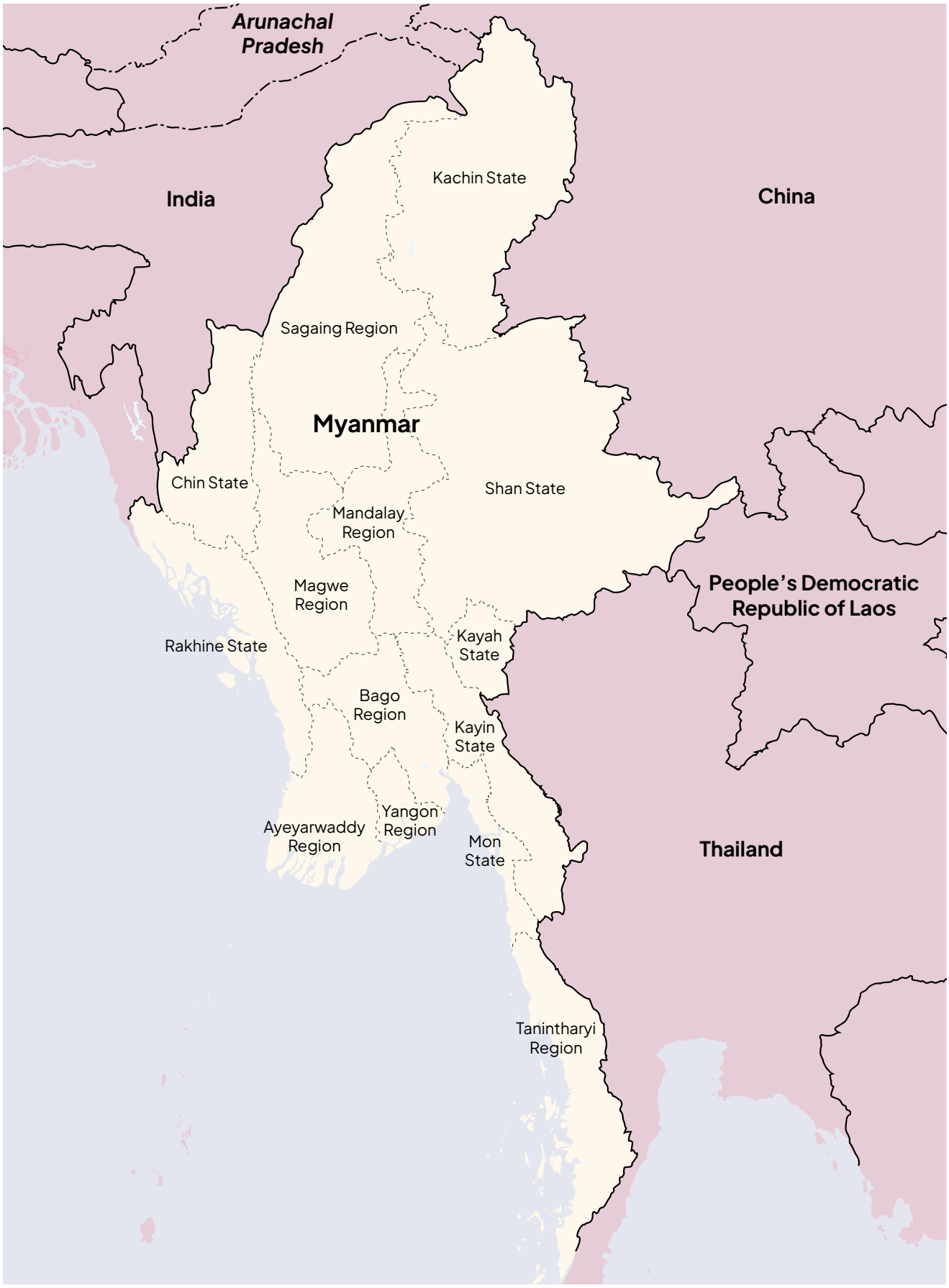
Although this report focuses on crisis response, the distinction between humanitarian, development and peace sectors is often arbitrary and ill-suited to Myanmar's context of protracted humanitarian crisis, contested governance and revolution. The authors use the term international humanitarian actors to refer collectively to donors, UN agencies, INGOs and similar actors. They are separated when necessary. The term 'aid' is used periodically throughout this paper and refers to humanitarian, development and peace activities, with humanitarian specified when needed. As examined later, the authors recognise that IHAs and aid actors are extremely heterogeneous, with different ideologies, risk appetites and ways of working.

1.5 A humanitarian snapshot

Humanitarian needs are high across Myanmar, preceding but dramatically expanded since the 2021 coup. An estimated 19.9 million people are in need of assistance in 2025, with approximately 3.5 million people internally displaced (OCHA, 2025a). This includes pre-existing crises, such as in Kachin and Rakhine states, before the expansion of violent conflict across the country following the coup. There are also over one million refugees in neighbouring countries. Many of these figures likely underestimate the severity of the situation, as many displaced people and people in need are housed with families and are often not captured in the formal humanitarian system's data.

For 2024, the Humanitarian Response Plan was only 39% funded, the sixth lowest of all Humanitarian Response Plans globally. While most attention is on the formal humanitarian architecture, mutual aid networks and resistance actors have played a critical role in meeting the vast humanitarian needs across the country. This includes EROs, who deliver and coordinate humanitarian assistance across resistance-controlled areas, which now make up the majority of the country. Consequently, it is important to decentre the importance of the international system and instead better understand (and support) highly effective locally led approaches. (See Figure 1 for a map of Myanmar, its regions and states.)

Figure 1 Map of Myanmar and its states and regions



It is also important to note that humanitarian assistance has historically been heavily politicised in Myanmar. In 2008, the military initially prevented and then heavily controlled humanitarian aid flows after the devastation of Cyclone Nargis. Since the resumption of war in Kachin in 2011 and resulting humanitarian needs, the military has systematically blocked humanitarian assistance from reaching ERO-controlled areas, including in Karen, Shan and elsewhere. In Rakhine, displaced Rohingya have been restricted to camps that are often described as open-air prisons (Amnesty International, 2017), and are heavily reliant on humanitarian aid. In comparison, the 2015 floods in Chin witnessed some state-led response by the military-aligned government. This differentiation reflects the bifurcation of the responses to armed conflict and natural hazards. Such a dynamic remains evident as witnessed in the response to the devastating earthquake in March 2025. The military has allowed (minimal) humanitarian assistance to reach people in areas it controls, but it continues to systematically block aid reaching resistance-controlled areas, while also continuing to launch airstrikes against people in these areas.

1.6 Methodology and limitations

This paper forms part of a broader research agenda on state-led crisis response, including parallel studies in Indonesia and the Philippines, which will collectively contribute towards a regional ASEAN analysis (plus Kenya and Somalia studies for an East Africa comparison). Myanmar offers a unique case, owing to the deeply contested nature of the state. The following are the key research themes:

1. What is the state of play for Myanmar's multi-faceted resistance and construction of a new federal system, and what are the implications for humanitarian actors?
2. How do IHAs and LNHAs navigate Myanmar's contested governance landscape to address widespread humanitarian needs?
3. How can humanitarian assistance be better aligned with the emancipatory agenda being pursued by resistance actors across Myanmar?
4. What does 'state-led' crisis response look like when the state itself is contested?

Data collection focused on a wide-ranging literature analysis, complemented by a diversity of key informant interviews. These semi-structured interviews included Myanmar civil society, resistance actors including ERO representatives, western donors, UN agencies, international NGOs (INGOs), analysts and other related actors, identified through snowball sampling. A total of 50 interviews were conducted, including 22 women, 26 men and 2 non-binary people.

The research also drew upon Burawoy's (2009) extended case method, which is a sociological and ethnographic approach that combines participant observation with a focus on broader social and historical contexts. It emphasises reflexivity, where researchers acknowledge their impact on the setting, and aims to link micro-level observations to macro-level structures. The approach seeks to understand how local practices are shaped by larger social systems and historical processes. For the research team, this involved each researcher having more than a decade of extensive engagement with local, national and international humanitarian and aid actors, plus resistance actors, including EROs, and the more recently established NUG and PDFs. Such engagement heavily informed the research approach and analysis captured in this paper.

2 Misunderstanding Myanmar: a brief history of fraught international engagement

This chapter provides a brief historical account of international engagement with Myanmar, particularly in relation to humanitarian, governance and resistance dynamics. This is intended to address what Mac Ginty refers to as 'recentism,' namely how dis-embedding current realities from history 'risks separating events from structural factors' (2022: 195). Or as Vickery suggests, 'a major fault of most writing about recent events has been its ahistorical character, ignoring all that happened before' (1984: 3). Although this chapter only captures a small fraction of Myanmar's complex history, it emphasises three main factors. First, the current post-coup resistance and governance struggles, and related humanitarian impacts are not new, but rather part of the population's decades-long pursuit of emancipation. Second, international engagement with Myanmar has been consistently problematic, from colonisation to independence to the period of relative liberalisation in the 2010s. And finally, the international community must move beyond tried and failed approaches to instead forge new modalities of engagement in the country that align with the popular will of Myanmar's population – namely, the population's desire for an end to military rule, and the creation of an inclusive, federal democracy (Justice for Myanmar, 2024).

2.1 Trouble from the start: the failure of the externally imposed centralised state system in Myanmar

Myanmar was among the dozens of newly independent sovereign nation states that emerged after the Second World War as part of a global decolonisation process. The borders of the new country overlapped or entirely enveloped the territories of numerous Indigenous self-governed peoples who had been living in these territories well prior to colonisation. Post-independence laws and policies nationalised the Burmese language and elevated Buddhism as the national religion. This marginalised the extensive cultural, linguistic and religious diversity across the country, particularly in the borderlands (Galache, 2020). In the year of independence, 1948, Indigenous People's grievances contributed to the beginning of the armed struggle against the central state, in pursuit of the right to self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty. After years of escalating struggle, the military launched a coup in 1962 that marked the beginning of decades of oppressive rule met with myriad forms of resistance (Fink, 2009). As the central, militarised state sought to impose itself on the entire country, a multitude of resistance actors, particularly EROs, fought back, while also carving out and governing territory in the borderlands. The imposition of the central state was a failure.

2.2 A new dawn? Pseudo liberalisation and international zeal

Following decades of junta oppression pitted against different forms of resistance, the military sought a new era of what it termed 'discipline-flourishing democracy' with the creation of the 2008 constitution. Following an illegitimate referendum in 2008 that coincided with the devastating Cyclone Nargis,[2] the country underwent profound changes (see Galache, 2020; see also Box 1). The constitution guaranteed the military's control over key ministries and a quarter of parliament, which would prevent any amendments to the constitution. Elections that were neither free nor fair were held in 2010, electing the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party. Despite the tightly controlled process and barring of the hugely popular National League for Democracy (NLD), the international community saw it as a significant step in the right direction. Further liberalisation occurred, including an expansion of civic space and independent media, while democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi was able to run for, and won, a by-election in 2012, as the NLD re-entered electoral politics. In response to these significant changes, international fervour to re-engage with Myanmar rapidly grew.

Box 1 Cyclone Nargis: state neglect and manipulated humanitarianism

In May 2008, Cyclone Nargis killed over 130,000 people in Myanmar and caused billions in economic damage, making it the most severe climatic shock in the country's recent history. The fact that the military continued with the constitutional referendum rather than address the immense humanitarian crisis was symbolic of its neglect of the population and consistent focus on control and self-preservation. The military heavily restricted humanitarian access, exacerbating hardship across the country. Foreign assistance and IHAs were eventually allowed into the country, but under strict controls and surveillance, which demonstrated the junta's willingness and ability to manipulate foreign engagement. Meanwhile, local and national networks were the first responders and accessed the hardest-to-reach areas, reflecting a long-standing tradition of mutual aid in the absence of the state (see Fink, 2009). Similar dynamics occurred with the March 2025 earthquake response, as the junta manipulated humanitarian aid and access.

The military took advantage of the transition period to re-engage with the international community, including visits to Europe to strengthen military ties (Parameswaran, 2017). International aid was a significant part of the liberalisation process, with Myanmar going from being the 79th largest recipient of aid globally in 2010 to the 7th by 2015 (Burke et al., 2024). Concurrently, foreign companies, particularly from the west, flooded into the country to capitalise on one of the world's largest 'untapped' markets. This was not seen as a benign or benevolent process, as the provision of aid was criticised for being aligned to western economic interests, with donors 'only too cognisant of the need

2 The referendum voting occurred under junta dictatorship and was held during the devastating Cyclone Nargis. Neither the constitution itself nor the process of voting were legitimate with the population. The constitution is now considered null and void by those opposing the junta (International IDEA, 2022).

to present their deeper motives in moral or ethical terms' (Zarni, 2012: 290). While the 2015 election of the NLD further fuelled western enthusiasm for the reforms underway, the population's concerns over international engagement and aid practices were mounting.

2.2.1 Conflict, ceasefires and contradictions

In parallel to the tightly controlled liberalisation process years of 2010–2015, the military pushed for a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), while paradoxically also resuming war against the Kachin Independence Army (the armed wing of the KIO) in June 2011. Many western actors aligned with the military to support the NCA process, despite widespread reservation from many EROs, political actors and civil society groups. Concerns centred around the lack of political solutions, exclusion of some EROs and the continued centralisation of state power. Under significant western and military pressure, and following offers of various incentives (see Snyder, 2020), 8 of an approximately 24 established EROs signed the NCA. The timid uptake reflected long-standing concerns over the military's sincerity and whether the NCA would lead to any substantive political change process. This perception was reinforced by the military's escalating violence in Kachin and other parts of the country.

The resumption of war in Kachin is illustrative of the military's aggression and contradictions. Erupting in 2011, the war forcibly displaced over 120,000 people, many of whom took refuge in KIO-controlled areas. LNHAs were at the forefront of the humanitarian response, while the KIO offered some degree of state-led response, particularly in terms of coordination efforts. The war was not a new phenomenon but part of the military's 'divide and conquer' strategy, as it sought to expand its control rather than pursue a just peace (Naw, 2017). In the past, periodic ceasefire agreements have been used by the military state as a tool to assert its power and extend its control into strategic areas (Woods, 2011). As the war in Kachin intensified, the delivery of humanitarian assistance to displaced people in KIO-controlled areas was systematically blocked, reflecting the military's long-standing practice of weaponising aid. On the one hand, the military espoused the importance of the NCA, yet on the other, it continued to wage war and stood accused of war crimes in Kachin (Fortify Rights, 2018). Nonetheless, the international community, particularly western donors and diplomats, persisted with the NCA, scaling up aid and normalising political and economic relationships with the country. The centralisation of state power continued and was arguably consolidated, despite civil and political calls for a decentralised, federal democracy. Tensions and disillusionment were set to escalate further.

2.2.2 Reality revealed: genocide and democratic collapse

Although facing wide-ranging challenges, the NLD pursued a governance direction that was incongruent with Myanmar's pluralistic reality. The NLD made the critical misstep of trying to proceed with its reform agenda without substantive inclusion of or consultation with other stakeholders, particularly ethnic political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs). This reflected its hierarchical and exclusionary approach to politics. The NLD government, as the state, was criticised for marginalising minorities' concerns, while further consolidating power and resources with the central state (Seng Raw, 2019). Despite NLD rhetoric of national reconciliation, Indigenous People and other minority

communities continued to feel marginalised from the nation-building and liberalisation process (Snyder, 2020). Many civil society actors working in ERO-controlled areas continued to face the threat of arrest under the Unlawful Associations Act, while other colonial-era laws were also used to stifle dissent. The international aid apparatus continued to scale up support, despite the growing fissures across the country. As a foreign diplomat remarked at the time to one of the authors of this paper, 'the peace process will not fail because of a lack of money. We will provide whatever is needed.'

The military's 2017 genocide against the Rohingya marked a critical juncture in Myanmar's contemporary history.[3] It resulted in approximately 700,000 Rohingya being forcibly displaced into neighbouring Bangladesh, amid widespread military atrocities. Most Rohingya that remain in Myanmar are living under apartheid-like conditions in open-air prisons, heavily dependent on international humanitarian assistance (Amnesty International, 2017). This genocide poses one of many ethical quandaries for IHAs, as they focus on meeting immediate needs, yet downplay how they are being manipulated into perpetuating Rohingya encampment (see Hart, 2020). The genocide also highlighted the fragility of the liberalisation process, alongside the NLD's distinct lack of influence over the military. Aung San Suu Kyi would remain hugely popular domestically, but suffered a collapse in international legitimacy, as she defended the military's actions. For many minorities across the country, her stance reinforced a sense that she was continuing the military's efforts to privilege Bamar Buddhists at the expense of others. If the war in Kachin wasn't sufficient, the genocide further demonstrated the military's disregard for the civilian population and willingness to unleash extreme violence. Even the international community's optimism began to fade.

Despite the many warning signs, the 2021 coup took most people and institutions by surprise, triggering a nationwide reckoning that continues as of 2025. The military quickly detained NLD parliamentarians and sought to impose military rule across the country. This was met with widespread non-violent and dynamic opposition, particularly in central, Bamar-majority areas. While this echoed revolutions past, particularly the 1988 democratic uprising (see Lintner, 1990), the opposition to the coup has been far more wide-reaching and sustained. Following initial peaceful protests that were violently suppressed by the military, the opposition has turned to armed resistance and innovative ways to assert sovereignty, whether at highly localised or larger state levels. The resistance has achieved unprecedented success in liberating territory and establishing decentralised governance systems, which will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 3.

From this brief historical account, the rest of this chapter highlights some of the key issues for making sense of and engaging with post-coup Myanmar. The overarching point of this chapter is that the country's contemporary reality is deeply embedded in decades-long struggles for emancipation and an end to junta rule, where the military has proven, time and again, that it cannot be trusted, owing to repeated coups and decades of violent suppression. Additionally, international engagement in

3 The US determined the military's actions as genocide (see Blinken, 2022), but the military has largely avoided accountability, with international investigations and court cases ongoing. The Gambia's case at the International Court of Justice for the military's genocide is ongoing.

Myanmar has been ineffectual at best, but largely problematic, even if well intentioned. These points are particularly important to acknowledge, as various international actors, including ASEAN, China and western states, call for a ceasefire and political/peace process. For Myanmar actors, this is untenable unless the military is definitively removed from politics, its economic control relinquished, and it is held accountable for the atrocities it has committed.

2.3 Misplaced engagement: misrecognition of the military state by the international community

> States are perceived as 'fundamentally legitimate actors even when they violate the laws of war systematically', yet international law narratives criminalise practically all forms of violent resistance carried out by armed opposition actors. (de la Cour Venning, 2019)

The international community persists with misplaced engagement (and appeasement) towards the junta, despite the historical and ongoing atrocities it has committed against the population. This appears connected to the junta's control of the capital (Naypyitaw) and significant parts of the economy, including the central bank, but it is disconnected from the broader domestic context. The Myanmar population continues to reject the military's attempt to rule and is not conferring legitimacy on the junta. Diplomatic actors, however, continue to engage the junta as the state, disregarding the population's preference.

The case of misplaced recognition is not just about the post-coup era, as the international community's historical engagement with Myanmar has contributed to centralised state power. During the 2010s, extensive resources and other support were provided to the central state, while assistance to and engagement with sub-national authorities, particularly EROs, was minimal. The consolidation of power was also exacerbated because funding was cut from CSOs operating in the border areas outside of the central state's authority. Although there have been significant efforts to support ethnic education and health systems, far greater attention was paid to supporting the central state.

2.4 Supporting the central state at the expense of civil society

The international enthusiasm for Myanmar's so-called 'transition' during the 2010s posed major challenges for many CSOs, particularly those operating in ERO-controlled areas. CSOs were strongly encouraged to register with the national government and establish offices centrally. While this was opposed by many groups, donor funding shifted substantially from border-based CSOs to those located and registered in central Myanmar. One civil society interviewee explained:

> There were some donors who were putting pressure on us. They clearly didn't understand the security implications for our staff and the people we serve in our community. They were going to jeopardise the safety of the people in our network... There is also trauma associated with conflict when passing through the Myanmar military checkpoints for the civilians living in the KIO areas.

CSOs were also encouraged to engage with the central state and thus contribute to its perceived legitimacy, which concurrently undermined many EROs' long-term emancipatory pursuits and governance efforts. The prioritisation of the central state was evident, for example, when Norway cut funding support for the KIO's liaison office, after the KIO's decision not to sign the NCA. Similarly, Japan's Nippon Foundation urged the KIO, KNU and other EROs to sign the NCA to gain access to humanitarian aid (Naw, 2017; Network Media Group, 2018). Both instances are indicative of aid being used for political ends that aligned with the central state's interests, rather than the pluralistic reality of Myanmar. Ultimately, such approaches were a costly mistake by the international donor community: following the coup, the military used the available civil society data to shut down operations and target activists (IRN, 2022). Civil society presence has shifted back to resistance-controlled and cross-border areas, while trust in the international donor community has plummeted.

Following the coup, the international donor community response has continued to be obstructive. The military has created a new Organisation Registration Law to assert control over civil society actors, who must submit details on activities, funding and other operational aspects to the junta (Kyaw, 2024). Even if registered, organisations face fines and imprisonment, with risks continuing to escalate (Sida, 2025). Donor insistence on organisations being registered to receive funding has been met with alarm and again is aligned with the junta at the expense of civil society actors. As the revolution has continued amid military atrocities, donors did gradually ease registration requirements, but they are now increasingly requiring registration and engagement with the SAC/junta. For example, in a recent call for proposals for Myanmar, the World Food Programme had a selection criteria that partners must 'legally register as a non-governmental, non-profit, non-political organization in the country of the operation' (WFP, 2025: 2). For many civil society actors, mistrust continues, grounded in the historically problematic engagement by the donor and broader international community with Myanmar.

3 Understanding the resistance as a pluralistic state leading crisis response

This chapter is set in the post-2021 coup context, focusing on the nationwide resistance and its creation of what the authors term the 'pluralistic state'. As highlighted in the previous chapter, Myanmar's governance has been contested prior to and ever since independence, where a single, heavily centralised state is ill-suited to the country's diversity. While various state-building efforts are decades-old, particularly those of major EROs, other initiatives have emerged following the coup. As Htet Lynn Oo (2024) suggests, such diversity should not be perceived negatively, but rather as complementary. The intention of this chapter is threefold, as follows:

1. To demonstrate that the resistance is a diverse group of actors and projects that is reflective of Myanmar's ethnic, religious and linguistic heterogeneity.
2. To detail why the actors that form the 'pluralistic state' have the strongest claim to being Myanmar's legitimate state, grounded in concurrent constitution development and governance efforts.
3. To urge international actors to rebalance their preoccupation with a single, central state entity with an understanding of and support for the pluralistic state, including in relation to state-led crisis response.

3.1 Reframing statehood in Myanmar

Myanmar's political architecture has undergone a dramatic transformation following the military's coup in February 2021. Rather ironically, the coup was in violation of the 2008 Constitution, which itself had been crafted by the military (Noel, 2022). As the population opposed the coup, the military's brutal crackdown – characterised by widespread violence, arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings – rapidly escalated the crisis, prompting a shift from peaceful movements to armed resistance (King, 2022). As a result, in addition to long-standing EROs, hundreds of new armed groups known as the PDFs have emerged. These groups are now engaged in coordinated resistance efforts, often in alliance with EROs, against the junta.

While the military employs coercive methods to assert control, its territorial authority has progressively diminished, as resistance groups expand their areas of influence. According to an assessment of over 14,000 village groups as of December 2024, the military exercises full control over only 21% of Myanmar's territory. EROs and various resistance organisations govern 42% of the country, with the remaining areas being contested (Henschke et al., 2024).[4] This has contributed to an increasingly contested governance landscape. Local administrative bodies, often operating in alignment with the NUG and ethnic administrations, have been established across resistance-controlled areas. These entities perform various governance roles and offer essential public services, and are often

4 The statistics relating to territorial control are debated, while also not reflecting the military's control of heavy weaponry and aircraft. However, the trend is increasing resistance control of territory.

perceived as more legitimate and responsive than the junta's institutions. Concurrently, EROs have expanded their territorial control and service provision. Overall, Myanmar's political landscape now reflects a decentralised and multi-actor governance model that challenges conventional central state assumptions that are embedded in international aid and humanitarian frameworks.

3.2 Understanding Myanmar's pluralistic state

Following the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has witnessed the emergence and solidification of a homegrown governance landscape, particularly at the sub-state level. At the overarching level of this evolving political architecture is the NUG, established by the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (parliament) and composed primarily of civilian representatives elected in the 2020 general election, who were subsequently ousted by the military coup. Although it remains a work in progress, particularly in terms of inclusivity, the NUG represents the most ethnically and politically diverse government in the country's history. It brings together actors from EROs, ethnic consultative councils, and other revolution forces. This coalition reflects a hybrid form of legitimacy, combining de jure authority through electoral mandate with de facto legitimacy grounded in active participation in resistance and local governance. While seeking international recognition, the NUG has prioritised building functional governance structures by collaborating with some EROs in their respective territories and supporting the formation of local administration bodies in newly liberated or contested areas. Although the NUG continues to attract significant criticism (see Win, 2025) and has limited influence, it plays an important role as part of the pluralistic state. This is particularly in terms of coordination and policy efforts at the national level, alongside representation internationally as the legitimate alternative to the junta.

Whereas the NUG exists more at a representative and coordination level, sub-national resistance actors are at the forefront of Myanmar's unique pluralistic state. According to Mampilly (2011), resistance actors across other contexts often derive legitimacy through a combination of coercion and consent, establishing an informal social contract with civilian populations. Such resistance actors often assume state-like roles by providing public services, establishing security systems, and engaging in symbolic actions to build public support. Civilian collaboration is central to their political strategy, as legitimacy cannot be maintained through coercion alone.

However, in Myanmar the source of legitimacy for resistance actors (including the NUG) diverges notably from many other conflict contexts. Actors such as the NUG, PDFs and various EROs have earned public support not through coercion, but through recognition that they are the only forces capable of offering protection and advancing federal democratic aspirations. Their legitimacy stems from their role as defenders of the people in the face of a military regime that consistently violates the core responsibilities of a state, while the NUG includes democratically elected ministers. As the junta continues to perpetrate indiscriminate violence and dismantle the rule of law, these resistance actors are viewed by civilians as the state, in a pluralistic form. For many EROs particularly, this is not a new phenomenon, as they have long provided security, health, education, land titles and other services. Civilians within a particular ERO's territory therefore view that organisation as the state.

3.3 Expanding territorial control and pluralistic governance

Following the coup, Myanmar's resistance actors have been gradually expanding decentralised administrative structures across most of the country. In areas traditionally controlled by EROs – such as parts of Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Rakhine and northern Shan states – existing governance systems have been strengthened, albeit in pluralistic form. For example, the Arakan Army controls nearly all of Rakhine State, while the IEC governs most of Karenni State. The former adopts what is regarded as a more militaristic and confederate approach (see International Crisis Group, 2024), whereas the latter is regarded as a model of inclusive and progressive democratic governance (see KCSN et al., 2024). The nationwide governance shifts have accelerated as PDFs, many of whom received military training from and now coordinate with EROs, have increased their operational presence, enabling the expansion of non-junta administrative control into new areas.

A second governance dynamic is unfolding in central Myanmar, particularly in the Magwe and Sagaing regions. Many PDFs operate under the command of the NUG, while other local defence forces operate autonomously, without formal ties to the NUG. Both types of forces have gained considerable control over much of central, particularly rural, Myanmar. While EROs are extending their established governance practices into new territory, resistance groups in areas like Magwe and Sagaing represent new experiments in governance. These emerging local administration bodies, often formed through grassroots mobilisation, are undertaking core state-like functions. This includes the provision of security and essential services such as health and education, despite facing significant capacity constraints and military violence. This reflects part of the nationwide shifts toward pluralistic and localised governance, where legitimacy is grounded in performance and community support rather than formal recognition.

3.4 The pluralistic state-led crisis response

This section details the continually expanding humanitarian response led by the pluralistic state in Myanmar. It highlights how the response varies across territories, but overall, it represents a legitimate and locally relevant state-led approach. This calls into question why the international community, particularly humanitarian donors and actors, remain so averse to any substantive engagement or support for this pluralistic state-led response. It comes at a time when discourse around locally led and decolonised aid practices is proliferating, which must include addressing colonial and other historical legacies. As outlined earlier in this paper, it requires adjusting the international community's misplaced focus on Myanmar's central state, including ongoing engagement with the junta, at the expense of the more legitimate pluralistic state. Supporting the pluralistic state's humanitarian response offers a unique opportunity to not just meet the population's needs, but to also contribute towards the broader state-building project that is well underway.

In financial terms, the operations of the NUG and various resistance actors in Myanmar were initially, after the coup, heavily dependent on voluntary contributions and donations from the public. However, as resistance actors gained control over more territory, their revenue-generating capabilities have improved (NUG, 2024). Local administration bodies, under the NUG's guidance, have begun raising

funds through various taxation channels, which vary in scope depending on the territory. For instance, areas with key economic resources such as trade routes, oil and mining operations have seen substantial revenue collection, which contributes to sustaining self-governance operations.

The NUG reports that the bulk of its revenue is allocated to defence and military operations, but a portion is also earmarked for humanitarian needs.[5] This signals not only the importance of humanitarian response in these regions, but also the potential for state-led crisis response in Myanmar, despite the international aid system's limited engagement (as explored later in this paper). For example, the NUG's policy of revenue allocation follows a division where 30% of local revenue is directed to the union (national) level, another 40% is allocated for PDFs, and 30% is designated for township (local) administration (NUG, 2022). At the township administration level, 10% of the allocation goes to humanitarian responses (ibid.), although verifying allocations and effectiveness is difficult. This highlights the ongoing efforts by local administration bodies to address humanitarian concerns (complementing extensive mutual aid efforts). It offers a stark contrast to the junta who, rather than allocating funding for crisis response, continues to commit egregious violence that drives humanitarian need across the country. As one interviewee with long-standing engagement with resistance groups put it:

> There are many misconceptions about the NUG and armed resistance actors. They are very cost efficient to deliver assistance and diligent [...] Diplomats complain that it's funding a party to the conflict, but the NUG represents a country that refused to accept the coup. It's important to work with them and build up their ability. [...] Many internationals are far more lenient on the SAC than resistance actors.

For the practicalities of humanitarian response, the NUG collaborates with local administrative bodies in areas under their control. Each local body designates a focal person for humanitarian affairs, who is responsible for coordinating efforts, collecting data, ensuring accountability and reporting. The overall delivery and management of humanitarian assistance is decided collectively by the administrative body members. Administrative authorities and PDFs also provide security and logistical support to CSOs and community organisations operating within their territories. Whereas many international aid actors view this as controlling or gatekeeping, the reality is far different, as a governance expert interviewed for this paper explained:

> There needs to be a mature recognition that these armed actors have the authority to give permission and that serves as a legitimate function for that society. We should treat these actors as the state because they have historical legitimacy.

In areas governed by EROs, relevant authorities also coordinate and support humanitarian efforts (see Box 2). This varies significantly according to the ERO, typically depending on the strength of their institutional structures.

5 See, for example, www.facebook.com/crph.official.mm/videos/512394578633022 and www.facebook.com/crph.official.mm/videos/657626353284469/.

Box 2 Decades of resistance governance

The KIO, as one of the most established EROs in northern Myanmar, is indicative of how many resistance actors function as a state. It established the Kachin Relief and Development Committee in the early 1990s, while the Internally Displaced Persons and Refugee Relief Committee (IRRC) was established in response to forced displacement following the 2011 resumption of war in Kachin (La Rip, 2014). Following the coup, this committee played a prominent role in coordinating and delivering humanitarian assistance across KIO-controlled areas, including coordination with LNHAs and historically IHAs, although the latter is increasingly difficult owing to the junta's attempts to prevent such coordination. More recently, the IEC of Karenni State (eastern Myanmar) established the Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Department following the coup. It assisted approximately 150,000 displaced people in 2024 in Karenni State, while also pioneering inclusive politics (see Chapter 4). Despite significant challenges, these local authorities demonstrate the commitment and potential for the pluralistic state to lead crisis response in Myanmar.

The examples in Box 2 are not intended to imply that these local administration bodies run entirely smooth operations, but it highlights the rapid and substantial evolution of Myanmar's administrative structures towards more locally relevant modalities. These local authorities face numerous challenges, both in newly emerging structures in central Myanmar and in the expanded territories controlled by EROs. Nonetheless, the continued governance transformation must be recognised as a significant shift. Despite ongoing junta violence, local administrative bodies and EROs are the primary providers of essential services and meeting humanitarian needs (KCSN et al., 2024). It is crucial for the international donor community and other relevant parties to conflict understand this context and align their engagement and support strategies accordingly.

3.5 Comprehensive political transition despite humanitarian crisis

Amidst the substantial changes in governance dynamics, resistance actors in Myanmar have continued efforts to bring all relevant and legitimate stakeholders into a shared political platform. This pursuit of unity is essential to prevent the country from becoming fragmented. A key political framework guiding these efforts is the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC), which serves as a common foundation among the main democratic forces resisting the military regime. It was developed through consultations and negotiations by the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), a committee involving many resistance actors (NUCC, 2021). The FDC affirms a collective commitment to establishing Myanmar as a new federal democratic nation. To advance this goal, the NUCC plays a central role in engaging a wide range of political stakeholders across the country. The FDC outlines a three-phase transitional roadmap (see International IDEA, 2022):

1. the *interim period*, also referred to as the revolutionary phase, which corresponds to the current moment of armed and political resistance;

2. the *transitional period*, which will commence after the military is defeated and will focus on drafting a permanent federal democratic constitution;
3. the *federal democratic period*, when the newly approved constitution will be implemented.

Initially, the transitional period was envisioned to begin only after the complete defeat of the military across the entire country. However, more than four years after the coup, it has become clear that military defeat may not occur uniformly across the country. As a result, democratic actors are now considering the possibility of initiating transitional governance in areas where the resistance holds stable control. This would serve both to advance political progress and to counter the junta's attempts to regain legitimacy, including plans to hold a sham election. Drafting transitional governance arrangements for this phase is currently an ongoing process.

While these constitutional efforts are happening at the union level, various regions, including borderland states, are simultaneously developing their own governing documents. In Chin State and the Sagaing region, these documents are referred to as 'constitutions' and are drawing upon the IEC's inclusive model, while in Karenni, they are known as 'arrangements'. Regardless of terminology, they all serve the same purpose: to guide governance during the revolutionary and transitional periods. Despite progress, negotiations among emerging stakeholders with diverse interests and priorities have proven incredibly challenging, especially since the processes at the union and sub-state levels are unfolding in parallel.

Ultimately, the success of these efforts will depend on the degree of unity, coordination and political will among the actors involved. Myanmar will not return to the pre-coup status quo under the military-constructed 2008 Constitution. Instead, the country is on a path toward becoming a federal, democratic state, characterised by greater decentralisation, stronger self-determination, and more robust local governance (see KCSN et al., 2024). During this transformative and highly contested process, it is critical that international aid and humanitarian actors engage with such dynamics and align support in an emancipatory direction.

4 EROs: where humanitarianism, governance and resistance coalesce

Established following the coup, the NUG attracts some of the most significant attention internationally and serves an important purpose, but long-standing EROs epitomise the convergence of humanitarianism, governance and resistance in Myanmar. However, EROs are often misunderstood and misrepresented by the international community, particularly donors and humanitarians. Terms such as 'insurgency' and 'rebel governance' are commonly used, and they fail to capture the far more substantive role EROs play as state entities. Similarly, the term ethnic armed organisation is widely used, particularly before the 2021 coup, but it emphasises their armed status rather than the groups' broader resistance efforts, including governance, which is reflected in the term ERO. This chapter examines two prominent EROs, the decades-old Kachin Independence Organisation and the Karenni state-building project, commonly referred to as the Interim Executive Council, that has emerged following the coup, albeit grounded in longer-term emancipatory struggles. The purpose is to demystify perceptions of EROs, elucidate their legitimacy and ultimately encourage the international community to engage them accordingly. As written in the introduction, this paper recognises that EROs are heterogeneous, ranging from inclusive and democratic to more militarised and practising top-down governance, such as the Arakan Army and UWSA – the fact that they are typically referred to by their military rather than civilian wings is indicative of their militaristic slant. Concerns over the latter should not, however, be cause for international disengagement, but rather reinforces the need for thoughtful approaches. Overall, EROs are a fundamental part of the pluralistic state –international actors must engage with them rather than marginalise them.

4.1 EROs as inclusive and democratic governance

EROs across Myanmar are typically trusted and considered the legitimate local governance bodies by the people living in the territories they control. While EROs are often labelled non-state actors, many function as states (see Brenner, 2019). Even during the so-called 'transition' period of the 2010s, EROs were usually more locally legitimate, representative and accountable than the central Myanmar state because they have close ties to their ancestral lands and local communities. This legitimacy has only increased following the coup (see SAC-M, 2025). For many EROs, their governance is based on Indigenous Peoples' right to self-determination within their traditional territories. The KNU is indicative of this, where its Land Policy outlines a holistic and sustainable approach to land use, grounded in Indigenous sovereignty and values (see KNU, 2015). The policy was developed in consultation with CSOs and directly refutes the central state's efforts to control Indigenous territories.

Following the coup, the KIO in Kachin (northern Myanmar) and IEC in Karenni (eastern Myanmar) have taken major steps towards building inclusive and democratic states by working with a diversity of relevant stakeholders. Both institutions understand the importance of cooperation with CSOs, local activists and mutual aid actors for service delivery and strengthening their popular support.

The participation of local people is a source of legitimacy for EROs' governance structures. Abiding by international law is another important source of legitimacy, where the contrast between the junta and EROs is stark. Whereas the junta terrorises populations across the country and has a history of recruiting child soldiers (Human Rights Watch, 2004), the KIO has banned recruitment of minors. Less visibly, Kachin communities and CSOs hold the KIO accountable for adherence to this policy (de la Cour Venning, 2019). It must be noted, however, that other EROs continue to recruit minors and the Arakan Army is accused of many violent atrocities against the Rohingya.

4.2 Learning from the KIO's governance

What is often lost for humanitarian actors is the scale and depth of legitimacy the KIO holds across territory that it governs. At the time of writing, it controls most of Kachin State, having expanded its reach extensively following the coup, although control is fluid as fighting remains active. Although the KIO has attracted significant criticism for natural resource extraction in the past (see Woods, 2011), it has taken many measures to improve its governance, including transparency and accountability, such as suspending many environmentally damaging rare earth mining operations. Often perceived by international aid actors as simply an 'armed group', the KIO provides extensive governance, including land titles, car registration, health services and education, alongside humanitarian response. This includes 12 departments covering different areas, such as agriculture and education. Even prior to the coup, it offered far more comprehensive state functions than the central government. The KIO is also connected to CSOs, community members and the Kachin diaspora, all of which provide varying degrees of support and accountability (Brenner, 2025). Evidence of the KIO's legitimacy is in a 2018 survey, where nearly 75% of respondents, in areas it controlled, agreed that the KIO supports community needs.[6] In contrast, only 35% agreed the same for the NLD in central government-controlled areas (Durable Peace Programme, 2018).

More broadly, the KIO has also sought to ensure civilian influence over decision-making processes. Civilian consultations have been long-standing, from the day-to-day management of displacement camps to feeding into the former peace process. Following the coup, the Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team was formed, which includes representatives from CSOs, women's organisation, Kachin churches and the diaspora (KNG, 2021). This team collectively engages with the different transitional governance processes across Kachin State and Myanmar. More recently, the KIO has also established local-level administrative systems for governance in newly liberated territories. These systems are intended to address the greater ethnic and religious diversity in these new areas of control (Ko Ko, 2024). The KIO's iterative approach to local governance has similarities with the multi-level, bottom-up governance model being implemented in newly liberated areas in Karenni State (KCSN et al., 2024). Although not perfect, many of these efforts go unrecognised by the international community, with the KIO reductively perceived as an armed or insurgent group, rather than a significant part of Myanmar's pluralistic state that should be engaged and supported in its efforts to lead crisis response, and achieve an inclusive, political resolution.

6 More recent data is unavailable due to the prevalence of armed conflict.

4.3 The Karenni model of inclusive nation-building

The Karenni governance model, the IEC, that emerged after the 2021 military coup is recognised as one of the most comprehensive, visionary and inclusive political systems in contemporary Myanmar history. A predominantly Christian community in a Bamar, Buddhist majority country, the Karenni people never ceded their territory to become part of Myanmar: it was forced upon them. Instead of pushing for only the Karenni people's agenda within its expanding territorial control, the Karenni administration has focused on bringing diverse local people and resistance groups together to co-create an inclusive governance system. The Karenni governance model prioritises reconciliation, trust-building and legitimacy among diverse groups. Having been denied their rights to live with dignity, respect and equality by the junta, its goal is to achieve legitimacy through representation, including through the participation of women, youth and ethnic minority communities that live in Karenni State. The governance model prioritises sustainability through intra-Karenni political reconciliation, and hybridity through decentralised administrative approaches (see KSCN et al., 2024).

There is a multitude of interconnected governance structures that constitute the Karenni state-building project. The Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) was formed out of the need to coordinate with all relevant Karenni stakeholders in the changing political and military situation after the coup. The KSCC oversees three branches that form the overarching state apparatus – alongside the IEC is the Karenni State Interim Parliament and the Karenni State Interim Judiciary. The KSCC describes itself as being guided by the principles of accountability, responsibility and transparency. These principles are applied to its humanitarian efforts and service delivery as the foundation of peacebuilding for Karenni society. The IEC holds executive power as the interim government during the current revolutionary period. It has two primary responsibilities: to help implement bottom-up state-building processes based on the vision of a federal democracy in Myanmar, and to coordinate social service provision including healthcare, education and humanitarian assistance through the nine departments under the IEC's oversight.

The KSCC has taken steps to include representatives of civil society in governance decision-making. Representatives from the Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) are among the IEC's seven governing members (known as supreme council members). A Karenni woman now in the government explained during an interview how 'women have become members of the Central Committee. We no longer just advocate for gender equality from the sidelines. We are now making real change by being part of the government.' A KNWO member and now member of government elaborated on the vision and the importance of women's rights:

> We are very encouraged by what we have been able to achieve in realising our political visions and pursuit of self-determination. Prevention of GBV [gender-based violence] is a form of resistance to the militarised and violent state [...] the women's rights conversation doesn't begin and end with empowerment training. Humanitarian assistance and funding for women's health are extremely important in this case for women's rights and wellbeing. When international donors cut funding for humanitarian and GBV prevention, women suffer. The IEC is trying to fill in the funding gap as much as we can, but our resources are limited.

In an interview, IEC Chairperson Khu Oo Reh explained the importance of involving people from diverse backgrounds with good reputations and standing, including women and youth, for inclusive governance. This helps with the creation and implementation of progressive policies that are transforming Karenni society, while strengthening the IEC's legitimacy. Such an approach is not entirely new, as civil society actors have long been engaged with Karenni policy development, even prior to the coup. For example, the women-led, community-based organisation Karenni Evergreen played a crucial role in designing the KNPP's land and environment policy. This influence ensured a section on women and land that guaranteed equal land ownership. Education has been another critical area, where the IEC has a 'no child left behind' policy intended to address the needs of all children, including those with disabilities. That policy has contributed towards specialised and individualised teaching, even as classrooms face indiscriminate junta airstrikes.

Across interviews for this paper, there was widespread regard for the IEC and Karenni state-building project, particularly its ability to design and deliver a progressive and inclusive agenda:

> People don't see how much time and energy goes into the IEC's internal negotiations. The Karenni project is incredible – rather than just a success story, it's a demonstration of how micro-negotiations can lead to much bigger shifts. They are resolving long-standing grievances and creating unity of purpose, yet they are careful to not extend beyond the KNPP's comfort zone. Kachin and other groups are learning from Karenni – it's very positive. (Donor interviewee)
>
> A strength of the IEC is that it involves many civil society people. They are leaders in exercising governance duties beyond just being a resistance actor, while they separate power between branches [...] Many involved young people are not from Karenni. They are well educated and committed. It shows the collaborative ability. (Yangon-based CSO)
>
> The IEC is the easiest resistance actor to work with because it involves many former civil society people. They are very open to new societal values. They have established a development fund, but it's very hard to get donor support. (Cross-border IHA interviewee)

Despite the extensive state-building efforts and widespread praise, the Karenni project continues to grapple with an international aid system that is ill-suited to the realities of Myanmar's pluralistic state. The Karenni are delivering state-led crisis response, which is intricately linked with the state-building project, yet further progress is hampered by limited donor support and siloed funding approaches. For example, the influx of humanitarian funding for the March 2025 earthquake response exacerbated concerns because it was concentrated in SAC-controlled areas and was manipulated by the junta. There are also fears that such funding will be taken away from the liberated territories, such as Karenni state, for which it was intended. An IEC representative expressed similar concerns about the international humanitarian system:

> We are the legitimate government for the people of Karenni State, but often international humanitarian organisations neglect our achievements. Due to their own rigid institutions, they don't recognise that we have been doing much more than the Myanmar state who only oppresses us.

4.4 Recognising EROs as part of the pluralistic state

In rethinking state-led crisis response in Myanmar, the international aid architecture must align with the country's evolving, nuanced and pluralistic governance structures. Recognising the contested nature of authority alone is insufficient to fully capture the dynamics at play. Equally important is understanding the emergence of localised, community-driven governance arrangements that increasingly command public trust and legitimacy. These diverse administrative bodies, formed through collaboration among resistance actors, EROs, civil society actors and communities, reflect a new political reality grounded in decentralisation and local ownership. It is crucial to grasp that the people of Myanmar view these resistance actors as the (pluralistic) state because they are the ones fulfilling state responsibilities, even amidst extreme challenges. Without a nuanced understanding of this pluralistic and bottom-up governance landscape, international engagement risks being ineffective, inefficient, and misaligned with the needs and aspirations of crisis-affected populations. The pluralistic state is already leading crisis response – the international donor and diplomatic community needs to align support accordingly.

5 Political meets civil: the whole-of-society pursuit of self-determination

Although this paper is centred on the state as part of a broader HPG research agenda, the state cannot and does not exist in isolation from civil society. Whereas political and civil society are often understood and analysed as distinct, separate spheres (see Alagappa, 2004), they function in relation to each other, where the distinction is often blurred. This is particularly the case when also understanding civil society as a space of ideological contestation (see Gramsci, 2000). Furthermore, as Abdelrahman (2013) writes about the Egyptian revolution, it is critical for those opposing tyranny to be able to adapt to a changing political landscape and take on new roles as opportunities arise, including shifts from activism to political leadership. This is acutely evident in Myanmar's dynamic and fluid context.

This chapter examines the role of civil society actors in relation to the pluralistic state-building process, particularly in terms of crisis response. The authors acknowledge the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. The following analysis, however, raises questions about often simplistic interpretations and applications of independence and neutrality. While there are questions of whether such principles contribute towards humanitarian organisations being anti-state (see Barter, 2024), they can also limit understanding of the interplay between civil society actors and the pluralistic state. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the inclusion of civil society leaders into the Karenni IEC has proven highly advantageous for ensuring a more progressive and inclusive state-building project. Other research has also shown how, post-coup, community-level health workers have contributed to peacebuilding in Myanmar through fostering collaboration, trust and solidarity (Décobert, 2025). Perhaps more than anything, this chapter reinforces the need for humanitarian actors and operations to move beyond siloed and reductionist approaches that are particularly ill-suited to contexts such as Myanmar.

5.1 Self-determination and legitimacy: civil and political humanitarianism

While the formal humanitarian architecture focuses primarily on UN agencies, INGOs and NGOs for delivering responses, a much broader cross-section of civil society actors plays a critical role in Myanmar. This includes mutual aid networks, from village or community-based organisations up to national-level networks. The diaspora also plays a pivotal role through providing financial and social support, alongside global advocacy. For these actors, the delivery of humanitarian response is necessary, but also part of the broader pluralistic state-building project. Elements of this dynamic have been popularised by what Kamal (2023) terms 'humanitarian resistance', where the act of providing humanitarian assistance is a form of opposition to the junta. However, the intersection with resistance politics and the state-building project goes much further.

The ability of civil society actors to work with EROs and their interdependence serves as an important source of legitimacy for the pluralistic state. Whereas nearly all international aid agencies, whether humanitarian or development- or peace-focused, are based in junta-controlled areas (excluding cross-border agencies), Myanmar civil society actors operate across the country. Those CSOs working in ERO-controlled spaces are often trusted and supported by the respective ERO, where frank and constructive dialogue and mutual accountability is fostered. A CSO staff member explained during an interview:

> The opportunity for us to be invited to work with government on policy development never happened before under the Burmese [Myanmar] central governments. The Burmese governments didn't trust us because we work in KIO-controlled areas. Some international donors also pressured us, suggesting we were illegal when we refused to register our organisation with the Burmese government. We chose to stop the partnership with those donors [...] From our experience working with the KIO, for matters that we don't see eye to eye, we can still talk with them and can come to agreements. There is a mutual understanding and trust that we want to do what's best for the community we are serving. This is important in every partnership.

In contrast to the junta, civil society actors and the pluralistic state pursue and demonstrate accountability to the populations within their territory. This is solidified because many resistance institutions emerged from local needs and pursuits of self-determination, whether in the civil or political spaces. The pursuit of bottom-up and collaborative governance between civil and political actors is not conceptual, it is a rejection of the military's flawed top-down and violent rule. For international aid actors, this rather symbiotic relationship between civil society actors, including mutual aid networks, and EROs should not be seen as compromising independence and neutrality. Rather, it is part of the pluralistic state-building process that is tailored to Myanmar's heterogeneous reality.

5.2 Social service provision as community justice and sovereignty

CSOs have long considered their service provision as a form of resistance to the central state because their collective work, in the face of state neglect and violence, has been central to the continued existence and survival of their communities. Whereas international donors and aid agencies espouse neutrality, for CSOs across Myanmar, service provision has much deeper significance, particularly for Indigenous and ethnic minority communities. As one Myanmar doctor explained:

> The establishment of health services, including mental health services and sexual and reproductive health services for women, is political.

The concept of social service provision as a form of community justice is one of the major differences between the delivery of assistance in junta-controlled areas or by locally connected CSOs and EROs. In the Bamar-Buddhist state, pre- and post-coup, many people from marginalised and minority communities were denied social services in their own mother language from people they trust. Such

disenfranchisement is now undergoing national transformation, as social services form a critical part of the population's pursuit of self-determination. For example, many ethnic health and education systems are now staffed by local workers who know local languages and customs.

A Kachin medical worker shared her perspectives:

> Even when there is a Myanmar government nurse and a clinic, community members choose to come to our [CSO] clinic because of our services, our long-term presence and the community's trust in us. We understand how important it is to gain people's trust, and we work hard for that.

This contrasts with central government staff who have no understanding of the local context and 'don't even know that they are not trusted'. Yet historically, the central government has never recognised ethnic civil society health services. This lack of recognition reflects the long-standing lack of willingness by the central state to engage and reconcile with Indigenous People and ethnic minorities.

It is a similar case for education, which is one of the most critical areas of service provision and resistance to the junta. Teaching is an act of defiance and pursuit of self-determination, particularly teaching Indigenous and minority histories and languages. Two Karenni teachers working in a camp for displaced people explained this:

> In the Burmese school system, the history lessons they teach us do not empower us as Karenni people. In the Karenni education system, we get to learn our history by speaking our language. We also base our teaching on helping develop students' critical thinking skills [...] I want our kids to find their power through our education. To the kids, I tell them that we are so much more than the food and humanitarian assistance we receive. We are taking this time to learn and to rebuild our future, so we never have to run from the war again. There is a big shift in our politics, and I want to be part of that and help keep the momentum going. My role is educating our younger generation to help ready them to lead us.

A distinct challenge, however, is the technocratic approaches of humanitarian actors that fail to recognise the cultural and political significance of the provision of health and education services, which local populations see as part of a broader emancipatory project. The often-symbiotic relationship between CSOs and EROs is also reflective of funding constraints, where the pluralistic state seeks to lead service provision, but relies on civil society actors to fill the many gaps. For many civil society actors across Myanmar, service provision it is not just about humanitarian response or meeting immediate needs – it is linked to long-term aspirations that are also intimately connected to the broader resistance movement. While there are significant calls for decolonising the international humanitarian and broader aid systems, the reality in Myanmar is that many local actors are driving the change, in spite of, not because of the aid architecture.

5.3 Beyond independence and neutrality

Despite immense challenges, many of Myanmar's Indigenous and ethnic minority communities can finally exercise their rights to self-determination and are realising their vision of implementing a federal democratic state. As the Karenni leader Khu Oo Reh reflected in an interview for this research, 'For the first time in history we are bringing the political vision of creating a just and equal political system to life'.

New governance structures that involve a constructive dynamic between civil and political actors are enabling people who had long been marginalised by colonialism and authoritarianism to now live with greater dignity. In developing newer, fairer and more just governance systems, people are looking towards the international community and aid agencies for support. There is deep frustration at how international actors continue to preference engagement with the junta, rather than the pluralistic state and Myanmar civil society actors. As this chapter and the paper as a whole makes clear, the resistance is the state and international assistance must be aligned accordingly to support the population's pursuit of self-determination and justice. What then is being done by the aid and humanitarian apparatus?

6 How are humanitarian actors navigating Myanmar's contested governance?

Many of the current post-coup dynamics, such as pluralistic governance amid military atrocities, are not new, but rather an intensification of what has existed for decades across much of Myanmar. Humanitarian actors' difficulties in navigating and addressing governance also exist across many geographies globally. Sudan and South Sudan are illustrative, where Operation Life Sudan pioneered humanitarian engagement with non-state actors. However, most analyses frame contested governance as an issue largely pertaining to humanitarian access and the implications for the humanitarian principles (see Ricigliano, 2005). Although political realities and the ability to influence the behaviour of parties to a conflict are acknowledged (see The New Humanitarian, 2014), a narrow access lens struggles to make sense of how humanitarian actors can better engage with not just contested, but transformative, governance. As this paper argues, Myanmar's contested governance is not just an access or rights issue, but part of a broader process of reconfiguring and creating the pluralistic state.

One of the main contemporary distinctions for Myanmar is that anti-military resistance has made unprecedented progress in liberating the country, where the likelihood and viability of ousting the junta from its (attempted) rule continue to improve. As examined in previous chapters, resistance actors control much of Myanmar's territory, are establishing a pluralistic, federal democratic state system, and are already delivering state services and humanitarian response across most of the country, even with constrained resources. The resistance as the pluralistic state is fortified by a symbiotic relationship with civil society actors, including important contributions from mutual aid networks and diaspora.

This chapter examines the responses of IHAs and LNHAs to Myanmar's post-coup context, within the overall research framing on state-led crisis response. Whereas the global humanitarian and indeed political structures are centred on the idea of a single state entity, this research has illustrated how pluralistic resistance actors are the state in Myanmar. Consequently, the ensuing analysis examines how humanitarian actors are navigating Myanmar's pluralistic state-building project. The analysis focuses on key groups of actors, such as Myanmar civil society actors, UN agencies, INGOs and donors, followed by key cross-cutting findings. Although this paper focuses broadly on the post-coup dynamics, the international response to the 2025 earthquake in Myanmar has reinforced the trend of misplaced and even harmful engagement.

6.1 United Nations agencies: unable and unwilling to navigate Myanmar's contested governance realities

> The UN and its claim to neutrality make it look like it sided with the junta. It's so frustrating to watch the UN. I wish they would stop doing their funding drives. They can't reach people and they're not honest about it. (Donor interviewee)

> The UN has been crippled by the coup. They think the government [junta] is their counterpart, so they just can't compute. (INGO interviewee)

The above quotes are indicative of the frustration with UN agencies operating in Myanmar – a frustration that was unanimous across all interviews, with minor caveats. The UN was seen as incapable of adapting to Myanmar's post-coup context and contested governance landscape. The UN's continued engagement with the SAC, and rare or non-existant engagement with resistance actors, contradicted any claims to neutrality; the junta continues to be favoured. As one former UN employee noted, 'neutrality is used as a shield to minimise engagement with de facto authorities like the EROs and NUG'. This dynamic is accentuated by the fact that nearly all UN agencies are headquartered in Yangon and severely restricted, by the junta, from accessing resistance-controlled or contested areas (which make up most of the country). Other interviewees reiterated similar points that the UN doesn't consider resistance actors to be legitimate state actors. For resistance actors, particularly long-standing EROs such as the KIO, KNPP and KNU, any UN engagement was perceived as top-down, disrespectful and a box-ticking exercise, causing further frustration in the resistance's efforts to govern the country and provide state-led crisis response.

The UN's inability to navigate Myanmar's contested governance is having deleterious impacts on humanitarian response across the country. Firstly, the UN remains the primary conduit for humanitarian and broader aid funding, thus diverting funding away from actors more capable of navigating Myanmar's context. Even if funding flows through to LNHAs, they are beholden to UN decision-making and bureaucracy. For example, the cluster system, by design, engages with the junta. This raises major security concerns for all humanitarian actors because sensitive information may be shared, thus limiting their engagement, particularly for LNHAs. Secondly, UN direct operations are concentrated in junta-controlled areas, while engagement with the junta is widely perceived as having a legitimising impact. Consequently, Myanmar organisations and the public have a deep distrust of the UN, which was acutely evident across interviews and elsewhere (see Progressive Voice, 2022). The result is that the UN continues to dominate the humanitarian system, yet lacks local legitimacy, and is proving an impediment to the sector better engaging with resistance actors and supporting their pluralistic state-led humanitarian efforts.

Despite the above critique being widespread and backed by ample evidence, there are notable caveats. One agency was regularly seen as an outlier in being more understanding of and able to navigate contested governance dynamics. (The agency cannot be named due to security and other risks.) However, there are major concerns about donors being over-reliant on the UN system, alongside frustrations about the continued dominance of international intermediaries for aid flows across Myanmar, while cross-border actors are framed as breaching national sovereignty. Similar concerns existed for the Myanmar Humanitarian Fund (MHF), run by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), on which donors relied too heavily as a vehicle for localisation, thus undermining more systemic shifts. This is also backed by OCHA data: in 2019, 26.8% of MHF funding went directly to LNHAs. This has only marginally increased to 28% by 2024 (OCHA, 2025b), despite LNHAs taking on substantially more risk and humanitarian caseload over that five-year period.

Interviewees acknowledged that OCHA includes LNHAs in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), which, in theory, should improve LNHAs' influence in humanitarian decision-making. There were major concerns, however, that involvement of the Myanmar Red Cross Society posed security risks, owing to its perceived close relationship with the junta. This was having a chilling effect on information sharing within the HCT. Otherwise, there were instances of UN agencies supporting only very limited relief and governance efforts in liberated areas.

Another key caveat is the junta's Unlawful Associations Act, which makes engagement with actors deemed 'unlawful' (namely resistance actors) a punishable offence. This act, however, applies to any individual or institution operating in Myanmar, not just UN staff. The consequence is that LNHAs – which are at the forefront of engaging resistance actors to deliver assistance, while encouraging the pluralistic state-led response – face the most acute risks. LNHAs expressed deep frustration that UN agencies were too comfortable with engaging the junta and not doing enough to improve protections for LNHAs operating in resistance-controlled areas, where the vast bulk of humanitarian need is located.

Overall, it is evident that most UN apparatus is ill-suited to Myanmar's contested governance dynamics and in many ways is an impediment to the populations' emancipatory pursuit of a new federal, democratic state. As highlighted in earlier chapters, resistance actors are delivering state-led crisis response with scant resources, yet they are continually hampered by the UN's perception of and engagement with the junta as the state. The March 2025 earthquake is illustrative of these dynamics (see Box 3).

Box 3 Earthquake: local leadership amidst international inadequacies

On 28 March 2025, a devastating earthquake hit Myanmar, causing immense damage, while also highlighting many of the issues discussed in this paper. Over 5,000 people were killed amid widespread destruction that is expected to cause approximately $11 billion in direct economic losses (World Bank, 2025). The earthquake wreaked havoc across both junta- and resistance-controlled areas. Rather than pause fighting and facilitate humanitarian access, the military imposed severe restrictions on aid flows and continued to launch airstrikes in liberated areas that were impacted by the earthquake (Henschke, 2025). Interviewees for this paper reported aid manipulation by the junta in the reconstruction phase, to ensure alignment with its interests, while access restrictions to liberated areas remained. This has resulted in the UN's response being concentrated in junta-controlled areas, thus failing to be neutral, independent and impartial, as the junta manipulates aid flows (Kamal, 2025). Meanwhile, LNHAs receive minimal aid funding, while they operate amid military airstrikes and acute security risks.

LNHAs also expressed major concerns during interviews that the March 2025 earthquake response served to legitimise the junta, while the international community and aid system are continuing to neglect the legitimate and important role of resistance actors. The pluralistic state is seeking to lead response efforts, yet it continues to be maligned. Perversely, multiple interviewees believed the injection of donor funding was ultimately benefitting the junta, causing more harm than good for the broader population, particularly as overall humanitarian funding across Myanmar remains grossly inadequate. In interviews, donors were criticised for their perceived triumphalism in funding the earthquake response, while the junta's aid manipulation was exacerbating tensions between communities receiving and excluded from assistance. A Myanmar civil society interviewee summed up the frustration:

> International actors always think they can influence the SAC. It's stupid. Why do they have a strategy to engage the SAC ministries, but no strategy to engage resistance groups?

Ultimately, the practices of the UN in Myanmar raise far deeper questions beyond just being ill-suited to the context. All the above dynamics have existed, in various forms, for decades, simply becoming accentuated in the post-coup reality. This demonstrates a distinct inability for the UN to evolve and adapt, contributing to its acute lack of legitimacy across the country. As such, Myanmar's population and pluralistic state-building project would be far better served by international assistance aligning power, resources and decision-making away from the UN and towards LNHAs and resistance actors. This would substantially contribute towards improving the pluralistic state-led response in Myanmar, while freeing up the UN to focus on its normative and policy roles, rather than sprawling, expensive operations that have failed Myanmar for decades.

6.2 INGOs: from blinkered to solidarity-based approaches

This section examines the spectrum of INGOs' ability and willingness to navigate Myanmar's contested governance dynamics and, indeed, support the pluralistic state-led response. While an overarching differentiation can be made between INGOs being based within and outside Myanmar, the variations in approaches are underpinned by other key factors. An underlying question for all humanitarian actors is whether they are anti-state, particularly as they claim independence and prioritisation of meeting immediate needs that may deter rather than encourage state engagement (see Barter, 2024). Relatedly, the ideological inclination of actors has distinct practical implications, such as where they are on the spectrum from charitable to justice-oriented, or whether they are strictly humanitarian compared to multi-mandate actors. Justice and/or multi-mandate actors are, by definition and in practice, more likely to consider and engage in contested governance dynamics. An INGO's degree of commitment to locally led action is also another significant factor, as LNHAs are essential for the pluralistic state-led response in Myanmar. Higher degrees of INGO collaboration with LNHAs indicate that they are more amenable to navigating contested governance. Considering the country's volatile and insecure environment, INGOs' risk appetite was also a central element in how they might navigate or even support the pluralistic state-led response. INGOs exist at varying points across all these factors, but arguably the clearest differentiating element is whether they are based in junta-controlled areas (typically with a head office in Yangon) or in neighbouring countries, most commonly Thailand.

6.2.1 INGOs based in Myanmar: necessary caution or undermining the pluralistic state?

After UN agencies, INGOs located in Myanmar are the second-largest group of intermediaries for formal aid flows and are beset by many of the same challenges. The key difficulties of heavily restricted access, insecurity, junta manipulation over aid and the Unlawful Associations Act all apply to INGOs, alongside having to register with the SAC, which creates another form of control. Two key differences are that INGOs do not have the same diplomatic protections as the UN, but nor do they have the same degree of bureaucracy, which allows for considerably more operational agility. It is not possible to capture the full range of humanitarian INGOs operating in Myanmar, but the following analysis focuses on common issues.

Many of the problems with the UN in Myanmar are replicated with INGOs based in the country. Typically operating with a central office in junta-controlled Yangon, most INGOs are unwilling and/or unable to navigate Myanmar's contested governance dynamics, let alone support the pluralistic state's humanitarian efforts. Many INGOs have become entrenched service providers operating in SAC-controlled areas and unable to directly access resistance-controlled territory, where most humanitarian need is located. Like the UN, this reinforces the incongruence between where aid actors are based and operations located, and where humanitarian need is highest. Similarly, humanitarian principles are severely compromised, resulting in many INGOs based in junta-controlled areas losing legitimacy with the population. For example, assistance cannot be provided impartially when the military heavily restricts access. This is particularly the case when aid is prevented from reaching resistance-controlled areas, which have the highest needs across the country (Wells and Maung, 2024). While the security risks for INGO staff are acute, many interviewees suggested that a problematic status quo had taken root, with INGOs acquiescing to the junta's demands, rather than seeking out ways to substantively circumvent restrictions. While such actors may be meeting some humanitarian needs, like the UN, their operations are misaligned with resistance governance in Myanmar, and the political aspirations of the population. This is particularly the case for charity-oriented and conservative INGOs. As one Myanmar analyst said: 'These extremely risk-adverse international organisations aren't willing to do anything.'

Although most INGOs in Myanmar are risk-averse, there are notable exceptions. In certain instances, there are INGOs that have opted to maintain or re-establish offices in liberated areas, despite the associated insecurity. They acknowledge the risks, but believe it is important to push back against the junta's onerous restrictions and manipulation, while also recognising that presence in liberated areas was essential because that is where the bulk of humanitarian need exists. In these cases, INGO interviewees not only reported an ability to engage with resistance actors, but they also found it much easier to operate than in junta-controlled areas. Access was typically not restricted (with notable exceptions owing to active conflict), humanitarian principles comparatively well respected (although concerns remain in certain areas; see Human Rights Watch, 2024), and effort made to provide security (whereas the junta is the primary driver of insecurity for humanitarians). Resistance actors, particularly the more established EROs, also played a significant role in coordinating relief efforts, demonstrating their ability to deliver a state-led response. This results in a distinct bifurcation between INGOs (and UN agencies) opting acquiescently to operate only in junta-controlled areas, and those INGOs that are

willing to operate in resistance-controlled areas, in line with the humanitarian imperative and principles. Whereas the former are increasingly an obstacle to the pluralist state-led crisis response, the latter are pursuing coordination and coherence with the resistance state.

The other significant grouping of INGOs within Myanmar is those based in junta-controlled areas, but committed to and working in partnership with LNHAs. Rather than directly working in resistance-controlled areas, these INGOs support LNHAs, who are considerably more agile and adept at navigating Myanmar's contested governance dynamics, and whose involvement is critical to accessing people with the most acute humanitarian need. As written elsewhere, these partnerships occur on a scale from low- to high-quality localisation. Low quality occurs out of necessity and involves extensive risk transfer without adequate support, whereas high-quality localisation is out of solidarity and supports emancipation (Barter and Sumlut, 2023); the research for this paper finds that low-quality localisation is more prevalent than high-quality localisation. The mindset driving low-quality localisation was also acknowledged by a UN staff member in an interview:

> Regular international humanitarian response doesn't work in this highly restricted context. The UN and INGOs can't access many areas, so it accelerates the push for localisation.

INGOs and other IHAs have made some efforts to improve partnerships, such as providing overhead costs and reducing compliance requirements, but the quality of localisation remains poor, particularly with the INGOs that do not have a clear institutional commitment to localisation. There is also a significant subset of INGOs who are registered and operating in junta-controlled areas, while also working with LNHAs. This often involves direct implementation and top-down modalities where possible, and subcontracting 'partnerships' where necessary due to access restrictions. As one INGO staff said: 'Most INGOs are now working with partners because of access restrictions, but they are transferring all the risk.' (See also Box 4.)

Box 4 Registration risks upending the humanitarian response

In 2025, the junta is tightening its control over humanitarian activities and funding, with potentially diabolical impacts for crisis response. The junta's Union Registration Department launched a survey in the middle of 2025 for registered IHAs and LNHAs, to capture data on financing flows and operations, broken down by states and regions. The mandatory survey could create data that poses immense risks for organisations, as it would provide granularity of how humanitarian assistance reaches across the country. The military could then use the data for investigations and repression of humanitarian actors, including imprisonment for humanitarians. Although such risks and threats have existed for years in Myanmar, this appears to be part of a much more systematic effort by the junta, which could upend the already struggling humanitarian system. The impact for populations in resistance-controlled areas would be most acute. Against such a backdrop, it is critical that donors enable and support operational flexibility, while also making a sustained effort to push back against the junta's oppressive tactics.

6.2.2 Cross-border INGOs: principled and emancipatory approaches

The contrast between INGOs based in Myanmar and those operating from neighbouring countries is stark. Although facing different restrictions from host governments (and often operating discreetly), INGOs operating cross-border were acutely more understanding of and engaged with Myanmar's contested governance dynamics. Their work is predominantly in partnership with LNHAs and reaching liberated areas across the country, albeit concentrated in eastern Myanmar. Rather than avoiding engagement with resistance actors, there are substantive and trusted coordination efforts, particularly with EROs. This includes supporting LNHAs to improve resistance-led crisis response, where resistance actors are understood to be the legitimate, pluralistic state. Free from the junta's onerous restrictions, cross-border INGOs can act significantly more independently and impartially. Beyond being better able to adhere to the humanitarian principles,[7] cross-border INGOs operate in an emancipatory direction through being aligned with the popular will of Myanmar's population.

Cross-border INGOs require sustained and thoughtful approaches to be effective, yet they must grapple with a humanitarian system that is antithetical to such ways of working. Successful modalities were grounded in long-term trust-building and collaborative partnership models, whereas the humanitarian sector is predicated on short-term funding and mindsets. For cross-border operations, commitments to locally led approaches are paramount, yet are persistently lacking in the broader humanitarian architecture. This often includes a long-standing acknowledgement that resistance actors, even pre-coup, are legitimate state entities. Trust had been built with EROs to ensure more agile and scaled humanitarian operations following the coup. For many cross-border INGOs, the international perception towards engagement with resistance actors is perpetually frustrating. Whereas UN agencies and INGOs in Myanmar are knowingly engaging with a violent regime that is manipulating access and aid, cross-border actors are coordinating with resistance actors that are generally committed to the population's wellbeing. Nonetheless, donors continually question cross-border INGOs about aid diversion to armed actors or access restrictions. The irony is acute in comparison to the junta, as one Myanmar interviewee remarked:

> EROs often provide the initial emergency response, as it takes months for international assistance to arrive. They are experienced in dealing with displacement and local people go there for protection. It's not a perfect system, but it's important to support these ERO structures.

6.3 Myanmar civil society: pioneering locally led humanitarian action

Myanmar civil society actors are at the forefront of humanitarian response – as LNHAs – and navigating the country's contested governance dynamics. Although some examples featured earlier in this report, this section focuses more specifically on humanitarian response. The diversity of civil society actors across Myanmar is vast, from community-based mutual aid networks to religious and ethnic-based

7 The humanitarian principle of neutrality is deeply contested in Myanmar because it benefits the junta, without improving access, and downplays the decades of military atrocities against the population.

organisations, to large-scale multi-mandate actors. Like all humanitarian actors, there are also varying ideological inclinations between charitable and justice approaches, alongside varied risk appetites. Any distinction between mandates has become more blurred following the coup, as development, activist and other actors have pivoted to humanitarian response out of necessity. Meanwhile, those based in liberated areas often have more operational freedom compared to actors based and/or registered in junta-controlled areas. This section acknowledges such heterogeneity, taking a more thematic and issue-based approach to analysis than a focus on specific actors, partly owing to the security risks and partly because many themes are cross-cutting.

6.3.1 Leading the nationwide humanitarian response

While IHAs are severely restricted by the junta, LNHAs are consistently proving able and willing to operate throughout the country, at great risk. Civil society networks, including mutual aid systems, have long played a critical humanitarian (and social safety net) role in Myanmar, often owing to the absence of the state (Fink, 2009). Their role has ranged from community-based services to being first responders in times of crisis, whether for the large-scale Cyclone Nargis in 2008 or the resumption of war in Kachin in 2011. This includes a wide array of actors, such as community networks, faith-based organisations and others, often rapidly activating and operating fluidly. Their importance and impact have grown dramatically following the coup. A network-of-networks model has evolved (see Kamal and Fujimatsu, 2024), enhancing adaptability, resilience and coordination, where state and regional-based civil society actors respond according to localised realities, including navigation of and engagement with the pluralistic state.

Through the formal aid system, most support for this networked model has primarily occurred through low-quality localisation, with IHAs providing resources out of necessity, rather than preference (as highlighted earlier). There are significant exceptions – pockets of high-quality localisation arising from substantive effort to shift power and resources in solidarity with LNHAs – but they are in the minority.

Beyond the formal system, diaspora fundraising, remittances and other forms of mutual aid have contributed significantly to dynamic locally led response. Compared to traditional humanitarian funding, such assistance is highly flexible and adapted to the contested governance realities. For example, funding might go directly to resistance actors to deliver humanitarian support to crisis-affected populations. This can then yield benefits in strengthening the pluralistic state's service delivery and thus governance capacities. While major attention is paid to the formal humanitarian system in Myanmar, these parallel, yet complementary systems are critical. They address immediate needs, but they also contribute to the long-term vision of a liberated country.

6.3.2 Contributing to the pluralistic state-led crisis response

> Local actors are critical for navigating contested space. Across the country, local actors have a long history of engaging with contested governance. (INGO interviewee)

Beyond the utility of Myanmar's civil society actors being able to access areas that IHAs cannot, they are also playing an important role in improving the pluralistic state's crisis response. This role varies according to the nature of resistance actors. For more established EROs, such as the KIO, KNPP (IEC) and KNU, they have relatively coherent humanitarian systems that help coordinate emergency assistance, oversee displacement settlements and provide security, amongst other humanitarian services. They also provide health and education services, where any humanitarian/development distinction is arbitrary (see sub-section 6.5.1). For other resistance actors, such as PDFs, their governance approaches and capacities vary widely, as they grapple with ensuring security, while also addressing community needs. In such contexts, the presence of civil society actors delivering humanitarian assistance improves the accountability of resistance actors, alongside demonstrating modalities for aid delivery beyond internationally centric approaches.

The contributions of Myanmar civil society to the pluralistic state-led crisis response are constrained by the aid architecture. Official aid flows are largely ring-fenced from reaching resistance actors to provide crisis response, posing a significant barrier to expanding and institutionalising how civil society actors can contribute. Considering IHAs typically avoid any engagement with the pluralistic state, civil society actors' bear extensive responsibility, while facing intense donor scrutiny. An interviewee working closely with LNHAs in liberated areas summed up the contradictory dynamic:

> There are many misconceptions about the resistance actors. They are very cost efficient in delivering humanitarian assistance and are quite diligent. They accept red lines. Donors constantly ask questions about whether we are feeding PDFs, but the whole country is full of PDFs providing security. We need to be realistic.

6.3.3 Adaptive humanitarian response

Particularly in comparison to IHAs, Myanmar civil society actors are delivering humanitarian response in ways that adapt to the ever-changing context, particularly the fluid governance dynamics. IHAs continually struggle to make sense of these shifts and remain focused primarily on engaging the junta, where the focus for contested areas is primarily about access, not governance. In turn, the junta uses access as a bargaining chip to manipulate international actors. IHAs' response activities also struggle to adapt to the volume and pace at which displacement occurs across much of the country, particularly liberated territories. In such areas, Myanmar civil society actors are far more adept at delivering adaptive humanitarian response. This is grounded in understanding fluid governance realities and being able to engage different resistance actors. It also involves quickly changing response activities as needs evolve, whether that be in scale, location or types of assistance. Across the research process, it was evident that IHAs are often constrained by mandates, whereas Myanmar civil society actors are more driven by population needs, including governance. As one civil society actor explained:

> We need sympathy and empathy, but international actors are just focused on income. We are doing this for our community. We cannot do a project-based revolution. International actors are very technical, but for us, it's more holistic.

6.4 The international political and diplomatic community

International engagement with Myanmar's contested governance dynamics on political and diplomatic levels has been consistently problematic (see Sidoti, 2024, in Trithart, 2024). ASEAN and its humanitarian coordination centre (the AHA Centre) have not made positive contributions in Myanmar's post-coup environment; for example, an attempted humanitarian corridor initiative by the Thai government, backed by ASEAN, quickly ceased operations after repeated difficulties. As a collective, ASEAN created a so-called '5-point consensus' in response to the coup, which included steps such as an end to violence and for the AHA Centre to deliver humanitarian assistance (ASEAN, 2021). The document has had no influence over the junta's actions, while the AHA Centre's operations continue to be marginal (see Justice for Myanmar, 2024).

There has been much public criticism by Myanmar actors of ASEAN (Latt, 2025), which was reiterated across interviews for this research. ASEAN's commitment to consensus decision-making and non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states has severely impeded any useful contribution to Myanmar, despite stated commitments to human rights and democracy (see Barter, 2021). Some individual ASEAN states, most notably Indonesia and Malaysia, have taken more critical stances towards the junta. However, ASEAN member states and the AHA Centre consistently focus on engaging the junta and rarely, if ever, engage the pluralistic state. Amongst interviewees, further criticism was levelled at western states and Japan hiding behind ASEAN, rather than properly and directly engaging with the issues at hand. Such an approach also places undue expectation on ASEAN, which has always struggled with addressing internal member-state conflicts.

Broader international political and diplomatic engagement with Myanmar has been lacklustre and junta-centric. Like ASEAN, very few states are willing to or consistently engage the pluralistic state. China has perhaps the most extensive engagement with the pluralistic state and is the most consequential actor for influencing the outcome of the current revolution. However, China prioritises economic interests and continues to support the junta with weapons and other assistance, although also supports some EROs. Elsewhere in Asia, Japan and South Korea have taken more pro-democracy positions, while maintaining engagement with the junta. The European Union, UK, US and other western states have enacted major sanctions against the junta, yet their engagement with the pluralistic state remains minimal and variable. The US's Burma Act is one of the most definitive and impactful policies that has enabled broader engagement, yet other western states have persisted with risk aversion, and the benefits of the Burma Act are already being rolled back, as the US slashes its aid budget. For example, the scale of flexible US assistance reaching resistance-controlled areas has already greatly diminished, while US engagement with the pluralistic state has precipitously declined.

6.5 Cross-cutting findings

Whereas the above focused on how different types of humanitarian actors are navigating Myanmar's contested governance and to what degree they are contributing towards the pluralistic state's efforts to lead response, the following are cross-cutting findings. Many of them are directed towards IHAs and how the international aid and humanitarian architecture struggles with a context like Myanmar.

6.5.1 Development actors get contested governance; humanitarians struggle

One of the most striking themes across interviews was how development actors are far more understanding of and willing to engage in contested governance than humanitarian actors. Whereas humanitarians often approach contested governance primarily as an issue of access, interviewed development actors recognise the legitimacy of resistance actors. The difference in approach is a major problem because of the compartmentalisation in funding and modalities of operation between humanitarian, development and peace actors, despite calls for more integrated approaches. For many development (and peace) actors, contested governance is the reality and they constructively engage with resistance actors, particularly in assisting education and health systems. Development actors are also active in supporting resistance governance structures. The notion that resistance actors are the legitimate state was widespread across interviewed development and multi-mandate actors, although most of their work is discreet and/or cross-border. Development actors based in SAC-controlled areas are far less able and willing to engage resistance actors.

In contrast, while IHAs acknowledge contested governance, most are incapable of effectively engaging in or navigating the situation, with cross-border IHAs being the notable exception. The separation between development and humanitarian actors complicates the situation further, because most aid is channelled to humanitarian response. Not only does this sector struggle to adapt to the contested governance reality, but it is also short-term, where volatile funding undermines more nuanced and thoughtful approaches to delivering aid in the contested governance landscape. The limited and inadequate earthquake response is a recent case in point.

For many LNHAs interviewed for this study, the distinction between humanitarian and development programming is seen as arbitrary and counterproductive. Instead, they are typically driven by not just the needs of affected populations, but consideration of how their actions could contribute towards the remaking of Myanmar's politics and governance. This centres on a longer-term vision of emancipation and ousting the military, with which the internationally imposed distinction between humanitarian and development initiatives is frustrating and misaligned.

Considering the protracted nature of crises and contested governance in Myanmar (existing well before the coup), the inability of humanitarians to adapt is concerning. This reinforces the unsuitable siloing between humanitarian and development, which is detrimental to meeting the needs of affected

populations. Rather than a call for technical integrated nexus approaches, there needs to be a wholesale integration of systems and recognition that the resistance is the state. This would go some way towards addressing the currently broken international aid and humanitarian system in Myanmar.

6.5.2 Minimal evidence of humanitarians considering state-led crisis response

Putting aside the contested nature of governance across Myanmar, there was minimal evidence from our research to indicate that IHAs are even considering broader issues around or attempting to support state-led crisis response. This illustrated a blinkered approach that centred on meeting immediate needs without considering broader political, conflict and other dynamics. While it is understandable that any engagement with the junta would be futile, there was a distinct lack of consideration that IHAs might shift away from being perpetual crisis responders. This entrenches IHAs in delivering responses, while reinforcing what many interviewees criticised as ill-suited humanitarian action. The notable exception was cross-border IHAs, many of whom believed in the importance of the pluralistic state leading response efforts. Similarly, Myanmar civil society actors were typically aware and supportive of resistance actors leading crisis response efforts. A key difficulty, however, was resistance actors prioritising military efforts to gain and hold territory, which consumed extensive resources, hence mutual aid and other civil society networks playing critical humanitarian roles.

6.5.3 Health and education entry points for pluralistic state-led crisis response

The provision of health and education offer important entry points for how humanitarian actors can better support state-led crisis response. Such services have been devastated post-coup, particularly owing to military violence against health and education workers, alongside the nationwide civil disobedience movement. Consequently, increasing support for the provision of health and education would have multiplying benefits. It would align with the needs and aspirations of the population, while being an area that can enhance the legitimacy and governance of the pluralistic state. Education provision, in particular, is a long-standing form of resistance against the junta, especially for Indigenous People and ethnic minorities. Both areas are also where humanitarians can learn from development actors, who have provided extensive support for EROs' health and education systems for decades. This once again highlights that a wholesale integration of internationally led systems is needed across Myanmar.

6.5.4 Misunderstanding of and inadequate engagement with resistance actors

Throughout interviews for this research, there was frustration that most IHAs, particularly most donors, INGOs in Yangon and UN agencies, misunderstand resistance actors, which in turn deters engagement. Resistance actors are perceived primarily as armed actors or insurgents rather than legitimate governance actors, collectively constituting a pluralistic effort to create a new federal democracy. This misunderstanding underpins not just risk aversion and lack of engagement, but it also undermines

resistance actors' claims to being the legitimate, pluralistic state. Consequently, much of the international aid architecture remains stuck in a vicious cycle of calling for peace and a political solution, while continuing to act in ways that reinforce the legitimacy of the junta over resistance actors.

What is perhaps more frustrating is that myriad Myanmar voices have spoken about the legitimacy of resistance actors as the state for decades and since the coup there has also been a proliferation of analyses reinforcing this point (see Thame, 2024; SAC-M, 2025). Yet, many aid actors within Myanmar continue to be unable to comprehend or unwilling to take corrective action to better engage resistance actors. Frustration is further compounded by continued calls by donors and the diplomatic community for a ceasefire and peace process, despite such efforts proving futile for decades (as outlined in Section 2.2). Aid actors' legitimacy with Myanmar's population is greatly undermined by their association with the junta. Civilians would rather see international support directed towards the emerging pluralistic state-building process.

6.5.5 The importance of long-standing engagement with Myanmar

Although this could be said for all contexts, the best practices by IHAs were all connected to having staff with long-term engagement in Myanmar. This was particularly the case for donors, UN agencies and INGOs, where the ones willing to take substantial risks, successfully engaging with resistance actors and supporting locally led approaches, all had staff that were highly attuned to the context. Unfortunately, most IHAs (particularly UN agencies and donors) move international staff on a rotating basis; regularly changing staff undermines thoughtful programming. Such a dynamic is exacerbated by the reality that the best IHA practices in Myanmar are the least visible – this is out of necessity because of security risks. Perversely, this means IHAs that operate far more visibly because they are in junta-controlled areas reinforce a perceived acceptability of poor aid practices. Such a dynamic needs to end by allocating resources to actors that are proving able and willing to navigate Myanmar's contested governance, primarily LNHAs, and secondly IHAs that have staff that are attuned to the context. It is also important to recognise the importance of country-based solidarity groups, such as Burma Campaign UK, which can be a critical source of information that can improve international aid practices.

7 Recommendations: how can different humanitarian actors support pluralistic state-led crisis response?

Myanmar yields lessons and implications for many other contexts with contested and pluralistic governance, such as Somalia, Syria and Yemen. The following recommendations are tailored towards different groups of actors relevant to Myanmar, but many of the recommendations have relevance elsewhere. As this paper has made clear, the international aid and humanitarian systems need to acknowledge and better work with Myanmar's contested governance realities. This must include recognition of, and willingness to align support with, the popular will of the people, including the specific aspirations of Indigenous People and ethnic minorities.

7.1 For the international community

The international community needs to reflect on its strategy towards Myanmar, particularly relating to the junta and pluralistic state. International deference to ASEAN and its 5-point consensus is inadequate and hampers resolution of the crisis and accountability for the junta (see Abdullah, 2025). Increasing political and financial pressure on the junta is critical, alongside stemming the flow of weapons and its ability to commit violence against the population. Instead, the international community must recognise and work with the pluralistic governance that has developed across Myanmar, to address the crisis. This will prove far more effective than fruitless calls for ceasefires that fail to learn from decades of lessons past (see Justice for Myanmar, 2024).

7.1.1 For donors

The authors recognise the difficulties and sensitivities most donors face, and that many of the best practices remain largely invisible. Nonetheless, there is widespread frustration across Myanmar with current donor practices and priorities. The following are key recommendations, responsive to the analysis in this report.

- **Mindset:** Comprehend that the pluralistic state is legitimate and already leading crisis response across much of the country, which is a key part of the nation-building project. This requires decentring the junta as the state.
- **Understanding:** Systematically engage and consult Myanmar civil society and resistance actors, including EROs, the NUG and others, without imposing or forcing these actors to engage with the junta.
- **The pluralistic state:** Even though official recognition of the pluralistic state might be difficult, humanitarian and other aid actors should be focused on supporting the pluralistic state-led crisis response, including service delivery, governance and other priority needs, such as de-mining and infrastructure.

- **Funding:** Redirect funding away from humanitarian actors based and operating in junta-controlled areas to those operating in resistance-controlled areas (including cross-border), where needs are highest. Continuing to fund in and through SAC/SSPC-controlled areas increases the junta's control and props up its financial system – this must be avoided as it prolongs the junta's financial viability and ultimately its ability to wage war against the population.
- **Civil society:** Donors must prioritise funding for local and national civil society actors, including networks, particularly those operating in liberated areas. They are at the forefront of navigating Myanmar's contested governance and holding the pluralistic state accountable. They are also reaching the most difficult-to-reach populations and areas where humanitarian need is highest.
- **Integrated aid:** Humanitarian programming and financing must be integrated with development and peace work to improve aid coherence. This will ensure better navigation of contested governance and alignment of assistance with the popular will of the population. This must include significant support for governance and state-building that improves immediate humanitarian response, while contributing to ending the primary driver of needs – the junta's violence.
- **Flexibility:** Build on progress to date to further ease compliance and other requirements for LNHAs to enable more agile response that is better able to engage with Myanmar's contested governance. Such flexibility is best matched with long-term funding that enables better crisis response and resilience building (see MCCS, 2025).
- **Risk:** Recognise that having most of the aid apparatus concentrated in junta-controlled areas is an acute risk. There must instead be willingness and support for those humanitarian actors – local, national and international – who are operating in and prioritising liberated and contested areas. Risk must be shared, not simply transferred to LNHAs.

7.1.2 For international aid actors: UN agencies and INGOs

UN agencies and INGOs play a critical role across Myanmar, yet many problematic practices – many of which existed pre-coup, but have become accentuated subsequently – must be addressed. Reform remains too slow. The authors acknowledge that institutional mandates and values vary considerably; the following recommendations can be applied accordingly.

- **Fundamentally shift to aligning support for locally led humanitarian action**, including the pluralistic state. This must be thoughtfully and flexibly done, recognising the acute challenges LNHAs face when operating across the country, particularly the most insecure areas. It must include support for informal networks and actors, including mutual aid, that are the backbone of the response and should not be forced into becoming overly institutionalised.
- **Integrate governance thinking and approaches into humanitarian action**, recognising that the pluralistic state is providing response across much of the country and can be supported to take on further leadership and improve response. Effort must be made to support and transition towards pluralistic state-led response, where Myanmar's civil society plays a symbiotic role.

- **Engage with health and education as excellent entry points for working with the pluralistic state to support its response efforts**. Humanitarians should collaborate with and learn from development actors, who have successfully engaged with EROs for many years, whether on service delivery and/or governance.
- **Refrain from perpetual service delivery and an unhealthy co-dependency with the junta**. Alternatives exist, including operating cross-border in ways that are more flexible and aligned with the population's pursuit of liberation.
- **Maintain staff that have a nuanced understanding of the Myanmar context**, including the borderlands and contested governance, which is critical for ensuring more thoughtful and emancipatory approaches to humanitarian action.

7.2 For resistance authorities

Resistance authorities are an acutely heterogeneous group, where policies and practice vary considerably, as outlined in this report. They are playing an important role in delivering state-led crisis response, but this can be improved and expanded. The following are overarching recommendations for resistance actors:

- **Transparency and accountability must be prioritised**, as key elements for maintaining and strengthening public legitimacy, alongside improving donor trust and the potential for international support for state-led crisis response. This must include accountability to affected populations and for any breaches of international humanitarian and human rights law by armed actors. Acceptance of diverse cultural, religious and linguistic practices is also essential.
- **Participation is crucial** – ensure accessible opportunities for women, youth, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender plus (LGBT+), ethnic/religious minorities and other marginalised groups to influence decision-making at political, humanitarian and other levels.
- **Human rights must be respected and prioritised**, including the protection of civilians and addressing long-standing concerns over rights.
- **Lead by example in terms of demonstrating state-led crisis response across different sectors**, such as food security, health, education, protection and water, sanitation and hygiene.
- **Social harmony must be a central goal in the way humanitarian assistance is provided**. Community consultation is essential, particularly with women and marginalised groups, and including diverse ethnic groups.
- **Federal democracy should be the goal.** It is understandable that military objectives are being prioritised currently, but this should not impede progress towards solidifying inclusive, federal democratic institutions, including a roadmap for armed actors to come under civilian control.
- **Civil society remains key to the pluralistic state's legitimacy**. Civic space and actors must be protected and supported. Implementing exclusionary and top-down policies undermines the state-building project.
- **Ensure adequate funding support for humanitarian response**, while maintaining efforts to mobilise resources from international donors, such as through establishing development and humanitarian funds that could be vehicles for support.

7.3 For Myanmar civil society actors

The authors acknowledge that civil society actors range from highly localised community-based organisations to national NGOs and networks that operate at a large scale across the country. This diversity of actors is typically the frontline of crisis response across the country, with the following recommendations tailored towards their role in relation to the pluralistic state-led crisis response.

- **Accountability:** Holding the pluralistic state to account is a critical role for civil society actors, regardless of the volatility across the country. This provides checks and balances that improve the pluralistic state's crisis response, and the overall legitimacy of the revolution.
- **Service delivery:** This is understandably a priority considering widespread humanitarian need, but Myanmar civil society actors must avoid becoming entrenched in such roles. It is important to work towards supporting the pluralistic state to take over and lead such functions, so that civil society actors can prioritise their work on human rights, governance, peacebuilding and other areas.
- **Advocacy:** Engaging with the international community, from donors to state to multilateral institutions, remains a critical role that must be prioritised. The production of robust data and analysis remains vital to dispelling international misconceptions about locally led action and strengthening trust with international partners.

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