

## **Using aid to buy humanitarian space: the politics of Myanmar's Rakhine State**

Alex Douglas

*Project Manager, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's Rakhine State Project*

This paper investigates the politicisation of aid and humanitarian assistance in Myanmar's Rakhine State, which was the site of communal violence between the majority Buddhist and minority Muslim communities in 2012. This paper is based on observation and over a hundred key informant interviews with residents of Rakhine State, including senior government officials, NGO staff, leaders of violent groups, politicians, and aid recipients, conducted over the course of 20 field trips to Rakhine State between 2013 and 2015. This research was undertaken in the course of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's project to reduce violence and promote stability.

This paper charts how the humanitarian sector's focus on the Muslim community (which constituted the overwhelming majority of displaced persons) increased the Buddhist majority's grievances against humanitarian actors, resulting in a riot that forced the temporary suspension of operations. In order to regain humanitarian space, senior leaders of the aid sector decided that their emergency operations needed to be complemented by development programs that could be rolled out in the Buddhist community, thereby 'buying' humanitarian space.

This paper finds that this rebalancing has so far failed to change the overall political dynamics for two reasons. Firstly, despite sustained efforts there has been a failure to substantially change the religious make-up of beneficiaries because of the nature of modern development assistance, a siloed development bureaucracy, and humanitarian norms. Secondly, this rebalancing was not matched by a political strategy to change community sentiment. These findings provide insights into the politics of how aid is distributed, the differential political impacts on development versus humanitarian assistance, and how international aid can exacerbate conflict.