

Aid localisation amidst revolution in Myanmar

by Tamas Wells, Anne Décobert and Anonymous Myanmar author

20 September 2023



Aid for people fleeing violence in Myanmar
Photo Credit: [DFID/Flickr](#)

In revolutions, citizens push to overthrow the power of unpopular and unjust leaders. Yet in these contexts, it is often the case that other established power relations in society are also challenged. Revolutions and crises can ‘lift the lid’ on other unequal relationships and injustices.

In the case of Myanmar’s current revolution, the exiled National Unity Government, along with numerous armed groups and resistance movements around the country, are resisting the deeply unpopular and abusive Myanmar military. Amidst this revolution, however, there are other relationships that are being renegotiated, for example between different ethnic groups and, as millennials increasingly take on new leadership roles in the movement, between different generations.

Meanwhile, relationships and power dynamics within the aid architecture are also being challenged, as local and national Myanmar organisations question the longstanding dominance of international actors in humanitarian decision-making and resourcing.

Along with the revolution, there is currently a devastating humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. The [UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates](#) that more than 17 million people, or almost one-third of the country, will need humanitarian assistance in 2023. As international NGOs and UN agencies are heavily restricted in their access to key areas of need, humanitarian programs are almost entirely reliant on local and national organisations. Yet despite their central role in aid program delivery, Myanmar humanitarian organisations remain on the periphery of humanitarian decision-making and resourcing.

In late 2022 and early 2023, we did interviews with 25 leaders of these Myanmar organisations (along with ten interviews with international aid agency representatives in Myanmar), exploring the dynamics of aid localisation.

One of our key findings is that there is a ‘[conflict paradox](#)’ for these local

organisations – where local humanitarian actors can be both disempowered and empowered through international aid partnerships in settings of conflict. In conflict situations characterised by restricted international access, local actors can have greater control over aid resources and decision-making; yet such contexts can also result in the further disempowerment of local actors, when they are reduced to subcontractors delivering aid programs that remain controlled by international agencies.

In Myanmar, on one hand, local organisations are facing severe restrictions from the military regime – who **confiscate and block aid**, attempt to **control financial transactions**, and frequently **threaten the security** of staff and communities. At the same time, these Myanmar humanitarian organisations also report being hampered in their work by the bureaucracy and risk aversion of their international aid agency ‘partners’.

At times, international agency compliance rules – such as gaining three quotations for services, or keeping recipient lists – place local organisations and communities at risk from the regime. For example, one local aid provider told us how, in Sagaing division in Myanmar, the military regime recently destroyed all of the medicine at a local pharmacy and forced its closure, after local authorities saw the store listed on a voucher which had been kept for financial auditing of an aid project.

While some international agencies have increased their flexibility, Myanmar agency leaders reported that many international partners had shown little awareness or willingness to change systems to be more appropriate. More broadly, local leaders said that the relationship between international and local organisations was often a disempowering one in the humanitarian system. One Myanmar leader said that the “donors’ approach ... examining [local groups] and saying ‘you don’t have this and you don’t have that’ ... it undermines and disempowers the locals from the initial contact.”

On the other hand, local organisations have also, in some ways, been empowered in their work within the context of Myanmar’s conflict. They are able to operate more autonomously than international agencies as they have the ability to navigate the instability and dangers of the context. One Myanmar humanitarian organisation leader said, “Since COVID in 2020, and followed by the [military] coup [in February 2021], we know that, and we have proven that, local CSOs [civil society organisations] and agencies are the only actors on the ground.”

Along with greater access, local organisations have often developed stronger relationships of trust with other local organisations and communities. In the context of instability and revolution, such trust is crucial and is seen by many to go beyond

the context or duration of an aid project. A leader from one organisation said, “trust-building does not happen overnight ... If we want to support, help, and work together with [communities], we need to go beyond the project.”

Due to their access and relationships of trust with local communities, Myanmar humanitarian organisations, rather than international ones, are at the centre of current humanitarian responses. Yet regime and donor agency restrictions also hamper these responses.

This conflict paradox, where Myanmar humanitarian organisations are both empowered and disempowered, has led local leaders to attempt to reposition their agencies within the aid architecture. Rather than being subcontracted through a chain of funding – going from bilateral donor to UN agency or pooled fund to international NGO to local NGO – many large Myanmar organisations are now seeking to establish more direct funding relationships with donors. This aim is in line with the commitments made by the largest aid agency donors through the **Grand Bargain** in 2016.

Myanmar organisation leaders argue that they play a more effective aid intermediary role than international agencies. Access, local knowledge and trust allow them to support other local organisations and communities with more efficiency and context sensitivity.

Yet more than simply having greater effectiveness, Myanmar organisations are pushing for more decision-making power within the aid architecture as a matter of political rights and **self-determination**. They argue persuasively that decisions made about humanitarian action should be made by the people who are affected by them.

Revolution is not only a time of struggle towards regime change, but also a time when old inequalities of other kinds can be more clearly seen and challenged. This includes the old hierarchies in the aid sector. International aid agencies, including DFAT, need to adapt quickly and find sensible ways to address the inequalities in the aid system and more directly support the growth of Myanmar’s humanitarian organisations.

Disclosures:

This research was conducted by the authors through their work for the Myanmar Research Network at the University of Melbourne. The research was part funded by a European NGO (anonymised due to security concerns in Myanmar).

Author/s:

Tamas Wells

Tamas Wells is a research fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Before entering academia he worked as an aid and development adviser and consultant with various NGOs, including Save the Children and Oxfam.

Anne Décobert

Anne Décobert is a senior lecturer in development studies at the University of Melbourne. She has worked as a researcher and practitioner on aid programs in Myanmar since 2009.

Anonymous Myanmar author

Anonymous is a Myanmar development adviser, consultant and researcher with more than 15 years experience in the aid sector.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/aid-localisation-amidst-revolution-in-myanmar-20230920/>