TRIPLE CRISIS IN MYANMAR:

COUP
COVID
& CLIMATE
CHANGE

GUSTAAF HOUTMAN
CHAYAN VADDHANAPHUTI

TRIPLE CRISIS IN MYANMAR:

COUP
COVID
& CLIMATE
CHANGE

RCSD

The Regional Center for Social Science
and Sustainable Development
Chiang Mai University

TRIPLE CRISIS IN MYANMAR: COUP, COVID & CLIMATE CHANGE

EDITED BY:
GUSTAAF HOUTMAN
CHAYAN VADDHANAPHUTI

NOTE ON COVER PHOTO

Covid, coup, and climate change—the three 'C' crises—have left an indelible mark on every facet of Myanmar. Of these, climate change threatens to leave the most enduring legacy. In her compelling chapter in this book, Zar Chi Oo explores the unsettling end of an age-old natural rhythm: the annual flooding of the Irrawaddy River's alluvial islands, which has failed to occur for the past eight years. The front cover shows a boy swimming during the last flooding. The back cover shows how, as the flood waters recede, an alluvial farmer begins to prepare and plough the land for planting crops. This life-giving inundation, a staple of Myanmar's agrarian rhythm for centuries, has been a crucial factor for the region's alluvial farmers, the cessation of which heralds an ominous manifestation of climate change. As the floods cease, the once fertile soil turns barren, thrusting the farmers into a relentless cycle of unpayable debt as they borrow heavily, unable to compensate for the declining crop yields. Driven to desperation, they are forced to abandon their ancestral lands, seeking economic refuge in the teeming urban spaces of Myanmar and beyond the nation's frontiers. In doing so, they are uprooted from their traditional lifestyles, further deepening the social impact of this environmental crisis. The specter of climate change looms large, exacerbating the already dire consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the military coup, casting a long, menacing shadow over Myanmar's future.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Prior to 1989, the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia was exclusively known internationally as "Burma," the name that British colonizers used after they consolidated the central plains and previously autonomous mountainous regions in the mid-1800s in reference to the country's largest ethnic group, the Burman. The international use of "Myanmar" to refer to the country dates only to 1989, when the country's unelected military rulers of the time announced the change of the nation's name to *Myanmar naing-ngan*.

In addition, the official names of many ethnic groups, regions, cities, and villages were also changed, including that of the former capital from "Rangoon" to "Yangon."

The name changes were purportedly an effort on the part of the military regime to remake Burma into a more inclusive, multiethnic country, and to cast off vestiges of the colonial era. However, many critics pointed out that these changes failed to address the root causes of problematic Burman/ethnic minority relations, and historians have shown that both "Burma" and "Myanmar" were used prior to British administration. In addition, the use of "Myanmar" in English presents a grammatical challenge, as there is no conventional adjective form.

While international organizations such as the United Nations and Amnesty International have adopted the use of "Myanmar," journalistic, activist, and academic convention in much of the world continues to favor the use of "Burma," although usage patterns continue to evolve. For this volume, the decision of whether to use pre- or post-1989 "official" names has been left entirely to the authors, and in most instances the names are used interchangeably with no intended political implications.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BGF	Border Guard Force
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CRI	Climate Risk Index
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organizations
EMRF	Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
GFDRR	Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery
GoM	Government of Myanmar
GONGO	Government Organized Non-Government Organization
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International Non-Government Organization
IOM	International Organization of Migration
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IRI	Innovative Resource Institute
KECD	Karen Education and Culture Department
KIA	Kachin Independence Army

KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KNU	Karen National Union
KRZ	Karum Zinkhiri
KWAT	Katchin Womens' Assoiation Thailand
MIMU	Myanmar Information Management Unit
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PDF	People's Defence Forces
PDNA	Post-Disaster Needs Assessment
PPLF	Pann Pyoe Latt Foundation
PPP	Purchasing power parity
PwD	Persons with Disabilities
SAC	State Administrative Council
SEZ	Special Economic Zones
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
WHO	World Health Organisation

LIST OF FIGURES

CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

Gustaaf Houtman and Chayan Vaddhanaphuti

Over the past three years, Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, has been grappling with a convergence of three major crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, a military coup, and the ongoing impacts of climate change have created a complex and challenging situation for the country's population.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020, has had a devastating impact on Myanmar. With over 600,000 reported cases and more than 19,000 deaths, the health crisis has led to widespread economic hardship, including business closures and soaring unemployment rates. The pandemic has also disrupted education, with schools closed for over a year.

Adding to these challenges, Myanmar has been under military rule for over six decades, with the last three years being particularly devastating. The military coup of February 2021 overthrew the democratically elected government, leading to widespread protests and severe instability. The coup has also disrupted the country's response to the pandemic, including the rollout of the coronavirus vaccine.

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) emerged as a non-violent resistance campaign in response to the coup. Initiated by doctors in Mandalay, the movement quickly spread across the country, with public sector workers from various fields joining in droves. Despite the military's crackdown, which has severely constricted healthcare and education delivery and led to the displacement of many CDM participants, the movement has remained a powerful force for democracy. Approximately 60% of the nearly one million civil servants continue

participating in the CDM, demonstrating their resolve despite the high personal costs of losing their livelihoods and homes.

The coup has also led to a significant increase in the number of refugees from Myanmar. As of July 2023, the United Nations reports over 1.35 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Myanmar and over 1.2 million refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar in neighboring countries.

The third crisis, climate change, poses a long-term challenge for Myanmar. The country is already experiencing the effects of climate change, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and deforestation. These changes will likely significantly impact Myanmar's economy, food security, and public health. Myanmar is particularly vulnerable to climate change due to its tropical geography, agriculture-dependent economy, and social inequality.

The three crises are interconnected, with the coup exacerbating the economic and social problems caused by the pandemic and hindering efforts to combat COVID-19. Furthermore, climate change will continue to impact Myanmar's resilience to crises in the long term.

Despite these challenges, the people of Myanmar have shown remarkable resilience and tenacity. Their commitment to non-violent resistance, embodied in the CDM, volunteerism, and resource-sharing, has united them in opposition to military rule. However, they cannot overcome these crises alone. The international community must support their efforts by providing financial and technical assistance and pressuring the military to restore democracy and respect human rights.

. . .

This book contains contributions to the 7th International Conference on International Relations and Development organized by the Research Center for Sustainable Development held at the University of Chiang Mai, Thailand, 22-23 July 2022. Over 180 scholars, researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners presented papers on the social and political impacts of recent crises in Southeast Asia. One-third of the scholars presenting were from Myanmar.

The chapters in this book collectively analyze the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the military coup, and climate change on Myanmar's population. They reveal common themes of increased vulnerability, displacement, and insecurity and the adaptive strategies individuals, communities, and organizations employ in response to these crises.

In the first chapter, Aung Naing sets the stage by exploring the complex interplay between the pandemic and the coup, focusing on the heightened vulnerability of displaced households. This theme of vulnerability is echoed in subsequent chapters, with authors such as Aryuwat Raruen and Roi San Labang examining the experiences of refugees and internally displaced persons, respectively.

The emergence of volunteerism as a significant form of resistance to the coup is a key theme explored by Spring Rain and Aung Naing. They introduce the concept of 'Coupvid' and analyze the formation of a 'volunteer citizen' identity, suggesting a potential transformation of societal identities towards a more civic orientation.

The adaptive capacity of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in post-coup Myanmar is a shared focus across the chapters. Thida, Htet Htet, Aye Aye, Khin Mar & Aung Naing highlight how CSOs, despite pressure and restrictions from military authorities, continue to function by subtly adapting their practices to maintain civic space and support public resistance.

The chapters also delve into the human rights limitations and violations experienced by Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, with Melissa Wing and Naing Lin discussing the complexities of Thailand's immigration governance and its burdens on migrant workers. They argue that the securitization of these workers exacerbates their human insecurities.

Finally, the issue of climate change is addressed, with Zar Chi Oo and Aung Kyaw Thein focusing on its impact on agrarian transition and children and families in peripheral areas of Myanmar, respectively. They challenge common assumptions about adaptation and emphasize the need for proactive, locally-driven strategies.

In sum, the book underscores the complex and intertwined nature of the crises in Myanmar, illuminating the importance of resilience, good governance, and international cooperation in managing these compounded risks. The chapters collectively highlight the need for new policies and interventions to increase resilience and preparedness among vulnerable populations, particularly children and families, and to secure sustainable futures for displaced migrants and migrant workers.

2

COVID, CONFLICT AND COPING IN MYANMAR

Aung Naing

Independent researcher, Myanmar

ABSTRACT

Myanmar faces the triple threat of Covid-19 effects, conflict and climate change. Evidence suggests that many households cope despite the multiple threats and highly constrained context. However, coping strategies increasingly tend towards food compromise and financial strategies, negatively impacting future coping capacity. While the direct experience of Covid-19 infection was associated with an immediate but short-lived increase in vulnerability, conflict-related displacement appears to be associated with more prolonged increases in vulnerability. Given the high number of displaced households, the longer-term impact of conflict-related displacement on vulnerability is of particular concern. The sharp rise in coping activities such as food compromise and asset liquidation among displaced rural households, and the persistence of increased levels of household vulnerability even after returning from being displaced, suggests that both household and community coping capacity is being rapidly eroded, approaching a dangerous threshold. In the face of this, initiatives to rapidly mitigate displacement effects, such as local disaster relief hubs, could significantly reduce the long-term risks associated with displacement.

COVID, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT

Disaster-related acute insecurity accounts for 10% of the overall global prevalence of food insecurity, with the remainder being chronic under-nourishment due to 'recurrent lack of availability of or access to food of sufficient quality' (Roetter, Van Keulen, Kuiper, Verhagen, & Van Laar, 2007, p. 28). Conflict is the most significant cause of recent surges in need for food assistance (Global Network Against Food Crises, 2021); however, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the complexity of compound crises, particularly where these take place in contexts of deeply embedded structural inequalities (Phillips et al., 2020).

> Climate variability and change interact with existing vulnerabilities and drivers of conflict, and with the patterns of risk that shape humanitarian needs. The complexity of the interrelationships between different shocks and stresses has become more obvious in the context of Covid-19. It is no longer sufficient to understand and act on individual hazards (Peters & Dupar, 2020, p. 3).

The relationship between climate change and conflict is well documented, although the picture remains complex. As Salehyan (2014, p. 5) notes: "Climatic influences on various forms of conflict are not simple and direct". While often contextually framed, the effects of climate change on resource scarcity (for example, water, arable land or agricultural productivity) link to an increased likelihood of conflict (von Uexkull, 2014), often by exacerbating existing inequalities.

Numerous studies have highlighted the socioeconomic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic at both national and household levels and amongst different types of households (Palma & Araos, 2021; Rajan, Sivadasan, Jayanth, & Batra, 2021). While wealthier nations were able to provide a degree of social protection as part of pandemic control measures, evidence from low-income countries points to significant increases in food insecurity (Gundersen, Hake, Dewey, & Engelhard, 2021; Niles et al., 2020). The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic relates not only to households where members are infected with Covid-19 but also to households in communities affected by control measures, such as lockdowns, quarantining, and restrictions on travel (Fernandes, 2020). Again, while much of the impact is more directly

attributable to control measures and lockdowns, some are "simply part of the inherently risky lives of many households in low-income countries"—again highlighting how new crises tend to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. Pandemic-related shocks include 'job loss, business closure, disruption of farming activity, rising input prices, falling output prices, increasing food prices or illness or death of an income earner' (Josephson, Kilic, & Michler, 2021, p. 559).

Associations between the Covid-19 pandemic and conflict are also increasingly documented and present a mixed picture. A broad analysis using the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) data showed a short-term decline in inter-group conflict in the early months of the pandemic, after which levels steadily increased to return to pre-pandemic levels (Bloem & Salemi, 2021). Similarly, Tobias Ide (2021, p. 1) noted a decline in conflict in four countries but an increase in armed conflict levels in five countries, "with conflict parties exploiting either state weakness or a lack of (international) attention due to the COVID-19 pandemic."

However, there may be a significant nexus of overlap between Covid-19, climate change and conflict in three phenomena. Firstly, migration, a typical response to climate-change-induced economic shocks, was significantly curtailed by pandemic control measures, effectively cutting off a significant coping strategy and increasing pressure on scarce local resources. In some contexts, many migrants were repatriated, adding to local economic burdens (Ratha et al., 2020). By exacerbating existing resource scarcity pressures, these, in turn, increase the risk of conflict.

Second, the capacity of governments in low-income countries to mitigate complex crises has been severely challenged by the costs of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in difficult policy choices, potentially reducing fiscal space for climate change mitigation (Aebischer, 2020; Corfee-Morlot, Depledge, & Winkler, 2021). The demand for economic stimulus may override environmental concerns, which in turn may exacerbate local conflicts regarding resource extraction. Thirdly, and relevant to this study, in contexts where government lockdowns and control measures were imposed with little effective amelioration, coping mechanisms were more localized, enhancing the specific demands on local resources, such as water. As labor movement is restricted by Covid-19 control measures, responses to income and food insecurity

become more localized, enhancing the sense of community ownership of resources such as water and land, which in turn increase the risks of resource-related conflict (Pritchard, Grundy, van der Horst, Dzobo, & Ryan, 2020). Conflict, in turn, reduces the efficacy of pandemic-related responses, such as vaccination, and severely hampers post-pandemic economic recovery (Alsabri, Alhadheri, Alsakkaf, & Cole, 2021).

COPING WITH COVID AND CONFLICT

Broader coping strategies concerning income and food insecurity are contextual in relation to the nature or cause of the crisis and the local socioeconomic situation. However, three main categories of coping have been commonly identified: those relating to changes in consumption—particularly concerning food, but also non-food items (Maxwell, 1996); income mobilization strategies, such as borrowing or liquidizing assets (Shariff & Khor, 2008; Sultana & Rayhan, 2012); and income generating strategies, which, while under the broader rubric of livelihoods, describe a broad range of formal, informal, legal and non-legal activities, including day-wage labor, migration, begging and prostitution (Mosberg & Eriksen, 2015). More frequently, households employ a mix of strategies calibrated against available resources and demands:

> Food security is a managed process. Households are not passive agents but respond to the risks or shocks they face to reduce their vulnerability to these adverse events (Sassi, 2021, p. 8615).

In their study of the impact of Covid-19 on households in four African countries, Josephson et al. (2021, p. 559) observed a high rate of overall deployment of coping strategies and significant differences between urban and rural households in terms of which strategies were primarily employed. Strategies included "living off savings, selling assets, reducing food or non-food consumption, receiving help from family, and receiving government assistance". Rural households were more likely than urban households to rely on asset sales and less likely to rely on reduced consumption and help from friends and family.

Jane Corbett (1988, p. 1105) highlights the complex nature of coping. Coping strategies are often deployed sequentially in response to

emerging needs and scarce resources, which often start with what she calls "insurance mechanisms" such as reduction in consumption, inter-house/family loans and transfers, and sale of convertible assets such as jewelry, and are followed by the disposal of productive assets, such as livestock, or borrowing from local money-lenders; and ending with "destitution" where distress migration, begging and more extreme forms of servitude represent a last resort. In reality, coping involves "stark trade-offs" for households, "between ensuring their future economic security and meeting their current consumption needs". Such strategies, while effective at keeping household members alive, "will also have a high cost for households" (p. 1109).

Where steep inequalities exist, the impact of Covid-19, conflict and climate change-related food and income insecurity (Blundell, Costa Dias, Joyce, & Xu, 2020), and the capacity to deploy different strategies is even more unequal. Analysis of household coping strategies highlights the constraints on poor households, who are more likely to employ "food compromised" coping strategies than wealthier households, who have a higher likelihood of being able to deploy "financial" strategies (Das et al., 2020, p. 1). Food compromised strategies included reducing the amount, quality and frequency of food; financial strategies included the sale or credit of assets, borrowing money and borrowing food. Even within particular coping capacity categories, the nature of their deployment differs: wealthier households typically had a greater capacity to liquidize non-productive assets and to access low-cost finance from relatives or formal lending sources, whereas poorer households tend to have fewer non-essential convertible assets, and less access to flexible, low-cost borrowing (Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Honohan, 2009).

Household coping responses to conflict are profoundly contextual. They relate to both direct and indirect effects (Keen, 2001), where the ripple effects of conflict extend well beyond direct injury to poverty (Fernández & Pazzona, 2019), wage inequalities (Gimenez-Nadal, Molina, & Silva-Quintero, 2019) and changes in social composition (Sánchez-Céspedes, 2017).

COUPVID: THE VIOLENT EXACERBATION OF MYANMAR'S INEQUALITIES

Despite modest progress made under the first period of civilian rule from 2016, particularly concerning economic and governance reform, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the 1 February 2021 military coup, Myanmar was already ranked 23rd in the list of fragile states (Peace Fund, 2021), the only country in Southeast Asia listed in the top 40. Myanmar is also considered one of the countries at the highest risk of the effects of climate change, mainly due to its low levels of mitigation capacity. In 2021, Myanmar had 158,000 displacements, mostly from weather-related disasters (IDC, 2020). Decades of authoritarian rule resulted in deeply entrenched inequalities, not only concerning claims to ethnic self-determination and agency

(Griffiths, 2017; Walton, 2013) but also concerning class, gender and disability (Campbell & Prasse-Freeman, 2022; Griffiths, 2012). Armed conflict has been a feature of life for many communities in Myanmar for decades (Wallensteen & Sollenberg, 2001), with more well-documented events such as those in Rakhine State in 2017 (Ware & Laoutides, 2019), and less high-profile, protracted conflicts in Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Shan and Chin States, and parts of Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Bago regions (Cheesman & Farrelly, 2016). Such entrenched inequalities, tenuous political unity and a sorely underdeveloped economy meant that Myanmar was, and remains vulnerable to the impact of pandemic threats such as Covid-19, and climate change. However, the coup further exacerbated these vulnerabilities, occurring after the first two waves, but before the deadly third wave of Covid in July 2021, prompting some scholars to adopt the name 'Coupvid' to describe the overlapping nature of the threats (Lwin, San Wai, & Win, 2022).

Covid-19 pandemic control measures severely impacted an already fragile economy: research conducted towards the end of 2020 indicated that over 80% of households had seen significant reductions in their household income since the start of that year (World Bank, 2021). Economic forecasts project that poverty rates will likely double from 24% recorded in 2017 to 48%. Thus, households face the triple threats of Covid, coup-related conflict, and the effects of climate change, all taking place against extremely fragile economic systems. At the beginning

of 2021, efforts were underway to commence a national vaccination program and slowly re-open the business, education and travel sectors. However, the coup d'état of 1 February 2021, and a subsequent rapid spiral of violence, have wrought havoc on an already fragile society and economy. Swiftly following the coup were the imprisonment of key civilian government leaders, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as increasingly brutal repression of the rapidly emergent, well-organized mass resistance to the coup. Regarding pandemic control measures, broader public health service provision was deeply affected by the Civil Disobedience Movement, led by healthcare and education staff, who refused to work under the military regime. Healthcare, and to a large extent education, remained available in the private sector at considerably higher costs, or provided by striking government staff in free or low-cost settings.

A combination of instability, economic mismanagement, economic sanctions, and the reversion to "cronyism" also undermined any possibility of post-Covid economic recovery (World Bank, 2022): the exodus of foreign capital, mainly due to new currency controls by the military junta, further depleted industrial and service-related job sectors, and the rapid depreciation of the Myanmar kyat also increased the prices of imports, particularly fuel and medicines, in turn increasing basic food costs in urban areas.

The impact of the coup, and in particular, post-coup economic management, also impacted climate-change mitigation policies. After the coup of 2021, a significant number of extractive projects were either resumed or previous curbs removed, prompting concern for further erosion of disaster prevention measures (Kyungme Kim, 2022), as well as the exacerbation of conflicts about resource extraction and ownership, such as jade, coal and copper. This again illustrates the confluence of climate change and conflict, notably where the junta, lacking the expertise, capital or will to implement serious economic recovery policies, has reverted to extractive industries to generate income.

The 18 months following the coup have seen a resurgence of conflict in areas contested by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs[1]), and outbreaks of violence. Violence in EAO-contested areas has largely followed previous patterns, and violence in previously peaceful areas has significantly replicated the counter-insurgency tactics utilized by the Myanmar military over the previous decades. However, a key difference is evident between urban and rural areas: violence in urban areas tends to be localized responses to junta-led crackdowns on protests and arrests of protesters; in rural areas, where resistance has become increasingly organized, clearance operations have involved the insertion of troops by air or road, and widespread burning and looting of homes, crops, livestock, and civic and religious buildings (ACLED, 2022). These operations are associated with many displaced persons, as whole communities flee when such clearance operations are imminent. Air strikes have been associated with an even wider spread of displacement. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has recorded over 12,000 events and 22,500 casualties since 1 February 2021 (ACLED, 2022). At the time of writing, nearly 1 million people in Myanmar remained displaced, a significant proportion of whom was displaced due to recent conflict (UNOCHA, 2022).

A survey conducted two months after the coup, mainly in areas not directly affected by conflict, found that the majority (79%) of households reported a reduction of household income since the military coup; 25% had not worked at all, while another 31% had worked fewer hours. Lack of transport (40%) and lack of available work (35%) were the main reasons for not working[2]. This resulted in significant increases in food insecurity. In a nationwide, randomized sample of households interviewed by telephone survey three months after the coup, 55% of households reported decreased food availability, over 40% reported skipping meals regularly, and the majority (75%) reported a reduction in the consumption of staple foods, particularly proteins such as meat and fish. The lack of income increased food prices due to fuel price

---

1. More recent nomenclature differentiates between Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations, which are largely engaged in active resistance against the current military junta, and Ethnic Armed Organizations, which retain military capacity as a deterrent to territorial incursion by junta and junta-aligned forces.
2. Data taken from phone survey of 800 households in Mandalay, Yangon, Bagan, Monywa and Budalin, conducted by the authors.

hikes, increased transportation costs, and disruptions to markets and transport infrastructure, and all decreased the availability, accessibility and affordability of food. For households in the cohorts studied here, the threats are interlinked, and prior inequalities and vulnerabilities highly condition the ability to cope with threats.

A large cross-sectional study conducted in early 2022, mainly in areas with relatively low levels of conflict, highlighted a trend towards increasing vulnerability amongst poorer households in Myanmar, with changes appearing to be driven by lower levels of livelihood diversity, higher unemployment, more income spent on subsistence consumption, and higher rates of food insecurity. From that study, nearly two-thirds of households reported worse income over the past year, compared with 37.6% in a similar population in 2017; one-third reported asset worth decreased over the past year (compared with 16% in 2017) (LIFT, 2020, 2022). Wealthier households were far more likely to report improvements than poor households. These findings were similar to a study conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) during the same period, which suggested that, while households were, to some extent, coping, a growing number were in precarious conditions (IFPRI, 2022).

External assistance (a key element in coping strategies) was prominent during the first two waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, where local civil society organizations, volunteers, and government agencies provided health and economic-related assistance to households directly affected by Covid-19 as well as those indirectly affected due to control measures (Lwin et al., 2022). However, post-coup, volunteer associations, CSOs and welfare organizations were increasingly targeted by the military authorities, with multiple instances of the arrest of personnel, seizure of assets, and freezing of bank accounts of philanthropists, humanitarians and, in many cases, ordinary citizens attempting to help their neighbors (Liu, 2021). The squeezing of humanitarian space has further localized coping and assistance but at the same time has acted as a catalyst for emergent welfare movements, including some which have participated in this study.

METHODOLOGY AND COHORT (1,000) EXPAND TO GIVE SOME 'INSIGHT'

This paper is based on an analysis of data from a cohort of households located mainly in central Myanmar, in a mixture of urban and rural locations, and areas with a higher or lower degree of direct exposure to conflict. The names of specific locations have been redacted for security reasons. In April 2021, a small cohort of urban poor households was recruited into a program of regular monthly cash relief payments using a methodology initially designed for use during Covid-19 pandemic-associated lockdowns. In the absence of adequate government-led support for poor households that failed to meet stringent registration criteria, such as household residency documentation, national ID cards or ward registration, data were collected by telephone from an initial 100 households, with relief distribution facilitated directly or indirectly using digital money.[3] As restrictions on formal humanitarian agencies increased, this informal system expanded, gradually developing into a network of volunteer-led relief programs in nine separate locations, with a cohort of over 2,000 households. Households were included in different cohorts based on the particular focus of the volunteer group. In several cohorts, there was a strong emphasis on the inclusion of households with persons with disabilities or older persons; three cohorts focused on either urban slum households or urban migrant households.

Monthly tracking data, using a 10-minute telephone questionnaire, included questions on household members, income, livelihoods, debt and borrowing, access to other relief assistance, and exposure to hazards such as Covid-19 infection or conflict-related displacement or eviction. In several cases, the volunteer groups could not maintain regular contact with households, and in two cases, the volunteer networks were disbanded due to security threats. Thus, from the cohort of over 2,000 households, 1,217 households were identified as having at least 3 data points during the study period, each no more than two months apart. Data from three locations were excluded for insufficient or inadequate periodicity, and a small number of households were excluded from the final selection of cohorts due to insufficient data. Many of the households included were part of programs explicitly

---

3.   Some households did not possess sole access to a telephone, and so distribution was made through a local volunteer.

targeting households with Persons with Disabilities (PwD). The tracking process for most households in this cohort is taken from July 2021 to demonstrate a 12-month analysis. Most households typically received cash benefits between 20,000 and 30,000 kyat (between $11 and $16 at the time of writing); two urban cohorts (1 and 2) received in-kind benefits from a bundle of rice, oil and staples of equivalent value.

It should be emphasized that the households in this cohort represent a pre-selected sample for being more likely to be vulnerable to food insecurity based on prior knowledge of the communities. Previous research had identified these as higher-risk household profiles, such as those with persons with disabilities, insecure or temporary housing, and those recently affected by unemployment.

Cohort	Location	Number of households	Data commenced	Program type
1	Urban	30	July 2021	poor/persons with disabilities
2	Urban	73	July 2021	poor/persons with disabilities
3	Rural	461	August 2021	persons with disabilities
4	Urban	143	August 2021	poor
5	Urban	25	September 2021	poor
6	Rural	485	January 2022	poor/older persons

Fig.1. Household cohort sub-groups

The cohort included the following household profiles, shown in Fig. 2:

Type	Number	Percentage
Rural	956	77%
Urban/peri-urban	261	23%
Households with children	832	64%
Households with one or more PwD	591	48.5%
Households with older persons	792	65%
Households with pregnant women	36	3%
Households with no income source	96	8.5%
Households dependent on day-wage labor	316	25%

Fig. 2. Profiles of households in the cohort

One of the key indicators used in this paper is household vulnerability. In contrast to other development indicators, the vulnerability index here is measured after the selection and inclusion of the household. It is based not on fixed demographic markers such as disability, gender, or land tenure but as a dynamic measure of multiple aspects of household coping capacity. This aims to measure the household's vulnerability to shocks and stresses based on a modified version of a ten-point scale developed for use in rural and urban households in Myanmar (see Griffiths, 2018; Griffiths, 2012b, 2015; LIFT, 2020). A household is classified as vulnerable if three or more of the ten scale items classify as vulnerable. These include livelihood diversity, income and expenditure, economic dependency, food security, problem debt, assets (particularly asset diversity), health, water access, and social and political capital. The survey also recorded exposure to hazards, such as the direct experience of Covid-19, displacement and eviction, and specific coping strategies relating to food consumption, livelihood changes, migration, asset management and borrowing.

Food security was also measured using a five-point scale, including questions on a reduced frequency, quality and amounts consumed, skipped meals and reliance on donated food. The questionnaire also tracked access to other assistance, from formal sources such as NGOs and government agencies to informal assistance from friends, neighbors, religious organizations and local welfare groups.

FINDINGS (I) HOUSEHOLD VULNERABILITY DRIFTING TOWARD THE PRECIPICE

The considerable selection bias in the cohort studied here means that direct comparisons with other studies, or claims to broader representation, cannot be made, as the baseline characteristics of households in this cohort tended to illustrate higher levels of vulnerability. For example, at baseline, over 50% of households were classified as vulnerable on enrolment compared with 33% of households in the aforementioned cross-sectional study. Households in urban areas had higher vulnerability rates, primarily due to selection criteria prioritizing poorer and more vulnerable households.

We compared the initial baseline classification of each household with their most recent assessment to analyze changes in vulnerability status. Households with three or more of ten domains classified as vulnerable were then classified as vulnerable overall; likewise, those with two or fewer of the ten domains classified as vulnerable were classified as non-vulnerable overall.

Overall, there was a net increase in households classified as vulnerable on their most recent assessment. While just over 6% of households had changed from a vulnerable to a non-vulnerable status—representing an improvement in status—13% went the other way, with an adverse change in status. Most households remained vulnerable, but over a fifth tended towards even greater vulnerability.

Status/change	Number	%
Became vulnerable	158	13%
Vulnerable before, and stayed vulnerable	665	54.6%
Non-vulnerable before, and stayed non-vulnerable	319	26.2%
Vulnerable before, but became non-vulnerable	75	6.2%
	1,217	

Fig. 3. Vulnerability status at latest record, compared to status at enrolment

More instructive are the patterns of month-to-month change in the proportion of households across all cohorts whose vulnerability increased, decreased or remained the same. Across all cohorts, November 2021, January/February 2022 and April/May 2022 were the months with the largest net proportion of households with worsening vulnerability. These periods corresponded with a higher frequency of the first exposure to a major shock—either displacement, eviction or Covid-19: in November, 10% of households experienced their first major shock; in January and February 2022, 15% and 12%, respectively, and in April /May, 9% and 25% respectively.

Overall, there was a 7% net increase in vulnerable households, and over 60% either became newly vulnerable or remained vulnerable.
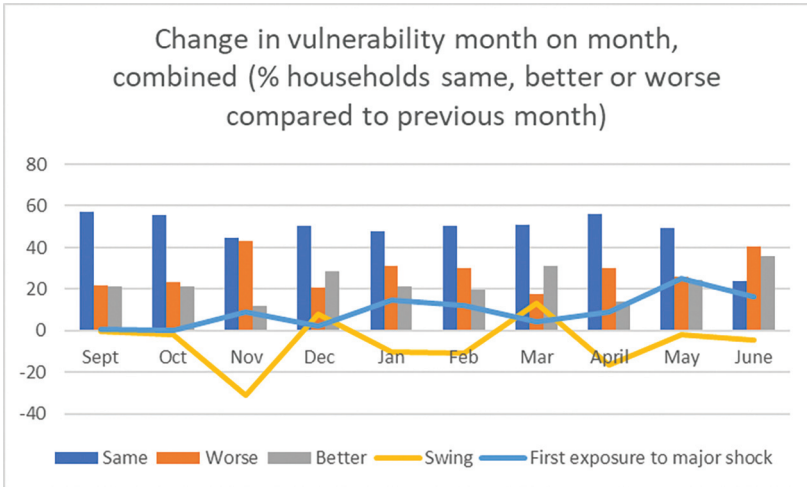
Fig. 4. Changes in vulnerability by month

Which households were more or less likely to become vulnerable? Unsurprisingly, the most significant association with a greater likelihood of worsening vulnerability was the lack of livelihood: nearly a quarter of all such households descended into a vulnerable state throughout the study period. Urban households tended towards greater volatility, with over a third changing vulnerability status and a greater net increase in vulnerable households (14% of the total urban cohort) compared with rural households, where only 15% changed status, with a net increase in vulnerable households of just under 5% of the rural cohort ($p<0.01$). Households with children tended to be vulnerable and stay vulnerable (63.5% vs 44%, $p<0.01$).

Access to assistance (apart from that provided by this project) also correlated with vulnerability outcomes: households reporting no other external assistance from family, friends, neighbors, government and non-government organizations and local relief organizations were more likely to experience increasing vulnerability (Fig. 5). Nearly one in five households reported receiving either no assistance or less than once per 90 days during the study period. The Odds ratio of worsening vulnerability for households receiving little or no assistance, compared with those receiving more regular assistance, was 2.7 (95% CI 1.62-4.41).

	Became vulnerable	Stayed vulnerable	Stayed non-vulnerable	Become non-vulnerable
Received regular assistance	11.6%	54.2%	27.9%	6.3%
Little/no assistance	19%	56.3%	19%	5.7%
Total	13%	54.6%	26.2%	6.2%

Fig. 5. Proportion of households with changes in vulnerability status by assistance category

Perhaps surprisingly, households in urban areas were more likely to report little or no assistance than rural households. This was mainly due to higher reporting of assistance in rural areas from local welfare associations (*parahita* organizations), which appeared to remain active in rural areas in 2021. However, the data showed a steady decline in households reporting assistance from such organizations. This is most likely due to the impact of raids by military forces on rural communities, resulting in a disruption of social and economic life, displacement and increased threats to local welfare organizations.
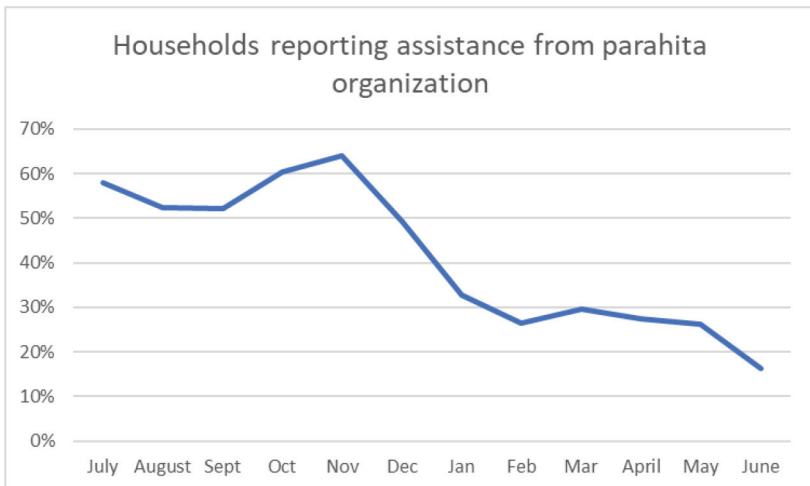
Fig. 6. Households reporting assistance from parahita organizations (apart from the assistance provided through this project)

This correlates with findings from other cross-sectional surveys, which also indicate a weakening of localized welfare provision due to a decline

in the local economy; arrests, intimidation and asset seizure by security personnel; out-migration of young people who typically provide the bulk of volunteers; and the effects of forced displacement on normal community functioning. Research from Myanmar prior to Covid and the coup demonstrates the considerable capacity of localized welfare to perform redistribution of funds to maintain community life; even small amounts of welfare, or low-interest emergency loans, are often sufficient to prevent destitution (Griffiths, 2019; Griffith, 2019b). The apparent decline of these organizations raises serious concerns about weakening an essential element of coping.

COPING WITH THREATS: WHAT STRATEGIES WERE TYPICALLY EMPLOYED, AND WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES?

Given the decline in the availability of external assistance, what other households employed coping strategies? A 2017 panel survey of mainly rural households in Myanmar documented household coping strategies to a range of shocks, such as natural disasters, health emergencies, and economic downturns. The most common coping strategy was borrowing (nearly 50%), with livelihood diversification (16%), selling animals or assets (11%) and spending savings (8%) (LIFT, 2020). Where external assistance was received, the primary providers were local welfare associations. In a telephone survey conducted in October 2020, Headey et al. reported that the most common coping strategies in response to downturns in income and increased food security were changes to non-food expenditure and consumption, borrowing, and using cash savings (Headey et al., 2022). A relatively small proportion of those surveyed reported reducing food consumption or liquidizing assets. However, a more recent survey in 2022 by IFPRI noted more worrying trends:

> Ninety percent of households applied at least one coping strategy to deal with lack of food or money during the past month. More than half of all households lowered food and non-food expenditures. A large number of households also used more dramatic coping strategies, including high-risk income generating activities (IFPRI, 2022, p. 1).

In this cohort, food compromise strategies (reducing the amount, frequency and quality of food) were employed most frequently, with nearly all households reporting compromised food consumption at least once

during the study period. Nearly a quarter of households reported compromising food consumption daily or weekly for at least two months out of three. Such frequent food compromise was more frequent amongst urban households (40% vs 20%, $p<0.01$) and was associated with exposure to shocks such as Covid-19 infection or eviction.

Of the cohort, 95% reported borrowing money to buy food at least once, and 67% reported selling assets. Only 15% of households reported any livelihood strategy, either finding work locally or migrating. When looking at the coping strategies utilized overall, 58% of all coping strategies were related to food compromise, 40% to financial strategies like selling assets or borrowing, and only 2% to livelihood strategies such as finding new work or migrating for work. Most households employed various strategies, although different households tended to have different capacities.

Among the rural households in the cohort, the proportion of households reporting any coping strategy was relatively low in the third quarter of 2021, with an increase in financial-related strategies around September, when Covid-19 infections were increasing in non-urban areas. However, rates of all coping strategies increased dramatically from December 2021, most likely due to a combination of declining food supplies and an increase in conflict-related displacement.
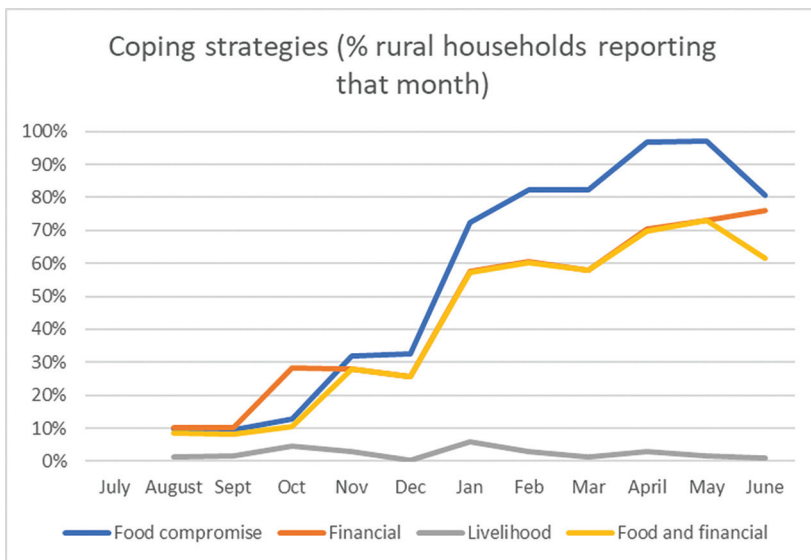
Fig. 7. Trends in coping strategies amongst rural households

The trends in coping strategies amongst urban households showed less volatility, although overall, urban households were more likely to employ food compromise strategies than rural households in the cohort. However, urban households were more likely than rural households to report finding new work at some point during the study period (6.3% vs 3.7%, $p < 0.05$); conversely, rural households were more likely to report a household member migrating to find work (12.7% vs. 8.9%, $p < 0.05$). Food compromise strategy was most likely in households reliant on day-wage labour.
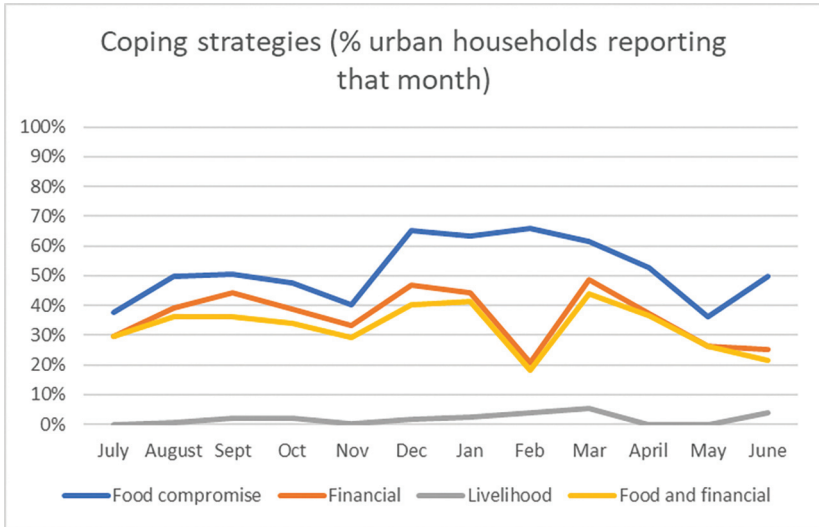
Fig. 8. Trends in coping strategies for urban households

Households adopting primarily food compromise strategy had a higher likelihood of worsening vulnerability in the subsequent month than those adopting a more financial strategy (OR 1.65, 95% CI 1.1-2.7) and those adopting a livelihood strategy (2.22, 0.7-11.3). This is not simply a consequence of the food compromise strategy: households that primarily employed food compromise strategies tended to be poorer and thus have fewer assets to sell or less social capital with which to be able to borrow money for food. This inequality in coping capacity, leading to worse outcomes, is likely to further increase the inequalities between wealthier and poorer households. Thus, some households were more likely to cope better than others. Factors associated with better coping (measured in terms of the increased likelihood of positive trends in vulnerability) included:

Being wealthier already (both in terms of income and disposable assets. There is considerable evidence that wealthier households were able to replace assets, or at least were able to sell off assets that were not crucial to livelihood activity)

- Being male-headed

- Being rural

- Having primary income from agriculture or livestock

- Having more diverse livelihoods (but contrast 'strategic' with 'survival')

- Having fewer dependents

- Membership of social/mutual organizations (but depends on type)

- Living in areas where there is less conflict

COPING WITH COVID

While conflict-related displacement and evictions did occur in the latter half of 2021, the third wave of Covid-19 was the primary threat during that period. During July, August, September, October and November of 2021, 186 (26% of those enrolled at the time) households reported one or more household members affected by Covid-19. A further peak in the rural population occurred in February-March 2022. In total, 23% of the entire cohort reported experiencing one or more household members affected by Covid-19 during their enrolment period, with households in rural and urban areas equally likely to be affected. Nearly half (48.2%) of affected households had a worsening vulnerability status the following month, compared with only 1.5% of unaffected households. Overall, the Odds ratio of worsening vulnerability in the month after Covid was 2.49 (95% CI 1.63-3.77), comparing all households who had had Covid with those who had not. However, in the longer term, households affected by Covid were more likely to recover, with an Odds ratio of 0.8 (95% CI 0.5-1.4) of being classified as vulnerable at the end, compared with households who did not experience Covid-19.

During the peak months of the third wave, the majority of households deployed a food compromise strategy (80-90%), financial strategy (80%) or both (65-74%). However, households reporting a member affected by Covid-19 were more likely to resort to financial coping strategies involving efforts to mobilize funds to pay for healthcare needs. Urban households were more likely to respond with food compromise strategies than rural households, possibly due to the increased challenges of procuring food during more stringent lockdown conditions.

The most common coping mechanism with Covid was selling assets. All households who reported experiencing Covid during the third wave also reported selling assets during or just after that period, compared with 45% of households who did not experience Covid at that time (p<0.001). While all the households in the cohort were receiving assistance, those who received cash assistance, as opposed to in-kind assistance, were less likely to experience worsening vulnerability. However, the overall trajectory of households affected by Covid-19 tended to show a more immediate shock but a return to prior levels of vulnerability in the subsequent months (i.e., a lowering of vulnerability scores, indicating a lower level of vulnerability).
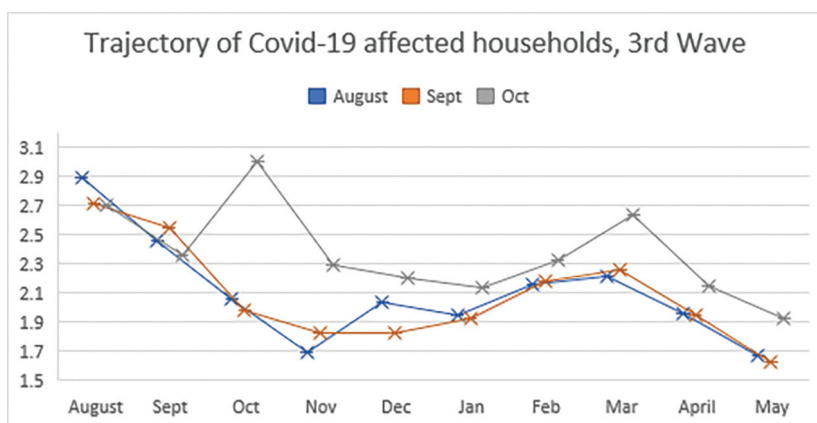
Fig. 9. Vulnerability scores of households affected by Covid 19 in three peak months

COPING WITH CONFLICT

A large cross-sectional study conducted in 2022 did not specifically enumerate households in conflict areas (LIFT, 2022). However, a significant 'ripple' effect of conflict can be seen. Using ACLED data to rank the townships according to the incidence of violence, households enumerated in the top 10 ranks (within the sample) for conflict had lower rates of resilience, and higher rates of vulnerability, than households ranked in the bottom 10.

Rank	Improved resilience	Income Worse	Vulnerable	Poor
Top 10	9.7%	61.6%	49.9%	17.3%
Bottom 10	25.8%	54.7%	25.9%	15.7%

Fig. 10. Resilience, vulnerability, income and poverty in households more or less affected by conflict (LIFT, 2022)

Analysis from the abovementioned cross-sectional study suggested two significant associations between higher rates of conflict and drivers of vulnerability. Firstly, livelihood profiles for households in townships with higher conflict rates demonstrated significant constraints on work opportunities. Compared with households in townships with lower rates of conflict, households in townships with higher rates of conflict had higher rates of unemployment (27% vs 21%), a lower average number of income sources (1.65 vs 1.78), and a greater likelihood to rely on only one income source (47% vs 38%).

Secondly, in areas with higher rates of conflict, indicators for social capital were negatively affected, with participation in groups lower amongst households with higher rates of conflict, particularly poorer households. This confirms findings from other studies and observations from this cohort study, highlighting the breakdown of mutual self-help associations in some areas where sustained violence has also targeted charitable associations.

Over 70% of households in this cohort study were forced to leave their household in the previous year, either as permanent eviction or fleeing conflict. Of urban households, 3.5% experienced permanent eviction –either slum households or households in areas where the military authorities demolished housing. Of rural households, 90% of rural households had experienced temporary displacement at least once; 64% had experienced repeated displacement. These were households in villages in areas of more intense conflict. Many households in this study were located where organized armed resistance to the military junta had been particularly strong. In these areas, military forces, often assisted by locally formed militias loyal to the junta (known locally as Phyu-Saw-Htee) conducted frequent raids into rural communities, burning houses and buildings, looting property and detaining, torturing and killing residents. ACLED data between December 2021 and

June 2022 reported over 250 incidents in the two townships included in the study, with 260 fatalities.

While only a minority of households in this study experienced direct arson, looting or detention by military forces, the impact of repeated fleeing and returning was associated with a steady increase in vulnerability. Health issues, particularly with older persons and persons with pre-existing chronic illnesses, the steady depletion of assets to obtain food, medicine and shelter, and the disruption of livelihoods all erode individuals' coping capacity. As noted earlier, the broader negative impact of military incursions on the capacity of community welfare organizations to provide effective relief is also a key factor. Where such assistance is not available, households are more likely to resort to self-sufficiency, such as food compromise, asset liquidation, and, where possible, borrowing, often at high-interest rates.

In response to displacement, most households employed either food compromise or financial strategy, with asset liquidation and borrowing being the most common. Displaced households had consistently higher rates of the major coping activities, such as borrowing for healthcare or food, reducing consumption and liquidizing assets (Fig. 11). However, the degree of difference decreased over time as a large proportion of rural households experienced displacement at least once. By May 2022, nearly two-thirds of all rural households had been displaced at least once, and the difference in rates of coping activities, apart from asset liquidation, was almost negligible in May and June.

What this means is: each month, more and more households were being displaced, some for a second, third or even fourth time. After December, in any given month, the households categorized as not displaced for that month include households who had previously been displaced but were not displaced that month—i.e., households who, to some degree, had already been traumatized by prior displacement. These households demonstrated the persistent effects of prior displacement, with higher rates of coping activities. Thus, by June, the 'not displaced' group of households included very few who had not previously been displaced. Even if further displacement did not occur, households that had experienced displacement at least once had persistently higher rates of coping activities than those who never experienced displacement.

What this means is: each month, more and more households were being displaced, some for a second, third or even fourth time. After December, in any given month, the households categorized as not displaced for that month include households who had previously been displaced but were not displaced that month-i.e., households who, to some degree, had already been traumatized by prior displacement. These households demonstrated the persistent effects of prior displacement, with higher rates of coping activities. Thus, by June, the 'not displaced' group of households included very few who had not previously been displaced. Even if further displacement did not occur, households that had experienced displacement at least once had persistently higher rates of coping activities than those who never experienced displacement.

Fig. 11: Odds ratios of coping activities if displaced, by month

Coping activities were in response to several immediate impacts of displacement, such as an immediate spike in income insufficiency in the month of displacement, increased rates of ill-health in the month of displacement, and increased rates of vulnerability in the month after displacement. The Odds ratio of worsening vulnerability in the month

after displacement was 1.57 (95% CI 1.23-1.98), and the increased risk of vulnerability persisted for several months after the event, unlike the experience of households affected by Covid-19. Households with children and persons with disabilities were more likely to experience a negative trend than other households.

Displacement has a lasting impact on households: they suffer an immediate shock, followed by an increased vulnerability for at least three months. This is caused by negative coping strategies such as asset liquidation and high-interest borrowing, repeated displacement and ongoing security risks, making it difficult to estimate the long-term impact of displacement.
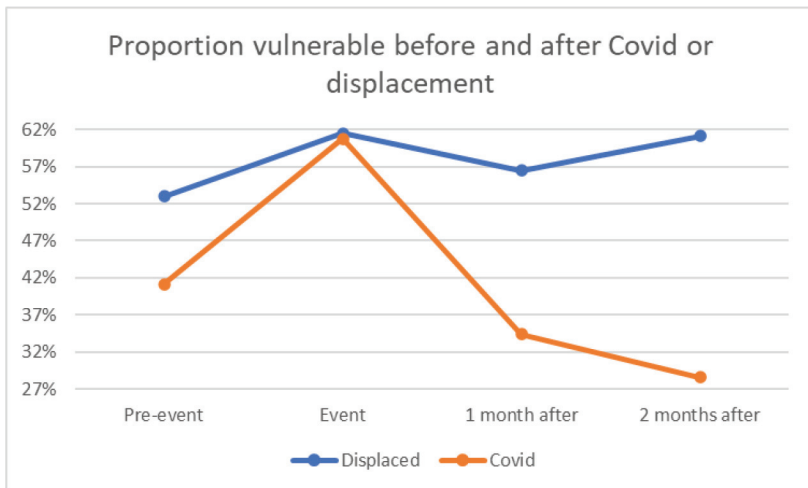
Fig. 12. Vulnerability trajectory of households experiencing Covid or displacement

CONCLUSION: COMMUNITIES ON THE BRINK

This paper highlights three key findings concerning coping with the dual threat of Covid-19 and coup-related conflict. Firstly, the frequency of reported coping activities is higher than in other coping studies concerning food insecurity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Josephson et al.'s (2021) study of coping with food security during the Covid-19 pandemic in four African countries, even in the country with the highest reported coping strategies (Uganda), around 40% reported 'doing nothing' in terms of specific coping actions. In this study, all households affected by Covid-19 deployed at least one coping strategy and most deployed several.

Secondly, the demands on coping appear more sustained in response to displacement for two likely reasons. The impact of displacement appears to be more chronic, with households demonstrating persistently higher levels of vulnerability several months after the initial displacement event. This relates to the liquidation of assets and persisting conditions of insecurity, making the resumption of livelihoods more problematic. Additionally, whereas the impacts of Covid-19 could be differentiated at the household level, displacement tended to affect whole communities at once. This limited the ability of local welfare organizations, which provided considerable assistance to Covid-affected households, to assist displaced households, as they were also being displaced at the time.

Thirdly, persisting conditions of insecurity mean that more resources, including financial and human, are redirected towards greater community protection and attempts to mitigate the likely impact of future raids. The presence of insecurity changes the logic of coping and resilience; activities and assets that, in times of security, would represent future-orientated investments, are now rendered untenable, and coping strategies are redirected to more short-term horizons, such as immediate preservation of life.

Thus, this shrinkage of livelihood, welfare and social network space has altered the nature and probably the long-term outcomes of coping. The past decades have seen substantial investment in livelihoods, mainly rural development, with decreased absolute and relative poverty levels (World Bank, 2018). However, these previous gains in terms of wealth creation, especially amongst poorer households, have been wiped out; and a 'deficit' is emerging, with the erosion of livelihood networks, social and economic networks, as well as household-level assets, coupled with inadequate nutrition and poor health, and delayed or abandoned education. This will, in all likelihood, result in a significant increase in inequalities. This deficit is not simply material; the broader breakdown of already fragile social ecosystems and public services represents a more challenging deficit, as they cannot simply be replaced.

The large number of households displaced by conflict in some areas, especially repeated displacement, appears to be associated with major "*shocks*" to the household and community ecosystem, resulting in

negative impacts like deteriorating health and asset liquidation. Thus, the consequences of direct and indirect exposure to the conflict are likely to emerge slowly and unevenly but are persistent. Future surveys will likely show a sharp deterioration amongst poorer/vulnerable households over the next 6-12 months and the emergence of poor households with whom poverty reduction initiatives will be particularly challenging.

A crucial question concerns the threshold at which households or communities cannot cope. Where, or what is the 'tipping point'? Suppose local coping capacity and community cohesion are being severely undermined/eroded. What does that mean for a community-led development process, especially in a context where access by external actors may be limited?

These findings point to the immediate and longer-term consequences of shocks such as Covid-19 and displacement, even where fatalities, arson or theft have not occurred. The primary mechanism of injury is the negative consequence of coping. Asset depletion or taking out high-interest loans to meet immediate income and food insufficiencies further undermines the capacity to cope later. This highlights the urgent need for locally available support to households at risk of displacement to enable coping which does not erode assets and livelihood capacity.

Whereas Covid-19 mitigation measures may require a more complex public health approach, this paper suggests the efficacy of locally situated mitigation mechanisms, whereby displaced populations can rapidly access food, shelter and essential items without resorting to more costly and erosive measures such as asset sales and loans. The essence is both speed and suitability, but it could be undertaken by a project which enabled village clusters to develop pooled emergency support resources that could be rapidly deployed to displaced populations within a given radius. This kind of "*rapid response*" disaster relief hub could also act as a node for developing emergency response and rehabilitation capacity, further consolidating notions of localized, indigenous and self-organized citizenship.

REFERENCES

ACLED. (2022). *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*. Retrieved from https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard

Aebischer, C. (2020). *The socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and how to deploy international climate finance in the context of green stimulus packages*. DIW Berlin, German Institute for Economic Research. Germany. Retrieved from https://policycommons. net/artifacts/1916469/the-socio-economic-impacts-of-covid-19-and-how-to-deploy-international-climate-finance-in-the-context-of-green-stimulus-packages/2668241/ on 19 May 2023. CID: 20.500.12592/c8vdjx.

Alsabri, M., Alhadheri, A., Alsakkaf, L. M., & Cole, J. (2021). Conflict and COVID-19 in Yemen: beyond the humanitarian crisis. *Globalization and Health, 17*(1), 83. doi:10.1186/s12992-021-00732-1

Beck, T., Demirgüç-Kunt, A., & Honohan, P. (2009). Access to financial services: Measurement, impact, and policies. *The World Bank Research Observer, 24*(1), 119-145.

Bloem, J. R., & Salemi, C. (2021). COVID-19 and conflict. *World Development, 140*, 105294.

Blundell, R., Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R., & Xu, X. (2020). COVID-19 and Inequalities. *Fiscal studies, 41*(2), 291-319.

Campbell, S., & Prasse-Freeman, E. (2022). Revisiting the Wages of Burman-Ness: Contradictions of Privilege in Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 52*(2), 175-199.

Cheesman, N., & Farrelly, N. (2016). *Conflict in Myanmar: war, politics, religion*: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Corbett, J. (1988). Famine and household coping strategies. *World Development, 16*(9), 1099-1112.

Corfee-Morlot, J., Depledge, J., & Winkler, H. (2021). COVID-19 recovery and climate policy. *Climate Policy*, *21*(10), 1249-1256.

Das, S., Rasul, M. G., Hossain, M. S., Khan, A.-R., Alam, M. A., Ahmed, T., & Clemens, J. D. (2020). Acute food insecurity and short-term coping strategies of urban and rural households of Bangladesh during the lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic of 2020: report of a cross-sectional survey. *BMJ open, 10(12),* e043365.

Fernandes, N. (2020). *Economic effects of coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) on the world economy*. IESE Business School Working Paper No. WP-1240-E. Available at SSRN 3557504 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssm.3557804.

Fernández, J. M., & Pazzona, M. (2019). Evaluating the Spillover Effects of the Colombian Conflict in Ecuador. *Defence and Peace Economics, 30*(3), 324-348.

Fund for Peace. (2021). *Fragile States Index.* Retrieved from Country Dashboard | Fragile States Index.

Gimenez-Nadal, J. I., Molina, J. A., & Silva-Quintero, E. (2019). On the Relationship between Violent Conflict and Wages in Colombia. *The Journal of Development Studies, 55*(4), 473-489. doi:10.1080 /00220388.2018.1425393

Global Network Against Food Crises. (2021). *2020 Global report on food crises: Joint analysis for better decisions: September update in times of COVID-19*. Rome, Italy; and Washington, DC. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); World Food Programme (WFP); and International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). https://www.fsinplatform.org/global-report-food-crises-2021

Griffiths, M. (2018). *Using Vulnerability mapping to measure medium term impact of relocation and resettlement by Special Economic Zones (SEZ): Thilawa SEZ, Yangon Region, Myanmar.* Retrieved from Yangon: http://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/ Thilawa_Vulnerability_Research_Feb2018.pdf

Griffiths, M. (2012). Uncomfortable Truths: inequalities due to disability in Myanmar. *Bulletin of the Social Policy & Poverty Research Group, 1*(5).

Griffiths, M. (2012b). *Using the Umbrella Model to measure Household Vulnerability: application in Myanmar to assess disability related*

vulnerability Paper presented at the 1st Global CBR Congress, Agra, India.

Griffiths, M. (2015). *Dimensions of poverty, vulnerability and social protection in rural communities in Myanmar*. Retrieved from Yangon/Nay Pyi Taw: http://www.lift-fund.org>uplods>ResearchPDF

Griffiths, M. (2017). *Regional Inequalities in Myanmar*. Paper presented at the Inclusive Development for All, Yangon. http://www.mizzima.com/development-news/policy-dialogue-brings-income-inequality-forefront-development-discussions

Griffiths, M. (2019). Networks of reciprocity: Precarity and community social organizations in rural Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *49*(4), 1-24.

Griffiths, M. (2019b). *Community Welfare Organizations in Rural Myanmar: Precarity and Parahita*: Routledge.

Gundersen, C., Hake, M., Dewey, A., & Engelhard, E. (2021). Food insecurity during COVID-19. *Applied economic perspectives and policy, 43*(1), 153-161.

Headey, D., Goudet, S., Isabel, L., Maffioli, E. M., Oo, T. Z., & Russell, T. (2022). Poverty and food insecurity during COVID-19: Phone-survey evidence from rural and urban Myanmar in 2020. *Global Food Security*, 100626.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2020). *Global Report on Internal Displacement* https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/2020-global-report-on-internal-displacement#:~:text=The%20Global%20Report%20on%20Internal%20Displacement%20%28GRID%29%20is,challenges%20and%20opportunities%20in%20addressing%20and%20preventing%20displacement.

Ide, T. (2021). COVID-19 and armed conflict. *World Dev, 140*, 105355. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105355

IFPRI. (2022). *Welfare and vulnerability: Findings from the first round of the Myanmar Household Welfare Survey*. Retrieved from https://www.ifpri.org/publication/welfare-and-vulnerability-findings-first-round-myanmar-household-welfare-survey

Josephson, A., Kilic, T., & Michler, J. D. (2021). Socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 in low-income countries. *Nature Human Behaviour, 5*(5), 557-565.

Keen, D. (2001). *The political economy of war*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kyungme Kim. (2022). *How military rule makes Myanmar more vulnerable to climate change.* Retrieved from https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/climate/how-military-rule-makes-myanmar-more-vulnerable-to-climate-change/

LIFT. (2020). *Decreasing Vulnerabilities in LIFT-supported villages: 2014-2018*. Retrieved from https://www.lift-fund.org/sites/lift-fund.org/files/publication/2.%20Decreasing%20Vulnerabilities%20in%20LIFT-supported%20Villages%202014-2018.pdf

LIFT. (2022). *Vulnerability, Resilience and Coping in 2022*. Yangon: UNOPS (internal).

Liu, J. (2021, 28th September). CSOs after the coup: Operations squeezed, funding crunched. *Frontier Myanmar.* Retrieved from https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/csos-after-the-coup-operations-squeezed-funding-crunched/

Lwin, S., San Wai, K., & Win, N. (2022). *Capabilities, Coupvid and Cataclysm: Myanmar's Responses to Covid-19.* Paper presented at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Conference, "Covid-19 in Southeast Asia, 2020-2022: Restriction, Relief, Recovery", 28-29 July.

Maxwell, D. G. (1996). Measuring food insecurity: the frequency and severity of 'coping strategies'. *Food policy, 21*(3), 291-303.

Mosberg, M., & Eriksen, S. H. (2015). Responding to climate variability and change in dryland Kenya: The role of illicit coping strategies in the politics of adaptation. *Global environmental change, 35*, 545-557.

Niles, M. T., Bertmann, F., Belarmino, E. H., Wentworth, T., Biehl, E., & Neff, R. (2020). The early food insecurity impacts of COVID-19. *Nutrients, 12*(7), 2096.

Palma, J., & Araos, C. (2021). Household Coping Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chile. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 162.

Peters, K., & Dupar, M. (2020). *The humanitarian impact of combined conflict, climate and environmental risks.*London: ODI (https:// odi. org/en/publications/the-humanitarian-impact ….)

Phillips, C. A., Caldas, A., Cleetus, R., Dahl, K. A., Declet-Barreto, J., Licker, R., Spanger-Siegfried, E. (2020). Compound climate risks in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nature Climate Change, 10*(7), 586-588. Pritchard, R., Grundy, I. M., van der Horst, D., Dzobo, N., & Ryan, C. M. (2020). Environmental resources as 'last resort'coping strategies following harvest failures in Zimbabwe. *World Development, 127*, 104741.

Pritchard, R., Grundy, I. M., van der Horst, D., Dzobo, N., & Ryan, C. M. (2020). Environmental resources as 'last resort'coping strategies following harvest failures in Zimbabwe. *World Development, 127*, 104741.

Rajan, S. I., Sivadasan, T., Jayanth, R. S. S., & Batra, P. (2021). Household Pandemic Response: The Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Households in India. *Asian Economics Letters, 3*(Early View), 25382.

Ratha, D. K., De, S., Kim, E. J., Plaza, S., Seshan, G. K., & Yameogo, N. D. (2020). *COVID-19 crisis through a migration lens.* Migration and Remittances Team, Social Protection and Jobs, World Bank.

Roetter, R. P., Van Keulen, H., Kuiper, M., Verhagen, J., & Van Laar, H. (2007). *Science for agriculture and rural development in low-income countries*: Springer.

Salehyan, I. (2014). Climate change and conflict: Making sense of disparate findings. *Political geography, 43*, 1-5. doi:https://doi. org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2014.10.004

Sánchez-Céspedes, L. M. (2017). The consequences of armed conflict on household composition. *Oxford development studies, 45*(3), 276-302. doi:10.1080/13600818.2016.1213798

Sassi, M. (2021). Coping strategies of food insecure households in conflict areas: The case of South Sudan. *Sustainability, 13*(15), 8615.

Shariff, Z. M., & Khor, G. L. (2008). Household food insecurity and coping strategies in a poor rural community in Malaysia. *Nutrition research and practice, 2*(1), 26-34.

Sultana, N., & Rayhan, M. (2012). Coping strategies with floods in Bangladesh: an empirical study. *Natural Hazards, 64*(2), 1209-1218.

UNOCHA. (2022). *Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 19 | 28 June 2022.* UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Washington. Retrieved from https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-19-28-june-2022

von Uexkull, N. (2014). Sustained drought, vulnerability and civil conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Political geography, 43*, 16-26.

Wallensteen, P., & Sollenberg, M. (2001). Armed Conflict, 1989-2000. *Journal of peace research, 38*(5), 629-644.

Walton, M. J. (2013). The 'Wages of Burman-ness:' Ethnicity and Burman privilege in contemporary Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 43*(1), 1-27.

Ware, A., & Laoutides, C. (2019). Myanmar's 'Rohingya' conflict: Misconceptions and complexity. *Asian Affairs, 50*(1), 60-79.

World Bank. (2018). *2017 Living Conditions Survey.* Retrieved from Yangon: http://www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/Publications/PovRedu/MLCS-2017.pdf

World Bank. (2022). *Myanmar Economic Monitor.* Retrieved from https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/myanmar-economic-monitor-january-2022-economic-activity-in-myanmar-to-remain-at-low-levels-with-the-overall-outlook-blea#:~:text=Key%20Findings%3A,the%20year%20to%20September%202022.

3

EMERGENT IDENTITY: 'COUPVID',VOLUNTEERISM AND THE NEW CITIZEN IN MYANMAR

Spring Rain, Aung Naing

Independent researchers, Myanmar

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the youth-led resistance to the 2021 Myanmar coup was influenced by forms of volunteerism that emerged during the transition from military to civilian rule and grew in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Military rule suppressed overt political activity and organized civil society, leading activists to engage in citizenship through volunteer public welfare (*parahita*) organizations. These were apolitical and provided youth with a means to engage in activism. When the Covid-19 pandemic overwhelmed state services, many youth-led volunteer organizations stepped in to help by providing ambulance services, staffing quarantine centers, and procuring scarce medicines and oxygen. The 2021 coup deprecated and even criminalized the service of these volunteers, further feeding anger and resistance against military rule. This paper examines two case studies of 'volunteer citizens' and how they differ from "*ethnic*" or "*national*" citizens. The volunteer movement among youth has the potential to create a new civic identity that transcends other identities and is shaped by local associations rather than biological or political markers.

ရေဘေးလဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
စစ်ဘေးလဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
အောက်စီဂျင်လိုလဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
နိုင်ငံအတွက် စစ်တိုက်ပေးတော့လဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
သပိတ်ထွက်လဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
ဆေးဝယ်လဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
ဆေးပို့လဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
အငတ်ငတ်အပြတ်ပြတ်နက် နိုင်ငံတော်ရဲ့ အနာဂတ်ကြီးကို
ပြန်လည် ယူဆောင်ပေးဖို့ ဒုက္ခအမျိုးမျိုးခံပြီး တောထဲနေပြီး
ကြိုးစားနေကြတာလဲ ဒီလူငယ်။
လေးစားပါတယ်ဗျ။
ကိုတောင်ဘာမှုလုပ်မပေးနိုင်ဘူးဆိုရင် မစော်ကားပါနဲ့။

When it floods...these young people

In war, these young people

You need oxygen…these young people

Fighting for the nation…these young people

Demonstrations? These young people

Buying medicines for others…these young people

Taking medicines to others…these young people

Enduring hunger and hardships, suffering in many ways,

living in the forest….all for the sake of the nation's future…

these young people

I respect you!

May no one say you can do nothing!

A popular Facebook post from October 2021 featured the above poem praising youth. The post featured pictures of young people wading through knee-deep water to deliver relief goods; providing security for their communities; being arrested; taking oxygen tanks to patients sick with Covid; taking medicines to quarantined patients; and driving ambulances during the Covid-19 pandemic. This neatly captured the current face of the response to both the Covid pandemic and military

rule in Myanmar but also drew lines with earlier, youth-led initiatives to provide flood relief to victims of earlier floods, including those on the eve of elections in 2015.

These images juxtapose alongside those from the aftermath of the coup d'état of 1 February 2021, where the visible face of protest was unmistakably young, and the various means of protest were rooted in ideologies and technologies embraced mainly by the youth generation (Sumon Thant, 2021). In the history of resistance and revolution, this is far from unique: the 'Arab Spring' was noteworthy as one of the first mass movements to utilize popular social media platforms such as Twitter (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2014), and the sheer diversity and ubiquity of social media mean that, unless the internet is completely shut down, such means will be a significant factor in disseminating and mobilizing ideas and activism. However, rather than representing a kind of ex-nihilo emergence of youth activism in response to the 2021 coup, the emergence of youth-led resistance to military rule is in itself simply an extension, albeit with multiple reiterations, of a far longer trajectory of an emergent form of citizenship which has to a significant extent always existed outside of the sphere of influence of both established political parties and ethnic identity politics. The key characteristics of this form of citizenship are engaged activism, often in the form of welfare; self-organization; inclusivity concerning religion and ethnicity (but with caveats, as we shall see later); and localization of scope and identity, over and above notions of being part of national movements.

This form of citizenship is enacted as a form of protest and resistance to attempts by others, including authoritarian regimes, political parties and INGOs, to define citizenship, patriotism and belonging in other terms. The essence of *ko-tu, ko-hta* (standing on one's own two feet) is to enact welfare through own means and on own terms and, in doing so, to demonstrate one's worthiness of belonging. In answer to the question "What does it mean to be a citizen of Myanmar?" we would argue that the current generation responds with actions rather than words, and their actions orient around principles of self-organized welfare that date back, arguably, even to pre-colonial times.

A vital aspect of these actions revolves around volunteerism-sharply defined against 'paid' humanitarian work—often in local civic or

welfare organizations established in response to emergent needs and visible gaps or deficiencies in government service provision. The vigorous defense of the contrast with paid humanitarian work is rooted in organizational narratives, whose appeal rests largely on being philanthropic and altruistic, often appealing to a mix of civic pride and religious merit to attract and maintain volunteers and donors (Griffiths, 2019). It is precisely the location and framing of volunteerism in subtle tension between appeals to civility, on the one hand, and implicit critique of the shortcomings of government health and welfare provision on the other, which have given the current youth movements the imagination and energy for volunteerism as a form of resistance. Our thesis here is that the motivations of individual volunteers intersect with and transform the identities of the organizations with which they volunteer. Volunteering in these organizations shapes a particular volunteer identity, maintaining their commitment and motivation.

VOLUNTEERISM IN MYANMAR AND ELSEWHERE

Classic studies of volunteerism seek to understand the motivations of volunteers from a functionalist perspective, seeking to understand "what people are trying to accomplish and gain from their volunteer experience" (Mannino, Snyder, & Omoto, 2011, p. 129). This perspective highlights how motives may well be mixed: both altruistic, but with an eye on how volunteering can bring benefits to the volunteers themselves—if not material, then symbolic benefits such as new skills, the esteem of others, or religious satisfaction (Mannino et al., 2011, p. 130). However, the motivation of individuals relates to broader community needs, norms and expectations and, to an extent, overlaps with identities linked to places, professions and particular causes. Put another way: volunteers may feel a particular sense of duty because of who they are (their profession, their skills, or their affiliation with a group who are suffering); because of where they are—i.e., in response to localized needs or issues; and because of what they perceive that those around them may expect of them. Thus, individual and social identities (Mannino et al., 2011, p. 134) link to group membership, place identities, role identities, and religious affiliation. Analysis of the volunteerism discourses demonstrates scholarship's tendency to emphasize 'individualism over collectivism' (Ganesh & Mcallum, 2009, p. 345). However, this emphasis tends to overlook the iterative relationship between individual identity

and motivations, social identity and motivations, and the powerful influence of community and group identities on the shape of volunteering. The motivations to volunteer may well be bound up in an identity bound to multiple, overlapping identities and affiliations of place, profession, ethnicity, religion and gender. Thus, while personal values and concerns are motivations for volunteering, these values are not isolated but connected with a broader network of identity, affiliation and belonging (Mannino et al., 2011, p. 131).

This is significant when considering the interface between volunteers and the government.

Volunteerism can be understood, to some degree, as a social practice

> produced by the shrinking of the traditional welfare state
> […] studies have demonstrated a relationship between the
> amount of voluntary activity in a country and the overall
> size of its welfare sector: the less state welfare, the more the
> volunteering (Ganesh & Mcallum, 2009, p. 345).

Volunteer groups frequently emerge in response to crisis, mainly "if people see a need for urgent action that is not being taken by others, especially official organizations" (Twigg & Mosel, 2017, p. 450). Much literature has been devoted to best practices in handling volunteer groups during emergencies, recognizing the benefits and drawbacks of "non-professional" assistance. However, this again obscures the significance of coproduction, where "volunteers actively provide relevant public services to their own communities, typically without tangible compensation [..] to fill acute gaps and prevent public agencies from being overwhelmed during crisis events." (Miao, Schwarz, & Schwarz, 2021, p. 1). However, coproduction requires a degree of mutuality, whereby volunteer agency is appropriately respected rather than treated as a subservient source of free labor. Here, volunteer identity may be better framed in terms of citizenship: that providing such service is an expression of citizenship, but the volunteering is provided on the volunteer's terms. This positions volunteerism as an expression or a dimension of citizenship not bounded by the terms of government. Particularly in contexts where the role of citizens is largely depicted as "casting ballots and watching the action." (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1083),

governments may well treat volunteering as a valuable means to fill gaps, but rarely as a co-owner and co-producer of essential social capital. The point here is that, while from the perspective of governments and established institutions, volunteers and volunteer groups may be welcomed as a means to plug gaps, their very emergence not only highlights those deficiencies but seizes some of the initiatives in responding to them. In that sense, volunteerism represents a contestation of citizenship (Artero & Ambrosini, 2022); a performative claim not so much for a right to belong, as the right to determine what belonging means and looks like.

Myanmar has a rich heritage of volunteerism and philanthropy, regularly ranked highest in the world for donations of time and money (Dove, 2017; Future World Giving, 2016). While much of this can be attributed to the persistent influence of (mainly Buddhist) religious teaching (Jaquet & Walton, 2013), more recent scholarship has explored how the particular practices of volunteering and donation are framed beyond religious terms. Initial relief for victims of the 2008 Cyclone Nargis was from local groups, which

> Crossed ethnic, class and religious barriers, to the surprise of many observers [and] provided assistance to an estimated 350,000 survivors and opened up new space for civil society (Twigg & Mosel, 2017, p. 450).

The proliferation of self-organized welfare groups in the aftermath of the 2008 Cyclone merely represented the explicit presence of what had previously been suppressed—namely, a long tradition of localized welfare (Griffiths, 2019; Heidel, 2006; McCarthy, 2017). While many of these groups, identifying closely with Buddhist principles of altruism, would deny any political motivations, the discourses of welfare make implicit reference to three key assumptions: firstly, that the failure of the state to provide adequate welfare and protection gives de facto mandates to local organizations to step in; secondly, that by doing so, and fulfilling locally what the state should ordinarily provide, local welfare organizations in return expect a degree of forbearance from the state—freedom from interference, requirements to register, and taxation; and thirdly, that localized welfare represents a demonstration of a model society and citizenship—in contrast with the state's

iterations of citizenship—and thus, volunteers and donors to such groups, and communities which have such groups, are considered to be exemplars, and worthy of wider recognition by the state.

Behind the "do it ourselves, don't expect anything from the government" (Thawnghmung, 2019, p. 100) and the emphasis on *ko-tu, ko-hta* ("self-help") is a subtle critique of government inadequacies, allied with a desire to assert one's own stamp on the delivery of services or aid. Local welfare groups collectively redistribute sums far above state-led social welfare programs (Yaw Bawm Mangshan & Griffiths, 2018). Research consistently points to households contributing far more in charitable donations than taxes (McCarthy, 2016).

This, to some degree, posits self-organized welfare and volunteerism as a response to state inadequacy. However, one of these, rather than representing a meek acquiescence to the state's needs, has its own identity, objectives and demands and offers an alternative discourse to the state's monopoly on citizenship and belonging. Suppose volunteering is a means to assert a claim to a particular expression of citizenship concerning localized, place-based identity or a broader sense of affiliation. In that case, it represents an implicit challenge to state discourses on citizenship in Myanmar, which strongly emphasize remaining within established boundaries of religion and culture, subservience to higher authorities, and maintaining discipline and order (South & Lall, 2017). This potentially makes volunteerism somewhat dangerous—which largely explains why successive military governments in Myanmar have sought to suppress charitable and volunteer organizations.

Suppose the relationship between the mainly youth-led volunteers and military governments was largely one of oppression and evasion. In that case, the short period of civilian rule by the NLD government can perhaps be characterized as unfulfilled expectations. While there was assiduous (and successful) courting of the youth vote, particularly in 2020, many youth organizations felt that little was expected of them beyond electoral support—a maintenance of the divorce between social and electoral activism as forms of citizenship. After decades of a monolithic framing of citizenship, it fell to the NLD to rebuild the political dimension of citizenship. To achieve this, the appeal to citizens must extend beyond simple electoral support. It would need to

harness the vast amount of energy available in myriad self-organized development projects, philanthropy and education and engage citizens in a common task of nation-building. While progress was made in many areas, many felt as if the space for civil society had been newly constrained by expectations of technical and material, but not policy, contributions (Wells, 2022). In that sense, citizenship remained a domain primarily defined by the government, not by citizens: a notion ripe for challenge.

EMERGING THREAT, EMERGENT VOLUNTEERS—COVID-19 IN MYANMAR.

The Covid-19 pandemic reached Myanmar in March 2020, with an initial first wave recording a small number of cases and deaths due to a mixture of widespread control measures and low levels of diagnostic testing. A second wave, starting in mid-August 2020, rapidly dwarfed the first, placing an already fragile healthcare system under strain (Deshpande, Hnin, & Traill, 2020). Widespread stay-at-home orders, strict rules quarantining contacts and travelers returning from different countries or parts of the country, resulted in a massive demand for quarantine facilities. Schools and public buildings were converted into temporary centers, and while government staff and funds were used where possible, many centers relied heavily on volunteers and donations of food, medical supplies and cash

Case loads and mortality were relatively low in the first wave of Covid-19 in Myanmar, with 360 cases and 6 deaths recorded in the first 6 months. The second wave, in August 2020, saw daily cases rise to over 1,000 per day by mid-October (Deshpande, Hnin, & Traill, 2020). This wave has overwhelmed Myanmar's inadequate and understaffed health infrastructure, resulting in a "leveraging of non-health, private sector and civil society resources" (Lwin, San Wai, & Win, 2022, p. 3).

"Civil society and local communities contributed food, material and manpower to facilities in their vicinity, as government resources became overstretched" (Lwin et al., 2022, p. 3). Volunteer groups staffed quarantine centers, checkpoints, health facilities and ambulances, and further into the crisis, were engaged in initial preparations for vaccine rollouts. While costed estimates have not been produced, the contribution of

volunteers was staggering: in June 2020, well before the peak of the second wave, the then Minister for Social Welfare reported that there were over 45,000 volunteers staffing quarantine centers; "Yangon region [alone] reported at least 15,000 volunteers in emergency response", many connected either with some of the 140 charities operating ambulances prior to the pandemic or with societies newly formed (Lwin et al., 2022, p. 7).

The coup d'état of 1 February 2021 occurred while pandemic control measures were still in place, but to some extent easing, with Myanmar on the cusp of implementing a well-prepared vaccination rollout. As military forces detained civilian government leaders, expectations of a less brutal power seizure were quickly quashed, as rapidly growing demonstrations were increasingly met with force. Electorally, the NLD captured the youth vote and gave the younger generation a sense of ownership over the new government's mandate. Three demands marked the early days of post-coup resistance: the release of imprisoned leaders, respect the 2020 vote; a return to the barracks by the military. Despite the "divorce" with respect to electoral activism and broader political activism, the younger generation of voters nonetheless refused to countenance the theft of their vote or the unlawful imprisonment of their elected leaders. The focus of demands shifted quickly to the annulment of the 2008 constitution, the formation of a federal union, and support for the National Unity Government, which, comprised mainly of NLD lawmakers, sought to portray itself as a pan-ethnic representative group.

Likewise, the focus of activity shifted and diversified beyond non-violent protest to an array of creative resistance, including boycotts of products produced by military-owned companies (such as Myanmar beer, whose sales plummeted and remained low in the post-coup months); cyber campaigns to hack websites of government or military-backed institutions; name-and-shame campaigns to socially ostracize family members of junta-supporting personnel; and of course the formation of People's Defence Forces (PDF). This creative resistance includes welfare provision and effectively represents an evolution, or a continuum, of the kind of political engagement seen before the coup—self-organized, localized action responding to immediate, felt needs.

Five months after the coup, the third wave of Covid-19 engulfed Myanmar, still largely unvaccinated apart from military personnel, some medical staff, and those able to procure vaccination privately. As Lwin et al. (2022, p. 9) point out, "The coup, the subsequent political crisis and the SAC's responses threw the entire architecture into disarray. Measures against striking CDM medical staff eroded trust and willingness for coordination and cooperation with the military government, further exacerbating the deadly impact of the Delta variant-driven Third Wave".

While many volunteers and organizations did continue to operate, they did so under "increasingly challenging conditions" (p. 9), with ambulances, charities and relief groups increasingly targeted by security personnel on the pretext that they were helping resistance groups. As the Third Wave spread, "the SAC appealed to civil society to join the response but drew weak responses", with most groups avoiding explicit collaboration with military junta-led services. However, these groups continued to operate independently of the SAC apparatus, becoming "de facto front-liners during the Third Wave [..]Community ambulances and rescue crews were often the only source of oxygen and lifesaving treatment, and also to take away the deceased" (p.9).

Volunteers expressed a form of resistance to authoritarianism in organizing to deliver relief in such a way. Much of the anger against the coup perpetrators was motivated by the perceived insult to the extraordinary self-sacrificial volunteering undertaken during the successive Covid-19 waves by healthcare and other workers. However, this form of resistance is not simply public anger but a harnessing of existing kinesis: the *parahita* organizations that performed all the funerals and feeding and education before Covid; who then drove the ambulances, manned the quarantine centers—and still did all the funerals and feeding during Covid. All that self-organization, creativity, motivation, ability to mobilize community resources, funding and logistic support continues to be deployed, but in myriad ways over-and-against the coup and its supporters. To understand the roots of this "kinesis", this paper examines two cases of volunteerism during the initial Covid-19 pandemic response, looking first at the close link between volunteer motivation and identity and secondly at the latent "anti-authoritarianism" present in volunteer organizations frustrated by their sense of marginalization

prior to the coup. The first case study used narrative interviews to explore the nature of motivation for volunteers at a non-government Covid treatment center, analyzing what initially motivated them, how motivation was sustained, and how it changed over time, particularly in the days immediately prior to the 2021 coup. The second case study was based on field notes from 6 months of participant observation by one of the authors of their involvement with a local emergent volunteer group active during the pandemic.

RISKY ALTRUISM: HEALTHCARE VOLUNTEERS IN A COVID-19 TREATMENT CENTER

Like many countries, as Myanmar's hospital facilities became rapidly overwhelmed with Covid-19 cases, off-site field hospitals were established to manage active cases and monitor asymptomatic contacts (Nan Lwin, 2020). Several large centers were established by philanthropists and staffed by volunteers in medical and non-medical roles. The A center was established in one of Myanmar's major metropoli, with 300 beds. Four months after it opened, and at a time when many volunteers were experiencing considerable mental and emotional strain after a long period of largely uninterrupted service, interviews were conducted with seven medical and non-medical volunteers from the center to explore their motivations for volunteering as well as how they continued to sustain that motivation. The study found different motivating factors, which changed as the volunteering period lengthened. Many were initially motivated by a desire to learn new skills, perhaps part of the expression of the "entrepreneurial self" (Miller & Rose, 1995, p. 454).

> During the pandemic, our country also needs volunteering persons. I also need new experiences and helping others. That's a starting step (28-year-old female non-medical volunteer).

Much of the new experience was framed around fear and dealing with the fear of the unknown:

> The first time, I felt a little scared. I was worried and stressed about the high risk of infections, so I am careful to wear my mask. I repeat and repeat hand washing (23-year-old male volunteer).

However, learning to deal with the fear of the unknown, both in solidarity with patients and in collaboration with fellow volunteers, helped build new confidence and a strong sense of identity and agency as volunteers.

Altruism was a key motivator for volunteering during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a desire to help and assist those in need. In this study, most participants expressed their volunteering during the pandemic regarding self-identity, feeling valued, happiness, helpfulness, sympathy, satisfaction and sorrow. They spoke of how volunteering confirmed the value of their lives and purposes of their role, and their satisfaction in improving their community. Volunteer activities were described as essential components of self-identification. However, beyond simply providing help, volunteering was seen as fulfilling a responsibility or obligation: not simply what somebody could do but ought to do. In these interviews, almost all participants expressed their volunteering during the pandemic as fulfilling a responsibility.

> I want to help people who are infected. I want to fulfil my responsibilities by helping when everything is difficult (28-year-old female medical volunteer).

Despite knowing the risks, they volunteered to help patients with Covid-19 as they felt they should do something rather than nothing. Volunteers were more likely to continue volunteering when motivated by altruistic concerns (Cornelis, Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2013). Self-identity has focused on transforming the sense of self that is affected by and sustains volunteering (Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2007). The volunteer activities had been synthesised into their identities. Volunteering may also be motivated by moral identity. Referencing Lydon and Zanna (1990), Matsuba et al. (2007, 893) noted that "self-identity means an individual's commitments to volunteering and voluntary actions are predicted by the degree to which one's commitment is related to one's identity". Much of the sense of duty and obligation was centered not around obligations to the state but to society, particularly those living in the same locality. The rooting of motivation in the sense of identity was crucial. Whereas the novelty of learning new skills quickly fades in the face of the daily risks and pressures, volunteerism rooted in a broader self-identity provides a more sustained motivation:

I wanted to die at that time. Think about it, it can be contagious and can kill. I am not familiar with personal protective equipment and it was very difficult at the first time. I am anxious and have difficulty breathing because I am so afraid (28-year-old female volunteer).

I feel glad that I can help the patients when they need. [through this I not only] get new experiences, [but also] self-identify (19-year-old male volunteer).

This self-identity develops and transforms as part of the emergence of the volunteer group:

Working as an organization, there are many people who are very supportive. Everyone is willing to do more work so colleagues can rest more. We work together to balance [everything] (19-year-old male volunteer).

Grube & Piliavin (2000) suggested that individual role identity is a determinant factor in the process of volunteer behavior, particularly the factors of self-recognition and identity in volunteer activities. Penner et al. (2005) state that if individuals realize the value of their volunteer work, they tend to be satisfied with the experience and regard volunteering as a part of their identity, which leads to them becoming highly integrated with volunteer service organizations. The sense of identity engendered through their volunteerism, shaped by acquiring new skills, confidence and group affiliation, was a key element of sustained motivation. While much of the new experiences were framed around fear, the experience of dealing with the fear of the unknown and the confidence it generated (We survived! We are still alive!) was also arguably a crucial element in later, post-coup volunteering, where humanitarian actions were undertaken not simply against the backdrop of the threat of Covid-19, but of arrest and torture by security personnel. The experiences also highlighted the indispensability of solidarity and unity: the fearful unknown is best faced with others. This refers to how "the transformation of the sense of self that is affected by, and [..] in turn sustains, volunteering" (Matsuba et al., 2007, p. 890).

These interviews suggest a developmental arc, whereby volunteers were motivated to serve because of whom they perceived themselves to be, and thus the obligations and responsibilities which they had; but that self-identity was further shaped and transformed through the process of volunteering, not only providing a means of sustaining their volunteer spirit but shaping a more profound sense of volunteerism as an integral part of their identity as citizens. What is significant in this study is that, as with the majority of volunteers during the pre-coup Covid-19 pandemic period, much of the volunteerism took place in contexts broadly under the auspices and oversight of government authorities, but at the same time, to a certain degree, as a visible response to the deficiencies of those same government services. In that sense, the volunteer citizen's identity develops within a context of an implicit critique of government while nonetheless being co-opted into it. This dynamic is expressed even more clearly in the second case study, that of the Covid Action Group.

ADAPTIVE CITIZENSHIP FROM THE MARGINS: THE COVID ACTION GROUP

The extraordinary mobilization of volunteers in response to the Covid-19 pandemic was not limited to healthcare settings. In the early stages of the first wave, having identified the likely scale of need as dwarfing the capacity of both central and local government agencies to respond, the 'Covid Action Group' was established by a group of youth activists and local members of parliament. Using their existing social networks, they set about mobilizing young people to act as volunteers in quarantine centers, as well as collecting and distributing basic food items to both quarantine centers and treatment centers, doing local health promotion campaigns to distribute masks and hand-gel in poor neighborhoods, and, in the latter stages, establishing a system of food relief distribution for poor urban households suffering from food insecurity as a result of sustained lockdowns—a system which has since been replicated across dozens of locations across Myanmar.

Arriving at the group's headquarters, the first step was thorough handwashing and being sprayed with antiseptic. All around the room were piles of donated masks, PPE and hand gel, ready for transport to a nearby quarantine center. Inside, a team of a dozen volunteers

was working on various tasks: recruitment of more volunteers for the quarantine centers; donor lists; community mapping for distribution of masks and hand gel; and up-to-date information sheets on lock-down orders. Our (socially distanced) meetings usually took place in the middle of all this, with younger leaders demonstrating their initiative with the older leaders, mainly MPs, providing guidance and oversight. Apart from the more practical initiatives to distribute masks and hand gel, the group was also increasingly concerned with the effects of draconian lockdowns. These measures – termed 'Stay at Home' orders to avoid overt allusions to authoritarianism – ordered by the central government, but administered by regional governments, required people to remain indoors except for essential shopping and health-care, businesses (except essential suppliers) to close, and restricted travel between different areas of the city (Townships)

What concerned the group was the absence of any financial provision for poorer households affected by these measures and the lack of any roadmap for how lockdowns would be lifted. At that time, testing facilities for Covid-19 were minimal, and there was little available information on the local incidence of Covid-19, resulting in lockdown measures being applied uniformly across all areas, regardless of the actual risk. Based on surveys of local data and a careful study of international practice, the group drafted policy suggestions to present to the regional government, along with proposals to undertake periodic surveys to provide more up-to-date local information on the prevalence of Covid-19 and its economic impacts. A delegation led by several members of parliament who were key members of the Covid Action Group sought to present this to the regional government, but their advice was quickly dismissed.

This led to an uneasy relationship with the civilian government of the time, which, on the one hand, needed every available volunteer and donor to meet the vast challenge of dealing with the pandemic, but on the other hand, sought to remain in control of all aspects of pandemic management. Such control was often achieved by indirect means. The group attempted to conduct a sentinel survey program to gather data from local clinics on health-seeking behavior as a proxy to analyze trends in the prevalence of symptomatic Covid where mass testing was unavailable. However, response rates were low after the local medical

association, under pressure from the local health department, warned doctors not to participate.

As the effects of prolonged lockdowns began to emerge, the government began to distribute small cash grants to households in the area. However, following the standard administrative procedures, only households with up-to-date registration documents were included. This excluded thousands of migrants, temporary residents and slum dwellers, all of whom had, to a significant degree, been disproportionately impacted by lockdowns and had the least access to assistance. A system was designed to collect basic information from vulnerable households in four city areas and, using specially designed QR-code-based tags, deliver food aid in "*Covid-safe*" ways.

A dozen young volunteers were recruited and trained from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Many students could not continue their studies due to universities being closed. The first round of data collection and distribution took place in the first week of 2021, turning the organization headquarters into a sea of onions, bags of rice and bottles of cooking oil as basic food packages, supplemented by a supply of masks and hand gel, were prepared for over 100 households, delivered by the volunteers on motorcycles. Sadly, this was the only time that the Covid Action Group could deliver relief; in the following weeks, the coup d'état was swiftly followed by a widespread crackdown on social organizations, and this group was rapidly disbanded after being targeted by a raid by security forces. However, before this, the list of beneficiaries was transferred to a new, emergent volunteer organization, which continued to support those households throughout the post-coup period.

Fig. 13. Volunteers sorting food aid packages (Author, January 2021)

Fig. 14. Smart technology for relief distribution (Author, January 2021)

PLACE, IDENTITY AND AGENCY

The Covid Action Group was named after the city, reflecting a sense of civic duty and localized identity. Appeals were made to "rescue" that city from Covid-19. By framing the appeal in this way, the group was able to leverage three critical motivations from both volunteers and donors: firstly, the sense of being responsible for one's neighborhood, which also helpfully reduces the scale of responsibility to something more manageable; secondly, appealing to the sense of belonging, and the responsibility which that brings; thirdly, appealing to a sense of civic pride – that we, the people of this city, can look after ourselves.

Behind this appeal based on place identity lay three more implicit motivators. Firstly, while publicly positioning itself as complementary to government services, the sheer scale of this group's operations, one of many, highlighted the inadequacies and shortcomings of government services. Rather than direct people to donate to or volunteer with government-led initiatives, this group established itself as a separate entity that would fill in the many service gaps and do so openly.

This subtle critique fed into a further narrative: that of the aforementioned *ko-tu, ko hta* self-help spirit, which in this case was explicitly demarcated around a particular location. This extended to a sense of self-defense: volunteers and programs were undertaken not only to prevent the spread of Covid-19 within that locality but to keep others out who may be infected and "bring in" the virus-such as travelers or returning migrants from other parts of the country. This subtle framing of the other around location had a more positive side: by framing "others" as those from "outside" the city, it served, on the other hand, to produce a more inclusive sense of those who belonged, to some degree lowering the previously rigid divisions around religion and ethnicity. The volunteers in this group, and the communities they served, represented a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The third, deeply implicit motivation was a sense of political agency. Despite being formed by local MPs, the group leadership was frequently frustrated by the turgid policy responses of the government. While localized action was vibrant and innovative, regional government responses were primarily dictated by the central government, which was perceived as overly cautious and unwilling to delegate any downward

authority. On the various occasions where this group, with its considerable depth of both local knowledge and working experience, sought to provide policy advice on, for example, localized management of lockdowns, it was largely rebuffed, leading to the feeling that they, like many volunteer groups, were being treated as a source of free labor and fundraising muscle. "They want our time and our money, but not our ideas" as one of the group leaders put it.

This sense of frustration was channelled mainly into developing innovations to provide relief, demonstrating in actions the advice not heeded when given in words. The claiming of volunteer space involved, amongst other things, establishing a dedicated website that provided up-to-date information on Covid-19 and information on the group's activities, opportunities for donations, and the process by which poor households could apply for assistance. This, in many ways, mirrored government efforts, which by that time were also beginning to focus on material assistance to mitigate the effects of lockdowns. But the volunteers aimed for a smarter, more equitable approach enabling poor households, often excluded from government welfare due to lack of proper documents, to be assisted. This sense of political agency represented a performative critique of government responses, not simply filling in gaps but addressing needs in ways that highlighted both the shortcomings of the government program and the perception of government intransigence towards more equitable coproduction of knowledge and practice.

The Covid Action Group was in many ways typical of many larger and smaller organizations that were active during the pandemic period: emergent, although often rooted in prior iterations of welfare associations, mainly led by young people, with an older generation of leaders providing more "light touch" guidance; a focus on visible and tangible activities, such as donation of goods and public messaging; and having a broadly inclusive approach to both volunteers and recipient communities. Like many groups, they refrained from overt criticism or confrontation with the government, maintained a public position of being complementary, and to some extent subservient, but maintained a vigorous and well-defended independence, enabling their actions to serve as a performative criticism of government failings.

COPRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF MUTUALITY

In the introduction to their 2-volume discussion of coproduction, Beresford et al. (2021) highlight not only the importance of coproduction in the response to Covid-19 pandemics and similar challenges, but the importance of defining coproduction beyond subservient volunteering:

> Co-production is about bringing together citizens, communities, patients, and/ or service users with those working in health and social care research, policy, and practice, and attempting to form equitable partnerships. This extends to citizens, communities, patients, and/or service users making meaningful contributions to agenda-setting, and the formation of aims and objectives, not merely being "involved" once these important decisions have been made by those who traditionally hold power (5).

In their analysis, "meaningful co-production is about sharing power"(5), rather than tokenistic practice. While a growing body of literature has highlighted the critical role of volunteers and non-state actors during the pandemic, much of it frames volunteerism as a source of muscle rather than ideas or knowledge. The problem of coproduction is seen more in how emergent organizations and volunteer groups can be managed in ways that do not detract from the objectives of central authorities, rather than how they can be co-producers of policies and strategies. In some cases

> Agencies may regard emergence as an obstacle to efficient emergency management because of its informality; they may resent citizen involvement, because of the perceived implication that professional responses are inadequate; and as a result, they may try to prevent it. In consequence, ordinary citizens, existing groups and organizations, and emergent groups are often underutilized or even rejected during emergencies (Twigg & Mosel, 2017, p. 452).

An alternative is more "managed" volunteerism, such as that experienced in China during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a form of

"top-down and state-driven coproduction" (Miao et al., 2021, p. 2) where volunteers were largely under the control of the state apparatus. One of the challenges of coproduction, particularly where there is little opportunity for participation by volunteer groups, is the trajectory of such efforts. As Miao et al. noted, there is a tendency for the initial emergent efforts to get "crowded out" as state-led initiatives gain momentum (p.2). This marginalization of volunteers "speaks to one of the classic challenges of coproduction: How to create sustainable cooperation between government and citizens that continues beyond a particular crisis, such as COVID-19, and forms enduring relationships to address future challenges." If volunteerism is seen not as an extraordinary, individualized response, but as an expression of citizenship, it seems likely that volunteering in response to a particular crisis represents simply one aspect of an underlying trend of behavior rather than a one-off contribution. Ostrom (1996, p.1083) noted "activism through coproduction rapidly spills over to other areas." In these two case studies, altruism shaped by a strong sense of responsibility, particularly concerning location, shaped sustained volunteerism in response to emergent needs and evident shortfalls in state-led services. The individual and group identities evolved, particularly as government responses increasingly marginalized their contributions, and began to take on a more critical form.

Into this increasingly frustrated context came the coup, which at a stroke not only dismissed all semblance of coproduction and participation but, by annulling the recent election results, abrogated even the most basic functional responsibility of citizenship: ballot casting. Huge demonstrations were met with brute force, resulting in dozens of fatalities and hundreds of arrests. Anger at the coup was swiftly harnessed into effective action, utilizing all of the skills acquired and honed before and during the pandemic response: mass communication, volunteer recruitment, fundraising, public messaging, and later on, organization of volunteer healthcare and relief services. Some of the earliest opposition to the coup was initiated by doctors and healthcare workers, both incensed that the military would so dramatically repudiate the sacrificial service of health workers during the pandemic, and education staff who remembered with horror the pernicious influence of previous military rule on state education.

Hundreds of thousands of hospital staff, teachers, academics, and personnel from dozens of other government departments joined the general strike (Civil Disobedience Movement), resulting in empty hospitals and schools, paralysis of national rail systems, and a near-collapse of the banking sector. Volunteer organizations quickly filled the gaps, raising funds for striking workers, opening free clinics and schools, and organizing increasingly armed resistance to protect communities from raids by security forces. While many new groups emerged, many were simply reiterations of existing groups, often going "underground" to evade capture. As the economic impact of the dual hazard of Covid-19 and the coup began to bite, volunteer groups provided relief to local communities, usually using locally derived funds.

While international organizations remained paralyzed mainly by security concerns and ethical conundrums around collaboration with the junta-led State Administrative Council, local organizations continued to adapt to contexts of increasing risk, aptly demonstrating what Hugo Slim terms "humanitarian activism" (Slim, 2021). At the time of writing, Myanmar has become more fragmented, with the majority now under effective control by numerous militia groups opposing the junta. Such humanitarian activism is increasingly an act of localization, crucial in building future societies from the wreckage of coup violence. This frames emergent volunteerism well beyond simply efficient service provision: as Hugo Slim puts it:

> Localization is a matter of self-determination and political justice, not just effectiveness. Building locally-led organizations is about realizing political rights and making humanitarian citizenship (Slim, 2021, p. 1).

Activism arguably arose from the army's failure to coproduce and spread into other areas. This is important for the future of people living in what the regime renamed as 'Myanmar'. Citizens are increasingly defining new forms of citizenship for themselves rather than being defined by authoritarians and elites.

SELF-DETERMINATION AND THE HUMANITARIAN CITIZEN

While volunteerism is closely tied with notions of being "good citizens" (Horst, Erdal, & Jdid, 2020), the argument here is that volunteerism may also represent a means to contest citizenship. Where people "have a right to humanitarian self-determination which is a key part of 'internal' self-determination in a State." (Slim, 2021, n.p.), humanitarian self-determination goes beyond debates on crisis management and the common good. It extends to the claiming of citizenship space by citizens. While States may prefer ethnic or religious boundary markers as means of control, humanitarian movements may transcend such boundaries: much like the Covid Action Group, defining belonging in terms of locality rather than ethnicity and religion. The current resistance to the coup has seen, on the one hand, a strengthening of ethnic-based identities, particularly in discussions on a future federal union, but at the same time, a greater awareness of the need for equality and mutuality, in a repudiation of previous Bamar-centric hegemony (Campbell & Prasse-Freeman, 2022; Walton, 2013). We would argue here that the simmering frustrations at conditions of inadequate coproduction during the Covid-19 pandemic exploded into flames immediately after the coup. Doing so brought humanitarian energy, innovation and concerns closer to future statehood and citizenship discourses.

The practice of reciprocity and relief—for so long regarded as "apolitical" by local organizations—is now a crucial element of maintaining life in post-coup Myanmar and shaping a kind of citizenship that asserts terms of belonging not defined by junta authorities. Older modes of citizenship have focused mainly on two issues: who has the right to belong and how such "belonging" can be managed by the State (South & Lall, 2017). The issue of what citizenship belongs to (the nature of the political community) has been largely assumed, and notions of how a citizen belongs (the nature of the citizen) have been largely ignored.
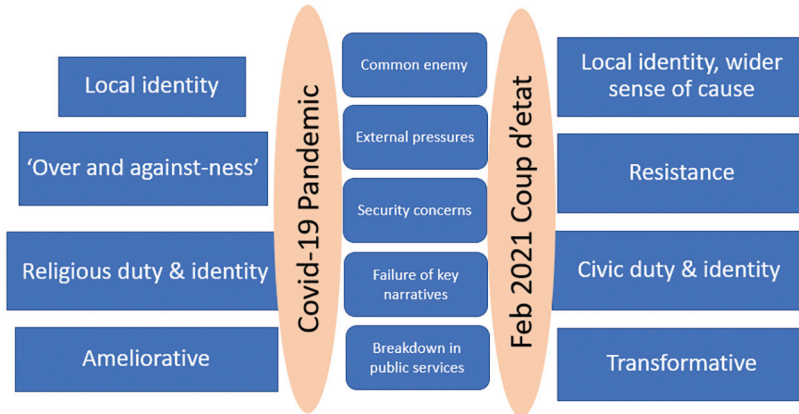
Fig. 15. An assemblage of the humanitarian citizen

Fig. 15 above presents the emergence of the 'humanitarian citizen' in assemblage terms. The transition of the many volunteers in places like the Covid-19 treatment center and the Covid Action Group, can be seen more clearly as one of relative continuity from the pandemic to the coup. Where Covid-19 was perceived as a common enemy, many volunteer groups had a stronger sense of localized identity, with less identification with the broader national needs. The coup quickly transformed this, paradoxically intensifying local response and broadening the sense of belonging to a larger, national cause.

The sense of implicit critique of authorities expressed in the actions of groups during the first half of the pandemic quickly morphed into overt resistance. Whereas much of the initial motivation of volunteers in the earlier pandemic response derived from appeals to religious values, post-coup resistance saw a broader collapse of key narratives, with a sense of civic identity becoming the overriding motivation. With the breakdown in public services, where pre-coup action had been mainly confined to filling gaps, the post-coup resistance focused on transformative action: the provision of relief, healthcare and protection all orientated towards radical change—the removal of military rule.

This comes into sharp focus in the current crisis, where the assumption that a country called Myanmar will continue to exist with its previous geographical integrity is increasingly questioned. Where the majority of the population has expressed their rejection of military rule in

various forms of protest, and where large areas of the country are now under the control of groups opposed to the junta, the question is: to what, exactly, would citizens belong? For those living in areas where ethnic self-determination has long been an organizing principle for resistance, a sense of belonging to a community defined more along ethnic lines is possible. However, there is increasing awareness of the need for inclusive processes for those with identities different from the majority ethnic group of that area.

But these discussions focus on the "how" of citizenship: what being a citizen looks like in a failed state. Humanitarian self-determination is a key part of that expression. To be a citizen implies a commitment to the well-being and aspirations of your fellow citizens. Beyond relief as simply providing aid is ensuring survival by means that do not compromise the broader goals of freedom from oppression. The humanitarian citizen asserts citizenship as defined by those who not only belong to this community but who demonstrate their belonging in ways committed to the well-being of that community. This coproduction of citizenship provides hope in an otherwise fragmented context. Here humanitarian citizens can forge new and transcend old identities designed to 'divide and rule'. New possibilities arise for emergent political communities as assemblages of smaller units of the citizenry. However, this takes both time and intention. Hugo Slim warns: "Humanitarian self-determination takes time and is always a work in progress. It is never finished because politics and society changes and new crises arise" (Slim, 2021, n.p.).

The future trajectories of the broader Myanmar political community are as yet unknown: what is certain, however, is that volunteer movements have seized the initiative in citizenship discourses, providing glimmers of hope that citizens themselves will increasingly define future citizenship.

REFERENCES

Artero, M., & Ambrosini, M. (2022). Citizenship beyond the normative script: young immigrants' volunteering as a practice of 'citizenship from below'. *Citizenship Studies, 26*(2), 203-220.

Beresford, P., Farr, M., Hickey, G., Kaur, M., Ocloo, J., Tembo, D., & Williams, O. (2021). *COVID-19 and Co-production in health and social care research, policy and practice: volume 1: the challenges and necessity of coproduction*: Policy Press. Bristol. UK.

Bruns, A., Highfield, T., & Burgess, J. (2014). The Arab Spring and its social media audiences: English and Arabic Twitter users and their networks. *American Behavioral Scientist*. 57.871-898.10.1177/0062764213479374.

Campbell, S., & Prasse-Freeman, E. (2022). Revisiting the Wages of Burman-Ness: Contradictions of Privilege in Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 52*(2), 175-199.

Cornelis, I., Van Hiel, A., & De Cremer, D. (2013). Volunteer work in youth organizations: predicting distinct aspects of volunteering behavior from self and other oriented motives. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 43*(2), 456-466.

Deshpande, A., Hnin, K. T., & Trail, T. (2020). Myanmar's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Brookings Institution Blog*.

Dove, C. (2017). Giving Trends in Myanmar: More Than Merit Making. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 10*(2), 205-222.

Future World Giving. (2016). *2016 World Giving Index shows Myanmar is most generous nation.* Retrieved from https://futureworldgiving.org/2016/10/25/2016-world-giving-index-shows-myanmar-is-most-generous-nation/

Ganesh, S., & Mcallum, K. (2009). Discourses of volunteerism. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 33*(1), 343-383.

Griffiths, M. (2019). *Community Welfare Organizations in Rural Myanmar: Precarity and Parahita*: Routledge.

Grube, J. A., & Piliavin, J. A. (2000). Role identity, organizational experiences, and volunteer performance. *Personality and social psychology bulletin, 26*(9), 1108-1119.

Heidel, B. (2006). *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar*: Books for Change.

Horst, C., Erdal, M. B., & Jdid, N. (2020). The 'good citizen': Asserting and contesting norms of participation and belonging in Oslo. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 43*(16), 76-95.

Jaquet, C., & Walton, M. J. (2013). Buddhism and relief in Myanmar: Reflections on relief as a practice of dāna. In H. Kawanami & G. Samuel (Eds.), *Buddhism, International Relief Work, and Civil Society* (pp. 51-73). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Lwin, S., San Wai, K., & Win, N. (2022). *Capabilities, Coupvid and Cataclysm: Myanmar's Responses to Covid-19.* Paper presented at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Conference, "Covid-19 in Southeast Asia, 2020-2022: Restriction, Relief, Recovery", 28-29 July.

Mannino, C. A., Snyder, M., & Omoto, A. M. (2011). Why do people get involved? Motivations for volunteerism and other forms of social action. *Social motivation*, 127-146.

Matsuba, M. K., Hart, D., & Atkins, R. (2007). Psychological and social-structural influences on commitment to volunteering. *Journal of research in personality, 41*(4), 889-907.

McCarthy, G. (2016). *Building on what's there: Insights on social protection and public goods provision from central-east Myanmar.* Retrieved from https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Mcarthy-2016-working-paper-2.pdf

McCarthy, G. (2017). The Value of Life. In A. L. South, M (Ed.), *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma* (pp. 167). Singapore: ISEAS.

Miao, Q., Schwarz, S., & Schwarz, G. (2021). Responding to COVID-19: Community volunteerism and coproduction in China. *World Dev, 137*, 105128. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105128

Miller, P., & Rose, N. (1995). Production, identity, and democracy. *Theory and society*, 427-467.

Nan Lwin. (2020). Timeline: Myanmar's Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Irrawaddy*. Retrieved from https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-covid-19/timeline-myanmars-government-responses-to-the-covid-19-pandemic.html

Ostrom, E. (1996). Crossing the great divide: coproduction, synergy, and development. *World Development, 24*(6), 1073-1087.

Penner, L., Brannick, M. T., Webb, S., & Connell, P. (2005). Effects on volunteering of the 11 September, 2001, attacks: An archival analysis 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 35*(7), 1333-1360.

Slim, H. (2021). Localization is self-determination. *Frontiers in Political Science, 3*, 80.

South, A., & Lall, M. (2017). *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma*. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute/Chiang Mai University Press.

Su Mon Thant. (2021). *In the wake of the coup: how Myanmar youth arose to fight for the nation.* Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, Brussels.

Thawnghmung, A. M. (2019). *Everyday economic survival in Myanmar*: University of Wisconsin Press.

Twigg, J., & Mosel, I. (2017). Emergent groups and spontaneous volunteers in urban disaster response. *Environment and urbanization, 29*(2), 443-458.

Walton, M. J. (2013). The 'Wages of Burman-ness:' Ethnicity and Burman privilege in contemporary Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 43*(1), 1-27.

Wells, T. (2022) Challenges for Myanmar's Civil Society: Depoliticization and Yangon's Urban Development under the NLD Government. *Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Asia* (pp. 129-143): Routledge.

Yaw Bawm Mangshan, & Griffiths, M. (2018). Social Protection in Myanmar. In J. Chambers, G. McCarthy, N. Farrelly, & C. Win (Eds.), *Myanmar Transformed? People, Places and Politics* (pp. 53-83). Singapore: ISEAS.

4

BUILDING FOR CHANGE

CSOS AND ADAPTIVE CAPACITY IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

Thida, Htet Htet, Aye Aye, Khin Mar

Myanmar Social Researchers Alumni Association

Aung Naing

Independent researcher, Myanmar

ABSTRACT

The global Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted civic space, constraining many communal practices and prompting a surge in volunteerism in many places. Myanmar's civil society organizations (CSOs) have operated in a restrictive environment for decades but played a crucial role in the initial waves of the pandemic. However, in the aftermath of the 2021 coup, CSOs in Myanmar faced increasing pressure, restrictions and harassment from military authorities who viewed most 'civil' activities as suspicious or hostile. Military authorities sought to redefine civic space, criminalizing welfare activities and practices by redrafting the penal code. Despite the pressures, many CSOs continue to function, subtly adapting their practices to maintain ownership of civic space, but in ways which, on the one hand, avoid scrutiny and evade military suppression, and on the other, sustain support for public resistance to military rule. Not all CSOs could employ this kind of 'deep pragmatism'. This study aims to identify and

analyze the factors that enable or constrain CSO capacity for strategic adaptation to their context. This study analyses interviews with eight diverse CSOs to highlight the role of organizational identity, leadership and communication in building adaptive capacity. It also analyses how widely deployed strategies of subterfuge and evasion are highly effective but also pose dilemmas for external funding agencies.

The international response to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar has been both muted and contorted: while framing the Russian war on Ukraine as a local issue of global significance, Myanmar's troubles are considered primarily domestic, evinced by a containment strategy characterized by masterly inaction and desperate attempts to avoid partiality for fear of offending the latest military junta (Kavi Chongkittavorn, 2022). UN agencies' continued semblance of neutrality has come under repeated criticism, particularly where agreements with the military junta authorities (known as the State Administrative Council, or SAC) have been signed (Blazevic, 2022). Arguments for a degree of cooperation with the SAC are justified in terms of pragmatism: that the end (humanitarian aid) justifies the means. CSOs in Myanmar are verbally and performatively challenging this.

This paper seeks to highlight the performative challenge to the form of pragmatism exhibited by UN agencies and larger INGOs. The nature of the performative challenge is simply this: many local CSOs, despite extraordinary pressure, intimidation and harassment, and with little or often no support from external agencies, have displayed a different form of pragmatism which enables the maintenance of civic space without the need for overt collaboration with SAC. In other words, there is more than one way to jump in the face of danger.

THE BIG SQUEEZE: CSOS IN THE CREVICES OF HISTORY

The definitions of and boundaries between civic space, civil society and civil society organizations have been much debated; however, few would question the importance of a healthy civil society, whether expressed in small, domestic units or more formalized organizational entities. Civic space is "the layer between state, business and family in which citizens organize, debate and act" (Buyse, 2018, p. 967). Civil society organizations can be loosely defined as "the collective and

organized elements within civic space and as particular manifestations of the notion of civil society" (p. 967).

While in some ways distinct from the state, civil society space is increasingly understood as having substantial overlap with the state. A Gramscian analysis of civic and political space assumes their interdependence:

> [the] distinction between civil society and the state/economy is 'purely methodological' [...] for Gramsci the boundaries between civil and political society are blurred and they may be indistinguishable (Doyle, 2017, p. 246).

As (Moon, 2002, p. 476) points out in her analysis of the emergence of civil society in South Korea:

> On the one hand, civil society emerges when the state is weakened. On the other hand, the state protects civil society, which in return guarantees the stability of the state's rule by generating hegemony. The relationship between civil society and the state is therefore not merely antagonistic but also interdependent.

Far from assuming that civil society is "necessarily opposed to the state", it frequently functions as the "arena wherein the ruling class extends and reinforces its power by nonviolent means" (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 26). This assumes and recognizes the substantial overlap between the functions of the state and the functions of civil society, as frequently less about differences in broader objectives and more concerned with issues of ownership, power and control. Civil society, then, "is never autonomous from the state; it has only varying degrees of independence" (Wiktorowicz, 2000, p. 56). As Buyse (2018, p. 968) notes, "Recent research into civil society [shows] the variety of hybrid forms of organizations, showing that the overlap in both functions and networks between the state and civil society and between the market and civil society space is, to a significant degree, a continually negotiated space in relation to the state". This works in three ways. Firstly, insofar as the state fails to represent or serve all citizens adequately, or protect all rights, civil society makes a claim. The space is "never a

given but is created in the interactions between CSOs and others. They thus have agency to shape civic space, as the whole notion of a zone of action beyond the state implies" (Buyse, 2018, p. 969). Secondly, the state itself influences the availability of civic space, either by negative pressure or by creating "more enabling conditions" (p. 969). Thirdly, states may seek to co-opt civil society and civic space, as Doyle (2017, p. 257) showed in her study of civil society in Turkey, where "CSOs are co-opted, regulated or at the very least disciplined by the state."

The squeeze on civil society space is both routine and alarming: routine, in that, even in states considered more 'democratic', the "bureaucratic structures of the state can, and do, intervene in civil society" (Doyle, 2017, p. 246); alarming in that the 'squeeze' appears to be accelerating, rather than declining (Voule, 2019). "The decrease of freedom for civil society, or shrinking civic space, has in the last decade widened from a range of incidents to a structural global issue" (Buyse, 2018, p. 982). The means to restrict the operational space of civil society are numerous but broadly fall into three categories: administrative control, such as requirements for registration and reporting; direct intimidation through threats, infiltration and detention (Mpani, 2021); and stigmatization, through selective labeling, often as a precursor to state action (Buyse, 2018 p. 972). Administrative control through registration and CSO legislation is a common tool of control:

> Registration is vital to CSOs as it may bring rights and benefits, such as formal legal personality. Thus it might be attractive for organizations. There are also states where registration is mandatory. In both cases, the registration procedure can be used to restrict civil society by requiring high fees to be paid, burdensome requirements of information provision, and periodic re-registration requirements. Without formal registration, legally undertaking activities is often impossible" (Buyse, 2018, p. 972).

Administrative control frequently involves the more arbitrary and selective application of legislation, often seeking to divide CSOs by "allow[ing] some NGOs to continue their work, whereas others were restricted, playing organizations against each other" (Van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1074). At other times, governments seek to "co-opt NGOs [to] execute the plans of the government or contribute to service

delivery" (1072) or by providing legitimate but limited space for discourse on subjects not considered a threat to their rule (Doyle, 2017). Direct intimidation, bullying, harassment, arrest and seizure of assets are also employed, but often with a precursor, such as "perverse forms of criminalization" (Van Der Borgh & Terwindt, 2021, p. 1071) such as labeling a CSO as supportive of terrorism. States "portray their control as the responsibility of a strong government" (ibid, p. 1074). This may be more common in contexts where there is a wider breakdown in security, and particularly where the state feels a threat to its control:

> NGOs and their staff generally suffer from a lack of protection in areas where the state is weak. Other diverse actors have come to control parts of the territory– even if this control is unstable and unpredictable. In these contexts of high insecurity, all types of NGOs can be affected by restrictions. They are most likely to suffer from physical harassment and intimidation; criminalization due to suspicion of collusion with the warring parties; and stigmatization because of a perceived lack of neutrality (Van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1076).

How do CSOs respond to this shrinkage of space? Van Tuijl (2011) noted three main categories of response. Firstly, more antagonistic: approaches that challenge the "status or legality of the existing regulatory framework for NGOs". A second approach is broadly evasive: "Creative interpretation or circumvention of the regulatory framework" – seeking loopholes or ways to function outside or out of the sight of regulatory frameworks. A third approach is solidarity: 'Cooperation and alliance building', which either entails moving away from state interference or seeking some form of compromise with it. Analyzing the experiences of CSOs in China, Hsu (2017, p. 1176) noted a variety of strategies, including donor-dependency, state-dependency and volunteer dependency, concluding that "organizations that engage in volunteer-dependent practices do offer a model of activist, organized engagement to their fellow citizens, teaching them a way to mobilize to respond to social problems and interact with the state. [..] we argue that this last set of practices is the most potent for promoting democratic, engaged citizenship."

CSOS IN MYANMAR: LONG YEARS IN THE SHADOWS

Myanmar has a long history of divergent expressions of civil society, with localized welfare organizations, monastic schools, and local militias representing contemporary expressions of centuries-old practice (Heidel, 2006; Lorch, 2008). While much scholarly attention has focused on the suppression of civil society during decades of military rule (Steinberg, 1997), more recent research has highlighted not only the persistence of civil society during that period, but also how authoritarianism gave shape to civil society in Myanmar (Griffiths, 2019; McCarthy, 2017; Turner, 2014). Terminology in many ways obscures ontology: while many observers noted the 'opening up' of civil society in the years after Cyclone Nargis in 2008, particularly after the elections of 2010, this broadly describes the increased visibility of what was already there, with hundreds of village and ward level funeral societies, blood donation co-operatives and mutual societies being given tacit permission to operate publicly, rather than in the shadows (Griffiths, 2019; Hlaing, 2007).

CSOs, particularly the *parahita* organizations, often organized around mutual assistance for funerals and health emergencies, have carved out a particular space in Myanmar in response to state neglect. The claiming of space is a political act: even where the state, particularly under military rule, was unable to fulfill even basic duties, it nonetheless ruthlessly suppressed all attempts by citizens to organize to do so (Aye, 2019; Ganesan & Hlaing, 2007). Such suppression took on most of the forms outlined in the previous section: legislation which was both onerous and arbitrary; criminalization, often concerning accusations of being 'involved in politics'; stigmatization; intimidation and outright violence; and coercion, such as establishing rival Government Organized Non-Government Organization (GONGOs) such as the Maternal and Child Welfare Association. These were used to render 'illegal' all other actors, "pre-empting independent civil society, humiliating the opposition, and supporting the military regime's political agendas" (Aye, 2019, p. 4).

The arbitrary application of both administrative and physical means of control sought to 'divide and rule', encouraging a sliding scale of cooperation with the state, which could then weaken both the links between organizations and the public and between organizations themselves. To

a considerable extent, this strategy succeeded; however, civil society and civil society organizations remained. A crucial element of their survival is the claims to legitimacy linked to religious and cultural norms concerning the needs of everyday life (Griffiths, 2019). Many larger, more prominent organizations, such as the Byamaso association in Mandalay or the Free Funeral Association founded by Kyaw Thu in Yangon, as well as myriad smaller, ward and village-based associations, base their appeals for funds, volunteers and space for action on religious values and duty: specifically, that this expression of welfare is an embodiment of parahita, which is itself an embodiment of core virtues of Buddhism (Griffiths, 2019). The same principle applies to non-Buddhist welfare associations: the Nibban-zaw association, considered by many to be the inspiration for the Byamaso organization in Mandalay, draws in Islamic principles as a critical legitimizing principle. This offers a degree of protection: while Byamaso, and the Free Funeral Service were not considered 'legal' entities by the pre-2012 military regime, their appeals to Buddhistic values appeared to invoke some hesitancy on the part of the military to act against them, particularly in the aftermath of the 2007 Saffron uprising. The key, however, is to avoid 'politics':

> [the] Military regime allowed religious and traditional custom and social ceremonies but, the political functions of civil society organizations were restricted (Aye, 2019, p. 7).

While the actions of traditional welfare associations did function as a performative critique of the then military regime's inadequacies, a degree of forbearance was extended, provided groups did not engage in anything the regime deemed 'political'. Local civil society organizations practiced evasive survival strategies: maintaining a low profile; avoiding registration as an organization; or registering as a business, which, apart from taxation requirements, had far fewer operational restrictions.

The advent of a pseudo-civilian government in 2011 was associated with a perceived relaxation of restrictions on civil and political society, with greater press freedom and new space for organizations to operate (Morgan, 2014). However, many of the ambiguities of the previous regime persisted, and while operational space was less restricted, the organizational restrictions remained. Arguably, there was a shift from overt intimidation and suppression to competition and co-opting, starting in the middle of the USDP government of President Thein Sein and

continuing under the NLD government elected in 2015. Complex regulatory frameworks and reporting requirements sought to control external funding of civil society organizations, and the prohibition of the use of specific terms, such as 'Rohingya' sought to muzzle any vocal criticism of the NLD government's role in the Rohingya crisis (Rahman & Rahman, 2022; Taylor, 2019). In a departure from the military regime's approach, the NLD government sought to co-opt civil society organizations into political society, positioning itself as the patron of a range of public service providers. At the same time, the NLD government sought greater control over CSOs by applying existing or amended laws. A paradoxical situation arose whereby international donors tacitly supported this process by limiting funding to registered organizations, which then pushed more organizations into formal arrangements with government, where greater control could be exerted:

> [Now] donors [a]re working only with legally registered civil society partners, a marked change after the NLD came into power. This then excludes several civil society actors who are either unwilling to register because of perceived risks to their autonomy or unable to register because of government opposition to their work (Parmar, 2020, p. 10).

At the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the state of civil society and civil society organizations could be characterized as one of disappointment: the promise of change by the NLD government had largely failed to materialize, some arguing that, if anything, many structural barriers to genuine change had been strengthened, not removed (Swe, 2021). Despite this, civil society responded with an extraordinary commitment to the welfare challenges of Covid-19, and in the latter part of 2020, at the ballot box, delivering a landslide win to the NLD (Huang, 2022). However, the role of civil society, and civil society organizations, was radically altered by the pandemic and the coup d'état of 1 February 2021.

This paper draws on new empirical data to analyze, firstly, the challenges the pandemic and the coup posed to civil society organizations; secondly, how different civil society organizations responded to these; and thirdly, the underlying characteristics, capacities and contextual factors which enabled resilience and adaptation amongst CSOs.

We draw from two primary sources of data: first, an online survey firstly, of 40 CSOs on their operational status and challenges conducted in December 2021; second, from narrative interviews conducted with leaders and members of eight different civil society organizations in the first half of 2022. These organizations included two faith-based organizations; two with a primary focus on advocacy for (women's rights and land rights); an organization focussing on civic education; a labor union; a disabled people's organization, and a local community welfare (*parahita*) organization. The interviews were conducted in the Burmese language, and the transcript was analyzed. Organizations were purposively selected to provide a range of geographical locations, organizational entity types (such as registered, unregistered, faith-based), organizational focus and organizational history (recently established, long-standing entity). Due to security concerns, the names, locations and any details which could enable identification have been removed, as have the names of respondents.

COVID, COUP AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Surveys conducted in Myanmar twelve months after the coup suggest, on the one hand, that civil society organizations tenaciously remain but are facing increasingly insurmountable challenges (LIFT, 2022). In many ways, the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup represent interlocking crises, both temporally, in that the coup took place between the second and third waves of Covid, and in impact, in that the coup authorities' actions exacerbated the pandemic's negative impacts in terms of mortality and economic fallout (Lwin, San Wai, & Win, 2022; Nan Lwin, 2020). Wells and Aung Naing (2022, p. 249) noted "the Covid-19 pandemic was, in many senses, a double-edged sword [for local CSOs]". On the one hand, CSOs were very much at the forefront of the response to the pandemic, providing much-needed volunteers and financial muscle to treatment centers, quarantine centers, ambulances and welfare programs (Lwin et al., 2022). Many CSOs diverted resources or adjusted programs to meet the challenges emerging during the pandemic, significantly reallocating resources and personnel from more advocacy-related work into relief.

However, as Spring Rain and Aung Naing noted in their article in this volume, CSOs were frequently treated as only a provider of resources

rather than a partner. The coup d'état, occurring after the second wave of Covid and before the third wave, was widely seen as a repudiation of the extraordinary levels of volunteering and sacrifice by young people (Spring Rain & Aung Naing, 2023) and served to transfer much of the energy of Covid-related volunteerism into active resistance to the coup. The survey of CSOs conducted in December 2021 indicated three critical, interrelated challenges: safety and security, volatile operational space, and financial challenges. While safety issues relating to Covid-19 required significant modifications to operational practices, the coup d'état posed an entirely different set of risks. As Wells and Aung Naing described:

> Pre-coup, local CSOs were regarded as critical sources of human and material resources in the Covid-19 pandemic response [however] the vocal and vigorous response of the same CSOs and volunteers in protest against the military coup resulted in harassment, arrest and seizure of property by the military authorities. Humanitarian acts, including ambulances, food distribution, were treated as hostile by the military (Wells & Naing, 2022, p. 249).

In the wake of the coup, not only were the elected leaders (mainly from the ruling NLD party) imprisoned, but a rapid overhaul of the judiciary and various legal instruments radically redefined civic space (Strangio, 2021). By rewriting anti-terror laws, a massive swathe of social practices was criminalized. This represented a reboot of practices of previous military regimes, which insisted on maintaining a distinction between the 'social' and the 'political'- with 'political' being defined arbitrarily by the military. What CSOs found is that, while they had to some degree maintained a 'social' identity, as distinct from a 'political' one, the coup sought to redefine that identity for them:

> Q: Some people say *parahita* is nothing to do with politics. They are separate. What do you think?

> A: Well, I don't agree. I mean, *parahita* organizations are doing their social work for the benefit of others. But then, they are getting oppressed and arrested for that. So, you can't say it has nothing to do with politics! (Leader of labour rights advocacy CSO).

Revising the penal code served to criminalize numerous civic acts in the name of 'counter-terrorism' (Van Der Borgh & Terwindt, 2021). In doing so, it radically redefined the social space, effectively politicizing welfare and re-labeling the 'political' as a risky act.

When asked about new challenges they faced after the coup, three-quarters of respondents mentioned security, particularly of staff, and the need to change operating practices radically to avoid arrest. This also harmed collaboration and networking; while on the one hand, there was widespread public support for demonstrations, CDM and resistance, at the same time, fear of military informers, called dalan, also grew. Previous trust networks closed down for fear of being compromised, particularly as the military increasingly used torture to extract information from detainees. As one CSO leader noted, "In these days, you have to put first your own security. Although they [other CSOs] are our friends, you don't know what people will do under pressure" (Leader of faith-based CSO, central Myanmar). The arbitrary nature of the application of newly written laws and the subsequent abandonment of even a semblance of the rule of law has meant that almost any action is liable to result in detention (Root, 2022). As one CSO educator put it:

> Any movement is suspicious movement [to them]. It's like an animal instinct, just to react to any movement, whatever it is.

The effective re-labeling of a range of civic practices as political was not unilateral: where the junta was accused of seeking to weaponize aid by claiming a monopoly on distribution (Mizzima, 2022), INGOs and CSOs have also needed to navigate a more complex ethical terrain, where civic actions seen to be conducted in collaboration with the junta are a target for social, or more severe, sanctions, both from the public, from groups opposed to the junta, and from their staff.

> These days, they [INGOs] have very difficult choices. If their head office signs an MoU [with SAC] then they don't feel ethical anymore. Some decide to resign (Director, Civic Education CSO).

The new junta authorities also reintroduced coercive legislation on the registration of CSOs.

Organizations faced challenges concerning their operational focus as well. During the pandemic, many organizations either shut down or, in most cases, redirected their resources and realigned their organizational objectives based on immediate needs and constraints. The coup added a third dimension to this: not only were many activities now effectively criminalized, and the means of undertaking activities severely curtailed, but for many, needs and priorities were increasingly shaped by the compulsion to align the organization's vision with resistance to the coup. This was driven more by grass-roots membership than by leaders, as one leader from an advocacy-based CSO reported:

> Our staff are also citizens, so they are part of everything which is happening.

The fallout from the coup, particularly the effects of attempts to control the flow of funds out of the country, or financial support to resistance organizations, resulted in an ongoing banking crisis, with cash withdrawal limits resulting in a booming market for informal agents facilitating deals for a fee. For CSOs working with donor funds, this represented a double challenge, not only cash flow but the issue of who would pay the brokerage fee for withdrawals:

> I mean, it's like buying your own money. We get a donation, but we have to pay, like 5%, 7% to get it. Who pays that? Not the donor, because it isn't in the budget. So, we pay ourselves, from our own money (Staff of advocacy CSO).

The military junta initiated investigations into the finances of some CSOs, particularly those with known connections to the detained NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, such as the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation, the Yangon Free Funeral Service, and most notably, the Open Society Foundation, where accounts were frozen and finance managers detained (Irrawaddy, 2021). A decline in external funding for CSOs in Myanmar has compounded the cash flow issues. A survey of 40 CSOs found that while funding levels remained unchanged during the pandemic, median income levels had halved after the first nine months

of the coup. The median for volunteer and staff numbers had also decreased, from 23 to 14.

RESPONSES: CREATIVE, CUNNING CONTESTATION

Van Tuijl (2011) described broad categories of responses as antagonistic, creative and collaborative. However, surveys and interviews with Myanmar CSOs revealed a range of responses best categorized as either circumventive or subtly subversive, seeking to maintain ownership of the broader practice of parahita welfare over and against attempts by the junta to redefine it as criminal. However, case studies based on interviews with three of the organizations interviewed also demonstrate subtle differences in responses, determined by differences in organizational history, structure and capacities. The following case studies describe the general nature and purpose of the organizations, the challenges they faced, and how they responded.

Case 1: Faith-based Organization

We interviewed leaders and members of a large faith-based organization. Despite being part of a broader national network, it has its governing board and has been operating for over 20 years. It undertakes various educational and welfare activities with private donors' support and operates mainly through volunteers rather than paid project staff. Due to the pandemic and the coup, many activities had to be suspended, and they experienced an income downturn and increased security concerns. Being a well-known organization, they faced increased pressure from junta authorities to provide detailed reports on activities and funding. Their primary approach, however, was to adapt and maintain a range of activities, but conducted with a much lower profile, exploiting the strong relationships between volunteers and local communities to pursue a more 'people-based' rather than 'organizational led' approach to relief and educational activities.

Case 2: Women's Rights Organization

We also interviewed a rights-based organization focusing on women empowerment and gender equality activities, which operated with support mainly from institutional donors. It has been operating for about seven years with a small number of regular staff, supplemented

by project-specific personnel. Before the coup, they operated independently, with little cooperation or networking with other CSOs. Post-coup, they suspended all activities due to security concerns and financial problems. Their pre-coup identity as a rights organization led to immediate scrutiny and pressure from the military authorities. They have begun re-orientating their focus towards humanitarian rather than rights-based work but face challenges securing ongoing funding. Staff numbers and salaries have both been reduced post-coup. In relative stasis, they have sought to maintain a low profile, maintaining a balanced harmony between society and the military authorities.

Case 3: Disabled People's Organization

The third case study features an organization formed by persons with disabilities, which has been operating for about 20 years. They rely on a mix of locally generated income from prior revolving fund activities and private donor funds. They have a sizeable executive committee of seventeen and operate mainly with volunteers rather than salaried staff. They undertake a range of welfare, livelihood empowerment and microfinance activities for persons with disabilities. They suspended all activities for two years due to mobility restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic and the initial post-coup period, but have resumed some activities. In addition to financial pressures, this group faced internal organizational issues, with some executive committee members being replaced. Although lacking legal protection and with members facing arbitrary arrest and harassment by security personnel, this organization faced less direct scrutiny from the coup authorities, possibly because of its identity as an organization of persons with disabilities. They could resume activities as a CSO, including regular meetings.

Adaptation and evasion were significant strategies, particularly the shift away from organizationally focussed work to lower profile, disaggregated approaches:

> People say, 'Oh, if you don't co-operate, you can't do anything. That's nonsense. There are so many ways you can do things. You just don't do things with your name, with your organization's name. You just do it like person to person (Civic Education CSO).

However, this introduced new tensions: where, in the first case study, a move to less organizationally focused assistance was helpful for actual implementation, the ongoing reporting requirements from donors at times mitigated such disaggregation.

A degree of subterfuge was frequently employed, with some organizations conducting more visible, benign-looking activities as a normative performance, distracting from less visible but more impactful activities:

> Some did things more superficially, and others did things in a more fragmented way (Member of labor rights CSO).

Most organizations we interviewed had to maintain balance in the relationship with junta authorities. In most cases, relationships with communities meant that the public would also endorse unavoidable contact:

> We should definitely avoid cooperation with SAC. It is impossible to avoid them completely—I mean, when we do things in the community, like funerals, we have to relate to them in some way, but we avoid any direct cooperation with them (Leader of Community welfare organization).

This approach is subtle, complex, and cunning. It requires a delicate balancing of minimal contact with the military authorities to maintain operational capacity, as a staff member from a women's rights CSO explained:

> Since [our city] is not a free zone from the military, we have to act cleverly with the military government and the community needs to understand our situation.

However, a key element of adaptation related to identity and how operational space was subversively contested. Before the coup, the demands of the pandemic channeled much of the energy of more rights-based advocacy organizations into relief-focused activities, in some ways restricting the more overtly political space. The coup, in turn, sought to recast relief as political activity, controlling dissent. However, CSOs themselves sought to resist not the recasting as political but the efforts by the military junta to delineate the political. Instead, the CSOs effectively proclaimed ALL civic space as political:

It's like this, in every country, there is government, and government systems which do things [for the people]. But they can't do everything, so we have social organizations. The role is important. So, if the government doesn't do it, we will do it, whether that is relief or advocacy. This means, whatever we do, it will be political in some way (CSO leader of advocacy organization).

By doing so, CSOs attempted to frustrate the attempts of the military junta to 'divide and rule' through a selective rendering of some activities and organizations as permissible and others as outlawed: instead, by declaring all civic space to be political, and therefore subject to arbitrary criminalization, CSOs subversively resist attempts to isolate and persecute particular practices.

The resistance to SAC attempts to criminalize particular modes of welfare also involved a vigorous contention of one of the core tenets of parahita philosophy: that of non-discrimination. The SAC sought to justify harassment and detention of those involved in welfare by declaring certain groups and movements as 'terrorists'. Thus, anti-terror legislation, such as the notorious section 505 of the penal code, could be used to justify taking action against anybody associating with, or assisting those groups. One of the main groups targeted with a terrorist label was the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Effectively a national-level civil servants' strike, this movement saw hundreds of thousands of healthcare workers, teachers, railway workers and other government employees refuse to work. As such, many were evicted from government housing and had no income. Because of its association with the parallel government established by ousted parliamentarians, SAC considered supporting CDM as supporting a terrorist organization. Thus any welfare directed to striking staff was designated as criminal. However, the CSO member we interviewed appealed to this core tenet of 'parahita' and non-discrimination, resisting attempts by the junta-led SAC to define the nature of civic space:

Q: Some say CSOs and social organizations should not support CDM staff, as that is political. What do you say?

A: *Parahita* organizations are social organizations in the country, and so the people who are part of them are also part of the country, part of society. In that way, nobody is separate from politics. What CDM is is a non-violent movement which is part of society. So why should we not support them? They are part of society, part of the community. (Leader of civic education CSO)

We always say, we provide help regardless of race, religion, and so when we are dealing with issues like suffering, death, we don't discriminate between those on CDM and those who are not (Leader of community parahita welfare organization).

This type of response is rooted in, on the one hand, a commonly shared understanding of parahita and welfare drawn from Buddhist principles known by both the public and the military authorities. However, the capacity to re-interpret or pragmatically adapt the application of these principles to maintain their integrity is also required.

DEEP ROOTS AND SHIFTING SHAPES: ADAPTIVE CAPACITY IN THE POST-COUP ERA

Analysis of the three case studies featured here and interviews with the other seven organizations demonstrate differences in the ability to fashion different responses to the post-coup constraints, ranging from suspension and stasis to reorientation and diversification. Key differences in organizational identity, structure and modus operandi enabled different response forms, and six key enabling or constraining factors were identified.

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Leadership significantly influenced adaptive organizational capacity, particularly having established leadership with experience of operating under previous military governments. From both the featured case studies and interviews with members of other organizations, it was evident that organizations with more experienced leadership were more likely to be able to adapt rather than suspend their operations.

This relates to strategy and tactics: strategic thinking to enable organizational repositioning concerning the operational context and donors; and tactical agility to respond to daily, localized restrictions, challenges and incidents. As Fiedler (2005, p. 191) notes "Crises, emergencies, and situations of high uncertainty make it difficult to think calmly and logically. Unless covered by extensive prior drill, these situations call for quick and decisive action based on intuition and hunch, both of which are products of previous experience." One respondent, who works as the secretary for the faith-based organization described in the case study, emphasized the importance of governance experience:

> [Our] board members, who have been working since the [previous] military junta era, have long experience of overcoming many challenges and pressure in the past so they contributed with the right decision and guidance for our team to develop our plans when responding the challenges in this crisis.

This relates not only to relations with local stakeholders, particularly the military-led authorities but also with staff, volunteers, donors and local communities.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Of the eight organizations featured here, two were faith-based; three were issue-based advocacy organizations; two were representative organizations (disability or labour), and one was a community-based parahita organization. The capacity to adapt related to the scope of organizational identity to either a shift in focus or to disaggregate 'de-identified' approaches. The two faith-based organizations appeared to have the greatest scope for adaptation compared to issue-based advocacy groups and the labor union. Paradoxically, while the disabled people's organization had the most fixed identity in many ways, the military perceived it as least threatening. So little adaptation of identity was required.

DIVERSITY OF FUNDING

Organizations with a lower reliance on project-based funding, typically from external or institutional donors, appeared to have a greater

adaptive capacity. While all the CSOs interviewed noted a decline in funding, more precipitously after the coup, organizations whose funding was tied to specific, issue-based project activities had far less scope to adapt. Conversely, for the faith-based organizations, the community parahita organization and the disabled people's organization, a portfolio of funding, mainly derived from local or private donors, enabled more rapid reallocation of funding to different activities. Interviews also noted that local funding levels, in contrast with external donors, tended to be more stable. An operations manager from the women's rights CSO described their challenges:

> [From our] community approach we got a small amount of funding just once or twice in a year. So, after the project [finished], there is no core funding left and since we don't have an income source to provide for our staff, our organization and operations broke down.

Core funding, which covers undefined administrative and organizational expenses, is essential since it enables flexibility and enhances sustainability beyond a specific project. Healthy core funding "allows CSOs to have both ownership and autonomy of an organization and allows organizations to be more strategic and to develop long-term planning" (Parmar, 2020, p. 12). Because of the lack of core funding after the projects, some CSOs faced difficulty maintaining staff salaries. A commonly cited experience was that CSOs could not complete existing project activities due to the pandemic. They could not reallocate the funds but were penalized for an incompletion and could not apply for new funding.

Additionally, more flexible funding sources enabled some CSOs to cope better with the cash flow challenges post-coup. Where project funding rules gave little leeway to cope with the additional, unofficial transaction costs, organizations had to fund project activities from their own pockets:

> When we withdraw cash, we have to pay a percentage, but the donors don't understand this. We can't put it in our budget, so we have to pay for it ourselves. So, it's like we have to pay to get the money to do the work (Member of Civic Education CSO).

INTERNAL HARMONY & COMMUNICATION

CSOs with a healthy internal culture of trust and communication were, not surprisingly, better able to adapt. For some organizations, pandemic-related restrictions on in-person meetings undermined internal communications and trust, particularly for newer organizations or those which had proliferated. Post-coup, the military government restricted internet, telephone and electricity lines in some areas, further hampering communication. At the same time, organizations were increasingly under surveillance, and for some CSOs, the fear of betrayal by informers undermined trust. Some organizations relocated to other countries, while others continued in situ but with a lower profile. The women's rights group explained that, after the 2021 military coup, they stopped communicating with other CSOs and communicated with their team only if necessary to avoid compromising their security. This, in turn, impacted trust and the ability to make collective decisions:

> We faced a lack of harmony between team members. It affected our organization and delayed implementing activities (Finance officer, women's rights CSO).

Conversely, organizations with a stronger bond between leaders and staff/volunteers, and higher levels of trust, were able to adapt their programs more quickly:

> Our generation trusts our board members. We trust that they will protect as much as they can for our safety in this local area (Secretary of faith-based CSO).

Trust building was a product of both shared history and contemporary communication. Our findings also point to the importance of shared identity. Organizations with an identity beyond a common operational focus (for example, faith-based, as opposed to women's rights or land rights) also had a more robust basis for establishing trust.

NETWORKING CAPACITY

As noted in previous sections, while the Covid pandemic resulted in an upsurge of cooperation between CSOs, the coup promptly reversed

this. Organizations all too familiar with divide-and-rule tactics eschewed cooperation in favor of protecting themselves. However, networking between civil society actors is crucial since it can strengthen their influence and credibility and enhance their technical capacity (Lanjouw et al., 2016. The Chairman of the disabled people's organization mentioned highlighted the importance of networking:

> Having networking with other CSOs is one of the advantages since we can get technical and social support for our long-term existence.

Networking was challenged, however, by the pressure from the junta for organizations to register, which was used to gain information about the CSO concerned and other CSOs, through requirements to submit details of organizational activities and expenditures. Registration was seen by most as tacit support for the coup regime, resulting in rejection by the community. On the other hand, the military government harasses and oppresses unregistered CSOs, and in several cases, donors also excluded unregistered CSOs from grant applications.

CULTURE OF VOLUNTEERISM

Another critical factor in organizational adaptive capacity and resilience is how their staff and volunteers are motivated by organizational values and belonging. Griffiths (2019, p. 113) describes the commonly perceived difference between a 'volunteer' (*cetana wuntan*) and an ordinary staff worker (*wuntan*):

> *Cetana* can be applied to an attitude (*cetana seik*, meaning a charitable spirit) or even to describe volunteerism, where the purely voluntary *cetana wuntan* is differentiated from an ordinary *wuntan*, who is getting paid for their service.

Several organizations we interviewed relied more heavily on salaried project staff; when institutional donor funds dried up, salaries could not be paid or paid in full, and staff could not be retained. This contrasted with other organizations with a more robust culture of volunteerism: while some relied on paid volunteers, they could also rely

on a level of commitment beyond employment. The disabled people's organization was able to resume activities with its core team after suspending activities for nearly one year.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of interviews with CSOs identifies the broader response patterns to the challenges posed by the pandemic, particularly the coup. Where the pandemic resulted in adaptations of activity focus and operational methods, it tended to reinforce the social, as opposed to the political nature of the civic space in which organizations worked. Organizational adaptation was more technical and pragmatic, and the capacity to adapt depended on leadership capacity and financial flexibility. Conversely, the coup d'état, which sought to radically recast much of that civic space as political, resulted in more profound adaptations (which we will term 'deep pragmatism'), which involved both internal reorientations concerning the acknowledgement of the political nature of their activities and external reorientation about how those activities were presented in a hostile environment.

'Deep pragmatism' acknowledges the 'interlocking web of games' (Myhre, 2020, p. 107) involved in language and symbolic actions. Here, it refers to CSO evasion, distraction and reinvention strategies to engage civic space in ways that avoid confrontation with junta forces and to avoid betrayal of the wider resistance to the coup. Such 'deep pragmatism' is enabled firstly by leadership experienced in such tactics of camouflage and smokescreens; secondly, by a profound rooting in local sources of identity, human resources and funding, rather than issues or external donors; and thirdly, through well-established relationships of trust with staff and volunteers to enable collective reorientation around new modes of practice. These capacities enable the kind of 'subversive creativity' described by Darby Ray (Ray, 2008, p. 15) as the 'key to moral agency within situations of extreme constraint'. In such situations

> Those on the underside of power may not be able to write their own script for living, but they can perform the script they are given disloyally, refusing to allow its intentions or caricatures to be fully defining.

The role of external agents, particularly international donors, is both marginal and equivocal: while a number of the CSOs interviewed had established substantial programs with external funding, most found this to be a constraining factor when external pressure made it impossible to fulfill their project contracts. Conversely, those organizations with more modest but diversified funding were able to adapt more quickly and effectively. Much is made of the 'localization' agenda. However, the reality of most CSOs in this study was inflexible subcontracting arrangements that hindered rather than enabled an adaptive response. So long as the focus of external assistance is framed around prescribed issues, methods and project outcomes, such aid will contribute little to the development of 'deep pragmatism' highlighted as necessary in this challenging context.

The kind of 'creative subterfuge' which enables survival and meaningful contributions to the maintenance of the fabric of society and civic space is also perhaps an object of suspicion for external agencies, whose demands for forms of accountability leave little margin for the funding of doublespeak. However, in prolonged conflict and lengthy rehabilitation, the presence of deeply rooted yet agile and adaptable institutions able to creatively contest and reimagine community life is critical for reclaiming civic space in Myanmar.

REFERENCES

Aye, K. M. (2019). *The State of Myanmar's Civil Society under Military Government (1988-2011).* MERAL Portal.

Blazevic, I. (2022). Myanmar Civil Society Is Right to Criticize the UN on Aid Distribution. *Irrawaddy*. Retrieved from https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/myanmar-civil-society-is-right-to-criticize-the-un-on-aid-distribution.html

Buttigieg, J. A. (1995). Gramsci on civil society. *Boundary 2, 22*(3), 1-32.

Buyse, A. (2018). Squeezing civic space: restrictions on civil society organizations and the linkages with human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights, 22*(8), 966-988.

Doyle, J. L. (2017). State control of civil society organizations: The case of Turkey. *Democratization, 24*(2), 244-264.

Fiedler, F. E., & Garcia, J. E. (2005). Leadership in a non-linear world. In C. Cooper (Ed.), *Leadership and management in the 21st century: Business challenges of the future* (pp. 185-203). Oxford University Press.

Ganesan, N., & Hlaing, K. Y. (2007). *Myanmar: state, society and ethnicity*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Griffiths, M. P. (2019). *Community Welfare Organizations in Rural Myanmar: Precarity and Parahita*. Routledge.

Heidel, B. (2006). *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar*: Books for Change.

Hlaing, K. Y. (2007). Associational life in Myanmar: past and present. *Myanmar: state, society and ethnicity*, 143-171.

Hsu, J. Y., Hsu, C. L., & Hasmath, R. (2017). NGO strategies in an authoritarian context, and their implications for citizenship: The case of the People's Republic of China. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 28*(3), 1157-1179.

Huang, K.-P. (2022). Myanmar's 2020 election: Explaining the strong performance of the NLD and some ethnic parties. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 1-23.

Irrawaddy. (2021, 16th March). Myanmar Regime Seizes Bank Accounts of Soros' Open Society Foundation. *Irrawaddy*. Retrieved from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-seizes-bank-accounts-soros-open-society-foundation.html

Kavi Chongkittavorn. (2022, 3rd May). Asean tackling aid for Myanmar people. *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved from https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2303874/asean-tackling-aid-for-myanmar-people

Lanjouw, S., Phuah, C., & Phan, La . (2016, October). *The Art of Networking: a study of civil society networks in Myanmar*. Yangon: *Mimu*. https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/

files/assessment_file_attachments/A_Study_of_Civil_Society_
Networks_in_Myanmar_-_EU_2016.pdf

LIFT. (2022). *Vulnerability, Resilience and Coping in 2022*. Yangon: UNOPS (Internal).

Lorch, J. (2008). The (re)-emergence of civil society in areas of state weakness: the case of education in Burma/Myanmar. *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar*, 151-176.

Lwin, S., San Wai, K., & Win, N. (2022). *Capabilities, Coupvid and Cataclysm: Myanmar's Responses to Covid-19*. Paper presented at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Conference, "Covid-19 in Southeast Asia, 2020-2022: Restriction, Relief, Recovery", 28-29 July.

McCarthy, G. (2017). The Value of Life. In A. L. South, M (Ed.), *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma* (pp. 167). Singapore: ISEAS.

Mizzima. (2022). UN and ASEAN risk helping Myanmar junta weaponise aid. *Mizzima*. Retrieved from https://mizzima.com/article/un-and-asean-risk-helping-myanmar-junta-weaponise-aid

Moon, S. (2002). Carving out space: Civil society and the women's movement in South Korea. *The journal of Asian studies, 61*(2), 473-500.

Morgan, A. J. (2014). A Remarkable Occurrence: Progress for Civil Society in an Open Myanmar. *Pac. Rim L. & Pol'y J., 23*, 495.

Mpani, N. M. (2021). *Selective Suppression: Relations between Civil Society Organizations and the State in Zimbabwe*. Faculty of Humanities, Department of Sociology.

Myhre, K. C. (2020). Deep Pragmatism. In The Mythology in Our Language: Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough", Ludwig Wittgenstein; trans. Stephan Palmié; ed. *Stephan Palmié and Giovanni da Col (pp. 97–115)*. Chicago: HAU Books.

Nan Lwin. (2020). Timeline: Myanmar's Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Irrawaddy*. Retrieved from https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-covid-19/timeline-myanmars-government-responses-to-the-covid-19-pandemic.html

Parmar, S. (2020). *Institutionalization of Civil Society in Myanmar*. Retrieved from https://myanmar.actionaid.org/sites/myanmar/files/publications/Discussion%20paper%20(English).pdf

Rahman, M., & Rahman, M. (2022). Term 'Rohingya' accepted worldwide but still taboo in Myanmar. *Academia Letters, Article 5788*.

Ray, D. K. (2008). *Incarnation and imagination: a Christian ethic of ingenuity*: Fortress Press.

Root, R. (2022). *Myanmar: International community weighs up further action, 18 months after military coup*. Retrieved from https://www.ibanet.org/Myanmar-International-community-weighs-up-further-action-18-months-after-military-coup

Steinberg, D. I. (1997). *A void in Myanmar: civil society in Burma*. Burma Centrum Nederlands (BCN).

Strangio, S. (2021). Myanmar Junta Arms Itself With Repressive New Laws. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/myanmar-junta-arms-itself-with-repressive-new-laws/

Swe, Z. L. (2021). Why the NLD fails to consolidate democratic transition in Myanmar. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 6*(4), 441-467.

Taylor, R. H. (2019). Anthony Ware & Costas Laoutides. Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict. *Asian Affairs 50(1), 161-163*. doi: 10.1080/03068374.2019.1567141

Turner, A. (2014). *Saving Buddhism: The impermanence of religion in colonial Burma*. University of Hawaii Press.

Van der Borgh, C., & Terwindt, C. (2012). Shrinking operational space of NGOs–a framework of analysis. *Development in practice, 22*(8), 1065-1081.

Van Tuijl, P. (2003). *Promoting rights while offsetting risks. An overview of NGOs in a disabled environment*. Civicus. Johannesburg.

Voule, C. N. (2019). *Rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association: report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association*. United Nations Human Rights. Geneva.

Wells, T., & Naing, A. (2022). Relief as resistance: (re)emergent human-
itarianism in post-coup Myanmar. In A. Ware (Ed.), *Implications
& Responses to Myanmar's Political and Humanitarian Crises*.
Canberra: ANU press.

Wiktorowicz, Q. (2000). Civil society as social control: State power in
Jordan. *Comparative Politics*, 43-61.

5

FROM CAMP STORIES TO 'IMAGINING COMMUNITY' ON THE THAI-MYANMAR BORDER

Aryuwat Raruen

Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

This article relates to my qualitative research which focuses on understanding the relationship between the local context of refugees and the process of repatriating refugees in the Thai-Myanmar border areas. The methodology includes interviews and participant observations from ethnic Karen refugees who have returned to settle in the Thai-Myanmar border area. The interviewees were divided into four groups according to their experiences to illustrate the diversity of thinking and what "imagining community" looks like in the face of political instability and conflicts between ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar military junta on the Thai-Myanmar border. The theory of "imagining community" is employed as a way to explain what has happened.

Preliminary findings suggest that refugees describe or define their imagining community differently based on their experiences at different stages of life. Some groups of refugees live in the village based on their social relationships which come from their beliefs and

experiences around serving the Karen National Union (KNU); others make decisions based on finance and livelihood. While interviewees had different background experiences, they were all drawn into the community by the man who initiated the repatriation space. However, one family decided to return to the camp due to the instability in the area. This paper takes a closer look at diverse refugee returnees' imagining community in one repatriation site.

INTRODUCTION

This study is based on participant observation focusing on collective community activities, including religious activities such as church attendance and monthly meetings, among Karen refugees who 'self-repatriated' from camps on the border to the Karen National Union (KNU) controlled area inside Myanmar, where the KNU provides infrastructure and opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. I apply 'imagining communities' to conceptualize how they frame their 'home' community in the context of their repatriation.
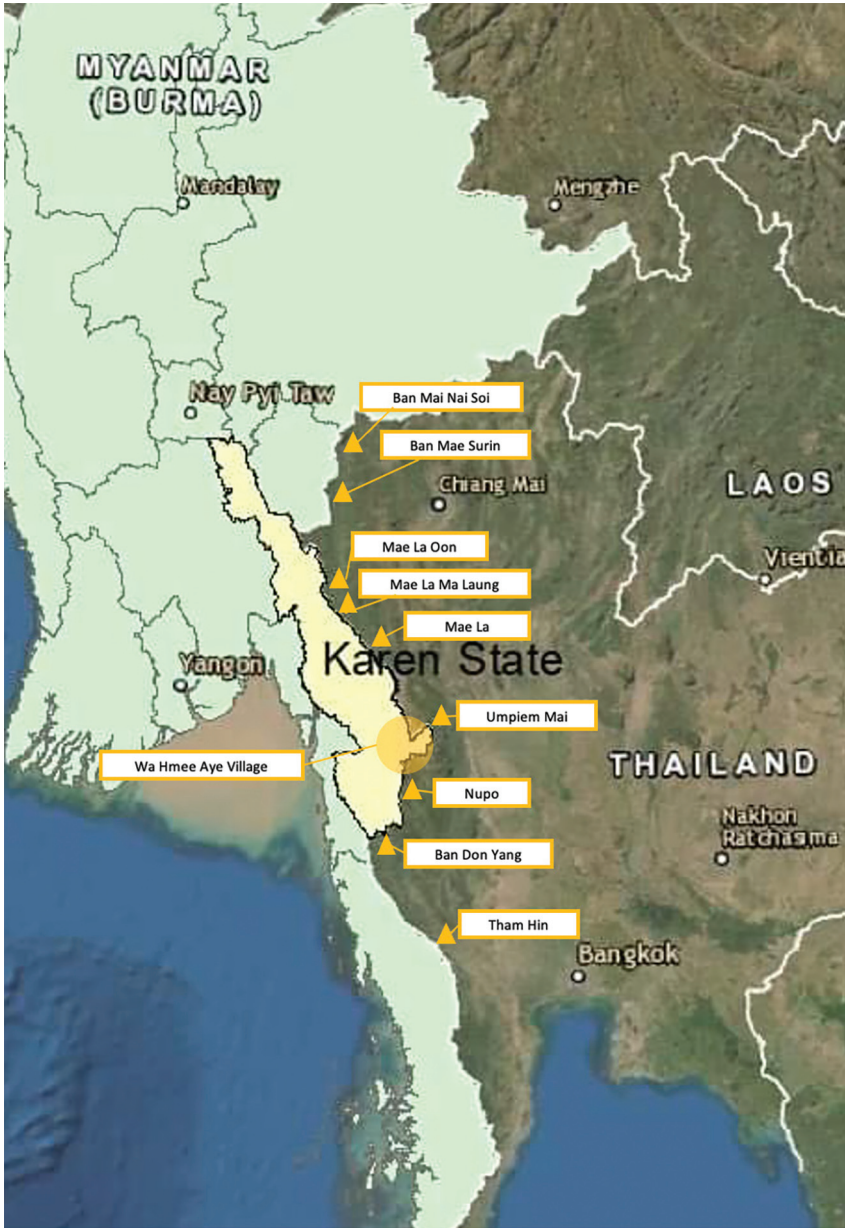
Fig. 16. Geographical area of Wa Hmee Aye Village in Karen State along with nine refugee camps in Thailand

In early 2021, I intended to collect information in Wa Hmee Aye Village (a newly established KNU-controlled repatriation village) as a volunteer teacher for about three months. However, the COVID-19 outbreak meant that outsiders could not enter Wa Hmee Aye Village, preventing data from being collected. Initially, I tried to go to a Thai-Karen village near Wa Hmee Aye village to collect data but could not enter. Fortunately, my research assistant could access Wa Hmee Aye and assist me with data collection. I also used online communication with the villagers and used my previously collected information. During the ongoing military coup in Myanmar and COVID-19 pandemic, I had the opportunity to interview Tee Soe, an old man over 60 who owns a small shop beside the main road in Wa Hmee Aye village in the early stages of entering the field, and he said:

> I chose to come back and live in this village because my family used to live in this area, and we used to grow corn. Most importantly, the situation now seems to have improved, and Tee Pra invited me to come back, so I felt it was time for me to return (Tee Soe, personal communication, July 10, 2021).

Tee Soe's quote exemplifies how two things impact the decision to move to a repatriation area. First, some refugees consider their experience of living in the area, as Tee Soe describes, where his family used to make a living before living in the refugee camp. The second part is the relationships developed in their camp (Tee Soe met Tee Pra, the one who, at the camp, originally initiated the repatriation village).

Before the clashes between ethnic armies and the Burmese Tatmadaw in 1994, only a few villagers resided in the area, with most of the ethnic population more spread out. Previously, the conflict did not significantly affect the area because it bordered Thailand. Whenever clashes occurred, villagers would flee to nearby border areas, such as in caves, under trees, in trenches/ditches or on dry riverbeds. Sometimes they would temporarily cross over to the Thai side, as Phatthada Rittang (2015) describes in her thesis. She writes that the political conflict around internal governance systems has led to fighting between the Myanmar government and diverse ethnic minority armed groups.

Whenever clashes occur, ethnic armed groups and villagers are forced to seek safety by evacuating temporarily across border areas.

Later, Myanmar soldiers invaded the villages, forcing them to be porters (carrying artillery shells and luggage). Through being abused, threatened, and beaten, it is common practice for Myanmar soldiers to force villagers to porter weapons. Once, shortly after this occurred, Tee Soe's family decided to move to a refugee camp. Initially, he found it difficult to adjust to the camp because he did not know anyone there. He also said he is not good at socializing and building relationships. Later, he came to know the people in charge of the area where he used to live under KNU authority. He remembered that he knew Tee Pra and that Tee Pra had told him he could help them with things like finding food and shelter or coordinating education for children. Throughout Tee Soe's stay at the camp, Tee Pra looked after him well. When the border situation improved, Tee Pra started inviting people in the neighborhood to return to Karen State and settle in Wa Hmee Village, the new village.

This article studies refugees repatriating from a refugee camp on the Thai border to a new village community in the Thai-Myanmar border area. It seeks to narrate the construction of refugee communities through Tanabe's (2008a) concept of 'imagining community' which explains that people with a sense of belonging construct communities. It focuses on community practices and understanding how communities can maintain their unity during social change and diversity of experiences, for example through their culture. In this context, this paper explores how people unite in constructing the Wa Hmee Aye community.

The interviewees were divided into four groups to illustrate the diversity of their thinking and their dreams for their refugee community in the context of regional political instability and ethnic conflict. Interviewees appear to have achieved 'imagining community' differently depending on their experiences at different stages of life.

IMAGINING COMMUNITY

The Thai-Myanmar border area is complex because its population is in flux, and its people are continuously engaged in movement and negotiation. They are concerned with issues to do with internal and

transnational migration. As Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (2011, p. 71) explains in the proceedings of 'Citizens in a World Without Borders', the borders of a nation-state are too complex to look at only in their legal dimensions. Another understanding would include citizens' diverse points of view based on lived experience and dimensions to do with how civil society is organized in the area. Consistent with data from border health supporters interviewed, when new villages are established, specifically border villages, we cannot explain the holistic nature of the village only by its long history of cohabitation and common values. The area is under Myanmar's jurisdiction because of the country's boundaries. However, most area residents do not identify as 'Myanmar', are subject to KNU supervision and can still travel back and forth across the border area daily. In a personal communication with Naw Pa (December 14, 2021), she shared how working with refugees and villagers living in border areas is challenging because of the dangers they face when returning to their home countries from this border area.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (2010) suggests that the 'community' concept broadly refers to a group of people living together and relying on their pooled resources. Community members may have diverse cultural characteristics such as ethnicity, language, beliefs, and migration history. When studying a 'community', we presume a sense of commonality based on the area where they live, their histories, their relationships, and how the community constructs itself into a unit. Shigeharu Tanabe (2008b) takes this a step further, for by imagining a community, we can see a new community arise with its members building relationships and weaving networks that act as a base for achieving individual and collective aspirations. His idea extends to the community as a virtual group. In that respect, the Wa Hmee Aye Village village community is interesting as most of its members were not born into it. Still, it represents a temporary network forged in the camps, where a community emerged that first imagined growing a new village organically through their initiatives. Though ending up co-residents in the village, its members remain free to shuttle between the camp and village depending on their needs and priorities. Despite its impermanent membership, with community members coming and going, this village community manages to work together to achieve its aspirations, whether in the village or the camps.

The emphasis here must be on community members' operations rather than society's structure and its institutional dimensions as productive of social duty. For example, Shigeharu Tanabe (2008b) understands the efforts to maintain the well-being and health of HIV-infected people in northern Thailand in the face of sickness and suffering. The public health system is experiencing a changing situation. People with HIV are stigmatized, so they try to hide it and come together to counter the stigma. Starting with an unofficial gathering, they built a self-governing community offering alternative treatment modalities. By linking treatment alternatives and modern medicine, inclusion has been encouraged through self-healing counselling for members, 'peer help' medication and learning about medicinal herbs. There is negotiation with the institutional authorities for medical and other components. This explains how people with HIV use the strategy to gather and create new information, which can lead them to the goals that they imagine together.

Benjaporn Deekhuntod (2010), employing the concept of imagining community, explains the construction of the musical folk drama community in Bangkok, beginning with the small communities where people connected with relatives and expanding to the bigger communities, which have variety and uniqueness, such as social status, occupation, and education. Using the sense of musical folk drama to imagine and share the sense of a community's relationship during their time together, they did not mention where the community was from and did not look at the communities physically in the area. The study explored the collaboration between diverse communities using diverse community-building methods. In addition, Penpit Changakram (2017) used the concept of imagining community to explain the relationship between the older generation and the new generation of the Dara-ang community. These two groups were set up as a cultural network in Thailand by older leaders, who developed these processes as tools to negotiate and claim rights in different areas from the government, and to bring back the Dara-ang's old ways of life. On the other hand, during the process of connecting these two generations, the new generation of Dara-ang focuses on education and coexistence in society. However, the activities of the new generation do not adhere to the traditions of culture. So, adjustments are made by adopting new knowledge and experience from outside the community which is making the definition of an imaginary

community different, and even though there is actually a relationship between both generations, it is a loose one.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti et al. (2022) researched imagining ethnic communities with a focus on three different communities: the Karen community in northern Thailand, a Dara-ang/Palaung community on the Thai-Myanmar border, and the Chao Ley (Mor Kan and Urak Lawoi) community in southern Thailand. By studying examples of struggle and negotiation among villages, the authors found that while they all strive to create and achieve things for their community, they have yet to achieve what they need. Additionally, outside communities and societal factors make it hard for these three communities to develop different strategies to address the conflict in their communities and villages.

Similarly, research has shown that most refugees from the Thai-Myanmar border camps who resettled in third countries since 2005 encountered challenges in adjusting to their new place. Many mentioned the difficulty of living conditions in areas that differ from their homelands, such as weather, culture, and languages. For example, some refugees must work hard to save money and divide it between two budgets. The first budget is to repay money borrowed from the resettlement program they joined on arrival. In contrast, the second budget serves to send money back in the form of remittances to their motherland with the expectation that one day they will return home (cf. Sitthidech Wongprachya, 2011; Rattiya Songkhramwongsakul, 2010). This research shows that some refugees who have resettled in third countries have the imagining or hope that they will go back home in the future, like some of the refugees in the border refugee camps in terms of the bound trust and pre-existing ethnic and kinship networks. Some chose to return to their homeland because they still believe in "Kaw Thoo Lei," which means the land without evil in Karen State, and still imagine it. In this way, I use imagining communities to explain the experiences of refugees who have returned to resettle in Wa Hmee Aye Village.

REFUGEES: A NEW FRONTIER OF THE COMMUNITY

Several refugees joined the KNU in establishing Wa Hmee Aye Village, Karen State, under KNU supervision in 2018 as a resettlement area. At the beginning of its establishment, there were about 50 homes,

with a small clinic to treat patients and a school that used the KECD curriculum. This village is near the border area, enabling villagers to move to Thailand or other areas whenever concerns arise. Therefore, it is interesting to consider how this former refugee community has come together to emerge as a village in this area.

Before the 2021 coup, there were more options for resettling refugees who had not chosen to return to their homes or resettle in third countries under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Strategic Road Map inside Myanmar. More places deemed viable and suitable were available at that time. With the opening of the Wa Hmee Aye village in 2018, refugees were allowed to repatriate to this area if they wanted to resettle in a KNU-controlled area.

Tee Soe was one of the first refugees to be encouraged by Tee Pra to move from the refugee camp to Wa Hmee Aye village. Tee Pra was the one who initially mobilized refugees in the camp and who had the idea of repatriating them to this new village. After more refugees joined the village from the camps, they named the community the same as before; however, in terms of security, I called it Wa Hmee Aye Village, which means the forest of bamboo. Most houses and roads were built collectively by refugees and the KNU. Tee Soe explained that the village had grown from having 50 houses to more than 60 within a year. However, some houses remain uninhabited because some refugees plan to return but have not done so due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and the fighting between the ethnic army group and the Myanmar military. The situation has become more uncertain since Tee Pra, who started the plan and encouraged refugees in the camps to repatriate back to Wa Hmee Aye, passed away at the end of 2018 from liver cancer. This creates a more intense situation for all refugees who repatriate here.

Under the close supervision of the KNU military force, some tasks that Tee Soe shares responsibility for include conducting meetings and keeping the community informed of the current political situation in the area near Wa Hmee Aye village. He also helps to organize volunteer work for the other parts of the villages, such as river trench digging, making water filters, cleaning, or helping to prepare a study

area for the school. When asked about his feelings about returning to the village, Tee Soe replied confidently:

> I was relieved because a number of KNU soldiers take care of the safety of the community from the entrance of the village to the exit (Tee Soe, personal communication, June 24, 2021).

The above communication shows faith in the work of the KNU forces. Tee Soe said that after talking to most people in the village around his age, they all said that this was a safe area for resettlement because, in addition to being able to work near the village, it was also easy to find a job such as planting and harvesting the crop or doing some hunting for forest animals and selling them.

> I don't have to worry about adjusting to stay here with other refugees because we are Karen people and we're facing the same situation in the refugee camps because there was a limited amount of food in the camp and hard to get an income (Tee Soe, personal communication, June 24, 2021).

Tee Soe explained that even when they stayed in the refugee camp, he was part of a group that gathered food supplies to send to KNU soldiers secretly because they knew sending the food outside the camp was inappropriate. In this way, they could continue to protect the area and prevent Myanmar soldiers from setting up as they had done in other parts of Karen State. This action not only supports the defense and control of the area but also illustrates the group's relationship with the KNU army.

Tee Soe said that this year (2022) in Wa Hmee Aye, he has been farming cassava on land he owns as he heard it could be sold for a reasonable price. Last year, he planted corn and received some money from the corn farm. However, even though he can support himself and his family with his farm income, Tee Soe explained how he maintained his refugee status in the camp for food assistance because of the uncertainty of being able to sustain his family long-term in Wa Hmee Aye village. He shared the situation that occurred a few months ago when

the fighting occurred very close to Wa Hmee Aye village. At this time, he and his family fled and hid on the Thai side. When he was on the Thai side, he would have liked to return to the refugee camp, but due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the camp was closed to incomers.

In summary, in Tee Soe's case, he returned to where he used to live with his family and has a farmland area near Wa Hmee Aye village. So, it might not affect his livelihood if he repatriates there. The favorable relationship with the KNU forces and the village's acceptance gave Tee Soe a feeling of belonging based on his experience in the area and his social status there. Even though the Myanmar military and KNU forces have been fighting, Tee Soe can live without financial problems, whether he chooses to stay or leave the camp. However, through the process of sense of belonging, which has to do with how refugees in Wa Hmee Aye village work to maintain their sustainability, and how the government works, which depends on the needs of the people in each area. In this way, the returning refugee community constructed a sense of imagining.

SECURITY: A NEW AREA FOR REFUGEES

Apart from the KNU army group in Karen State, which is responsible for securing areas for community living, there is also a police task force under the authority of the KNU to facilitate housing allocation and help to resolve conflicts in the village. I had the opportunity to interview a female police officer assigned to take care of Wa Hmee Aye Village since its construction.

Naw Lay is 46 years old. She was stationed as a village peacekeeper in a village in Brigade Six, Karen State, for over three years. Growing up, her family was always part of the revolutionary KNU forces. She was proud of her father, one of the leaders in that area. It was not until the 1990s that fighting began to occur. In 1997, the violence escalated. At this time, Naw Lay shared, "My village was blown up in 1997, and all the villagers had to flee in different directions to save their lives". She and others fled to the river and stayed there for a while. When the fighting did not subside, Thai officers advised her family to move to safety in Nupo refugee camp. She spent about 13 years in the camp from 1997 until 2010. While in the camp, she always wanted to find a way back to help the troops in Karen State.

By the beginning of 2010, Naw Lay and her children thought that the situation in Myanmar had become more stable, and the fighting was not as frequent as before. When I asked her why she would not settle in a third country, she said she did not want to because she had been told that living abroad was not easy with the language, food, and weather conditions. Additionally, the most important thing for her was going back home, and it was too tedious for her to consider going elsewhere.

Hence, when Karen State's situation achieved stability with some areas entirely under KNU control, Naw Lay decided to repatriate her family there.

> I want to help the KNU government because it's in my blood (Naw Lay, personal communication, September 5, 2021).

This conversation revealed Naw Lay's commitment to working with the KNU government, which has been ingrained in her life from an early age on. She devoted her whole life to working for the KNU. Naw Lay explained that after she chose to leave the camp, she enlisted as a police officer. To become a police officer, she had to undergo training for approximately six months, each day with exercise and education on the scope of her responsibilities. After she qualified, she was assigned to Wa Hmee Aye Village, where she received a monthly payment of 1000 baht (around 29 USD) and a sack of rice. Throughout the time she has been stationed in the village, Naw Lay shared that there had not been any conflicts. Her main task is to monitor the villager's situation. Monthly meetings are coordinated with the KNU military and inform the public if there is something to be aware of or any concerns. In addition to being a village policewoman, Naw Lay joins the other villagers in seasonal work such as planting, fertilizing and harvesting crops such as corn.

Asked about how the situation in Wa Hmee Aye village affects repatriates, Naw Lay said that regarding accommodation, livelihood, or any other concerns, we must always be careful because our enemies are close to where we are staying. She added that she always has a small bag prepared so that she can run as needed. Naw Lay recounted an incident where a fight erupted thirty minutes from Wa Hmee Aye village. She and the villagers had to flee from the village and hide in the

corn fields for two weeks due to the loud gunfire and explosions. They waited until there was no more gunfire and the explosions stopped. Then they returned to the village quietly to ensure there was no danger.

> The war is still going on, she said, 'Just like before, there was a loud gunshot. We fled to hide in the corn fields, and some of us crossed over to the Thai side to live with people we knew. As the situation improved, they let us know so we could return safely' (Naw Lay, personal communication, September 5, 2021).

However, by the time Naw Lay arrived back at the village, COVID-19 had spread there. Currently, the villagers are extremely cautious because of the insecurity of ongoing conflicts in the area. When asked if she would return to the refugee camp, Naw Lay was adamant that she would not return. She is confident in the KNU soldiers responsible for Wa Hmee Aye village's security. She said that the KNU soldiers here are very diligent.

When I asked Naw Lay about her long-term views on the village, she replied that she plans to remain long-term as she can travel more freely than in the refugee camps and feels she is contributing to a Karen community. Concerning the village, she proudly said,

> Let's help the Karen brothers together. Most importantly, you don't have to wait for help. When you don't have money, you can go and get a job. It's not like when you're in a refugee camp, when you don't have the money, you have to ask permission to leave the camp. The cost of leaving the camp is very expensive (Naw Lay, personal communication, September 5, 2021).

Naw Lay's story shows how experiences and narratives are cultivated and how values are passed from generation to generation to shape her sense of responsibility. For Naw Lay, knowledge has passed from her father. As a refugee in the camp, she gained added knowledge of KNU governance. These experiences have made her different from others in Wa Hmee Aye village.

THE FUTURE: THE COMPLEXITY OF YOUTH – REFUGEES FOR A DIFFERENT REASON

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Malee Sitthikriengkrai (2016) found that there are more opportunities for higher education than organized education in Karen State, Myanmar. Because of this, the camps include young people who have completed different levels of formal Myanmar education but cannot access formal education where they are. Some of these seek opportunities to access secondary or higher education by crossing the border to one of the refugee camps on the Thai side.

Naw Nee, a Karen youth from Brigade 4 in Karen State, arrived at a refugee camp to study. Initially, her parents told her to drop out of school to help them with work, but she refused and actively sought an opportunity to continue her education. She had the opportunity to study in a refugee camp for eight years. She undertook an internship before graduating from a camp-based college degree and is now a teacher in Wa Hmee Aye Village.

Naw Nee was 21 when we first met for an interview in the village. She shared how she felt good about leaving the camp as she had been there for quite some time. When Tee Pra offered her an internship at Wa Hmee Aye village, she willingly accepted as she wanted to learn what styles of education management are practiced outside the camp. Upon graduation from her camp-based degree, she accepted a full-time teaching position in the village school. In addition to teaching during the week, on Saturdays Naw Nee finds work as a seasonal worker with the other villagers, and on Sundays, she teaches Sunday School in the village church.

After she had completed her second year of work, I had another opportunity to interview her again. But this time she had expressed her feelings, and the tone of her voice had changed after three years of working in the village. The first sentence Naw Nee said to me was

> I want to go back to the refugee camp because I'm not enjoying spending my time here anymore. We are all struggling with income and food and fighting is more frequent near where the villages are located. Some days I

have been scared and don't even dare close my eyes (Naw Nee, personal communication, September 10, 2021).

Naw Nee continued to share how the first time she came to the village as a teacher, the situation was excellent because Tee Pra would always find activities they could do together. Notably, he was a leader who listened to the villagers when they shared their problems. Things changed after his death, and new problems arose. Most villagers now must manage challenges by themselves. As the conflict arising from the military coup d'état escalates in Karen State, they have had to run away from the fighting more often. She shared, "In the last four months, we fled to the farm for the safety of our lives several times". Every time they had to flee, teaching is impacted. In addition, COVID-19 restrictions caused the school to close. Things are also difficult as the cost of living has increased. For example, landowners ask villagers for a fee of 300 baht (8 USD) per year per house. As for the seasonal workers, no checkpoints allow them to cross due to COVID-19. Because of these situations, Naw Nee explained that, if possible, she would like to return to the refugee camp, where she has friends and would not have to worry about the next time they run.

Naw Nee explained that the situation that she is facing now is different from her past experience and her experience on the border. Before coming to the refugee camp, she never had to flee because of life-threatening danger. She has become a refugee because of her desire to pursue a future education. Naw Nee's journey to access education in a refugee camp and later return to her homeland is not unusual. Some of the youth I met in Wa Hmee Aye village share a similar life journey as Naw Nee, and they also desire to return to the safety of the refugee camp on the Thai border. In the current uncertain time, for Naw Nee and these youths, the refugee camp would, if possible, become their preferred home, a place of security and safety.

TEE PRA: THE MAN WHO LED REFUGEES OUT OF THE CAMP

Tee Pra is the man who initiated a conversation with the landowner of Wa Hmee Aye Village, which led to refugees in the camps being invited to repatriate there. He passed away from cancer six months before I visited the village a second time to collect data. However, there were

none that I met who did not mention him. Therefore, the conversation with the villagers helped me understand why refugees would return to Karen State and see him as one of the keys to returning to Wa Hmee Aye village.

Even though I did not have a chance to meet Tee Pra, I got to know him through what the villagers described and explained about him. Tee Pra was a KNU military leader until he was captured by Myanmar soldiers and tortured in a Yangon prison for more than 20 years. Upon his release, Tee Pra crossed the border to a refugee camp to seek safety and freedom in life. Tee Pra was chosen as the head of one of the refugee camps in Thailand. Due to his strong leadership, he gained the respect and confidence of the refugees, as the following quotes show:

> In the beginning, I was well taken care of by Tee Pra—a camp supervisor. At that time, Tee Pra was in charge and volunteered to work with the new refugees. He was the one who helped us register for food with The Border Consortium (TBC) and find other ways to provide assistance, such as clothing and home-building equipment (Naw Nee, personal communication, September 10, 2021).

> I have known Tee Pra for over 7 years. He is a very active person, working all the time and being on the school board. He was both the head of the area where I lived and when he was young, he was a leader of the revolution as well (Naw Lay, personal communication, September 5, 2021).

> Tee Pra is the one most people respect. When he asks for help or tells them what to do, the people of the village had more unity than the present (Saw Wa, personal communication, September 10, 2021).

> Tee Pra is the person who mobilizes refugees in the refugee camp and initiated the idea of people returning to resettlement in this area (Tee Soe, personal communication, June 24, 2021).

From my conversations, I got to know Tee Pra as bringing the refugees back to repatriate them. From Tee Pra's point of view, there were only two options for refugees: staying in the camp or finding a way out of the camp. Eugene Barblut-Sein's (2019) research explored these two options concluding:

> NGOs and international donors should be flexible and need to work closely with refugees to address real issues. Instead of assuming and acting on what is best for refugees in Myanmar's peace process, refugees should feel safe and confident in their repatriation from physical security. Access to health and education services, land, careers, and dignified recognition. However, the intentions of each refugee may be different. There will be some people who want to stay in Thailand even if their home country is safe (Barblut Sein, 2019, p. 22).

Tee Pra was essential in initiating the refugee return to Wa Hmee Aye village. Starting from Tee Pra's relationship with some refugees before their forced displacement to refugee camps on the Thai side and his connected network with the KNU, the relationship expanded when he also moved to a camp and assumed leadership responsibility. Several options have been provided for the refugees, but to provide the option that sustains them, NGOs and international donors should also hear their perspective.

CONCLUSION

The life of a Karen refugee on the Thai-Myanmar border is complex in an area of land between competing forces: the aggressive Myanmar military, the Thai border police and the KNU. This study presented the 'imagining community' of refugees who, in the middle of all this, repatriate from refugee camps to live in KNU-controlled Wa Mwee Aye village. Village life is attractive as it is possible to develop as a community jointly, making their self-sufficient living. However, because the village can be attacked at any time by the Myanmar army, it is unsafe, which affects the quality of education, and living there means accepting KNU patronage. So although removed from the camps, the camp always remains in these villagers' imagination as a place for

safe shelter, food and formal education that they can and to which they may have to return. Refugees of different ages and backgrounds describe and evoke different imagining communities based on their experiences at various life stages, whether in the camps or in the village. So this sense of newly found 'community' does not necessarily have a definite physical space. Some may be incorporated temporarily at any given time. However, the ongoing activities of the village and the camps foster social relationships between groups, expanding a vast network that may yet offer hope for the future.

REFERENCES

Barblut Sein, E. (2019). *The concerns of the Karen Refugee Youths in repatriation process on the Thai-Myanmar Border.* [Unpublished Honors Thesis]. The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

Changakram, P. (2017). *Imagining Community of Dara-ang in Thai Nation-State Context.* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Department of Social Science. Chiang Mai University, Thailand. (Transl. by author).

Citizens in a World without Borders (pp. 70-73). Bangkok: *The Project for Improving the Quality of Life of Migrant Workers and Persons with Problems of Person Status.* [Conference Session.] Office of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation. (Transl. by author).

Deekhuntod, B. (2010). *The musical folk drama: the poor people of the city and the construction of communities in the midst of contemporary life in Bangkok.* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Mahasarakham University, Thailand (Transl. by author).

Rittang, P. (2014). *Karen Seminary and Experiences of the youth in Refugee Camp in Thailand-Burma Borderland.* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Department of Social Science and Development. Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

Songkhramwongsakul, R. (2010). *The Journey Home: Creating a New Area for Overseas Vietnamese in Danang, Vietnam.* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Department of Social Science. Chiang Mai University, Thailand. (Transl. by author).

Tanabe, S. (2008a). *Imagining Communities in Thailand: Ethnographic Approaches.* Chiang Mai: Mekong Press.

Tanabe, S. (2008b). *Community and Biological Governing: HIV-infected groups in the north of Thailand.* Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre. Bangkok, Thailand. (Transl. by author).

Vaddhanaphuti, C. (2010). *'Determining the concept of qualitative research,' in Qualitative Research for the Development of Uthai Dulyakasem* (Ed.). Khon Kaen: Research and Development Institute. Khon Kaen University, 31-84. (Transl. by author).

Vaddhanaphuti, C. and Sitthikriengkrai, M. (2016). *The Alternative of Policy to Solving the problem of refugees in temporary shelters.* Bangkok. National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. (Transl. by author).

Vaddhanaphuti, C. Sitthikriengkrai, M. and Trenk-Hinterberger, C (2022) *Imagining Ethnic Communities: Resource Conflicts and Development in Thailand.* Center for Ethnic Studies and Development, Faculty of Social Science. Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

Wongprachya, S. (2011). *Hmong Lao Tham Kla Bok and the security and resettlement issues in the United States.* Bangkok: Asian Migration Research Center Office of the National Security Council. (Transl. by author).

6

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, MYANMAR'S POLITICAL CRISIS AND THE KACHIN INTERNALLY DISPLACED MIGRANTS IN KACHIN-CHINA BORDERLANDS

Roi San Labang

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

The migratory and livelihood practices of Myanmar's Kachin war-displaced people have changed since the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020 and the February 2021 military coup d'état in Myanmar. This paper examines the challenges Kachin war-displaced people and migrants have faced along the Kachin-China border since then. The study finds that displaced migrants face insecure lives, prolonged mental depression and fatigue due to the unpredictable situation they find themselves in, with no way to plan. The recent Myanmar military coup worsened their lives in many ways, due to severe inflation, increased risks if returning to their villages, and the lack of jobs around the IDP camps, in lockdown since the spread of Covid. The few who remained in China for job opportunities faced increased labor exploitation, discrimination

in workplaces as well as pressure and depression because of their illegal status. This study recommends that to respond more effectively to Kachin displaced peoples' insecurities on the Kachin-China border, local and international NGOs should cooperate with the local administrative bodies to create more livelihood opportunities and training to secure sustainable futures.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020 and the subsequent military coup d'état on 1 February 2021 have seriously damaged the migratory and livelihood practices of Kachin displaced people in the conflict-affected areas along the Kachin-China border. China shares a 2,000-kilometer land border with Myanmar between Yunnan Province and Kachin State (including Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) controlled areas) and Shan State (Song, 2018). Chinese officials in the provincial border areas engage with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) to manage various cross-border economic interests (Dean, 2020). Until the civil war and mass displacement that started in 2011, there was a degree of mutual understanding between officials on issues of cross-border migration. Chinese authorities often provided border passes without checking identification cards, which sometimes made it easier to travel across borders than inside Myanmar (Dean, 2005).

Human Rights Watch Report (2012) reported that at the beginning of the 2011 conflict, Kachin IDPs who sought refuge in Yunnan Province, China, began to be refused by China's central government. China established several war-displaced shelters inside its borders for a brief period. However, their conditions were not good, and China soon closed them down, forcing refugees to return to Kachin State. Later, 18 IDP camps were established in KIO-controlled areas for displaced people on the Kachin-China borders, and 119 IDP camps in Myanmar regime-controlled Kachin state (CCCM, 2022). Most Kachin displaced people were farmers before displacement. After displacement, they needed jobs in the overpopulated IDP camps due to a lack of access to local safe farming land. The Kachin displaced people depend heavily on cash income, as getting support from local and international NGOs

in these marginalized areas is challenging. The displaced have limited choices for jobs and lack livelihood access.

Before the pandemic, Kachin displaced people's livelihoods depended on labor migration to China. Geographical proximity allowed displaced people from Myanmar to cross the border and investigate new trade or employment prospects on the Chinese side (Zhou, Wu, & Su, 2022). The Kachin displaced people who migrated to Yunnan province in China work in manufacturing, construction, service industries, shops, noodle factories, tea plantations, steel mills, aluminum production and making tires (EMRF, 2019). Many Kachin women take jobs as domestic help for Chinese families.

However, most displaced migrants were forcibly repatriated from China to the IDP camps since the Covid-19 outbreak in January 2020. In addition, unfortunately, the Myanmar military coup d'état of 1 February 2021 has worsened the situation, heightening their physical, mental and economic insecurity. They are marginalized, vulnerable and living in the double crisis of the global pandemic and military violence, and need livelihoods. This paper draws on Henri Lefebvre's concept of perceived space, conceived space, and lived space of Kachin displaced people through their livelihoods and the challenges they and their families face.

METHODOLOGY

This research project employs qualitative methods, principally in-depth interviews with Kachin displaced migrants and other key informants, including expert leaders (IDP camp leaders, KIO leaders at the camps, NGO workers) in the Pa Kahtawng IDP camp, and related NGOs in the Kachin-China borderlands.

Fig. 17. Location of Kachin-China border from Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU, 2015)
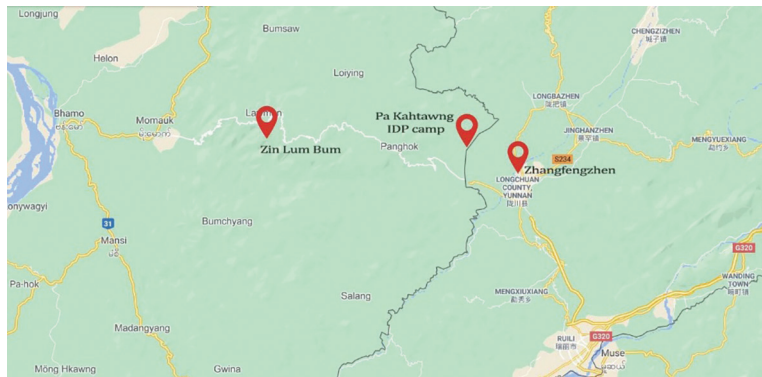

Fig. 18. Location of Pa Kahtawng IDP camp (Myanmar side) and Zhangfengzhen on China side. (Source: Google maps)

The research focuses on Kachin displaced former migrant workers in Zhangfengzhen since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was conducted across two sites: Pa Kahtawng IDP camp, just two kilometers from Mai Ja Yang, located on the China side of the Kachin-China border close to Zhangfeng. This camp was established in 2011 in one of the conflict-affected and marginalized areas inside KIO-controlled territory when KIA-Myanmar armed conflict resumed. Zhangfeng is an economic corridor about five kilometers from Pa Kahtawng camp,

where most Kachin migrants work. I explore how displaced people adjusted their livelihoods to the global and Myanmar political crises.

This study used purposive sampling, selecting knowledgeable key informants from relevant organizations. This research included participants across gender, age, and marital status. Because of restrictions on IDP camp entry, the study was accomplished with the help of the camp leader and research assistant.

This research interviewed a total number of twenty-one participants using qualitative methods. The study used a conversational semi-structured interviewing style to encourage participants to share information. For this purpose, the study has developed an Interview Guide based on the working conditions of Kachin displaced migrants, challenges in the workplace, future dreams, labor exploitation and family economy. Basic displaced people information was collected, including displaced people's livelihoods on the Myanmar side, the relationship of displaced people with kinship from the China side, migration patterns, job opportunities in China, and working conditions in the workplace.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twelve displaced migrants, including some who had returned since COVID and some who had stayed. Four household members living in the Pa Kahtawng IDP camp were also interviewed. The researcher believed this type of interview enabled sensitive and rich information to be collected. The research assistant conducted in person interviews with the seven returned migrants and four household members, while the researcher conducted five in-depth interviews with those who were still working in China. The researcher collected research data through online interviews (WeChat, zooms), and the research assistant interviewed in person in the IDP camp.

For more detailed information, the semi-structured interviews focused on the key informant interviews with four expert leaders. The first interview was with the camp leader, the second interview with a well-experienced NGO staff member who had been working in the livelihood sector for the IDP camp, the third interview was with the local non-profit community-based organization Karum Zinghkri, and the last interview was with the community-based organization Kachin Women's Association in Thailand. Because they are working on

supporting humanitarian aid and social services, the interviewer-researcher asked how the livelihoods of the IDPs have changed before and after the pandemic and political crisis in Myanmar. In addition to gaining perspectives from these expert leaders, I conducted two in-depth interviews with different organizations. One was from an INGO and another one was from KIO.

Secondary resources such as books, articles, news reports, journals, reports, and other resources were also consulted for this research. For instance, reports from the research team, KIO office in the IDP camp, the local NGO WunPawng Ninghtoi (WPN), the Kachin Waves media group, and the news media. Through social media, the researcher also accessed interviews by the RFA, BBC, and Kachin local news that provided updated information about the situation of the displaced people and the changes to their lives and livelihoods.

Because the research was conducted in conflict-affected areas, we needed to maintain strict confidentiality. Before conducting interviews, information and consent letters were exchanged. I anticipate the findings will benefit the displaced peoples' community—not just the Pa Kahtawng IDP camp, but the wider displaced population. It provides up-to-date data relevant to CBO and NGO planning. For the trustworthiness and credibility of the data, I applied triangulation of data collection methods. I collected data from the returned migrants in the IDP camp, displaced migrant workers in China and their family members in the IDP camp, and different organizations that work with IDPs to gain broader perspectives on livelihood and cross-border issues. I chose migrants working in diverse sectors. Moreover, I regularly consulted with my adviser.

THE HISTORY OF KACHIN DISPLACED PEOPLE ALONG THE KACHIN-CHINA BORDER

Kachin state, also known as Kachinland, lies in the northernmost part of Myanmar, bordered by Yunnan province to the east, Tibet to the north and India to the west. Its estimated population is over 2 million and it has an area of 89,041 km². Kachin are genetically a Mongolian Tibetan-Burman people divided into different ethnic groups (Kachin refer to 'tribes') speaking diverse languages: Jinghpaw, Zaiwa/Azi,

Lachid, Nung/Rawang, Maru/Lhaovo, and Lisu. Jinghpaw is the de facto shared market language. The Kachin were never been under any external rulers before the arrival of British colonialists. They lived independently in their 'No man's land' until the British created the Kachin Hills colony in 1885 (Pau, 2019). In 1885-86, Kachin patriots defied British colonial repression.

After World War II, the Kachin and other ethnic groups from Burma signed the Panglong agreement to create the Union of Myanmar. However, the federal system the Kachin were promised in the Panglong Agreement has yet to materialize. The unitary government discriminated against ethnic minorities and marginalized the Kachin from military leadership. Because of 'Burmanization', unequal political rights, and heavy centralization, many valuable resources were extracted from Kachin state by the central government, which did not adequately invest in the state's infrastructure. Because of this, and the adoption of Buddhism as a state religion, on February 5, 1961 the Kachin people founded their own autonomous army, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). From 1961 until 1994, there was regular fighting between the KIA and the Burmese army.

After the 1994 ceasefire agreement, the main driver of armed conflict became Article 338 of the 2008 Myanmar constitution, which states, 'all the armed forces must be under the Defense Services' (Zaw Lut, 2013). Article 338 planned for a Border Guard Force (BGF) system, which was unacceptable for the established ethnic armed groups. Therefore, shortly after the induction of Myanmar's newly democratic government in March 2011, the civil war resumed between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar Tatmadaw. There were high hopes from many domestic and international observers that democratic elections would lead to actual peace agreements for the many armed ethnic conflicts. However, the opposite happened, and the long-lasting ceasefire was broken. Since 9 June 2011, the conflict between KIA and Tatmadaw recommenced and continues today. Due to Tatmadaw breaking the 1994 ceasefire, more than 130,000 civilians were displaced in Kachin State and northern Shan State (some Kachin people live in northern Shan State, which has KIO-administered pockets).

Kachin livelihood typically depends on land cultivation and natural resources. Kachin land is rich in natural resources. Compared with neighboring ethnic groups such as the Chin, Karen and Shan, few Kachin migrated to other parts of Myanmar or other countries to work before the civil war in 2011. However, after the resumption of civil war in 2011, thousands of Kachin civilians fled to IDP camps, and tried to adapt their lives and livelihoods to the new environment. The Covid-19 pandemic and Myanmar political crisis have badly impacted the lives and livelihoods of displaced people.

Two main concepts guided this research; firstly, perceived, conceived, and lived space, and secondly, the livelihood concept. These two concepts provide the background to Kachin-China boundaries, and the interactions of people and their livelihoods. In this way, these concepts guide the understanding of the Kachin displaced people cross-border migration, the relations of people on both sides—Kachin State, and Yunnan province on China side—and the Kachin displaced people's livelihoods in the border area with special attention to the impact of the COVID- 19 pandemic and Myanmar political crisis.

The first concept of the three is what Lefebvre refers to as 'spatial practice' (perceived space) and it signifies the essential practices of world perception (Lefebvre, 1991). The perceived space is a physical, abstract, surface, material, and visual space. Lefebvre emphasizes that an individual or group purposefully creates the conceived space. It is a purposeful immaterial portrayal of reality with accompanying biases and hierarchies, not a neutral reflection of reality. Contrarily, perceived space reflects people's routine, embodied reality. Lived space discusses space and the experiences of individuals in an all-inclusive sense of looking at communication in a society. It is a re-imagination of the structure of the absolute space to a third component where social relations occur within the community and where we effectively experience it in our daily existence. These concepts guide understanding the process of Kachin IDPs cross-border migration, the ties of people on both sides—Kachin State and Yunnan province—and the Kachin IDPs' livelihoods on the border area with particular attention to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar political crisis.

Karin Dean (2005) applies Lefebvre's three-dimensional framework space of 'conceived', 'perceived' and 'lived' to understand the international state boundaries and people's relationships in China, Kachin State and Myanmar as a country. She noted that the Kachin-China border is an inter-State boundary that refers to the relations between the KIO and the Chinese State government but not international relations between the Burmese and the Chinese governments. Therefore, the moment of space, conceived, perceived and lived, can still be relevant to understanding the history of Kachin people who live in the border areas and their present circumstances regarding crossing the border into China. I apply this sense of three-dimensional space to understand Kachin displaced people's livelihoods.

DISPLACED MIGRANT LIVES SINCE COVID-19

The Covid-19 global pandemic and Myanmar political crisis have severely affected the lives of displaced people. The research findings highlight especially the stricter rules and regulations about borders, the increased risk of cross-border migration since Covid-19, and their impact on Kachin culture and traditions. The Covid-19 laws and regulations impacted on returned displaced migrants in Kachin and the displaced migrants still working in China. Since 2019, there have been outbreaks of Covid-19 nationwide in China. As a consequence, the Chinese authorities announced that all migrants must return to their own countries.

On the other hand, there is still a great demand for workers in China. So some employers negotiated with the local authority to keep some workers, especially the ones who are documented. However, the space for migrants has changed after the pandemic. The few IDPs who were not sent back from working in China before the pandemic had their travel restricted and have not been able to visit their families in the camps nearby, nor could they move freely within China to find other work. These IDPs may appear to be the fortunate ones, but under tighter security they could no longer work as before. They had fewer job opportunities, lower salaries, faced increased discrimination and significantly increased rules and tight regulations on migrant laborers since the pandemic.

After Covid, all migrants from the company went back to their country, but the boss told my friend and me to continue working in their company as we were honest and worked hard. But we got 3000 yuan (approximately US$433) per month before Covid, which decreased to 1,500-2,500 yuan (approximately US$216-289) per month. Sometimes, physically and mentally so tired. My hands are so weak as working so hard to please the boss out of fear of being sent back (Bawk, 15/12/2021).

When the pandemic started, the company my son was working for closed. My son did not have any job. The company did not even provide food, and he had no savings. I sent money to my son to buy food, but later, he had to borrow money from his aunt to survive there. He said he really wants to come back home but did not have the proper travel documents. I will be thrilled if someone or an organization could help bring my son back home (Mrs. Dim, 15/12/2021).

THE RISK TO CROSS-BORDER MIGRANTS

After the lockdowns began, the lives of the displaced migrants became more challenging. They faced job losses on the China side and difficulty finding stable or seasonal jobs on the Kachin side around the IDP camp. Even though some casual work is available on the Myanmar side of the border, the demand for labor is far less than the surplus of labor artificially created in these small towns. The displaced people are living in overcrowded conditions in the camps. The camp authorities were worried about internal camp outbreaks, and the neighboring host cities were also concerned about any outbreaks spreading into their areas. The displaced people have tried alternative ways to find work outside the camp, but they found it too risky as most lack education and documents. So displaced people often meet with human brokers or traffickers.

On the other hand, during the pandemic, the displaced migrants trapped in China have faced different challenges. Some could not go

out because of their illegal status, some were low-paid and overworked, and some had no choice except to follow what the boss asks them to do.

> I became a victim of human trafficking when the pandemic started. I lost my job and the boss's sister offered me another job in Shang Dung city which took ten days to arrive there. I was not clear what kind of work it would be, but I was desperate to make money to support my family. When I arrived there, they locked me in a room and different Chinese men were let in to see me as if I were a product to be sold. Then I noticed that I had been trafficked. So, I jumped from the window at 4 am and ran away. Then I called my family and they reported to the police and the police brought me and sent me to Myanmar, but I arrived in Yangon which is very far from my hometown. It took two months to arrive at the IDP camp as I have no money, so I worked for two months in Yangon for a transportation fee (Mrs. Pan, 19/1/2022).

> I was in trouble many times during my four years working in China. My first time in jail for a month was because the border passbook expired one day. The second time was because of a fist fight with the Chinese national, I was in jail for one year. Everything was terrible in the jail bullying, and discrimination against me as a Myanmar citizen. They took all my belongings like my mobile phone, money, and my ID card. They didn't care even though we were seriously sick, some prisoners died in prison. The food was also bad, and we had to do forced labor for the companies that had contracts with the prison. We never got paid (Mr. Awng, 20/1/2022).

KACHIN CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

The Kachin have lived in the areas around the China-Myanmar border for centuries. Many Kachin living in Myanmar have family connections in China, especially in Yunnan province. Historically, they have interacted as they share the same language, culture, and close ties through cross-border marriages, trade, and social activities.

Prior to the pandemic, with much displacement and interruptions to everyday healthy family life, and harsh and unstable economic circumstances in IDP camps, families used to arrange their daughters' marriages on the wealthy side of the border. Arranged and forced marriages of young women were common. These young women from the camps were often sold to more affluent Chinese men or Jingpo men from China. This interaction has changed after the pandemic and the Myanmar coup d'état.

Since the outbreak of fighting in 2011, China has been concerned with the possibility of refugee settlements on its soil. When the pandemic happened, China took even more stringent measures to increase border security. However, they were primarily concerned about a refugee inflow from Kachin state after the coup. They became worried that not only Kachin but a sizable percentage of the Burmese population might want to cross the border and establish refugee settlements. Border security was strengthened on China's side, and displaced people could no longer cross the border for work, social or cultural activities. One silver lining was that forced marriages from within the camps declined, delighting some Kachin cultural elders. A benefit of having Jingpo in-laws on the China side is provided by the elaborate marriage and family clan relations among the Kachin. If a family member working on the China side has troubles, the Chinese in-laws are obliged by cultural law to help. Traditionally, the Kachin depend on or help each other if someone is in trouble. This is the traditional custom of the Kachin, called Mayu- Dama, Kahpu- Kanau. Mayu (the wife giver), Dama (the wife receiver), and Kahpu- Kanau (the brother's clan), cement relationships by paying respect to both the paternal and maternal sides equally, showing the unity of the Kachin people.

> I came to China before Covid to make money for my graduation ceremony, but after Covid there are no job opportunities on Kachin side, so I keep working here to support my siblings who are studying now. Nobody else in our family can support their study fees and I do not want them to end their education. My elder sister married in China, so I came to China with her and my friends' connections. Before the lockdowns, we can gather for some activities like Christmas, and social events for

more connection. Some friends told us to find a husband in China and some Chinese men invited us to go out, like on a date. I do not want to get married in China. I want to go back to Kachin in a few months (Ms. Ja, 24/12/2021).

HUMAN SECURITY AND WELL-BEING DURING THE PANDEMIC AND MILITARY COUP

Human security is a significant issue in conflict zones. The study finds that the displaced people in the conflict-affected areas face a lack of access to health care during the pandemic and the political crisis created by the coup. Food security is also one of the main challenges for the displaced. They need livelihood security and savings. The inflation created by both lockdowns and the coup also affects them; they face higher inflation, comparing the relative buying power for staples like vegetables, than people living in centrally controlled areas. They also face shortages due to the difficulty and rising costs of transporting goods across the active fighting zones. The increasing lack of paid work opportunities, national and local inflation, and challenges of receiving aid after the coup, all led to malnutrition within these displaced communities. Human security takes a more comprehensive approach to the individual and the community, whereas traditional security focuses on state security. This study also investigates displaced students' education within human security. Thousands of displaced students study in the camps or at special boarding schools set up by the KIO Education Department to give them a better educational experience.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG DISPLACED PEOPLE

Health issues of the displaced people in the conflict zone are not only related to physical health but also mental health. Most people had been struggling with mental illness since 2011, which showed signs of increasing after the pandemic and military coup. The displaced are concerned about a lack of medicine, health facilities, and health professionals. The local hospital assigned nurses as health care professionals, but participants in this study said it was difficult to receive health care services in an emergency or at night. In these circumstances, many displaced people are left without healthcare services.

Some seek alternatives, such as private clinics, public hospitals, or local pharmacies, and paid-for healthcare services outside the camp prior to the pandemic. In cases of severe disease or accident, the KIO health system may not be able to offer effective treatment in the hospital, so people had to cross the border to China to seek treatment for emergency issues—but this is not possible during the pandemic. The costs can be unaffordable for displaced people. As a result, for displaced people who do not have regular salaries or savings, access to a hospital or clinic that is not free is currently a considerable difficulty. Moreover, the pandemic and the coup have had such an impact on the space of people's daily lives that many landowners can't even find day laborers to work during the long period of lockdown. Displaced people are suffering from physical and mental health problems. During the pandemic, the IDPs living in KIO-controlled areas worry about health care as they cannot get medical treatment in Burmese-controlled areas either. China also closed the gates even for medical treatments.

> To get good mental health, the displaced people need financial security. Lack of basic financial security leads to the disintegration of the otherwise strong family unit within Kachin culture, leading to many social issues. Many men leave their families for months or years, finding work and also fighting on the front lines. Children see little value in staying in the camps with their families as they have no family farm to take over and no family business to help run, as would normally be the case within Kachin family customs. Due to lack of nutritious food, the children and elderly are often sick, in return it can negatively affect their mental health. They are physically and mentally ill, but they do not go to the hospital (outside of the clinics within the camps) as they do not have money (KRZ, *8/9/2021*).

> My son has not been in good mental health for a long time. He cannot sleep at night due to anxiety. He said when he sleeps, he feels stunned and frightened. We do not bring him to the hospital as we don't have money. We brought him to the hospital in Mai Ja Yang city; however, the treatment did not help. We want to treat him in Laiza

or China, but the gates closed to China and even if the lockdown restrictions were removed, we cannot afford the travel or treatment (Mrs. Dim, 15/12/2021).

It is not easy to improve the mental health of displaced people. The KIO offers health care for civilians, but they need trained specialists for every condition. As everywhere, managing the pandemic tested the KIO health department. It does not cover all physical health areas of the displaced people. The key informants from NGOs/CBOs mentioned that they helped patients get treatment in Laiza, the headquarters city of KIO. The NGOs, CBOs, and faith-based organizations helped with the physical health of the displaced people. Additionally, the KIO received Sino-vac vaccinations and Covid test kits from the Chinese authorities. Due to Beijing's heavy-handed approach to vaccinating its neighbors, Laiza and Mai Ja Yang are allegedly 100% vaccinated. This mandated vaccination includes all IDPs living in or near these two main urban areas. Plus, they treated COVID patients freely in the hospital or quarantine centers. The respondents also mentioned that the CDM doctors and nurses also came to the IDP camps and checked people's health. The displaced people felt relieved by these responses during the pandemic. But their mental health problems, including of the displaced migrants in China, remain unresolved.

EDUCATION IN FLUX ON THE KACHIN-CHINA BORDERLANDS

During the pandemic and post-coup crisis, the Kachin Education Department has faced a rapid expansion of students transferring from schools that were shut down after the coup. They devised solutions to facilitate schooling in their control zones. It is significant to note that the Kachin Education Department continues to take responsibility for providing access to education, even during these emergency pandemic and coup conditions. Displaced Students from central government-controlled areas such as Myitkyina and Manmaw (Bhamo) have had their public schools closed.

The prospects for education among displaced youth living in centrally controlled areas have changed dramatically since the coup. Many government schools have been completely suspended or burnt down,

while others remained open with new pro-military teachers to replace the many who left for the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Many youths, especially high school students, near the end of their matriculation, and their parents, chose to finish their education under the KIO Education Department.

The military takeover has further exacerbated the difficulty of the IDP youth to continue their education meaningfully, as proved by many students who have relocated to continue their education in the KIO-controlled areas. This study discovered numerous problems, such as a lack of infrastructure, a shortage of teachers, and difficulty accessing school healthcare. The Education Department is responsible for developing solutions to accommodate schooling in emergencies, managing academics, maintaining student quarantines, and providing food and Covid-19 protective assistance. Students suffer from emotional and mental health issues due to the crisis. Most of those displaced in earlier conflicts still live in the camps, separated from their families due to the coup.

> This Covid badly impacted us. When it started spreading, no family members can meet us. I cannot go back home, our institution was on lockdown, and we cannot even buy toothpaste, soap, and basic needs. My mobile Sim card was also cut off, I cannot contact my family member and my family also did not have any money as they had no job, and no income at that time. My sister who works in China also cannot send us money as she even difficult to survive herself (Ms. Nu Nu, 14/12/2022).

RISING RISKS TO PERSONAL SECURITY DAMAGE LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

The lack of livelihood security, lack of income, limited options for a better life, and limited income-generating possibilities are some of the vital challenges facing displaced people (Oxfam, 2016, cited in Lazum, 2020). Kachin displaced people in the Kachin-China borderlands have been living in camps for over a decade, and making a living wage is quite challenging for them. Most Kachin IDPs in the border areas struggle for regular incomes for their livelihood. Even before recent

changes and challenges due to the coup, these IDPs have had difficulty supporting themselves and their families since the 2011 conflict. The coup and the following political crisis have created even less favorable conditions for their well-being, and chances of regaining a normal everyday life.

> Generally, the IDPs have been in very difficult conditions since Covid-19 started and now, the military coup and prolonged fighting more negatively affects their livelihood. They not only have to deal with Covid lockdowns in the camp but also a lot of Myanmar military checkpoints to other places, such as their family farms where they sometimes go to collect fruit to sell or the roads, they would need to use to trade goods. So, most of the IDPs have no jobs and can only stay in the IDP camp. The IDPs cannot find seasonal work or casual work like before as they have many Covid rules and Myanmar military restrictions. These two crises have created many new traumas on an already traumatized population (KWAT, 6/9/2021).

The Myanmar military coup d'état affected not only the displaced people but all local communities. KIO has also supported the displaced people from the KIO-controlled areas with shelters, space, healthcare, education, and food. However, the political situation changed after the military coup, affecting the displaced people. For instance, the IDPs cannot go back to their villages to harvest fruits, vegetables, and other goods for cash generation, as many displaced families' farmlands and fruit orchards are in the front-line and 'no-man's land' areas. Living in these areas is far too dangerous, and harvest trips were quite risky, with real possibilities of meeting Burmese troops or stepping on landmines.

With the coup and escalated fighting, only some displaced people dared take the risk. Thus, the displaced people are worried about their livelihood security in the current situation and their unpredictable futures. Since the coup, any short or mid-term hopes of cooperation between the two sides for the safe return of displaced people or access to external aid have faded. We cannot understate the importance of land to these populations. Although many may make just a few hundred

dollars a year from seasonal work or small cash crops, they lived rich lives back home with plenty of food, fruits, vegetables, herbs, fish, and wild meats from their gardens and surrounding lands. Materials for housing and cooking fuel were freely available in abundance. These communities are genuinely poorer than ever in history. They have all the skills to care for themselves and their families, but they need land and forest. Now they are solely dependent on cash for these things.

> After the military coup in Myanmar, our lives are more challenged than before. Difficult for livelihood, travel restriction, cannot go back to our village and difficult to find jobs. After the military coup, we are not safe to go to our village because our village is Lisu village, and we are the only Jinghpaw family and only my father joined KIA. The rest of the households are Lisu tribe and have not joined KIO/KIA. We feel not safe, that someone will tell the Myanmar military that our family is related to KIO/KIA. Though we went to our village to harvest before Covid-19, we stayed with our relatives in a different village and harvested our fruit crop without being seen by our own village. We did not have the confidence to stay at home. Now, we cannot go back to the village because of security issues, so we grow some vegetables in camps with very limited space. Everything is so expensive now, we can only eat what we grow (Mrs. Roi, 23/12/2021).

THE EMERGENCY RESPONSES DURING COVID-19 AND THE MILITARY COUP

A decade before the pandemic, the KIO and local NGOs were overworked with thinly stretched resources. After the pandemic, their workload increased, as did the need for funding additional issues on top of normal camp operations, such as quarantine centers. For example, during the pandemic and Myanmar political crisis, the KIO, NGOs, and CBOs collaborated to take responsibility for the displaced people in KIA-controlled areas. At the pandemic's start in Myanmar, before the military coup in 2021, the healthcare and Covid-19 responses were normal in central government-controlled regions. The civilians, including the displaced, received Covid-19 protection aid

and affordable healthcare in hospitals if infected with Covid-19. But displaced people in KIO areas were challenged, as international humanitarian support was restricted to the border areas. The gates were closed, and transportation was quite restricted. As a result, the people in the border areas faced many challenges to survive and find accommodation. Market prices doubled for some basic needs; for instance, a bottle of vegetable oil which was twenty yuan increased to 40 yuan (approximately US$5.78) during the pandemic as the gates between China and Kachin were closed. Many necessities from Myanmar could not be transported across borders due to Covid restrictions.

After the military coup in Myanmar, the situation changed in the central government-controlled and KIO-controlled areas. Myanmar-controlled areas struggled more after the coup. As the NLD state government had no authority in government systems such as managing the healthcare systems, many NLD members got arrested, and some relocated to ethnic army-controlled areas. The Civil Disobedience Movement, in which many civilians protested the military coup, did not care about the lockdown restrictions anymore. As a result, the second and third waves of Covid-19 affected the people in the central government-controlled areas. Many doctors, nurses, and health staff participated in Civil Disobedience Movements. The civilians treated themselves at home out of fear of meeting the pro-military hospital staff who did not join the CDM, or the military staff at the hospital who took over in place of the staff who left to join the CDM.

The 2021 military coup made the Bamar urban majority populations come closer to understanding the lives and struggles of the ethnic people, especially the ones from conflict zones, and the displaced people. Many young people came to KIO-controlled areas for political reasons, and Kachin students moved to continue their education as most of the government education provision had collapsed in the central government-controlled regions. Due to the sudden internal migration from many parts of Burma, there was a new Covid-19 outbreak in KIO-controlled areas in mid-2021, and thousands of people got infected. The KIO created the Covid action group with members from all related KIO departments. They took responsibility for Covid restrictions, lockdown plans, building quarantine centers, testing programs, and providing vaccinations. NGOs and CBOs, such as

WunPawng Ninghtoi, Karum Zinghkri, and other local organizations, donated food for Covid-19 patients. The Chinese government promoted Covid-19 protection and vaccines for all residents, and Covid tests were free in KIO-controlled areas.

> When the IDPs are struggling with Covid, yet another military coup plus lockdowns in the IDP camps and other areas, the displaced people are experiencing increased mental health issues as they cannot even get day labor work like before and are depressed for their life. The NGOs' support also decreased from before as money transfers through China became almost impossible. There were also many difficulties with transportation of aid supplies and basic food items such as vegetables which were often kept at security gates until they were rotten on their way into these areas (KWAT, 6/9/2021).

> During the lockdowns, the displaced people are so depressed as their living expenses increased and their ability to generate income has decreased. The NGOs/ CBOs experienced difficulty running their activities during Covid and military coups. Previously, these groups could receive funding through their Burmese bank accounts and travel into government-controlled areas to withdraw funds when needed. As crossing this border became more difficult and dangerous, they needed to pay 10% to transfer money from Burmese banks to the wave money system which works also inside of the KIO areas. This has caused many delays and difficulties getting aid to the IDPs consistently (KRZ, 8/9/2021).

DISCUSSION

Previous studies mention that formerly IDPs could cross into China legally or illegally as if the border did not exist (Dean, 2005). However, the study found that at the beginning of the pandemic, illegal cross-border travel was not available at any price due to newly heightened security restrictions along the border. Border security became severely restricted for a few months into the pandemic. No one could

cross the border legally or illegally. The Chinese authorities even installed triple-layer fencing with cameras, flood lights, motion sensors and loudspeakers that automatically shouted at approaching people in Burmese and Chinese to stay away from the fence.

An earlier study discovered that livelihood strategies for Kachin IDPs in conflict-affected areas were insufficiently sustainable (Lazum, 2020). This study found that the Kachin displaced people, currently beset by the pandemic and Myanmar political crises, face too many challenges and struggles to survive, and too many immediate challenges to seriously consider long-term planning. The local NGOs and KIO try to support them, but more is needed. Comparing displaced people's life conditions before the pandemic and the coup, life overall after the pandemic and the coup is much more uncomfortable because of the many gaps in the aid. Seasonal workers could always count on food from their orchards to cover some of these gaps. Since the pandemic and especially since the coup, there are very few ways left for the IDPs to fill gaps in necessary protein, health care, education, etc., which the government and the aid groups cannot fully provide.

The previous study finds that the Kachin displaced people's livelihood depends on cross-border migration and that illegal migrants face higher likelihood of labor exploitation, discrimination, and human trafficking (EMRF, 2019). The study found that IDPs are facing discrimination and difficulties not only in China but also in Kachin. The displaced people find survival and getting jobs challenging compared with local (non-displaced) people on the Kachin side. Some examples are displaced people being forbidden to pick fruit, gather firewood, or collect herbs from local forests because they have no local rights to do so. Some Kachin sugar cane plantation owners are negotiating lower salaries for IDPs.

CONCLUSION

Since the fighting re-erupted in Kachin state in 2011, the displaced Kachin agricultural communities, who can no longer pursue their farm livelihood, are among the most impacted. Since the pandemic and the Myanmar military coup, the war's impacts and displacement have grown in scale and severity. The prolonged civil war in Myanmar

is different from civil wars in most other countries: it is the longest ongoing civil war in the world. As Myanmar is a developing country full of conflict, much of the population lives in poverty, lacks access to education and adequate healthcare, and has an inferior quality of life. The protracted conflicts constitute a significant factor driving citizens into poverty. The disputes and disasters destroyed the lives and livelihoods of people as they lost their belongings, property, and lands.

Myanmar gets less international attention than other conflict zones, such as Ukraine, Palestine. It restricts access to international humanitarian aid, especially in the conflict zones of the north, which share a border with China. The Kachin have been quietly facing a health and social crisis; they have lived in crisis mode for more than 60 years due to renewed civil war and are now struggling more than ever.

Migration to and seeking asylum in China differs from other countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. These other countries have more favorable policies toward asylum seekers; however, they leave many gaps, and asylum seekers also experience a wide range of issues. According to the findings, the Chinese authority forced back all migrants at the start of the pandemic in 2020. Then, they significantly increased the security infrastructure along the Myanmar- China border and closed all the gates. The migrants still stuck in China also face various challenges like living insecurely and undocumented, without access to healthcare and being discriminated against for job opportunities. They work for lower salaries and in more risky jobs since the pandemic and coup—if they can still find work. To effectively address the livelihood insecurity of displaced people, local NGOs/INGOs, the Kachin State government, the KIO, and the Chinese government must work together. This includes creating job opportunities, adjusting policies to allow access to land for food production, and providing livelihood training for sustainable futures.

REFERENCES

Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM). (2022). *Myanmar: IDP Sites in Kachin State (as of 31 May 2020)*. https://reliefweb.int/map/myanmar/myanmar-idp-sites-kachin-state-31-may-2020 (Retrieved 2021, May 3).

Dean, K. (2005). Spaces and territorialities on the Sino–Burmese boundary: China, Burma and the Kachin. *Political Geography*, *24*(7), 808-830.

Dean, K. (2020). Assembling the Sino-Myanmar border world. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, *61*(1), 34-54.

Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMRF). (2019). *Border lives: The Kachin-China Border.* EMRF. https://www.emref.org/sites/emref.org/files/publication-docs/border-lives-the-kachin-china-borer.pdf

Google maps. (n.d). *Kachin – China border, Myanmar (Burma).* (Online) https://www.google.com/maps/place/Je+Yang+IDPs+Camp/@24.7038663,97.5087327,13z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x3731c-cdf9b30291b:0xafbb672bc3d31b6!8m2!3d24.6921774!4d97.5673485 (Retrieved 2021, May 3.)

Human Rights Watch. (2012). *Isolated in Yunnan: Kachin Refugees from Burma in China's Yunnan Province.* (Online) https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/06/25/isolated-yunnan/kachin-refugees-burma-chinas-yunnan-province (Online) (Retrieved 2022, June 28.) Human Rights Watch. New York.

Lazum, H. T. (2020). *Exploring the Livelihoods of Internally Displaced Persons in Kachin State, Myanmar.* Victoria University of Wellington. New Zealand.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (Donaldson-Smith N., Trans.). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.

Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU). (2015). *Kachin State – Myanmar.* (Online). https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/State_Map_Tsp_Kachin_MIMU940v02_06Jul2015_Topo_A1_0.pdf (Retrieved 2021, May 3). MIMU. Yangon.

Pau, P. K. (2019). Behind the enemy line: British-led guerrilla operations in the Indo-Burma frontier during the Second World War. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, *30*(2), 307-334.

Song, L. (2018). Forced migration of ethnic Kachins from Myanmar to China: Law and politics behind China's response. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, *27*(2), 190-208.

Zaw Lut. (2013). *Armed conflict, internally displaced persons and protection in Kachin State, Myanmar*. PhD diss., Chulalongkorn University, 2013.

Zhou, C., Wu, S., & Su, X. (2022). Cross-border Livelihood: Trade, labor, and internal displacement at the Myanmar-China Border. *Geoforum*, *129*, 49-59.

7

RIGHTS OF PASSAGE: MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THAILAND—PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Melissa Erin Truffles Wing

Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies,
Mahidol University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Thailand's immigration system is complex and opaque, making it difficult for migrant workers to navigate. This lack of transparency reduces their agency and makes them more vulnerable to exploitation. This paper presents preliminary findings from a more extensive study on the human rights abuses faced by migrant workers from Myanmar in Thailand. These workers often rely on intermediaries to help them navigate the system, which can be costly and risky. They are also tied to their employers by strict visa conditions and may be underpaid and forced to work in poor conditions. The fear of deportation makes it difficult for them to seek help when they face problems. This study uses desk-based research and interviews with NGOs and a migrant worker from Myanmar to understand these their challenges and explore potential solutions.

INTRODUCTION: THAILAND'S IMMIGRATION PROCESS

> There is one problem, about three months ago, there
> is one report in the Thai media, Thai police issuing the
> police card. The federal police or police from Bangkok
> arrived in Mae Sot, they do a check point. They arrest
> everyone, they ask the question about whether they
> bought a police card…they don't know how to be safe
> apart from police card. A lot of people won't go out now
> (Documented migrant worker).

> This incomplete and shaky system allows for corrup-
> tion, it doesn't promote corruption, but it allows for it
> (Informed expert, MAP Foundation).

Among the four NGOs that I have spoken to as part of the research for
this paper, there is agreement that Thailand's immigration governance,
both as it currently operates and has historically, places an undue bur-
den on the migrant.

Brahm Press of the MAP Foundation based in Chiang Mai notes that
the Thai government has not "committed to having migrant workers as
a functional part of society" (personal communication, 17 May 2022).

Ensuring a pool of temporary workers enables the Thai government
to use this labor pool as they see fit—enacting legislation to regularize
migrants as economic demand allows and making it difficult for mi-
grants to secure documentation during economic contraction.

Intra-regional Asian migration now makes up the world's most signifi-
cant proportion of migration, with the mass migration from Myanmar
to Thailand being the most significant proportion of this (International
Organization of Migration (IOM), 2020). Of the approximately 4.9 mil-
lion migrant workers based in Thailand, 2.3 million are from Myanmar,
with most living in towns along the Thai-Myanmar border (IOM,
2019). Before the current COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand had experi-
enced decades of significant economic growth, increasing its demand
for migrant workers to sustain and benefit from this (the World Bank,
2021). Conversely, economic migrants are attracted to countries with

comparatively strong economies (ibid, 2017). Regarding neighboring Myanmar, the recent 2021 coup and decades of instability have resulted in many Myanmar nationals seeking to leave the country due to economic limitations and persecution (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The Myanmar-Thailand migration corridor is a well-traveled route that has evolved over decades. As outlined by the IOM (2019), the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) process, agreed to by the Thai and Myanmar governments in 2004, is now the standard process used by low-skilled migrant workers to enter Thailand. This process allows migrant workers to enter the country already documented rather than regularizing their status once in Thailand. The process involves several different actors in each country; migrants first register with recruitment agents in their home countries, and these agents must be certified by the government's labor ministry or equivalent department. Under the MOU process, a migrant worker's visa is tied to a specific employer. However, a worker may change employers under certain circumstances, such as a breach of contract by the employer or harmful working conditions.

Of note is that these agents typically subcontract their work to source workers from more remote areas. These agents complete a range of services for prospective migrant workers, including securing an employer, organizing pre-departure arrangements, and organizing the requisite health check-ups upon arrival to Thailand.

Further, immigration policy operates at both a domestic and intra-regional level. In 2003, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Community was established, of which Myanmar and Thailand are members. The community comprises three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The free movement of people was discussed separately from these three pillars, and the free movement of workers was agreed to only for the highly skilled at this time (Aoki, 2019).

> When the government is dysfunctional, the MOU will also not function properly. Myanmar and the MOU, it

functioned for a while and is now trying to re-function (Informed expert, MAP Foundation).

Currently because of the political system in Myanmar, the government system also dead and not functioning at all. Difficult to apply the passport. Normally they are coming from rural area, uneducated, don't have legal ID in Myanmar [due to discrimination].

I don't want to only blame Thai immigration system. Sometimes the Burmese system, the function and the system is not really good enough, cannot blame only Thailand. Improve government system a lot, work and co-operation together to solve problem together (Informed expert, ADRA).

As noted above, the MOU process's efficient functioning (or indeed functioning at all) requires both governments' support. This does not appear to be a durable solution given Myanmar's ongoing political precarity, which results in the disruption of services government-wide.

The MOU process is mainly seen as restrictive, given that it limits the region and sector where a migrant may work. This, coupled with the system's complexity and high cost, has been a barrier to its use (IOM, 2019). A migrant worker's inherent temporariness is exemplified through the immigration process. The means of registration, benefits, and costs are effectively determined by the government of the day but are always centered around the impermanence of a migrant worker's stay in Thailand (Mekong Migration Network, 2016).

Further, while Thailand has implemented MOUs with its neighbors over time, it remains that, with no clear strategy on an international level, Thailand has been able to adapt and amend its immigration policies as it sees fit. Government policy must then walk a thin line. Placating (or not correcting or informing) the public's concerns around immigration while fostering economic growth is a challenge. The concept of "illusory correlations" put forward by Chattoraj, Hasan, Mohamad, & Ullah (2020) outlines the tendency of people and policymakers to substitute complex questions with more simplistic

ones. Their study indicates that data collection that informs decisions/policies around migrants and migration is often flawed and outdated.

METHODOLOGY

Desk-based Research of Secondary Sources

This paper collates existing literature on Thailand's immigration governance. This desk-based research aims to understand existing concepts and research and the effectiveness of any recommendations. This includes scholarly articles, NGO reports, and publications.

Qualitative Narrative Research: Informed Expert Interviews

The purpose of the informed expert interviews is to understand, at both an individual and community level, the perceived challenges that migrant workers, specifically those from Myanmar, face both during and after using the Thai immigration system in comparison to remaining undocumented.

At this stage in the thesis research, one-hour conversational-style interviews have been conducted with the following informed experts:

- Anna Engblom, Chief Technical Advisor, TRIANGLE in ASEAN project, International Labour Organization

- Wasurat Homsud, Senior Program Officer for Migrant Population, Raks Thai Foundation

- Brahm Press, Director, MAP Foundation

- Qingyan Zu, Program Director, Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)

The above organizations are all based in Thailand, and the interviews were conducted in person, where possible, or online. A series of questions were asked regarding each participant's knowledge of the immigration system, the current challenges, and potential solutions.

DOCUMENTED MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND

For this paper, documented Myanmar migrant workers are defined as adult migrant workers from Myanmar (of any gender and 18 years of age and over) who are currently in Thailand (all locations) working legally in the 3D sector (jobs considered dangerous, dirty and challenging).

This study acknowledges that the definitions of and differences between 'migrant worker' and 'refugee' are not always as binary as the media, states, and organizations present them. Many migrant workers may still seek to flee persecution in their home countries and seek better economic prospects in another country (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). Regarding migration from Myanmar (along with other countries), a distinction must also be drawn between those with more significant financial means and who have the resources to migrate easily compared to those who are migrating in search of economic resources. Generally, the latter group does not hold formal qualifications. 2020 IOM estimates indicate less than 1% of Myanmar migrant workers have completed education beyond secondary school and are typically relegated to '3D' sector jobs, which are dangerous, dirty, and problematic (IOM, 2019). As this study centers around government structure and policy, it will focus primarily on documented migrant workers entering Thailand, i.e., those engaging with the system. The study will differentiate between those migrating out of necessity versus those migrating because they have the means. The focus will be given to documented workers employed in the 3D sector. This is because the power imbalance between users of an immigration system and those in control of it (and enacting its policies) is compounded among those with lesser economic means (Coddington, Conlon, & Martin).

An in-person interview with Kyaw Win was conducted in Mae Sot in June 2022. Kyaw Win initially traveled to Thailand undocumented and was later sponsored by his current employer. Kyaw Win spoke about his and his community's experiences with the immigration process.

The interview concerns his lived experiences. Given the considerable variance in the experience a migrant may have regarding immigration, the interviews are not intended to represent the majority or even a cross-section of migrant workers.

As mentioned above, the purpose of the narrative study will be to understand, at an individual level, the perceived challenges that migrant workers, specifically those from Myanmar, face both during and after using the Thai immigration system compared to remaining undocumented. Challenge will generally be defined as a need for excessive time commitment, financial resources, or expert understanding to successfully navigate the system or any limitation on one's human rights through its use.

LIMITATIONS

One must consider that migration has also 'feminized' in the past decades, with increasing numbers of women independently migrating rather than as a family unit (Czaika & De Hass, 2013). Given the increased and varied risks women face when migrating, it is vital to consider a gendered perspective on the changing demographics of migration (Abshir et al., 2019). However, having only interviewed one male documented Myanmar migrant worker at this stage, it would be inappropriate to form definitive conclusions, particularly from a gendered perspective.

Further, the documented migrant worker in this paper initially traveled to Thailand without documentation and later secured this through his employer. This study intends to focus on those who travel from Myanmar to Thailand documented. However, such interviews can be challenging to secure.

It should also be noted that all interviews are being conducted in English, which may not be representative of the NGO sector or documented migrant workers.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS, AGENCY, AND SURVEILLED INVISIBILITY

Government Structure

Governments across the world have continuously presented migration as a binary concept. There is regular migration, synonymous with and

simplified as being 'good' and safe. By contrast, irregular migration is considered 'bad' and dangerous (Bylander, 2019).

Typically, migrants are encouraged by the government to use regular migratory channels, or governments actively discourage and seek to prevent irregular migration (ibid). Migrants using regular migration channels experience the immigration policies and processes of a government first-hand (rather than the reactive and preventative policies surrounding irregular migration). These policies often result in codifying the government's values and broader aims as they relate, or sit adjacent to, immigration.

Like governments themselves, immigration governance is not uniformly structured worldwide, and government structure, policies, and the departments through which policies are enacted vary greatly. At a practical level, the government department under which a country's immigration function sits can reveal much about its perception and approach to migrants entering their borders.

The reasons for these differences stem from myriad factors, and countries with land borders undoubtedly face increased complexity in their management of people movement. However, while we see operational and strategic similarities worldwide regarding national security, fostering international relationships, and ensuring welfare, Thailand remains unique. Of note is that the immigration department of Thailand primarily sits within the Royal Thai Police and is known as the Immigration Bureau. Their stated mission covers much ground; "to intercept prohibited or unwanted persons to prevent travelling into or out of the Kingdom as well as preventing threats to security in various forms." (Royal Thai Police Immigration Bureau, para 1, 2020). Their core value supports this mission, which is stated as "prompt action." (ibid).

This strategy, as well as the functioning of immigration policy in practice, may not be in alignment with the best possible outcomes to respect, protect and fulfill an individual's human rights (Aoki, 2019). Negative externalities are likely when government systems are vague, complex, and challenging to understand and may result in the limitation of a migrant worker's agency (Grub, 2017).

The Need for Intermediaries

Thailand's immigration governance is operationally so complex that it necessitates the services of intermediaries. As noted by all four NGOs interviewed, brokers have become an unavoidable part of the immigration process, given its complexity. Migrants must rely on word of mouth when selecting a broker. However, as broker services are continually subcontracted throughout the process, word of mouth is not always an effective means of selection.

Kyaw Win notes that brokers are seen as unavoidable, and while you can attempt to find trustworthy brokers through word-of-mouth recommendations, encountering unscrupulous brokers can be unavoidable too. The way he speaks of this, it appears that this is an accepted reality rather than an ongoing concern for migrants.

Increasing Costs

ADRA also spoke about the increasing frustration among migrants that the cost of obtaining documentation and remaining documented continually increases and is incredibly opaque. Many migrants no longer see the clear benefits of remaining documented.

Anna Engblom of the ILO notes that migrants are often referred to as "ATMs" by the local police. The extortion of migrant workers has become so commonplace in border towns that it is now codified in informal documentation. The use of "police cards" was noted by all NGO representatives. These are informal cards issued to migrant workers by the police for a fee. Should they be stopped by police, this card will prevent them from being detained or deported. It could be argued that this system is almost symbiotic; immigration police in border areas can supplement their incomes through the bribes they extort, while migrant workers can rely on these informal documents to avoid detention or deportation. However, given the power imbalance between the immigration police and migrant communities, this relationship can be seen as little more than parasitic, with migrant communities having much more to lose.

With little apparent benefit in obtaining documentation to work in Thailand, many migrant workers choose to enter Thailand undocumented or allow themselves to become undocumented while in the country.

Regarding the significant costs migrant workers must bear, Anna Engblom of the ILO states that these need to be passed primarily onto the government, with some assistance from employers. Wasurat Homsud of the Raks Thai Foundation also echoed this.

> Of course the ILO position, is that workers shouldn't pay for costs related to recruitment but systemically it's very rare that migrants do not pay (Informed expert (ILO).

Brahm Press notes that the flexibility of the migrant workforce is not matched by the immigration structures that govern them and suggests a more unrestrained movement of migrant workers, perhaps under an ASEAN governance framework. He also calls for a system where the employer and documentation are less intertwined, noting that switching between employer and industry should be easier.

ADRA calls for the special relationship between employers and the Thai government to be extended to employees. They wish to see employees included in conversations and announcements around upcoming immigration legislation changes to build agency among migrant communities.

Further, ADRA also calls for a greater focus on government-to-government conversations and solutions. While Myanmar and Thailand have entered the MOU process together, there have been no substantive conversations about its ongoing effectiveness.

NGO INPUT

Regarding NGO operations, these organizations feel they are listened to as supporters of migrant worker rights. However, it is employers themselves that primarily get the government's attention. Wasurat Homsud of the Raks Thai Foundation notes that organizations that hire migrants are informed about upcoming policy changes ahead of public announcements for them to prepare for any changes.

The Thai government appears happy to include NGOs and CSOs in the context of service provision, be it education or health services.

However, there is less meaningful engagement regarding higher-level policy change.

THE HYPER-PRECARITY OF THE MIGRANT IDENTITY

Much literature relates to the concept of immigration and immigration policy more broadly. As Kranrattanasuit & Sumarlan (2019) note, a general trend of migration has been presented by governments and perceived by the public as a 'threat' in recent years. As outlined by Hellwig & Abdulkader (2016), migrants are often viewed as a drain on public resources, threats to the local job market, and unwilling or unable to assimilate into local cultural norms and values. Pang and Ramsay (2015) further explore attitudes towards migrants in the Asian context, particularly regarding employment. Most migrants enter Thailand to work in '3D' sector jobs that citizens do not want to undertake. As noted above, the government must balance the economy's needs with the sentiment of the local population. Restricted employment avenues for migrant workers may serve as both a deterrent and a 'pacifier' to the local population (Kranrattanasuit & Sumarlan 2019).

Media plays an important role also; migrant workers play a huge role in the Thai economy in a way that benefits the everyday Thai citizen, such as through farming and food distribution efforts. However, information about this is rarely shown (Niyomsilpa & Sunpuwan, 2012). Given that most migrant workers live along the border in Thailand, there is often a limited opportunity for interaction between migrant communities and Thai citizens, which keeps barriers based on stereotypes in place (ibid). The Thai government encouraging labour-intensive industries to relocate to border regions further enforces this barrier.

Coddington, Conlon, and Martin (2020) note that rhetoric around immigration centers it as an economic practice. In the political sphere, this can play out at two extremes; migrants that work too much and cause job losses amongst the local population or migrants that work too little and abuse social systems. The government can, more so than most actors, shape and control the public image of immigration. Bylander (2019) observes that irregular migration is continually positioned as a key problem to be solved. This is further supported by

Grub (2017), who notes that discourse around legal and illegal migration centers on illegality as a core problem that needs to be fixed.

Much like Sen's (2009) commentary on the theory of justice, where he notes the ease of defining injustice in comparison to agreeing on an ideal of justice, states and state actors are concentrated on defining irregular migration and its risks rather than building a usable, safe regular migration system. Bylander (2019) observes the trend of conflating "orderly" and "regular" with "safe" migration and explores how regular migration is often of more benefit to the state than the worker. Further, concerning irregular migration, blame is typically placed on traffickers by governments. Yet, they create a complex system, as is the case with the Thai immigration system, so that there is a continual need for intermediaries. Many migrant workers in Thailand perceive the MOU process (described above) as less advantageous than crossing the Thai border undocumented and having their status regularized. This is due to the indebtedness to employers, a concern that can be mitigated through the comparatively cheaper regularization process (Bylander, 2019).

However, removing this binary distinction appears possible when it is considered convenient for the government. An example is how Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are implemented in Thai border areas. SEZs encourage economic development in border areas and incentivize businesses to move operations there. The private sector is happy to benefit from a low-expense, captive labour force (remembering documentation is tied to employers). The Thai private sector has expressed interest in 'transitioning' refugees to labor migrants, viewing refugees as better qualified (Coddington, Conlon, & Martin, 2020).

REDUCED AGENCY ON THE GROUND

While the NGOs noted the reduced agency of migrant workers in the context of them being seen as mere economic inputs, there are many other ways migrant workers are used for broader aims. In this way, migrants are treated as pawns of broader problems.

Kyaw Win spoke about numerous migrant workers currently being held in detention centers who are victims of human trafficking by brokers. They are kept in detention unlawfully as they are effectively the

'evidence' that this trafficking has taken place. The conditions in these centers are poor, and instead of being deported quickly, migrants are held for unreasonable lengths of time. Kyaw Win states that this issue is not getting the attention of NGOs or CSOs, which will be necessary to create the government pressure needed to prevent such human rights violations from occurring.

Further, due to distrust of the Myanmar government, many migrant workers use false identities when obtaining documentation, allowing them to return home and to Thailand multiple times. While migrants are assured that information held in Thai government systems will not be shared with the Myanmar government, there is an understandable mistrust.

Regarding complaints, Kyaw Win says his primary concern is whether officials will take his identity details. If this is required to make a complaint, he will not proceed:

> Before I complain, I need to check if they use my real name or not, if they use my real ID, I will not complain (Documented migrant worker).

> Migrant workers, particularly undocumented workers will not use a documented system for fear of being deported. Documented workers might be a bit hesitant, they don't know how they will be treated (Informed expert (ILO)).

As noted in the comments above, complaints mechanisms surrounding the immigration process are weak and offer little incentive for their use.

REDUCED AGENCY AT A STRUCTURAL LEVEL

> The burden is always on the migrant. Paperwork requirements are opaque, [it's] difficult to know how to prepare. Rules change from time to time, it might not be the same process twice (Informed expert (MAP Foundation)).

Information regarding the immigration process and associated documents (such as application forms etc.) are typically in Thai and only occasionally in English or Burmese. While dedicated information centers and Burmese language information documents are being implemented, ADRA argues this is insufficient. How information is disseminated among migrant worker communities needs to be factored in. With NGOs and CSOs acting primarily as intermediaries between migrant communities and the Thai government, using these organizations as information distributors rather than simply creating signage/forms in Burmese will be beneficial.

This does occur to some extent currently. However, active and formally coded partnerships between these organizations and the Thai government will ensure the correct information gets to the right places.

Interestingly, the problems with information dissemination, as the NGOs noted, did not significantly factor into Kyaw Win's challenges during his immigration journey. The Burmese communities along the Thai-Myanmar border are well-established networks, and social media is used widely to disseminate real-time information.

Kyaw Win noted that he felt he had access to adequate information throughout his immigration process and relied primarily on Facebook groups to guide him as he navigated Thai bureaucracies. His primary concern was the continually increasing costs of migrating legally and the ongoing costs once in the country.

SURVEILLED INVISIBILITY

Many countries position migration as a threat to national security that must be managed, and negative public sentiment surrounding migration often serves these aims. It is a migrant's "*distinctiveness*" in their reception country that serves to magnify offences of the minority and overshadow those of the majority (Chattoraj, Hasan, Mohamad, & Ullah, 2020).

> It's a security-oriented framework. Identifying where they are, who they're employed to, having some sort of control over their whereabouts, rather than ensuring

migrants can receive their full rights. They're isolated and fragmented (Informed expert (MAP Foundation)).

As outlined by the above quote, Thailand's immigration system comprises numerous securitization measures. Migrant workers must verify their places of residence in Thailand every 90 days after completing the national verification process and receiving their temporary passports (Grub, 2017). The MOU process comprises a 'nationality verification' process conducted by the migrant-sending country. Due to distrust of the Myanmar government, false identities are often created as part of the verification process (Grub, 2017). With the temporary passports issued to Myanmar nationals under this process only permitting travel between Thailand and Myanmar, migrants are limited to one heavily policed migrant corridor. Figure one, below, indicates that 75.8% of the Thai participants in a 2,000-person study believe non-registered migrants are a threat to their personal security.
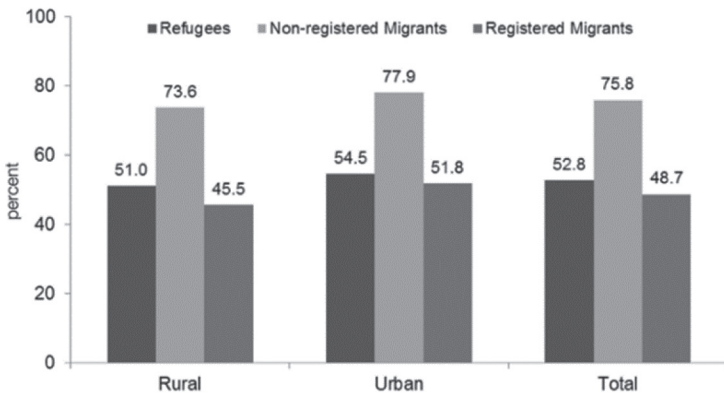
Fig. 19. Study of 2,000 Thai respondents based in rural and urban areas; proportion that agrees refugees or migrant workers pose a personal security threat. Niyomsilpa & Sunpuwan, 2012, p. 51

We must also consider how the legality of migration is a concept that focuses more on inter-state relations and their benefits rather than an understanding of the economic burden it places on migrants, as Grub (2017) describes. As mentioned above, Coddington, Conlon, & Martin (2020) indicate that migrants provide the most (economic) value in their enclosure. Having a captive workforce that is dependent

and vulnerable creates greater economic value than having a self-sufficient migrant population.

> Another challenge is in border town, they have to come from other districts to report 90 days. Along the way they have to go through different check points, authorities always checking documents. If they fail to report they have to be fined. They can't communicate to the authorities, they cannot see what is written on their visa or passport. Always checking authorities from when they left their home until they reach the destination. Even holding legal papers still have challenges (Informed expert (ADRA).

Supporting ADRA's position, Kyaw Win spoke of his experiences being stopped by law enforcement, which has happened multiple times. Bribes are continually extorted, and Kyaw Win notes the benefit of appearing to have lesser means as one is less likely to be a target. This issue appears to be compounded as Mae Sot migrant demographics have changed since the onset of the 2021 coup. Kyaw Win mentions that Myanmar nationals now have crossed the border without the intention to work in 3D roles. They come from means in Myanmar and seek to resettle in a third country; this makes them targets for police attempting to extort bribes as they typically wish to avoid having their identity details recorded and documented. However, Kyaw Win has heard rumors that government officials can remove your biometric data from their systems if you pay a bribe.

> Before the coup, situation in Mae Sot is really stable, you can stay without documents, even though there is some vulnerability, you can live here, have a job, just give some money to police. But some people told me it has always been a problem, Mae Sot police always arrest sometime. No one interested about the document, after the coup the situation changed suddenly (Documented migrant worker).

He describes the situation in Mae Sot before the coup as stable; the aforementioned police cards were quickly obtainable, and factoring in occasional bribes, one could remain in Mae Sot undocumented with

relative ease. However, there have been difficulties since the coup and the resulting influx of Myanmar nationals into the area. Police have enacted crackdowns on police cards, and while they were readily obtainable before, Kyaw Win states that currently, you need connections to obtain one.

> [I have] heard police sell migrants the sticker, it is corruption. If the migrant have the sticker or ticket, migrant have to pay around 500 baht per month, they [the police] won't harass [the migrant] that month, they will protect the migrant. It's like a mafia system (Informed expert [Raks Thai Foundation]).

Further, the cards are no longer physical but a phone number to call should you get arrested. Police cards operate as informal immigration governance and have become as opaque as formal channels.

RIGHTS VIOLATIONS OF WORKERS: LIMITED AGENCY AT THE CORE

As outlined previously, the rights violations of workers are well documented. However, the literature primarily focuses on rights violations within the workplace or during a migrant's stay in Thailand. There is relatively little that focuses on a migrant's experience of using the immigration system itself. Rights violations of undocumented migrant workers are also widely covered.

It is easy to assume that migrant workers ultimately prefer legal migration. Being documented means the looming threat of deportation or arbitrary detention is removed (or at least lessened). Migrants are afforded the rights of social security, work accident compensation, and driver's licenses.

However, there are burdensome costs associated with documentation. Based on discussions with Kyaw Win, with immigration governance operating with the same level of effectiveness formally and informally (for example, the MOU process versus police cards), cost remains the highest consideration. Legality ultimately becomes a commodity, not a form of compliance; it is simply a measure of who can mobilize

resources (Grub, 2017). As migrant workers must navigate an increasing number of steps in the documentation process and engage the services of multiple actors, the accountability of these actors becomes diluted. In this way, migrants face heightened precarity with no transparent actor from whom to claim their rights or to complain to (the MAP Foundation, 2012).
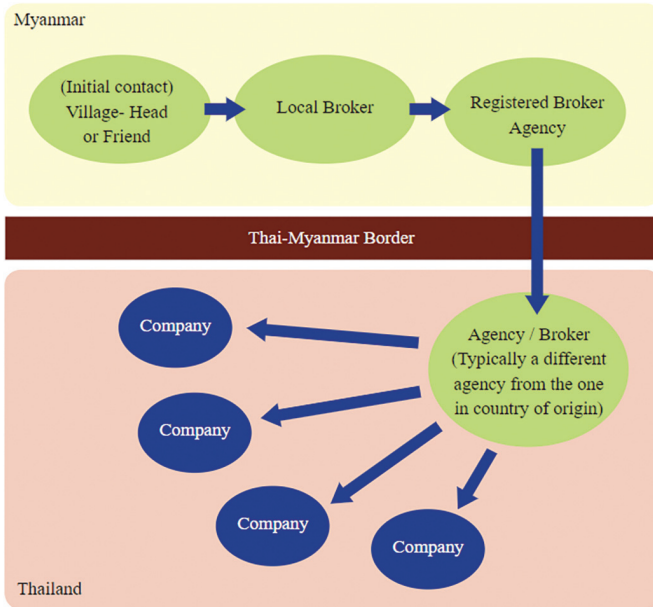
Fig. 20. Chain of brokers typically used to enter Thailand. The MAP Foundation, 2015, p. 14

As noted above by Coddington, Conlon, & Martin (2020), a migrant's political and economic benefit stems from their temporariness. They can be imported or sent back to their countries of origin, depending on economic demands and political will. Their rights and agency do not appear to influence these government and private sector-level decisions. The term "destitution economy" is used here to describe this process which results in an inability to secure financial stability (ibid).

This temporariness is expected and leads to migrant workers' inability to claim their rights fully as policies have historically sought to exclude them, such as preventing access to adequate healthcare or education (the MAP Foundation, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing Recommendations: Scholars

Frelick, Kysel, & Podkul (2016) recommend training border and immigration staff on human rights concepts and applications. Their work notes that border and immigration officials do not typically have a human rights or refugee protection mandate in their work. However, understanding basic human rights frameworks will benefit those migrants who are required to interact with them.

As outlined above, Bylander's work (2019) calls for the disaggregation of "safe" migration being synonymous with "regular" or "ordered" migration. Regular migration legitimizes the ever-growing costs and ever-shrinking freedoms associated with remaining documented. Policymakers would do well to engender safe migration rather than promote it, highlighting ethical employers and recruiters and providing greater information-sharing platforms (ibid).

At an interregional level, Aoki (2019) notes the importance of migrant management mechanisms being acceptable in both the origin and receiving country context. Further, Thailand's development assistance to its neighboring countries should consider migration management integral to rather than separate from its aims.

Thailand Based CSOs and NGOs

Regarding negative stereotypes of migrants and their ostracization, the Mekong Migration Network notes the apparent superficiality of social integration efforts (2016). Efforts to promote greater social integration among migrants and Thai nationals have not resulted in widespread change.

The Mekong Migration Network (2016) notes that a migrant's temporariness is inherent in the policies that govern them, creating a continual environment of insecurity and marginalization which makes it difficult for migrants to understand and claim their rights fully. The Network also calls for appropriate government resourcing to address the shortcomings in these governing policies and to ensure that the rights that apply to Thai citizens also apply to migrant workers in the context of the workplace.

The MAP Foundation (2015) also stresses the importance of legislative equity in ensuring migrant workers can fully access their rights.

International NGOs

The IOM recommended in their 2019 Thailand report that complaint mechanisms available to migrants are expanded and stricter penalties are enforced for those who violate the labor rights of migrant workers. Notably, there appears to be limited discourse around embedding employer obligations into the immigration system itself, such as requiring employers to prove their historical compliance with the relevant immigration and labor laws before being able to employ migrant workers.

As supported by the World Bank (2017), a standard recommendation is to lower migration costs, which are disproportionately burdensome on the migrant worker compared to the employer.

The International Labour Organization (2021) calls for strengthened institutional frameworks and strategic compliance tools and seeks to support the promotion and awareness of these.

RECOMMENDATIONS DRAWN FROM THIS STUDY

Accountability among Brokers

There is an apparent dilution in accountability as brokers outsource their services to numerous others throughout the immigration process.

While the leading broker in a broker services company must be registered with the Thai government, this is not true for subcontractors. Having greater due diligence in broker vetting, enacting restrictions on subcontractors, and ensuring harsher penalties for corrupt behavior are all factors that should be taken into account (or lobbied for) by the Thai government.

This would, however, be difficult to implement given that many sub-brokers are from rural Myanmar communities, which is how workers are sourced. Given this, steps to create a registration process for Myanmar-based brokers, including subcontractors, would be a good start to ensure greater visibility over the migration process from start to finish.

Adequate Incentives and Training among Thai Immigration Staff

Several NGOs state that Thai government staff do not generally receive large salaries. While this would be a significant undertaking, the organizational structure of on-ground immigration staff should be reviewed. Career progression based on human rights considerations and frameworks and ensuring adequate pay for workers may reduce corruption among immigration workers.

Ensuring adequate incentives for immigration staff to conduct their role without extorting bribes will not be a short-term fix. The extent to which corruption is embedded in Thailand's immigration governance is significant, supported by the use of 'police cards', which effectively serve as pseudo-formal documentation.

This culture change will likely need to come from 'top-down', with the Thai government formally condemning the extortion of migrant workers. Systematic reviews of human resource policies, including relevant code of conduct documentation, would be helpful to strengthen the institutional frameworks governing the day-to-day operations of the staff.

Community-led Communication

While much NGO-led focus has been on creating physical information centers, superior traction may be achieved through digital-based, community-led initiatives.

There are numerous barriers to the efficient running of physical centers. Further, they can be costly to operate and require migrants to take time out of their day to travel to the center's location. Building a network of reputable and verified social media networks is a valuable way to get information to migrants in real-time. Further, social media networks can lend credibility to the information provided as numerous people engage with reputable content.

Anonymous Complaint Mechanisms

While it would be ideal for a migrant's complaints on their experience with the immigration system to be received and actioned at an individual

level, a more realistic aim, at least in the short term, would be to focus on the benefit that receiving complaints could have at a macro level.

Implementing a general complaints mechanism that could be accessed online and anonymously would help create an aggregated dataset. Implementing a complaints system where individual complaints are listened to and actioned would take a significant working culture shift and operational mechanisms that may be complex and costly to implement. In the short term, creating relatively basic feedback mechanisms such as online surveys with closed-ended questions may be an effective way to understand pressure and problem points to help NGOs understand how to lobby for legislation or for the Thai government to understand how they can legislate accordingly.

Engaging with the Thai Government

While human rights limitations with the immigration system remain widespread, the Thai government has shown a continued willingness to engage (albeit at times superficially) with NGOs and civil society actors. As outlined above, the Thai government appears to welcome NGO assistance in the context of service provision. However, greater inclusion at a legislative level will be of benefit.

Continued pressure and long-term vision are essential here. For example, the TRIANGLE in ASEAN project has an overall timeframe spanning 2015-2027, with government funding from the Australian and Canadian governments committed throughout this time. Anna Engblom of the ILO notes the extensive timeframe of this project; however, she comments that this is the timeframe needed should one expect legislative changes to be passed. NGOs should take this into account when creating operational aims and strategies. While short-term goals are suitable for service provision aims, enacting legislative changes should be considered with a long-term vision.

CONCLUSION

The Thai-Myanmar migration corridor will continue to be among the most-used worldwide. The human rights violations of those who journey through it should no doubt be prevented to a far greater extent than they are currently.

Thailand's immigration system, as it currently operates in the context of migrant workers, is complex, opaque, and ever-changing. Migrant workers are continually surveilled; they are tied to their employers through their visa conditions and extorted for bribes by the immigration police. Despite this surveillance, as individuals, they are close to invisible. Limited access to information, few avenues for recourse, and being forced to pay ever-increasing costs all serve to reduce the agency of a migrant worker.

Solutions to this include accountability among brokers, training and adequate incentives for immigration staff, community-led communication, anonymous complaint mechanisms, and engaging with the Thai government in a meaningful, long-term way.

REFERENCES

Abshir, N., Branchini, C., Decker, M., Mar, A., Meyer, S., & Robinson, C. (2019). *Gender differences in violence and other human rights abuses among migrant workers on the Thailand–Myanmar border.* Violence against Women, 28(8), pp. 945-967. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218805587

Aoki, M. (2019). Thailand's Migrant Worker Management Policy as Regional Development Strategy. In Hatsukano, *Rethinking Migration Governance in the Mekong Region: From the Perspective of the Migrant Workers and Their Employers.* ERIA Research Project Report FY2017 no.19, Jakarta: ERIA and IDE-JETRO, pp.175-199.

Bylander, M. (2019). Is Regular Migration Safer Migration? Insights from Thailand. *Journal on Migration and Human Security, 7(1),* pp. 1-18. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502418821855

Chattoraj, D., Hasan, N., Mohamad, S., & Ullah, AKM. (2020). Migration and Security: Implications for Minority Migrant Groups. *India Quarterly, (76(1),* pp. 136-153. doi: 10.1177/0974928419901199

Coddington, K., Conlon, D., & Martin, L. (2020). Destitution Economies: Circuits of Value in Asylum, Refugee, and Migration Control. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers,*

110(5), pp. 1424-1444. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2020.1715196

Crawley, H. & Skleparis, D. (2018). Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44(1),* pp. 48-64. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224

Czaika, M. & De Haas, H. (2013). The Globalization of Migration: Has the world really become more migratory? *The International Migration Review Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 2014)*, pp. 283-323 (41 pages). Available at: https://domide.colmex.mx/Archivos/Doc_5820.pdf

Frelick, B., Kysel, I. & Podkul, J. (2016). The Impact of Externalization of Migration Controls on the Rights of Asylum Seekers and Other Migrants. *Journal on Migration and Human Security, 4(4),* pp. 190-220. doi: 10.1177/233150241600400402

Grub, I. (2017). The Emergence of the Temporary Migrant: Bureaucracies, Legality and Myanmar Migrants in Thailand. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, (32)(1),* pp. 1-35. doi: 10.1355/sj32-la

Hellwig, T. & Abdulkader, S. (2016). Different groups, different threats: public attitudes towards immigrants, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 43(3),* pp. 339-358. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1202749

Human Rights Watch. (2022). *Myanmar: Year of Brutality in Coup's Wake.* 28 January. [Press release]. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/28/myanmar-year-brutality-coups-wake (Accessed 9 May 2022).

International Labour Organization. (2021). *Thailand Decent Work Country Programme.* International Labour Organization, Bangkok, viewed 1 June 2021, available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_713808.pdf

International Organization of Migration Asia–Pacific Regional Data Hub. (2020). *Asia–Pacific Migration Data Report 2020.*

International Organization for Migration (IOM) Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, viewed 11 November 2021, available at https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/Asia-Pacific-Migration-%20Data-Report-2020.pdf

International Organization for Migration. (2019). *Debt and the migration experience: Insights from South-East Asia.* International Organization for Migration, Bangkok, viewed 29 November 2021, available at https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/debt_and_the_migration_experience_insights_from_south-east_asia_2.pdf

International Organization for Migration. (2020). *Flow monitoring survey: Insights into the profiles and vulnerabilities of Myanmar migrants to Thailand (Ranong-Kawthaung).* International Organization for Migration Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, viewed 11 November 2021, available at https://migration.iom.int/reports/thailand-%E2%80%94-covid-19-related-vulnerabilities-and-perceptions-non-thai-populations-thailand-0

International Organization for Migration. (2019). *Flow monitoring surveys: Insights into the profiles and vulnerabilities of Myanmar migrants to Thailand (round three).* International Organization for Migration, Bangkok, viewed 2 February 2022, available at https://dtm.iom.int/reports/thailand-%E2%80%94-flow-monitoring-surveys-insights-profiles-and-vulnerabilities-myanmar-migrants-1

Kranrattanasuit, N. & Sumarlan, Y. (2019). Restricted right to employment among refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia and its consequences, in Culture and International Law. In Hikmahanto Juwana, Dhiana Puspitawati, Mohd Hazmi Mohd Rusli and Jeffrey Thomas (Eds). London: CRC Press.

MAP Foundation. (2012). *Regular Rights: Do Documents Improve Migrants' Lives?* The MAP Foundation, Chiang Mai, viewed 18 May 2022. https://mapfoundation-cm.org/eng/index.php/works-wrapper/publications/regular-rights-do-documents-improve-migrants-lives-2012

MAP Foundation. (2015). *Study on the Impact of Regularization of Migrant Workers from Myanmar (Burma) in Thailand*. Second edition. Chiang Mai: MAP Foundation.

Mekong Migration Network. (2016). *Permanently Temporary: Examining the Impact of Social Exclusion on Mekong Migrants*. Mekong Migrant Network, viewed 3 May 2022. http://www.mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Permanently-Temporary-Eng-mmn-printed-version.pdf

Niyomsilpa, S. & Sunpuwan, M. (2012). Perception and Misperception: Thai Public Opinions on Refugees and Migrants from Myanmar. *Journal of Population and Social Studies, 21(1),* pp. 47-58. Available at: file:///C:/Users/OEM/Downloads/jpssadmin,+Journal+manager,+JPSS-vol21-No1-chap4%20(2).pdf

Pang, J. & Ramsay, J. (2015). Anti-Immigrant Prejudice in Rising East Asia: A Stereotype Content and Integrated Threat Analysis. *Political Psychology, 38(2),* pp. 227-244. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12312

Royal Thai Police Immigration Bureau. (2020). *Immigration Mission and Vision.* Available at: https://www.immigration.go.th/en/?page_id=1422 (Accessed: 31 October 2021).

Sen, A. (2009). *The idea of justice.* Oxford: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press.

The World Bank. (2017). *Migrating to Opportunity: Overcoming Barriers to Labour Mobility in Southeast Asia*. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/publication/migrating-to-opportunity-overcoming-barriers-to-labour-mobility-in-southeast-asia (Accessed: 20 November 2021).

The World Bank. (2021). *The World Bank in Thailand.* Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/overview#1 (Accessed: 15 November 2021).

United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand. (2019). *Thailand Migrant Report 2019.* United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, Bangkok.

8

COVID-19 IN THAILAND:

DOUBLE SECURITIZATIONS OF MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS

Naing Lin

Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Over the last three decades, the Thai government has consistently securitized Myanmar migrant workers as a potential threat to Thai society, to prevent transnational crime and the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS. After the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020, as Thailand suffered economic shrinkage and societal instability, the Thai government additionally viewed Myanmar migrant workers as vectors for the spread of COVID-19 and, thus, Myanmar migrant workers have become security targets for Thai government. Myanmar migrant workers thus experienced a double securitization as both migrant workers and vectors for COVID-19. This paper explores how the Thai government's securitization efforts during the COVID-19 outbreak affected Myanmar migrant workers. The article adopts securitization theory to focus on the securitizing actor, the Thai government. Some scholars have shown how political elites can use the securitization of outsiders to achieve their political ends. However, this article furthers this argument by showing how the securitization of minority groups exacerbates the human insecurities of the migrant minorities themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is one option for many people from developing countries to increase their income, gain better access to health and education and improve their life. Every year millions of people migrate internally and externally. Successful migration benefits not only migrants but also their family members and places of origin and destination in many respects. In addition, one's ability to move as one wishes is equal to having freedom of movement. However, not everyone can freely migrate, especially the unskilled, due to border restrictions and unwelcoming destination countries. Yet, they potentially fulfill labor demand in many low-skilled jobs such as agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and service sectors (UNDP, 2009). Many nations are oppressing international migration, perceiving migration as a security issue and an existential threat to national security and society (Bourbeau, 2011). This is the case for millions of Myanmar migrants in Thailand.

Thailand is a dynamic center for regional migration targeted by millions of Southeast Asian migrants, mainly from neighboring countries. According to the Thailand Migration Report 2019, about 4.9 million non-Thai residents were living in Thailand in 2019. About 3.9 million are migrant workers from Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, which make up 10 percent of the total labor force of 38.7 million in Thailand (Harkins, 2019).

Most migrant workers in Thailand are from Myanmar, about 87 percent or 2.7 million (Ayuttacorn et al., 2019). Most of them enter Thailand through two major Northern Thai border towns, Mae Sot in Tak province, Mae Sai in Chiang Rai province, and some through Ranong Province in southern Thailand (Myat, 2010). Due to ongoing conflicts in Myanmar, especially the fighting between the Burmese military and various ethnic armed groups, Myanmar migrant workers are increasingly entering Thailand through legal and illegal channels (Ling et al., 2018). Most migrant workers in Thailand work in low-skilled jobs such as construction, domestic, fishing, agriculture, and other service sectors (Tipayalai, 2020). The majority uses irregular channels to enter Thailand or become illegal after entering due to the expensive, laborious and complicated process of obtaining legal documents in Thailand (Khai, 2012). An estimated 2 to 3 million illegal migrants live and work in Thailand (Tipayalai, 2020).

Thailand's economic boom from 1987 to 1996 increased the wage differential with its neighbors and attracted millions of migrant workers to enter and work in Thailand (Harkins, 2019). Many migrant workers began to flood Thailand in 1988 due to political instability in Myanmar. Paitoonpong (2013) pointed out that migrant workers contribute approximately 760 million Baht annually to the national income. Although migrant workers contribute to the Thai economy and society, the Thai government sees them as threats to the nation. It has been securitizing them for decades, especially in the late 1990s when Thailand encountered an influx of illegal migrants across borders amidst a rapidly increased unemployment rate (Toyota, 2006).

As this paper will show, during the pandemic, the Thai government securitized them as both migrant workers and vectors of Covid-19. Therefore, these migrant workers encountered socioeconomic insecurities and social exclusion during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, they have long been affected by the securitization of immigration carried out by the Thai government.

As with countries worldwide, Thailand suffered from the Covid-19 outbreaks socially and economically. In Thailand the first outbreak of Covid-19 began in Bangkok from January to March 2020. As the capital city of Thailand, this is the center for international inbound arrivals, tourism, and sporting events (Leerapan et al., 2021). Thailand encountered the second Covid-19 wave, said to have started in migrant communities in Samut Sakorn province, in December 2020, and the third wave in April 2021. Indeed, the third wave of Covid-19 infections dramatically increased, with an average of over 10,000 reported cases daily. In August, the numbers reached 23,000 cases to over one million. Thailand came to the top of Asia's intensive Covid-19 outbreak countries (ILO, 2021). As of WHO Thailand's Weekly report on 2 March 2022, there were more than 4.5 million Covid-19 infected cases and 30,634 deaths caused by Covid-19 (WHO Thailand, 2022). Due to dramatically increased numbers of Covid-19 infections and causes of deaths from different waves of the Covid-19 pandemic across Thailand, the Thai government has imposed different restrictive measurement policies since early 2020. As a result, hundreds of thousands of low-income workers suffer the most socioeconomically from both Covid-19 and its measures (Leerapan et al., 2021).

This paper explores the following questions: How has the Thai government historically securitized Myanmar migrants? How has their double securitization during the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected their livelihoods? I employ securitization theory to explain the Thai context, portraying the Thai government as a securitizing actor and Myanmar migrant workers as the object of securitization (i.e., the existential threat or security issue). The Thai government aims to prevent transnational crimes and the spread of disease. However, for the securitization narrative to succeed, it must involve a qualified audience.

In terms of methodology, this paper is mainly based on secondary data, including journal articles, books, reports, news articles and internet sources, to discuss and analyze the theoretical concept of securitization and the empirical context of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand. I will first explain securitization theory and the issues of securitization theory in the Thai context. Then, I discuss the Thai government's securitization of Myanmar migrants and its impact on their human security. I analyze the Thai government's double securitization of migration and the Covid-19 pandemic and highlight how these impact their livelihood securities during Covid-19 pandemic.

SECURITIZATION THEORY IN THE LITERATURE

Securitization theory specifies the process and framework by which an issue becomes a security issue. An empirical study of securitization would need to identify three elements: a securitizing actor, a securitizing move, and the act of creating the conditions for audience acceptance (Stritzel & Chang, 2015, p. 550). In this sense, it can be assumed that securitization is a linear process that has to go step by step.

Salter (2008) asserts that the securitization process remains unchanging. The actors characterize the existential threat and convince the audience to accept the identified threat as a security issue urgently needing resolution. Collins (2005) characterized the securitization process in three steps. First, the actor must express and specify the existence of a threat posed to a specific 'vulnerable' referent. In this case, the threat is posed as requiring securitization with audience acceptance. The elite's interpretation of some issue as a security matter can involve securitization only when and if their audience adopts the notion of a

dangerous threat that must be addressed. The last stage involves mobilizing resources to overcome the threat by adopting extraordinary measures as a response (Collins, 2005).

Indeed, securitization is the act of justifying security concerns. It has been argued that in the context of national security, securitizing acts such as suspension of political rights, conscription of young men, imposing censorship, and deportation of immigrants are justified in the name of security concerns within domestic territory. Nevertheless, these justifications based on security concerns require deploying various extraordinary or exceptional measures beyond normal political boundaries (Zedner, 2003). Buzan et al. (1998) describe security as "the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics" (p. 23). This extremely politicizing act to justify security concerns is characterized as securitization. Thus, the securitizing process of existential threats is extremely politicized (Buzan et al., 1998).

The securitizing process is complex, involving diverse securitizing actors and audiences with various powers to shape and reshape it. According to Bourbeau (2014), the actors involved in the securitization process may be security professionals or elites and other actors such as religious leaders, NGO members and media actors (Bourbeau, 2014). However, political elites assert the most power (Dela Cruz et al., 2022). The audiences are typically from the public, but sometimes audiences can be from the government, NGOs or local elites we well. The audience plays an active role in the securitization process and can shape the values of constructing security intersubjectively (Côté, 2016; Dela Cruz et al., 2022). For example, Dela Cruz et al. (2022) show how protestors, considered audiences in the eyes of the government, have successfully challenged their government's securitization of the Covid-19 pandemic by demanding democracy and freedom of expression and claiming that Covid-19 is less scary than not having political freedom (Dela Cruz et al., 2022). Côté (2016) noted that intersubjectivity is part of the securitization process, manifesting as shared beliefs, collective values, norms, meanings, and identities formed by social interaction. In this sense, the securitization process must have gone through intersubjective acts to form a shared perspective on threats among social groups so that these can be securitized (Côté, 2016). In this case, securitization cannot be

performed by securitizing actors or audiences alone but represents an intersubjective and collective decision-making process.

The securitization process is exceptional and politically routinized. It is exceptional because the rules and regulations are beyond everyday politics. In addition, the securitization process is politically routinized patterns. In this sense, security professionals and bureaucrats organize the securitization process as a collaborative practice of political routine and pattern. By borrowing the concepts of governmentality from Foucault and the concept of practice from Bourdieu, Bourbeau stated that securitization is a governing technology for the political elites. These two rationales of exception and routine coexist, and each prevails in the securitization process as an incomplete process. These two incomplete rationales appear in multi-dimensional forms of their nature of changing and repeating identifying actors and perceiving the securitization process by the audience (Bourbeau, 2014).

Similarly, Salter (2008) explained securitization as a repetitive political action process rather than just a simple decision-making process between speaker and audience in a particular moment. Behind the securitization effort is a 'securitizing move' that, whether accepted or rejected by the targeted audience, depends on the speaker, the audience, and what is being heard. For a threat to become a national security issue depends on the threat, the perception of state receivers on that threat and the seriousness of the threat imposed on society (Salter, 2008, p. 323). In other words, Roe (2004) pointed out that security is defined as a speech act, and it is not something real out there waiting to be uncovered. Iterating security becomes a securitizing act that moves towards a threatening situation or objects claimed as a security issue. An actor claims special rights to use emergency or extraordinary measures to address the issue because if an issue is not solved now, the threat will overwhelm and become irresistible. Once iterating security issue becomes successful, that issue is securitized, often by the state actors.

The success of securitization has been argued differently among scholars. For instance, Roe (2004) insisted that successful securitization depends on gaining audience acceptance. Without audience accepting the issue as a security matter, the act of securitizing remains ineffective even if a securitizing actor tries to call for resonance and obtain

legitimacy to carry out emergency measures in securitizing an issue (Roe, 2004). On the other hand, Salter (2008) noted that successful securitization depends on certain conditions, including linguistic acts, the securitizing actor's authority and the relationship between actor and audience, whether the audience is likely to accept the securitizing effort and the character of the defined threats to the securitization process (Salter, 2008, p. 323). However, whether securitization's success depends on the audience alone, or different conditions of securitizing actors and audience, its consequences have a price for others that are considered as a threat even if they may not be.

The securitization process thus creates a contradiction between 'us' and 'them' or 'others.' Others, in this sense, refer to enemies, existential threats posed to 'us.' This legitimizes the Thai government deploying draconian exceptional emergency measures that set aside standard political rules and regulations and handle the enemy oppressively (Collins, 2005, p. 571). Furthermore, securitization may typically involve demarcating the inside from the outside. In other words, it secures us against enemies (others). It is also used as a governmental guiding principal technique to define how a community should conduct an appropriate way of life with justice on its terms (Roe, 2004). Likewise, Baldwin (1997) notes that the attempt to pursue one's security can sometimes, if not always, generate insecurity for others since each state is competing for its security. As a result of competition, there must be a winner or loser.

In this sense, the achievement of security of the winning state simultaneously creates insecurity in others. The effort of enhancing one's security that can affect the security of others is called a 'security dilemma' (Baldwin, 1997). In this case, pursuing one's security can simultaneously cause insecurity of others and demarcates two opponents who threaten each other. Then, the securitization process is not as simple as mentioned previously. The actor conveys a speech act by specifying an existential threat and convinces the audience to accept his or her proposal. Once the securitizing act is accepted, emergency measures are deployed, and the threat becomes real.

Even if a threat is perceived and securitized by using extraordinary measures, this does not mean the threat permanently disappears.

Instead, suppose the threat refers to a particular group of human or individual agents. In that case, they (whom to be considered a threat) are reversely threatened by the processes and acts of securitization.

The Thai government's securitization of Myanmar migrants in and of itself threatens their livelihood and human security because of their portrayal as threats to Thailand's national security and its people as shown below.

THAILAND'S SECURITIZATION OF MYANMAR IMMIGRANTS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON MYANMAR MIGRANTS

In general, most states perceive migration as a threat to national security and the political and social stability of the nation. Indeed, Song (2015) demonstrated how different International Relations (IR) theorists explain migration from different perspectives regarding security concerns. For instance, based on the realist perspective, migration is perceived not only as a potential threat to national security and sovereignty but also as impacting power balancing among states, engendering conflicts between and within states as well as controversy in the international system. On the other hand, from a liberalist perspective, the threats exposed by migration can be ruled and regulated by international laws and institutions. Therefore, national borders should not be restricted to the mobility of labor and the liberty of individuals so that they can create space for free markets.

While realists view migration as a threat, liberalists think this can be controlled. Critical theorists view fear of threats and insecurity posed by migration as an illusion that has become part of political and bureaucratic practices of everyday life generated by nationalist politicians, conservative media, public xenophobia, and security professionals (Song, 2015). Bourbeau (2011) also asserted that the object of securitization is not the movement of people but the phenomenology of migration, especially illegal migration and refugees. In this case, the way the Myanmar illegal migrant or refugee becomes the securitizing object is sustained by a shared perspective of a particular kind.

The national security concern underpins the Thai government's securitization of Myanmar migrants. The Secretariat of the National

Security Council (SNSC) is one of the vital securitizing actors that deals with migration issues as one of the core national organizations influenced by the Prime Minister's Office. In their eyes, illegal migrant workers are existential threats to Thailand's national security, social stability (Sevilla & Chalamwong, 1996), and national integration of Thai society. They are vectors of disease, criminals, and stateless people (Toyota, 2006) that undermine Thai culture or society (Bhula-or, 2019). Notably, illegal Myanmar migrants are negatively portrayed as causing crime and bringing infectious diseases such as AIDS, Malaria, and Elephantiasis, thus burdening the public health service sector (Sevilla & Chalamwong, 1996). Thus, Myanmar migrants have been existential threats to the Thai nation and its society and the object of securitization by the Thai government.

Thailand's immigration policies in managing and controlling migration are the critical mechanism for the securitization of immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants from Myanmar. This has led to regularizing of undocumented immigrants by establishing two primary Thai immigration laws, the Foreign Employment Act of 1978 and the Immigration Act of 1979 (Chantavanich, 2007; Khai, 2012).

Under the Immigration Act of 1979, anyone who came to live in Thailand without Thai authority's recognition or without holding legal documents will be punished by imprisonment of no more than two years or a fine of up to 20,000 Baht. So, the Thai government understands Burmese migrants or refugees as illegal aliens (Seltzer, 2013). According to Foreign Employment Act, migrant workers are only allowed to work in certain types of work specified by laws, so the jobs they can do are limited. The regulation also requires an indication of the location and duration of their work. Under immigration policy, investigators are authorized to inspect anyone they suspect is an undocumented migrant worker without having court warrants for investigation. Migrant workers found to be undocumented would receive criminal penalties and imprisonment for up to 5 years (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Indeed, the intensive process of securitization on migrant workers began in the 1990s when a rapidly growing number of undocumented migrant workers from its neighboring countries, especially from Myanmar, entered Thailand. Thai government began to be concerned

about this significant movement of illegal migrants as a security matter for Thailand. Coincidentally, Thailand was experiencing the 1997 Asian financial crisis. As a result, Thailand encountered a sharp increase in the unemployment rate from 1.5 to 4.1 per cent from 1997 to 1998. According to Toyota (2006), Thailand's unemployment rate in 1998 accounted for about 70 per cent of illegal migrant workers. So, the Thai government reinforced immigration policies and control over the movement of illegal migrants as threats to the well-being of the Thai nation and its labor market.

After declaring an emergency, the Thai government arrested and deported over one million illegal migrants between 1998 and 2000 (Toyota, 2006). The securitization process the Thai government carried out at that time targeted not only illegal immigrants but also marginalized minorities from upland areas of the Thai-Myanmar border who lacked Thai citizenship and had been targeted since the 1950s and 1960s in the early process of the nation-building process (Sevilla & Chalamwong, 1996; Toyota, 2006). However, the emergency measures toward undocumented immigrants does not stop them from entering. nor eliminate those already in Thailand. Many have gone through irregular channels or dodged the police officials who seek to arrest and deport them (Toyota, 2006).

The factors also come from business groups and industrial sectors in Thailand, with significant demand for cheap and unskilled labor to fill the continuing labor shortage. So, they have pressured the government to allow illegal cheap migrant workers from neighboring countries (Chantavanich, 2007; Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010). Thus, the Thai government has allowed illegal migrant workers to work in Thailand legally to benefit Thai industries from cheap labor while also creating revenue for the government from registration fees (Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010). The Thai government does not want immigrant workers to stay in Thailand permanently and wants them to return to their homes once their work permits expire. So, the government relies on ad hoc mechanism, known as Cabinet resolution, to manage the immigrant population. The Thai government has also attempted to open registration at different periods to encourage illegal migrants staying inside Thailand to register (Khai, 2012). In 1992, the Thai government first initiated the development of an immigration policy undertaken by two leading policymakers: the

Ministry of Interior and the National Security Council (NSC). The policy was established due to pressure from business groups that demanded the government allow unskilled migrant workers to fill the labor gap shortage (Chantavanich, 2007). In addition, the Thai government also established national verification (NV) and signed the Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with the governments of Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia in 2002 and 2003 for labor cooperation and development of managing and controlling illegal migrants (Khai, 2012). This shows how Thai businesses (the "audience" of the Thai securitizing government) have successfully opposed securitizing acts placed on illegal immigrants since they threatened business interests.

In addition, Thailand's legalization of illegal immigrants has never been efficient due to the complexity and difficulties of the legal process, including the high registration fee, the time-consuming legal documentation process, inconsistency and lack of continuity of registration measures over time, the ineffectiveness of registration mandates, the weakness in the government's capacity to deal with illegal migrants and the corruption of government officials. In addition, migrants are often unaware of the registration process in the past and even partially in the present due to inadequate information (Paitoonpong, 2013). Thus, many illegal migrant workers remain staying and working in Thailand. As a result, the Thai government continues to face the challenges of managing and controlling the movement of immigrants across Thailand. At the same time, this securitization of immigrants, under the name of crime and disease prevention and control for the sake of Thai national security and the safety of Thai society, has engendered human insecurities for many Myanmar migrants in Thailand.

Because the Thai government securitized immigration, hundreds of thousands of Myanmar migrants, especially undocumented immigrants, have encountered insecurities while attempting to enter Thailand illegally or living and working in Thailand illegally. Indeed, being illegal in Thailand, many Myanmar migrants are at risk and vulnerable to arrest and deportation by Thai authorities. It is often the case that they are also at risk of being exploited, abused, or extorted by brokers, employers, and some Thai officials. In addition, they are also vulnerable to deception and human trafficking (Khai, 2012; Harkins, 2019). For instance, since many Myanmar migrants and refugees outside the camps have never

been legalized, they are often sent to the Thai Immigration Detention Center or deported back to Myanmar whenever arrested.

In some cases, they can be released by paying large bribes to officials. Because many fear deportation to Myanmar, they usually find any conceivable way to continue to stay in Thailand at any cost or risk of being trafficked, abused or exploited. Meanwhile, Immigration officials usually are cooperating with factories. They asked factory owners if migrant workers demanded higher salaries so factory owners would tell the police or Immigration officers to arrest and deport them back to Myanmar. As a result, Myanmar illegal refugees or migrants become vulnerable to exploitation, and they would tolerate any victimization or maltreatment (Seltzer, 2013). Indeed, these migrant workers continue to experience severe vulnerability and insecurities during the Covid-19 pandemic, as seen in the next section.

SECURITIZATION OF COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON MYANMAR MIGRANTS IN THAILAND

Before exploring how the Thai government's securitization of Covid-19 and migrant workers affected Myanmar migrant workers, it is crucial to understand how successive Covid-19 waves infected Thailand. Thailand has experienced social and economic hardship from different waves of the Covid-19 crisis and the government's response. The first wave of infections began in boxing centers and nightclubs in Bangkok and spread across sixty-eight provinces in Thailand. In the first wave, the highest number of infected cases was below 200 in March, but the numbers increased to 3042 cases and fifty-seven deaths by 25 May 2020. The second wave was allegedly transmitted from migrant communities in Samut Sakhon province in Southern Thailand. Most migrants are from Myanmar and work in seafood markets and factories. The pandemic is said to have spread from these migrant workers in the seafood markets to over half of the provinces.

However, some believe that the initial cases spread in the second wave were among some Thai workers who worked in entertainment sectors in a northern state of Myanmar and returned to Thailand with infections when state quarantine officers caught up with them. So, the virus they brought has spread across northern provinces in Thailand. The

infected cases increased sharply, with 21,584 cases just in two and half months from the early third week of December 2020 and the last week of February 2021 (Rajatanavin et al., 2021). Again, Thailand encountered a third wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in April 2021. Covid-19 infections in Thailand have dramatically increased this time, averaging over 10,000 reported cases daily. In August, the numbers reached 23,000 cases per day, with cumulative numbers of over one million (ILO, 2021). Indeed, more than 61 per cent of those infected during the third wave were Myanmar migrant workers, accounting for 24,532 infections nationwide (Khemanitthathai, 2021).

Since early 2020, Thailand has recognized the Covid-19 pandemic as a non-tradition security issue that poses a fatal threat to national security and devastates the lives of the people and the economy in Thailand (Ganjanakhundee, 2020). On 26 March, the Thai government announced the declaration and enforcement of the State Emergency law after rapidly increased numbers of Covid-19 infected cases were detected in Bangkok (Leerapan et al., 2021; Marome & Shaw, 2021; Rajatanavin, 2021). The Thai government has exercised special powers under the 2005 Royal Decree on the Administration of Emergency Situations, which legitimizes the government's deployment of emergency rules to combat the Covid-19 pandemic (Ganjanakhundee, 2020). This emergency law led to the lockdowns of cities, including closures of schools, stores, restaurants and entertainment centers, social distancing and gathering in public places, and even imposed 'stay home policy' to prevent the spread of new Covid-19 cases (Leerapan et al., 2021; Rajatanavin et al., 2021). In April 2021, the government imposed that all people across 63 of 77 provinces in Thailand wear masks in public places. Anyone caught not wearing a mask in public places would be fined 20,000 baht (Dela Cruz et al., 2022).

In July 2021, the government again imposed containment measures, banning travel across provinces, imposing a curfew at night from 9 pm to 4 am and restricting restaurants to serve only takeaway services and shopping malls to close. Again, in August, the government classified the 'Red zones' for those provinces that needed maximum enforcement of Covid-19 control. The government also initiated Factory Sandbox to prevent closures of the essential factories that operate export processes and manufacturing goods such as food, cars, medical equipment, and

electronic stuff. The idea of sandbox, as it was also applied by tourist industry in Phuket, is to keep the business running under containment or control by the government policy without having contacted with public communities so that Covid-19 cannot be spread from inside to outside nor outside to inside the sandbox. To do this, the government proposed that businesses nationwide establish factory accommodation to contain the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak within those places under the approach called 'bubble and seal'. However, for factories to join this program, they must have at least five hundred employees and isolation and social distancing facilities (ILO, 2021).

Migrant workers were also under the control of the Thailand government as the second Covid-19 wave spread largely from migrant communities in Samut Sakhon province. So, the government controlled and limited the movement of migrant workers in living places and workplaces and also traveling across provinces in Thailand (Khemanitthathai, 2021). According to Pross (2021), Thai government officials made decision to contain over 40 000 Myanmar migrant workers in their living places for the purpose of to preventing the spread of Covid-19 infections (Pross, 2021). This policy of controlling the migrant population is associated with discrimination against and exclusively enforcing migrant workers in Thailand (Khemanitthathai, 2021).

Even though, in this case, the object of securitization or existential threat is targeted on the Covid-19 pandemic, Myanmar migrant workers are still historically seen as threats to Thai society in the sense that they are said to spread Covid-19 to Thailand. At the same time, they are also part of the audience to the securitization of the Covid-19 pandemic carried out by the Thai government, the securitizing actor. As a result of this double securitization, many Myanmar migrant workers encountered severe social and economic impacts during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Although, in general, most people, if not all, have been affected by different waves of Covid-19 outbreaks in Thailand and the Thai government's Covid-19 measures, the severe impact mostly has fallen on low-incomers, minorities, and marginalized groups, including migrant workers who are socioeconomically vulnerable. Both pandemic and government response have caused many people to lose their jobs because their workplaces have been forced to close and the shutdown

of businesses in many sectors (Leerapan et al., 2021). The numbers of unemployment have increased among migrant workers. Some must work and get paid on a daily basis. Those who worked in factories had their salaries cut off. Sometimes their work has been canceled by their employers. If their employers faced a business shutdown or downside, migrant workers were asked to quit their jobs. Thus, many have experienced a decrease of income during the Covid-19 pandemic (Khemanitthathai, 2021). For instance, Engblom et al. (2020) estimated that about 8.4 million workers are likely to lose their jobs. Among these numbers, migrant workers most risk losing their jobs. For example, an estimated 700,000 migrant workers have lost their jobs since the beginning of the lockdowns in March 2020.

After the lockdown, tens of thousands of migrant workers suddenly lost their jobs and returned to their homes from Thailand. Businesses, schools and universities were closed, restrictions were imposed on travel and foreign entries into Thailand, a curfew across the country, and 14-day quarantine and expiration of work permits. From March to June 2020, approximately 310,000 migrant workers from three countries returned home, while many remained in Thailand due to the closing of the borders. Nevertheless, it was not easy for migrant workers to go back home as they wished because both the governments of Thailand and from three countries did not prepare for those sudden returnees. Thus, migrant workers have encountered tricky situations since it was difficult to find new jobs and neither possible to return home nor to continue living in Thailand (Engblom et al., 2020).

In addition, many migrants have also experienced living and working in high-risk workplaces and dormitories during the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many migrant workers were forced to live in crowded dormitories with shared bathrooms as they became jobless and expected to stay in quarantine. However, in these places it was impossible for them to keep social distancing (Khemanitthathai, 2021). In the case of migrant workers in Samut Sakhon and Phuket, they faced limited access to clean sanitation and water while living in crowded and slum areas with very few facilities (Poss, 2021). Thus, many low-risk people experienced additional risk because they had to live with high-risk people in the dormitories. As a result, infections rapidly spread from these migrant communities across Thailand

(Khemanitthathai, 2021). At the same time, the migrant workers did not have adequate access to social assistance programs in Thailand. Although they have the same right to access social security as Thai nationals, they are excluded from those social benefits, especially informal and irregular migrant workers (Engblom et al., 2020).

According to Khemanitthathai (2021), migrant workers did not have access to vaccines in the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. They only gained access from early 2021 onwards, after the second wave of Covid-19 was reported to have spread from migrant communities. The Thai government's Covid-19 vaccination policy only allowed legal migrants access to under Section 33 of the Social Security Act. According to the data, the total number of vaccinations among immigrants from late February to November 2021 was about 1,294,666 (Khemanitthathai, 2021). However, these numbers were still low as there are over three million migrant workers in Thailand.

Moreover, Myanmar migrant workers have faced stereotyping and discrimination. They have been criticized and stereotyped as spreading Covid-19 to the Thai people. Having said that, some local medicine shops did not sell medicines to children of Myanmar migrant workers. The negative opinion and violence from Thai nationals against Myanmar migrant workers could be observed across the media. For instance, it is stated that "media also reproduced the otherness of migrant workers through discourses that portrayed Myanmar people as foes who threaten Thailand's security by bringing COVID-19 into the country". (Khemanitthathai, 2021). This evidence can be relevant to one of the securitizing acts that propose or convince the public that Myanmar migrant workers are an existential threat to Thai national security and society.

In response to Covid-19 infections, the Thai Government created a policy to provide financial support of 1.9 trillion baht or 59.7 billion US dollars to businesses and people affected by Covid-19 under three central emergency decrees undertaken by the Ministry of Finance. The Cabinet approved to increase in funding from 45 billion to 240 billion baht in April to provide cash benefit to 16 million people who were affected by Covid-19 but outside the social security program. They could apply for 5000 baht monthly for three months. In addition,

the Cabinet also provided financial support of 150 million baht to ten million farmers affected by Covid-19, so each farmer was entitled to receive 5,000 baht per month from May to July 2020. However, these benefits were only eligible for those with a 13-digit national identity card, meaning migrant workers are excluded from these financial benefits (Engblom et al., 2020). Especially low-skilled and undocumented migrant workers were excluded from social protection, although their livelihoods have been immensely affected by the outbreak of Covid-19 and the government's response to Covid-19 (Sophea, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The doubling of Myanmar migrant worker securitization during the Covid-19 pandemic has done little to prevent crime, the spread of Covid, or to preserve Thailand's socioeconomic and political stability, nor has it stopped migrants from entering Thailand legally or illegally. However, it dramatically intensified Myanmar migrant livelihood and human insecurities just as the country succumbed to a military coup when needs were the greatest. Already marginalized, excluded, and discriminated against in Thai society due to the securitization of immigrants, they continued to suffer the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Myanmar migrant workers further lost their security due to the double securitization process of them as migrant workers and as vectors of Covid-19. Due to the government's response, many are further marginalized and excluded, with no place to call home, even in their own country, which makes them even more vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic.

REFERENCES

Ayuttacorn, A., Tangmunkongvorakul, A. Musumari, P. M., Srithanavilboonchai, Jirattikorn, A. & Aurpibul, L. (2019). Disclosure of HIV status among Shan female migrant workers living with HIV in Northern Thailand: A qualitative study. *PLOS ONE 14*(5), 1-17.

Ayuwat, D. & Meekaew, N. (2020). Livelihoods and Food Security of the Migrant Households in the rural community of the Lower-northeastern Region of Thailand. *Systematic Reviews in Pharmacy, 11*(6), 1311-1319.

Baldwin, D. A. (1997). The concept of security. *Review of international studies*, *23*(1), 5-26.

Bhula-or, R. (2019). Migration and sustainable development in Thailand. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, *10*(1), 83-94.

Bourbeau, P. (2011). *The Securitization of Migration: A study of movement and order*. London: Routledge.

Bourbeau, P. (2014). Moving Forward Together: Logics of the Securitization Process Millennium. *Journal of International Studies, 43*(1), 187-206.

Buzan, B. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Collins, A. (2005). Securitization, Frankenstein's Monster and Malaysian education. *The Pacific Review, 18*(4), 567-588.

Côté, A. (2016). Agents without agency: assessing the role of the audience in securitization theory. *Security Dialogue, 47*(6), 541-558.

Chantavanich, S. (2007). *Thailand policies towards migrant workers from Myanmar.* Asian Research Center for Migration (ARCM), Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

Dela Cruz, A. G., Chu, T., Lee, S. J. & Nithimasarad, C. (2022). Explaining Thailand's Politicised COVID-19 Containment Strategies: Securitization, Counter-Securitization, and Re-Securitization. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1-21.

Engblom, A. Lephilibert, N. & Baruah, N. (2020). *COVID-19: Impact on migrant workers and country response in Thailand.* International Labour Organization. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741920.pdf

Ganjanakhundee, S. (2020). Covid-19 in Thailand: The Securitization of a Non-traditional Threat. *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute,* (51), 2335-6677.

Harkins, B. (2019). *Thailand Migration Report 2019* (Ed). United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand.

Retrieved from https://www.aidsdatahub.org/sites/default/files/resource/un-thailand-migration-report-2019.pdf

Human Rights Watch. (2010). *From the Tiger to the Crocodile: Abuse of Migrant Workers in Thailand.* Human Rights Watch. Retrieve from https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/thailand 0210_insert_low.pdf

ILO. (2021). *TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note.* Australia Aid. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/genericdocument/wcms_735106.pdf

Khai, K. S. (2012). Thailand's Policy towards Irregular Migration: Situation Analysis of Burmese Migrant Workers under Thailand's Migration Policy. *MFU Connexion: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *1*(1), 1-25.

Khemanitthathai, S. (2021). *Situation on Migrant Workers and Border Crossing During the Covid-19 Pandemic.* Migrant Working Group. Retrieved from https://mwgthailand.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Situation%20on%20Migrant%20Workers%20and%20border%20crossing%20During%20the%20covid19%20pandemic.pdf

Kusakabe, K. & Pearson, R. (2010). Transborder Migration, Social Reproduction and Economic Development: A Case Study of Burmese Women Workers in Thailand. *International Migration, 4*8(6), 0020-7985.

Leerapan, B., Kaewkamjornchai, P., Atun, R., & Jalali, M. S. (2021). How systems respond to policies: intended and unintended consequences of COVID-19 lockdown policies in Thailand. *Health Policy and Planning, 0*(0), 1-2.

Ling, C. M., Pardthaisong, L. & Huyakorn, Y. C. (2018). The Smart City-A City for All: Improving Migrant Workers' Perception of Smart Governance through Inclusion. *Political Science and Public Administration Journal, 9*(2), 157-186.

Marome, W. & Shaw, R. (2021). COVID-19 Response in Thailand and Its Implications on Future Preparedness. *International Environmental Research and Public Health 18*(3): 1089.

Myat, M. (2010). Burmese labour migration into Thailand: governance of migration and labour rights. *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy, 15*(1), 33-44.

Paitoonpong, S. (2013). Managing International Labor Migration in ASEAN: Thailand (Immigration) in Michael M. A. et al. (editors), *Special Volume of International Labour Migration*: 163-197.

Pross, C. (2021). *Migrant workers in times of Covid-19: An empathetic disaster response for Myanmar workers in Thailand.* Stockholm Environment Institute. Retrieved from https://www.sei.org/perspectives/migrant-workers-covid-disaster-response/

Rajatanavin, N., Tuangratananon, T., Suphanchaimat, R. & Tangcharoensathien, V. (2021). Responding to the COVID-19 second wave in Thailand by diversifying and adapting lessons from the first wave. *BMJ Global Health, 6*(7), 1-9.

Roe, P. (2004). Securitization and Minority Rights: Conditions of Desecuritization *Security Dialogue, 34*(3), 279-294.

Salter, M. B. (2008). Securitization and Desecuritization: a Dramaturgical Analysis of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority. *Journal of International Relations and Development, 11*, 321–349.

Seltzer, A. (2013). Human trafficking: the case of Burmese refugees in Thailand. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justi*ce, *37*(4), 279-293.

Sevilla, R. C. & Chalamwong, Y. (1996). Dilemmas of Rapid Growth: A Preliminary Evaluation of the Policy Implications of Illegal Migration in Thailand. *TDRI Quarterly Review*, 11(2), 16-24.

Song, J. (2015). Redefining Human Security for Vulnerable Migrants in East Asia. *Journal of Human Security, 11*(1), 45-56.

Sophea T. (2021). Rethinking social protection programs: Cambodian migrant workers deserve better. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/rethinking-social-protec-tion-programs-cambodian-migrant-workers-deserve-bet-ter/?__FB_PRIVATE_TRACKING__=%7B%22loggedout_browser_id%22%3A%22e02e16eb6b07019218ddc-

c33557264a36dd88fba%22%7D&fbclid=IwAR35ovambki7Flj7
1UziUkuEsdJRYPFce2A0v4BBgrRkNJYC--8pNWbNXd0

Stritzel, H. & Chang, S. C. (2015). Securitization and counter-securiti-
zation in Afghanistan, *Security Dialogue, 46*(6), 548-567.

Tipayalai, K. (2020). Impact of international labor migration on re-
gional economic growth in Thailand. Journal of *Economic
Structures, 9*(1), 15.

Toyota, M. (2006). *Securitizing border-crossing: The case of marginal-
ized stateless minorities in the Thai-Burma Borderlands*. Institute
of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological
University. Singapore.

UNDP. (2009). *Human Development Report 2009 Overcoming
Barriers: Human Mobility and development*. New York: Palgrave
Macmillan.

WHO Thailand. (2022). *COVID-19 Situation, Thailand 29 June 2022*.
WHO Thailand Weekly. Retrieved from https://cdn.who.int/
media/docs/default-source/searo/thailand/2022_06_29_tha-
sitrep-241-covid-19.pdf

Zedner, L. (2003). The concept of security: an agenda for comparative
analysis. *Legal studies, 23*(1), 153-176.

9

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT ON VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN PERIPHERAL AREAS OF AYEYARWADY AND YANGON REGIONS

Aung Kyaw Thein

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Climate Change

Climate change is affecting people globally, and the risks are growing. Millions of children are already affected by climate change worldwide, posing significant threats to their health, nutrition, education, and future. Children are less able to survive extreme weather events and are more vulnerable to temperature changes, toxic chemicals and diseases. Save the Children estimates that 710 million children live in 45 countries at the highest risk of suffering the impact of climate change (Save the Children, 2021). Floods, droughts, hurricanes and other extreme weather events impact vulnerable children and their families. Myanmar is one of the world's most disaster-prone countries, exposed

to multiple hazards, including floods, cyclones, earthquakes, land-slides and droughts (World Bank, 2020). Globally, there is a gradual increase in the average temperature of the Earth's atmosphere because heat is trapped in the atmosphere and not radiated out to space, resulting in global warming. Human activities are responsible for almost all of the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere over the last 150 years (IPCC, 2021). One of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions from human activities is burning fossil fuels for electricity, heat, and transportation.

The Earth's atmosphere has always acted like a greenhouse to regulate the temperature fundamental for the survival of most living beings, including humans. However, today, the Earth's temperature is rising faster than ever while ocean warming is accelerating faster than expected as heat is trapped in our atmosphere (Louis, 2019). Increasing temperature is causing the ocean to evaporate and destabilize, intensifying heavier winds and storms and making glaciers and icebergs melt, raising sea levels. All these factors are contributing to global climate change. The change in wind patterns affects the monsoons in Asia, and rain and snow worldwide, causing droughts and other unpredictable weather events (Chowdary et al., 2019).

The climate change index of NASA (2019) provides the following evidence of climate change globally:

NASA states that the earth stores 90% of the extra energy in the ocean since it has absorbed much of this increased heat, with the top 100 meters (about 328 feet) of the ocean warming by more than 0.6 degrees Fahrenheit (0.33 degrees Celsius) since 1969.

At the same time, NASA's Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment Index reveals that Greenland lost an average of 279 billion tons of ice annually between 1993 and 2019, while Antarctica lost about 148 billion tons of ice annually.

The data also show that glaciers are retreating almost everywhere worldwide, including in the Alps, Himalayas, Andes, Rockies, Alaska, and Africa. Global sea level rose about 8 inches (20 centimetres) in the last century.

In the United States, the number of record high-temperature events has been increasing while the number of recorded low-temperature events has decreased since 1950.

This means that we must pay more attention to climate change as a significant global concern. The current warming trend is of particular significance, due to human activity since the mid-20th century, and is proceeding at an alarming and unprecedented rate. It has far-reaching effects on humans and the environment, including increased hunger and water crises, threats to livelihoods from floods and forest fires, and higher health risks due to the increased frequency and intensity of heat extremes, especially in developing countries (IPCC, 2021).

Vulnerability
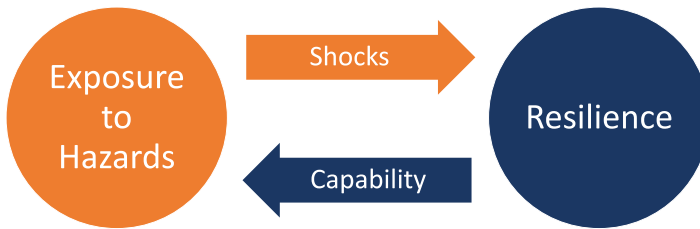
'Vulnerability' refers to a degree of defenselessness against hazards. From a climate change perspective, vulnerability can be defined as the 'propensity or predisposition' to be adversely affected by climatic risks and other stressors, which emerge from the intersection of inequalities and uneven power structures (Quintão et al., 2017).

Figure 21 shows that vulnerability depends on the level of exposure to shocks, such as extreme and non-extreme weather and climate events, in relation to the level of resilience based on capability. Higher exposure to the severity of shocks with a low level of resilience tends to increase the level of vulnerability, while an increased level of resilience with lower exposure to hazards can decrease the level of vulnerability. Therefore, trends in resilience and exposure to hazards are significant drivers of changes in disaster risks.

Myanmar's Context

Myanmar is facing several natural hazards, including extreme temperatures, drought, cyclones, flooding and storm surge, heavy rainfall events, deforestation and infectious diseases. As shown in Figure 22 below, Myanmar has been one of the most affected countries in the twenty years from 1999 to 2018. Different forms of climate change have directly and indirectly impacted many local community livelihoods, especially those relying on natural resources. In coastal areas, there have been increasing risks of unpredictable floods, higher waves, erosion, cyclones and drought. In the dry zone areas, temperatures are increasing, and droughts are becoming more prevalent. Delta areas are among the worst affected, especially in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Region. According to IFRC's Nargis Facts and Figures (2008), 2.4 million people were significantly affected by Cyclone Nargis in 2008 resulting in 84,500 people killed and 53,800 missing. In recent years, extreme flooding has displaced over 190,000 people, with damage to homes, schools and farms compounding the impact of annual floods (May, 2020).

CRI 1999-2018 (1998-2017)	Country	CRI score	Death toll	Deaths per 100 000 inhabitants	Total losses in million US$ PPP	Losses per unit GDP in %	Number of events (total 1999–2018)
1 (1)	Puerto Rico	6.67	149.90	4.09	4 567.06	3.76	25
2 (3)	Myanmar	10.33	7 052.40	14.29	1 630.06	0.83	55
3 (4)	Haiti	13.83	274.15	2.81	388.93	2.38	78
4 (5)	Philippines	17.67	869.80	0.96	3 118.68	0.57	317
5 (8)	Pakistan	28.83	499.45	0.30	3 792.52	0.53	152
6 (9)	Vietnam	29.83	285.80	0.33	2 018.77	0.47	226
7 (7)	Bangladesh	30.00	577.45	0.39	1 686.33	0.41	191
8 (13)	Thailand	31.00	140.00	0.21	7 764.06	0.87	147
9 (11)	Nepal	31.50	228.00	0.87	225.86	0.40	180
10 (10)	Dominica	32.33	3.35	4.72	133.02	20.80	8

Fig. 22. The ten countries most affected by climate change from 1999 to 2018 (annual averages) Source: The Global Climate Risk Index 2020

Figure 22 shows an annual average of 14.29 fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants due to extreme weather events in Myanmar between 1998 and 2017 (Mccarthy, 2019).

Where Extreme Weather Is Causing The Most Fatalities
Annual average fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants due to extreme weather events (1998-2017)

Country	Value
Myanmar	14.39
Dominica	4.72
Honduras	4.22
Puerto Rico	4.06
Nicaragua	2.95
Haiti	2.92
Micronesia	2.40
Dominican Republic	2.29
Russia	2.04
Grenada	1.92
France	1.82
Italy	1.71

@StatistaCharts   Source: Germanwatch

statista
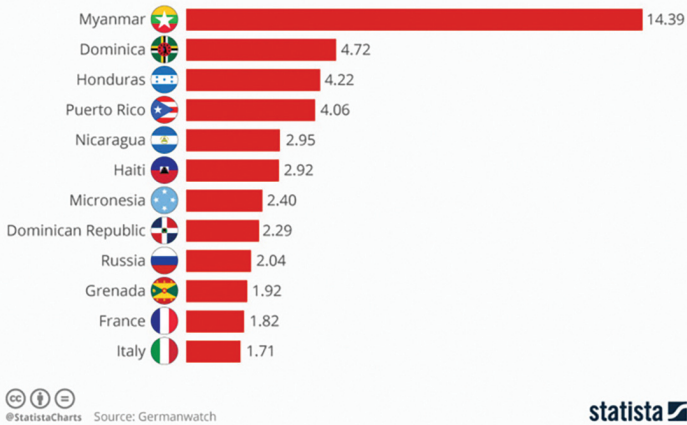
Fig. 23. Countries with the most extreme weather fatalities (1998-2017)
Source: World Economic Forum (McCarthy, 2019)

There is an increasing vulnerability of children and families in most of the delta areas in the Ayeyarwady Region and the peripheral areas of the Yangon Region. These hazards affect how children live; they are the most vulnerable. The destruction of ecosystems deprives many children of access to nature, clean air, safe drinking water, nutritious food, and safe shelter. Currently, the poorest children and families struggle to survive every day. Because they cannot afford to eat enough nutritious food, children get sick, and they cannot go to school. Lack of access to education means that their chances of escaping from any disasters and their coping ability are reduced. They face the most significant risks as the effects are compounded by poverty, reducing their ability to respond. They are generally understood as less physically, mentally and emotionally equipped to cope with life-threatening conditions. However, there is limited knowledge about their resilience and adaptability. Besides, in Myanmar policies regarding disaster risk reduction, cognition and perception are not considered with regard to the hazards and the environment in terms of vulnerability, capability and exposure, especially for children. The agency and capability of children have been overlooked in disaster risk reduction programmes even though it is critical to actively involve children and consider them as an active group who could participate in the DRR programme

to help each other and their families. Due to the scarcity of studies of child capability in relation to climate change and disaster risk management, it is necessary for further studies to concentrate on recognising and enhancing children's potential to increase resilience and reduce the risk of exposure to hazards. All these reasons have encouraged the Pann Pyoe Lett Foundation (PPLF) and Innovative Resource Institute (IRI) to conduct this climate change impact study focusing on vulnerable children and their families in hazardous areas in Myanmar.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Study Locations

The study areas were preselected based on the most vulnerable project areas of PPLF, and secondary peripheral areas of the towns where there is high potential climate change impact considering their social, economic and environmental disadvantages such as poor housing, exposure to frequent floods, lack of access to education and health services and other vulnerability factors.

The study location includes the two following townships.

- Hlaing Tharyar Township in Yangon Region

- Tharbaung Township in Ayeyarwady Region

Hlaing Tharyar Township is an industrial zone known to have air and water pollution affecting many children and families. All communities in Thabaung Township in Ayeyarwady Region suffer from seasonal drought and increased and unpredictable floods yearly. When the water level rises more than usual, people face many difficulties in accessing clean water. There are also other environmentally negative impacts from factories that cause deforestation and water pollution affecting the livelihoods of the local people.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are threefold and focused on:

Contributing to reducing the vulnerability of children and their families from climate change impact by highlighting social protection that could be strengthened in support of the resilience of targeted rural communities; advising on policy and support mechanism; and providing capacity development and advocacy to improve social and environmental protection systems that foster resilience, safety and environmental protection.

METHODOLOGY

The study applies Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools to enable the local participants to play an active role in analysing climate change impact, understanding adaptive capacity and finding solutions, while the researcher mainly acts as a "facilitator" (Narayanasamy, 2009). These tools were developed with the participants. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were facilitated by categorizing different groups of children (age 5 to 12), parents, teachers, community members, representatives from social organizations and local administrators respectively in each township. Each FGD consists of 7 to 10 participants, balancing gender and age, based on the convenient sampling technique. As described in Fig. 24, the Resilience Appraisal was separately developed to identify the capabilities of individual children in coping with the current risks/shock of the climate change impact, and to explore the areas of support needed to increase the strength of their resistance power by allowing the children to score themselves for 5 strengths clearly explained before the exercise.

This participatory study was conducted on three different levels:

- Community vulnerability which explored issues that affect most people in each community (focusing on climate-related issues);

- Household vulnerability, which looked at the specific vulnerability of families with children in the broader community context;

- Individual vulnerability, which explored the capability of individual children to withstand shocks by applying a resilience appraisal (Five Strengths Model).

PARTICIPATORY RAPID APPRAISAL (PRA) TOOLS

Fig. 24. PRA tools Developed and applied in this study

The Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) Tools were applied to explore the vulnerability of children and their families by examining the profound issues affecting the most vulnerable children and families in each community, focusing on climate-related issues. These tools were tested and applied in the Participatory Vulnerability Study of FAO 2019 (Thein et al., 2019).

PRA TOOLS

- Location Profile: Profiling village backgrounds and contexts

- Location Map: Mapping villages and highlighting areas of vulnerability (especially to explore the conditions of houses, high or low land, water sources, schools, cyclone shelters or any big houses or monastery)

- Ten year transitions on climate change (weather changes)

- Significant factors in village history

- Livelihood changes

- Any other changes and impact

- Village Timeline: Highlighting timelines of historical events representing low, medium and high vulnerability

- Season Calendar: Highlighting seasonality and identifying the most vulnerable issues and times of year

- Mobilization Map: Identify where children go in their daily routines, and explore current mechanisms of DRM preparedness and social protection (for example, access to a safe place or support)

- Ven Diagram: Map out the existing organizations or services available for preparation and readiness for disaster management

- Resilience Appraisal: Identify the capability of individual children in coping with the current risks/shock of the climate change impact and explore the areas of support needed to increase the strength of their resistance power by scoring the following 5 Strengths;
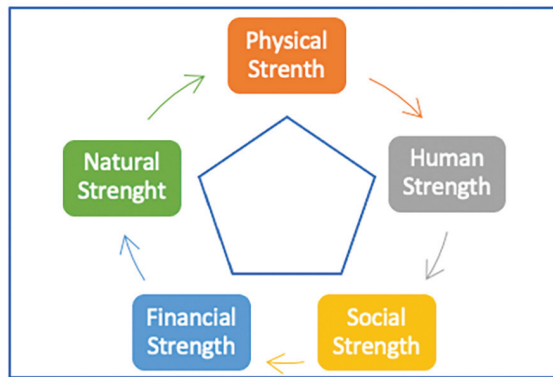
Fig. 25. Resilience Appraisal

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Assessing Climate Change

- What have been the climate changes and their impact in recent years?

- Any changes in the weather conditions that affect their lives

- Any hazards such as floods, strong wind

- Assessing Vulnerability and Resilience

- What are external and internal shocks and vulnerability contexts?

- How are the children and their families coping with these shocks and what are the levels of resilience?

Exploring 5 Internal Strengths of children and their family members.

SUGGESTIONS

- What could be done to reduce risks and increase resilience?

- Needs for individuals (children and family members) and others.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

The selected communities do not represent the broad spectrum of localities across the whole of Ayeyarwady or Yangon regions in Myanmar. At best, the small sample's findings represent the conditions of children and their families living in the areas where the study was conducted. However, the findings generally indicate the potential scale and spectrum of implications across the regions in terms of contextualising the climate change impact, vulnerability, resilience and potential actions for reducing risks and increasing resilience.

The study was conducted during the Covid-19 restrictions and political instability that limited timing and access to key informants in the study areas. The study team had to manage health security and political risks by following Covid-19 protocols and security measures.

The study points to the need for child-sensitive climate change adaptation at the household, community, and township levels to support children's coping mechanisms, and locally adaptive policy to enhance their resilience and reduce further potential risks.

This initial vulnerability assessment considered other socio-economic conditions in a holistic view of the community to give a more realistic picture of community livelihood vulnerability to climate change impact. The study raises awareness on the climate change issues in the local context. Moreover, the results from the pilot study in 2 locations can be used as foundations or initial steps to trigger policy towards a full assessment study in the future.

OVERALL FINDINGS

The study finds that Myanmar is inherently prone to extreme weather conditions. It remains highly vulnerable to further hazards such as cyclones, floods and other extreme weather events. The costs of the losses and damages caused by floods, landslides and droughts in recent years have already amounted to billions of US dollars, including casualties and deaths.

Around 2015, Myanmar suffered from severe floods, strong winds and landslides. Up to 5.2 million people were affected. Over 1.6 million people were temporarily displaced, 525,000 houses were impacted, and 132 lives were lost. A Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) undertaken by the Government of Myanmar (GoM) estimated that the total economic cost of the effects of the floods and landslides was approximately US$1.5 billion, equivalent to 3.1 percent of 2014/2015 GDP (Jeggle & Boggero, 2018).

Recent climate change increases vulnerability due to the frequency and severity of weather conditions that pose new threats from rising sea levels, food and water insecurity, diseases and land erosion.

The PRA assessment, especially the location profile, village map, timeline and seasonal calender, show that in the Delta areas most rural communities and their principal economic activities are dependent on natural resources. Livelihoods are mainly fisheries, on-farm activities and casual labour in the low-lying coastal zones, highly vulnerable to sea level rise, increased storm surge and land erosion.

The PRA tools also reveal that climate change impacts, such as high exposure to natural hazards and low capacity to respond to those

hazards, are significant issues that increase poverty levels and undermine the development efforts and economic progress in the Ayeyarwady Region and the peripheral areas of the Yangon Region.

The seasonal calender, mobilization map and timeline show the more frequent and severe climatic events that threaten most families in the study sites, especially those living in areas that are highly prone to floods, river erosion and heavy winds.

These areas are in critical need of preventive measures, with a view to slowing down and preventing further disasters while building resilience by adapting to a changing climate.

In terms of assessing existing mechanism and needs, there is lack of both policies and mechanisms required for preparing for, responding to, and recovering from these natural disasters.

The former Government recognized and committed to a national development framework incorporating disaster management and environmental sustainability by systematically embedding environmental and climate considerations into all future policies and projects. For example, the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (2018-2030) has committed Myanmar to a climate-sensitive development pathway and is complemented by the new National Environmental Policy and Myanmar Climate Change Policy, which were both recently launched by the President.

However, the military coup on 1 February 2021 revoked the results of the 2020 General Elections. Currently, efforts for disaster management are in abeyance leaving most of these vulnerable communities at risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic and current political crisis have further increased vulnerability, and negatively affected the health and education services and the livelihoods of millions of people in Myanmar. As a result, growth has been sluggish, and poverty has increased.

National policies and strategic action, including technical support from international development partners like UNDP, and extensive public consultations across Myanmar, are critically needed to prevent any

further potential disaster risks and to reduce the vulnerability of the vulnerable communities across the Ayeyarwady and Yangon Region.

In terms of considering the role of children in climate change perspectives, children are found to be under-engaged or underestimated for their ability in climate change dialogue and actions for disaster preparedness, apart from minimal campaigns to raise awareness. In fact, the Resilience Appraisal shows that the children are highly capable of adapting and adjusting to these extreme weather events but their resilience requires enabling mechanisms such as safe physical location, awareness and other preparedness. They can be the best agents for change in enhancing their own adaptive capacity and that of their families and communities.

Therefore, there is a critical need to pay more attention to children's capabilities in assessing their vulnerabilities in social and development study areas, including in the climate change arena, as suggested in more detail in the recommendation section. New policy environments and interventions are critically needed to set a new national vision for making Myanmar a climate-resilient society, with more preparedness and capability for children and families, that is sustainable, prosperous and inclusive for the well-being of present and future generations.

SPECIFIC FINDINGS IN EACH STUDY LOCATION

Study Site 1: Hlaing Tharyar Township

Situated in the western part of Yangon, Hlaing Tharyar Township was established in the 1980s. Housing the garment and other industries in the Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zones, it is one of the most populated and most developed industrial towns in the Yangon region. In 2018, the population dramatically increased with migrants from Ayeyarwady Region and other areas. There are 46 primary schools, 8 middle schools, 4 high schools and the West Yangon Technological University.

Population	687,867
Wards/ Village tracts	28
Population under 18	138,221 (20% of the total population)

Findings

Climate change has affected Myanmar rapidly in the past two decades, becoming one of the most disaster-prone countries exposed to multiple hazards. Hlaing Tharyar township is one of the most vulnerable areas to many kinds of shocks seasonally, such as fires in summer, earthquakes, strong winds, cyclones in rainy and summer seasons, and industrial hazards. The notable changes in the temperature and rainfall levels have led to the natural hazards in the region, as identified by the community representatives and local authorities. The seasonal calender and village timeline show that fire, floods, cyclones and industrial pollution are the most frequent hazards affecting Hlaing Tharyar township in Yangon Region.

Vulnerability

Hlaing Tharyar is a center of migrant workers and families moving from different areas, mainly from Ayeyarwady Region. They have mostly lived in an informal settlement for over a decade now. Families in informal settlements live close to the industrial zone and are prone to industrial hazards. Children and their families are the most vulnerable. The preliminary mapping activities conducted by UN-Habitat in 2016 estimated that 370,000 people (7% of Yangon's population) live in informal settlements and resettlement areas. Most are prone to disasters, such as in areas with riverbanks, drainage channels, and industrial hazards (UN-Habitant, 2020). Children, women and the elderly are the most vulnerable groups.

Moreover, the people living in informal settlements do not have secure housing, increasing their economic and social vulnerability. In 2017, the Yangon regional government issued 'smart cards' as part of a resettlement plan to provide low-cost government housing for those earning between 100,000 and 300,000 Myanmar kyat a month. However, no one has received any housing (Frontier, 2021). Currently, all those informal settlers are vulnerable to being displaced and exposed to further hazards as mentioned above.

Many low-income families have suffered a year-long pandemic, Covid-19, and an even more devastating military coup. They are now highly vulnerable due to the shutdown of most factories and instability. As

expressed by key informants, many people are unemployed, and some are even famished. Most of them are migrating back to Ayeyarwady Region. A key informant said, 'we are suffering a great deal from both Covid and political crisis. I have no job and no income' (Code 7.1).

The children and their families living in the villages in the coastal areas, peripherals of Hlaing Tharyar township, have faced more frequent storms, floods and heavy winds in recent years. The communities in the coastal areas mostly rely on fisheries and casual labor. There is also a scarcity of livelihood opportunities in recent months due to the restrictions of Covid-19 and instability.

Resilience (Five Strengths)
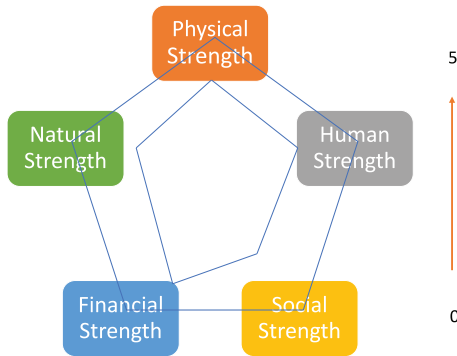
Fig. 26. Five strengths footprint in Hlaing Tharyar (town level)
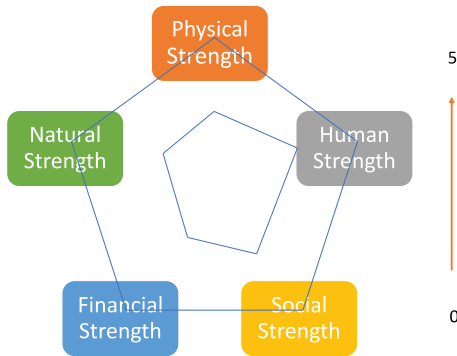
Fig. 27. Five strengths footprint in Hlaing Tharyar (village level)

Figs. 26 and 27 illustrate attainment of the five individual strengths in Hlaing Tharyar Township and Hlaing Tharyar villages respectively, based on scores indicating the closeness of the line to each box of strength for each footprint. The average individual strengths in the town are higher for financial strength, supported by strong human, physical and natural strengths, but their social capital is relatively low. In the villages, mainly Let Khout Kone and Se Eain Tan, the average individual resilience assessment shows that their human strength is strong, but they have only moderate physical strength. However, their financial, social and natural strengths are low.

Children and families living in the coastal areas are most vulnerable, either at moderate or high levels, due to frequent extreme weather conditions without having formal or informal preparedness for disasters, even though they live in disaster-prone areas. Additionally, no key informants have received any DRM training or awareness of climate change issues, the lack of which increases their vulnerability.

Most people who live in the center of Hlaing Tharyar township appear to have higher resilience and less exposure to hazards, except those who are living in industrial zones and who are exposed to high risks. However, there is a lack of preparedness or awareness. The most vulnerable groups are those living in informal settlements close to the industrial zone and peripheral areas of the town prone to industrial hazards, heavy wind, floods and fire.

Coping Strategies

The FGDs reveal that coping strategies vary depending on individual capability and location. Most respondents mention that education is key to their capability. In terms of location, the suburban areas in Hlaing Tharyar township have more advantages in having access to urban services, including disaster preparedness such as fire brigade and other emergency services that they can rely on. Most people use mobile phones, television and radio to receive information including about weather conditions to prepare for disasters, and other precautions, including market information.

Key informants, mainly local heads, community representatives and teachers, explained that receiving information about weather

conditions by phone and radio is critical to help evacuate families to safe locations or follow instructions given by the local authority. At the same time, most parents mentioned that an increasing number of children in their areas face illness, diarrhoea and coughs, especially in the rainy season, but there is limited access to essential health services.

Study Site 2: Thabaung Township

Thabaung is a township of Pathein District in Ayeyarwady Region. It is situated on the bank of the Pathein River, as shown in the map below. Most people live in rural areas, and only 4.7% live in urban areas, according to the National Census 2017. The township habitually suffers from floods and other hazards such as drought and heavy wind. The last high floods were in 2015 and 2016. UNESCO's Flood Risk Assessment 2020 states that most of the village tracts of Thabaung Township experienced higher level of floods seasonally especially in eastern parts of Pathein River (UNESCO, 2020). These village tracts are largely floodplain cultivated areas, are fertile, and produce many cash crops as can be seen in the google map below.

Population	154,400
Children (0-14 years)	31%
Village tracks	67
Wards	3

Thabaung Township Map (Source: Google Maps)

Findings

Thabaung Township is situated in the freshwater zone of the Delta but occasionally experiences problems from saline intrusion, land erosion and coastal cyclones. The FAO Vulnerability Study found that most villages on the riverside are in a seasonally flooded deep-water area that recedes to a few isolated bodies of water as the dry season progresses (Thein et al., 2019). It is a single-crop rice growing area planted as the floodplain waters recede since the water is too deep for growing rice during the monsoon. The main livelihoods include fisheries and on-farm activities, including casual labour.

Vulnerability

Key informants identified seasonal vulnerability issues such as paddy infestations during the winter; transportation difficulties by road during the rainy season; bushfires during the summer season (dry season), and frequent illness, particularly among children, during the rainy season. More positively, they explained that flooding from August to October allows transportation by boat.

According to the FGDs, the level of vulnerability of the most households that are living in the villages is low. For example, in Kanyinknone village, most families face seasonal floods and drought and diversify their livelihood by combining fishing, farming, raising livestock and casual labor. There is an economic connection between Ayeyarwady and Yangon. Most young family members work in the Hlaing Tharyar township factories to send remittances home. Raising children is one of the means to build social capital. Most key informants who have children of working age mentioned that their children had worked in factories in Hlaing Tharyar Township.

However, most have returned home due to Covid-19 restrictions and political instability that has increased vulnerability at family level. Members of female-headed households explained how they struggle to feed their families and raise young children before they can work, to earn money for schooling costs. Most households are found to be dependent on credit with high interest for their livelihood input costs, which makes them vulnerable to repayment default. For example, most fishers and farmers have to take loans from businesspeople at the start of each season for their initial investment outlays.

Resilience
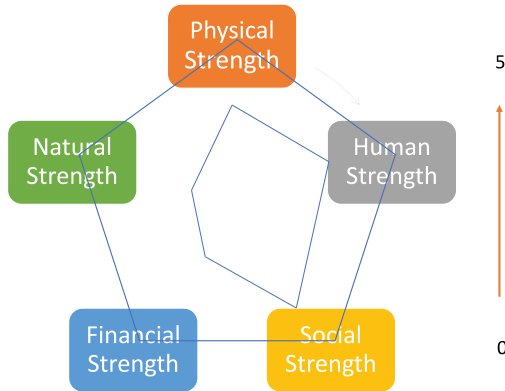
Fig. 28. Five Strengths footprint in Thabaung

Most individuals, mainly children and their families from each village, were found to have low financial and natural strengths but are supported by good social and human strengths. However, in Htan Zin Hla village, as an average of the resilience assessments of families with children, it is found that their average physical and human strengths are quite strong, with the moderate level of physical strengths, supported by their social strengths with development agencies including UNICEF. The key informants from FGDs interpreted their level of resilience as moderate even though their natural and financial strengths are low. More importantly, it is identified that families with more secure and diverse livelihoods are considered to have a higher resilience.

It appears that most children and families are vulnerable either at a moderate or high level due to frequent extreme weather conditions and having no formal preparedness for disasters. Assessing individual case studies regarding the experience of previous disasters that they had faced, it was found that when they lost assets to any disaster, they suffered a great deal to recover and were highly dependent on extensive external support that reduced their resilience. No key informants were identified as having received any DRM training, and lack of awareness of climate change could make them vulnerable to future large-scale disasters and the further impact of climate change.

It is found that the level of vulnerability is quite low in the relatively large number of households with arable land, along with their regular casual labor and other livelihood opportunities. However, all villages need stronger protection and more secure livelihoods at the household level.

Children and families appear to be more vulnerable at the individual level than their peers in Hlaing Tharyar township. And according to the individual resilience appraisal and the views of key informants, girls appear to be more vulnerable than boys. However, there is a need for detailed gender-disaggregated analysis for sound evidence.

Coping Strategies

The coping strategies of local communities include livelihoods—such as locally feasible planting techniques and choice of rice, using intensive insecticides to deal with rice pests and selling paddy soon after harvesting—and strategies for survival. The villagers use mobile phones for weather and market information to prepare for disasters.

In recent years, villagers have also faced more frequent storms in the winter and rainy seasons, and employment opportunities are scarce during the wet season. Their coping strategies are mainly receiving information about storms by phone and helping each other evacuate families to higher locations and places regarded as safe during flooding. The key informants mentioned that almost all children in their areas could swim, including girls. However, villagers do not have a formal DRM plan or know how to cope with shocks.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The climate risk screening in the studied areas presents different levels of low, moderate and high risks from more frequent hazards such as high tide, floods, erosion in the rainy season and droughts and bushfires in the summer, depending on their location. All children and their families living in the coastal and along the rivers of Ayeyarwady Region and the peripheral Yangon Region are the most vulnerable. Therefore, interventions are critically required for climate risk management options and opportunities. Substantial efforts are needed to apply an inclusive and locally-led approach at the strategy, program and activity levels to enhance the capacity for climate resilience.

Recent climate change-specific changes in the patterns of predictable local seasonal weather events—increases the vulnerability from frequent and severe hazards such as high tide, heavy floods, river erosion in the rainy season and droughts and bushfires in the summer. Interventions for addressing those issues are critically needed, especially for the communities in the coastal areas in the Ayeyarwady Region and the peripheral areas of Hlaing Tharyar township in the Yangon Region. Relocation of the most vulnerable communities should be the most favourable policy option for saving their lives and securing their livelihoods.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased vulnerability, negatively affecting health and education services and the livelihoods of millions of people in Myanmar. As a result, growth has been sluggish, and poverty has increased. Children in low-income families are most vulnerable. Interventions for livelihoods and economic recovery are critically needed.

In the current climate change context for children, several critical barriers are found that impede children's active engagement with climate change. They are interrelated and mutually reinforcing barriers—most notably, the controversial nature of climate change as a higher-level issue, combined with the traditional perception of adults' superiority, in which children's perspectives are either undermined or neglected.

Educational authorities and agencies such as PPLF should integrate strategies to overcome these barriers. The study also suggests a need for encouragement of children's constructive climate change engagement, new strategies and innovative methods to empower children's agency and facilitate their active participation in school and family discussions about disaster preparedness, coping mechanisms and social protection.

Empowering today's children, through formal and informal education, as primary agents in understanding and being able to take action on climate change should be an essential goal for any society. Therefore, promoting children's agencies should be one of the primary objectives in achieving present and future community resilience in the face of climate change impacts in Myanmar.

The study therefore advocates for promoting children as a focal agency not only to increase their resilience but also so that they can become primary change agents for change within their school and family environments in addressing the issues of climate change.

CONCLUSIONS

To date, very few studies have examined the climate change impact on children and their families in Myanmar. There is a lack of recognition of the children's climate change engagement beyond the formal classroom and among children's pre-educators. According to PPLF team and other key informants, only limited efforts have been made to facilitate children's collaborative climate change actions in and out of the classroom environment and with families. This study might be the first to deal with this gap in Myanmar, particularly to advocate for children's conducive engagement with climate change through participatory action research methods that endeavour to empower them and encourage them to increase resilience for themselves and their families. Specifically, this study engages 5- to 12-year-old children combining transformative participatory techniques with child-friendly methodologies to simultaneously explore and expand children's role as agents for engaging in climate change within their families and communities, through the students who have been actively engaged in the education projects of the Pann Pyoe Latt Foundation. The study contributes to theoretical and empirical knowledge of climate change study and its policy implications for climate change adaptation for children and their families.

As a general concluding remark, Myanmar is in critical need of responsive policies and accountable strategic actions, technical support including extensive public consultations and awareness programmes regarding climate change impact, realistic disaster preparedness at the local level across Ayeyarwady and Yangon Regions, particularly in the disaster-prone areas such as the coastal areas. According to the findings presented in this study, those vibrant policies and interventions are critical to prevent potential disaster risks and reduce the vulnerability of the vulnerable communities across Ayeyarwady and Yangon Region. Together, the suggested new policy environments and interventions can set a new national vision for making Myanmar a climate-resilient society, with more preparedness and capability for

children and their families, that is sustainable, prosperous and inclusive for the well-being of present and future generations.

REFERENCES

Frontier. (2021). 'Now we are starving': After coup, Yangon's most vulnerable struggle to feed themselves. *Frontier*. May 2021. https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/now-we-are-starving-after-coup-yangons-most-vulnerable-struggle-to-feed-themselves/

Jeggle, T., & Boggero, M. (2018). *Post-Disaster Needs Assessment: Lessons from a Decade of Experience.* © European Commission, GFDRR, UNDP, and the World Bank. http://hdl.handle.net/10986/30945 License: CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO.

Legg, S. (2021). IPCC, 2021: Climate change 2021-the physical science basis. *Interaction*, *49*(4), 44-45.

Kendra, P-L. (2019). Ocean warming is accelerating faster than thought, new research finds. *New York Times*, *10*.

Meyer, L. A., & Pachauri, R. K. (2014). *The Fifth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change.* Geneva: IPCC Secretariat.

IFRC Myanmar. (2011 May). *Cyclone Nargis 2008 Facts and Figures* [Press release]

Narayanasamy, N. (2009). *Participatory rural appraisal: Principles, methods and application*. SAGE Publications India.

McCarthy, N. (2019). Where Extreme Weather Is Causing The Most Fatalities. *Global Agenda.* World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/extreme-weather-environment-climate-change

Quintão, A. F., Brito, I., Oliveira, F., Madureira, A. P., & Confalonieri, U. (2017). Social, environmental, and health vulnerability to climate change: the case of the municipalities of Minas Gerais, Brazil. *Journal of environmental and public health*, *2017* Article ID 2821343 | https://doi.org/10.1155/2017/2821343

Save the Children. (2021, April). *Climate Crisis- 710 Million Children live in countries at high risk.* https://www.savethechildren.net/news/climate-crisis-710-million-children-live-countries-high-risk

Thein, A. K., Gregory, R., Akester, M., Poulain, F. and Langeard, R. (2019). *Participatory rural appraisal- Vulnerability study of Ayeyarwady Delta fishing communities in Myanmar and social protection opportunities.* FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Circular no.1177. FAO. Rome. 56 pp. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

Timothy, D. (2020). Helping Myanmar Farmers Adapt to Climate Challenges. *Climate Link* https://www.climatelinks.org/blog/helping-myanmar-farmers-adapt-climate-challenges

UN-Habitat. (2020). *Yangon Informal Settlements – Resettlement Programme* (YIS-RP): Survey Report: UN-Habitat. Available at https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/yangon-informal-settlements-resettlement-programme-yis-rp-survey-report

UNDP. (2019). *Why Climate Change Matters for Myanmar's Development, and What We Are Doing About It.* UNDP. Available at https://www.mm.undp.org/content/myanmar/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/why-climate-change-matters-for-myanmars-development--and-what-we.html

UNESCO. (2020). *Flood Risk Assessment of Thabaung Area, Ayeyarwady Region, Myanmar.* UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/fellowships/keizo-obuchi/summary-research-carried-'out/flood-risk-assessment-thabaung-area-ayeyarwady-region-myanmar

10

TRANSITION WITHIN AN AGRARIAN TRANSITION:

AN ALLUVIAL FARMING COMMUNITY ON THE IRRAWADDY IN CENTRAL MYANMAR

Zar Chi Oo

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Agrarian transition is non-linear and unique to local communities. Myanmar alluvial farmers experience a 'double transition' as they adjust to changing alluvial sedimentation and dissolution while being drawn deeper into the national and international economy. Despite the promises of guided transition, alluvial farmers find it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. The benefits and end goals of agrarian transition may not adequately portray or understand the experiences of Myanmar's alluvial farmers.

Anthropologists often write about various mobile "patterns of subsistence" of peoples (hunter-gatherers or foragers, pastoral nomads and

the "Sea Nomads"[4]), who change places to make their living. They also write about mountain peoples making a living practicing "shifting" or swidden agriculture by rotating slash-and-burn plots. The lives of mobile peoples differ markedly from the more fixed sedentary lives in agricultural settlements. Nation-states do not like nomadic peoples, who are among the most marginalized and least understood[5].

But what of inhabitants with a long history of living and working in the agricultural environment along an incessantly changing riverine space? To what extent might theirs constitute a 'mobile' way of living based on an 'alluvial lifeworld'? How does this notion that mobile people are least known and understood also apply to farmers continuously seeking new opportunities on ever-changing alluvial land? In what ways are their lives facing a "transition within an agrarian transition"? Moreover, how do we regard these "transitional" peoples in the context of "agricultural transition"? Since they are not as amenable to government control as residential farmers, what place do they occupy?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on collecting secondary and face-to-face data using ethnographic fieldwork techniques. I employ qualitative research methods with two specific data collection methods: in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Due to the current political crisis in Myanmar, I could not go back to the country and collect the data in person. But I could conduct interviews and focus group discussions via Facebook messenger and Signal face-to-face. My brother, a final-year anthropology student at Yadanabon University, assisted organizing meetings with informants and focus group discussions. Moreover, as the research site is my native village and my home, the villagers already know me and have been willing and comfortable talking to me online.

---

4. Nomadism is commonly associated with pastoralism. Sea nomads make their way of living on the sea (Sopher, 1965).
5. 'Mobile peoples, be they hunters and gatherers, pastoralists or swidden farmers, have systematically been sidelined from the growing movement to recognize indigenous rights in conservation and biodiversity' (Chatty, 2002, pp. 1-2).

I use in-depth interviews to collect data on alluvial farming, agricultural changes, crop pricing, and the farmers' challenges. I interviewed five farmers across ages and gender with a lifetime involvement in agriculture. Also, the focus group discussion with these farmers helped elicit local ideas about alluvial agricultural practices. This includes how crops are grown on alluvial land, the nature of alluvial land, historical changes in soil fertility, the landslides which have occurred so far, what, when and how the changes occur in alluvial farming throughout their lives, and why land disputes become intense.

THE ALLUVIAL 'PRIMARY TRANSITION' IN CONTEXT

My native Sitkone village is situated on an alluvial island in the middle of the Irrawaddy River in Magway District, central Myanmar, 70 kilometers downstream from the ancient city of Bagan. The village has about 300 households with a total population of around 2,000. Sitkone village is 1,500 meters wide and 900 meters long (informal conversation with the village chief, 8 March 2020). However, the island's size varies with the flow of the Irrawaddy. At its widest point is about 7,000 meters. No cars or roads are on the island; transport is entirely by boat, bullock cart, motorbike and on foot. The villagers have been living and growing crops on the lands surrounding the village for at least 60 years.

This island continually changes in size and shape with the flow of the Irrawaddy. Its volatility can be observed from the Google time-lapse of the island. Due to its unstable nature, the island does not have a name. Sitkone's current inhabitants moved to the village in the 1950s at around the same time as their former village elsewhere along the riverbank disappeared because of a massive landslide. There are also the remnants of another three villages surrounding Sitkone village on the island. However, because of landslides, these have been so diminished by erosion that their former inhabitants had to move away. Yet, they continue to exercise land rights even where the land has disappeared so that, when it reemerges, it is still theirs. This island used to get flooded yearly during the monsoon, depositing fertile sediment. River floods pose a risk but are also a most precious gift from nature for these villagers.

Villagers have been making a living on this island since before the advent of colonialism in 1885 by planting crops, especially peanuts, sesame, chilies, tomato, and various kinds of beans. During that time, these villagers living off the island initially accessed their alluvial lands only during the crop cultivation seasons from outside while living on neighboring islands. After losing their villages to erosion elsewhere, it was only later that they built village settlements on the island itself. They cannot plant rice on alluvial soil, which is too soft and sandy, and so cannot hold the water long enough.

THE NATURE OF ALLUVIAL LAND

Within Myanmar's legal framework, 'alluvial land' refers to various lands, ranging from seasonal or recent alluvial land to longer-term river islands. In the Myanmar language, alluvial islands are called

myei nu kyun ("an island with soft soil"), and alluvial land is known as *kyun myei* or *kai myei.* Temporary alluvial areas deposited in river-beds through the accumulation of alluvium during rainy seasons are managed communally by the village every year.

Over time, the Irrawaddy River deposits alluvial mud on its banks, even to the extent of growing alluvial islands of diverse sizes, some big enough to support multiple villages, in the main path of the river. Because these are particularly fertile, farmers find them desirable. However, as alluvial deposits come and go seasonally, farmers can never permanently rely on having access to alluvial land over the year or from year to year.

Indeed, the lifeworlds of alluvial farmers are such that they are continuously monitoring the river for new deposits while at the same time monitoring the disappearance of their habitual alluvial lands due to the changing and unpredictable environment. Google Earth's time-lapse shows the dynamic and challenging environment of alluvial farming[6]. Indeed, alluvial lifeworlds are about adapting to a river that takes away while giving simultaneously, shifting and changing all the time. Farmers need to act swiftly whenever opportunities arise, and they do not have the time or connections to go through long-winded bureaucratic processes before they can commence farming. Also, transportation and travel are rarely convenient, and costs may be high.

My research is on these alluvial lands, the lifeworlds built on them, and the human conflicts associated with their dynamics, directly or indirectly. Unlike mainland property, where even the most minor locations will be known, named, and mapped, many alluvial lands are still unnamed and will not have been mapped or noticed by most. Countless alluvial lands will not be there next year, and new ones will emerge from the river. In this way, the alluvial island of my research site, after appearing so many years ago, still does not have a commonly known name even though its village settlements do. While such dynamically changing transitory alluvial lands are not publicly "known" by words, governments much seek out these lands. They have historically long been

---

6. https://earthengine.google.com/
    timelapse#v=20.5215,94.73375,10.55,latLng&t=1.38&ps=50&bt=19840101&et
    =20181231&startDwell=0&endDwell=0

subject to a different legal status. Indeed, the chronicles recount how these were classified as crown lands and how kings would seek these fertile lands out to impose high taxes (Siok Hwa, 1965, p. 106).

The river flows with different strengths according to the season, with many alluvial lands often entirely flooded during the rainy season. Land is continually lost and gained in various areas over time, so this becomes a conflicted resource. Climate change, fluctuations in the rainy season and attempts to control river flow upstream, further compound their unpredictability. There is a customary distribution system of access rights and settling disputes, but these have not kept up with modern times.

The royal orders and the historical records report that, despite their irregularity and lack of permanence, alluvial lands were nevertheless precious to Myanmar kings and were accorded a special status. Past capitals of Myanmar—Bagan, Ava, Mandalay, and Yangon—were founded on or close to the Irrawaddy River banks. Rivers were essential means of transport and supported crucial agricultural irrigation. However, due to the superior fertility of alluvial soil, kings reserved a special tax for alluvial lands. Their taxes made proportionately some of the most significant contributions to the royal treasure year after year. Because of sometimes excessive high-yield expectations, there was evidence of over-taxation on alluvial lands (Cho Ma Ma, 2007, p. 96).

Although a ruling class on behalf of the king would be imposed over villagers, the rates at which they taxed the lands often involved consultation with local monks (who themselves had a stake in these lands through voluntary village donations). However, during the 19th century, high taxation and oppression were sufficient to cause an outflow of villagers even from these highly fertile areas to Lower Burma, where British rule appeared to them a lesser evil. This outflow eventually forced the monarchy to reduce taxation on these lands to compete with the British colonial regime (Cho Ma Ma, 2007).

During the colonial period since 1885, British colonial officers, more interested in increasing yield than enrichment through taxation, had the land measured and allocated equitably in terms of units defined as *kwin* (field) for each village according to local traditions. When

conflicts over land arose, British officials tried to solve them according to customary law. Villagers or the town got their land back if it was theirs. There was less corruption compared to after the 1962 coup. They could always claim *kwin* back when it reappeared after the river flood (informal conversation with village man, 6 March, 2020).

Allocating alluvial lands is not a new process. Also, under the Socialist government between 1962 and 1988, the village tract administration body managed to distribute lands to farmers with small holdings of less than one acre. That is when things started going wrong under General Ne Win's military regime. Much like during royal days, the township officials were often corrupt. Due to their fertile soils, alluvial lands have always been a crucial resource, and their allocation still is an essential means for authorities to assert their power and gain wealth (Allaverdian, 2019). Besides, alluvial land is unstable and can be subject to erosion and landslides. Therefore, the land title is also problematic as the customary land titles to alluvial land are not easily recognized or managed in national legislation.

ALLUVIAL FARMING

Alluvial soil is said to be the foundation of civilization[7]. The first cities grew up around fertile alluvial deposits along rivers, where agriculture began. There would be no cities without agriculture, no division of labor, no organized religion, and no hierarchical government. For example, the royal cities of Bagan and Mandalay relied heavily on fertile, productive alluvial soil for their existence. It was unlikely that royalty could have amassed their wealth had hardworking alluvial farmers not been forced to pay their taxes. Sitkone village, where I conduct research, is a living cosmos centered on alluvial deposits in the middle of the Irrawaddy River. Everyone talks about kings and splendid ancient cities, but they would not exist without these farmers. In this

---

7. "What rather explains the origin of civilization is the opportunity presented to a few human groups by flooding, which provided ready-fertilized alluvial soil…. The first civilizations usually emerged where there was alluvial agriculture…. In contrast to prehistory, in which development occurred in all manner of ecological and economic situations, history and civilization might seem a product of one particular situation: alluvial and perhaps also irrigation agriculture" (Mann, 1986, pp. 5, 35, 74).

case, my ancestors' alluvial agriculture provided the resourcing of the beginning of Myanmar's civilization as we know it.

Sitkone villagers have been moving along the Irrawaddy River, farming on emerging land and moving on when landslides occur since the emergence of time, according to the village elders' memory and stories they have heard from their ancestors. Before they moved to the current island where Sitkone village exists, the last place where they lived for about 40 years was on the western side of the Irrawaddy River. A considerable landslide occurred around 1978-79 and the whole village and all farming land disappeared into the river. As far as the village elders over 80 years old remember, they were on the eastern side of the river, which also vanished due to a landslide. Thus, we can understand how mobile their lifestyle has always been and the unstable condition in which they make their living.

This prompts me to refer to the lifeworld experience of alluvial farmers as one of "double transition", namely a perpetual transition by the nature of the alluvial process encapsulated within a more general agrarian transitional process prompted by markets and the state.

Every year, in the monsoon season (June–August), a seasonal flood overflows the entire island for a month and sometimes more. Farmers welcome this as it deposits the mud or sediments on the alluvial soil from upstream. These are free fertilizers given up by the river to the alluvial farmers. This sediment is like gold for them as it naturally fertilizes the soil, and farmers can live the whole year with crops produced by farming for only one season. They plant various beans, especially peanuts, sesame, chili, and tomato.

The Irrawaddy River and the experiences of seasonal events contribute to the coming into existence and erosion of alluvial land as part of the rhythms of alluvial farmers' life. As soon as the flood goes away, the alluvial farmers anticipate the type of soil that appears out of the river current, particularly on how much sediment deposits, so that they can choose the appropriate crops to plant. Sediments deposit unevenly, and farmers find their land covered mainly by fertile sediments, sand, or a mixture of sediment and sand. What to grow for the coming season depends on the nature of the soil.

Also, at the same time, they constantly must monitor the river and the weather and listen to the news of the weather forecast on the radio, whether there is much rain upstream and whether the flood will come back for the second time before they start planting anything. The wind can also tell much about whether the coming season will be hot or cold. If the wind comes from the north side, it means the rain is gone, and the flood will not come again, but if the wind comes from the southern side, there is rain to come, and the water level can increase, which can destroy the young plant they have grown. Different crops flourish in different weather conditions. Beans like chickpeas, white vatana pea and peanuts prefer cold weather, but chili prefers hot weather.

Some regularity and predictability in climate are essential to alluvial farming. The rain, the flood, the river current, the wind, and so on should come at the right time. Farmers cannot be sure how the weather will be, no matter how experienced they are. The timing is essential, and they cannot be too early or late. Crop productivity can drop for several reasons, such as irregular climate, which brings in many insects that destroy the plants from the root to the top. One thing leads to another.

On the other hand, the farmers must explore the market for their produce and investigate which foreign country is buying which beans to catch up with the high prices. This is like gambling – they cannot be sure what the weather ahead will be like, the cost, and whether the crops will be productive. However, they employ all their skills, senses, experiences, and knowledge to make the crops as productive as possible.

CHANGES IN ALLUVIAL FARMING

Significant changes have gradually impacted the alluvial farming world as the country has undergone political and economic changes and the global integration of capitalism and climate change. Some of these are technological. For example, after 1988, farmers started using China's small water pumps to pump the water from the river to the riverside plantations. They would also dig wells from which water can be pumped to the fields so that crops could be planted for the first time in summer, now allowing for an additional crop beyond the first planting (which usually starts around September immediately after the island has flooded).

Before, they did not need chemical fertilizers and pesticides as the seasons were reasonably regular and predictable. According to their saying, "there is flood when it is the flood time, and it is cold in winter and hot in summer". The heat, the cold and the wind significantly impact the soil and the crops they plant. They said, after 1985, different types of fertilizers and pesticides appeared on the market. However, for the alluvial farmers, their land still provided sufficient fertile sediments from the river, and they did not need to use them.

After 2000, with the opening of the market economy, alluvial farmers started adding various fertilizers and pesticides to avoid losing crops. Also, since 2015 floods are no longer regular; even if there is a flood, it does not overflow the whole island anymore. Currently, plants do not bloom or bear fruit if they do not use expensive fertilizers and pesticides. Only 1 out of 10 farmers can farm with their own money, but the rest must borrow money yearly. If something goes wrong with the crops, they end up in debt.

In the past, alluvial farmers could gain 40 *tin* (Burmese unit of measurement: 1 *tin* = approximately one bushel) if they planted one acre of peanut. The total investment was only 200,000 kyat (194 USD), and they could get up to 500,000 kyat (484 USD) sold in the market, depending on the market price. Their work was profitable, enough for the family to survive the whole year. However, since 2015 productivity has dropped due to an irregular climate and missed floods, and they can get only 20 *tin* per acre, sometimes less than that. They can no longer make ends meet and end up in debt.

Due to climate change and seasonally irregular floods, alluvial farmers have been losing their crops for three consecutive years since 2019. New types of insects destroying the plants emerged out of nowhere with seasonally irregular wind and rain. The farmers received nothing from planting and ended up heavily in debt, as most already needed to borrow money when they started farming. For instance, in 2022, the chili and lablab bean crops were destroyed by an insect that turns the bean plant yellow so that it no longer bears flowers.

Recently, some farmers have stopped farming because they cannot afford the investment anymore. Most young people are leaving alluvial

farming to work in the factories in Yangon and in foreign countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. It is common knowledge in my village that families with children working abroad are better off even without farming and can pay off their debts faster than those who continue to stick to farming and dramatically escalate their debts. Alluvial families tend to see their children as the family's chief earners for the first time.

In addition, the Sitkone village population has increased, and farmers now need more land to make a living. The demand for emerging fertile alluvial land is getting more severe as farmers cannot afford to invest, so land disputes have become more fraught within and between the communities. The constantly changing nature of alluvial land leads to conflicts, and several newspapers report severe disputes related to alluvial land.

The nature of the historic conflict under Myanmar's former monarchy differs from today's. In those days, conflicts arose over officials collecting excessive taxes, thus making these lands less attractive to farmers because the king pressured them to fill their revenues. This culminated in farmers migrating to the British-controlled territories south between 1823 and 1885, to which Myanmar kings eventually responded by lowering taxes.

However, government taxation is comparatively modest presently. Fights would appear more recently over alluvial land claimed by some over and above the rights claimed by others nearer to the land and with a more plausible claim to it. Here, corruption is often involved, resulting in sometimes deadly conflicts among villages/villagers and outsiders over what amount to land grabs (Allaverdian, 2019; Hein Thar, 2019). There was a particularly severe riverside conflict due to an inadequate response by government officials in 2019. It left 30 people dead due to a dispute over rich alluvial farmland between villagers from Phaye Kyun and Kantha (close to Sitkone village), in Magway Region, who had previously been on friendly terms. One of the critical factors of dispute is that the customary land allocation practices had broken down, and no documents were available to support villager claims to own their annually submerged lands (Hein Thar, 2019).

The other kind of conflict arose from the poor wording of the Land Act of 2012, which allowed foreigners to claim alluvial islands near Sagaing by proxy. This is reported to have occurred with Chinese investors aiming to grow watermelons (Khin Su Wai, 2019), instigating local people to buy land in their names to get around the regulation that foreigners are not allowed to own land. Another conflict concerns farmland erosion due to excessive and unregulated sand mining (Sam Aung Moon et al., 2020). Sometimes whole villages disappear as a result of erosion. The methods contemporary governments use to allocate such lands do not generally involve adequate compensation (Yee Ywal Myint, 2019).

Nowadays, conflicts over newly appeared alluvial land occur among villagers of Sitkone and villages on the island yearly, though not always as intense as above. There were conflicts where villagers who could not afford to pay bribes and complained of unfair allocation were sentenced to prison. Alluvial farmers can no longer focus on farming to improve their livelihoods. They must go to court and collect evidence supporting their claim to own the land with limited available tools (such as documents and historical maps measured during colonial times). The population is also increasing along the Irrawaddy River; therefore, more people need more land to make their livelihood in these areas. The river flow is also subject to unpredictable processes of nature that are difficult for humans to control.

Since 2010, Sitkone village has experienced rapid changes. Conflicts over land are increasing. Yet without a close and detailed analysis, it is not self-evident what the exact causes of these conflicts are and what has triggered them. This kind of analysis is both necessary and critical for understanding the lives of residents along Myanmar's rivers. We need to know more about ideas surrounding *Kyun Myei*, what this kind of land has meant to Myanmar people both presently and historically and what kind of land allocation system or land tenure they practice. Moreover, we must investigate how political, economic and agricultural changes and environmental factors complicate alluvial land tenure systems. These, together with climate dynamics, are underlying factors in conflicts over land access.

But now, with the military coup and unrest, everything needed to do farming is getting vastly more expensive than before. The investment

would be way higher than any returns, and so farmers are now doing less farming. Those with no alternative income try to farm only for subsistence, no longer offering their crops to the markets and the men and young people are forced to migrate to gain an income.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT AND CHANGE

For farmers, the land is everything: livelihood, security, wealth, power, status, etc. Myanmar's farmers must have their land rights respected to make a living. However, urbanization appears inevitable. Life increasingly revolves around urban life, industrialization, modernization, trade, resource extraction, etc. The role of farmers, formerly central to national and regional government policy and publicized in government-controlled media in socialist days, has receded in public focus. The coup has only further complicated this question.

How are the quality, fertility and security of alluvial land that sustains rural livelihoods around Myanmar's rivers affected by rapidly changing national priorities? How do the trappings of globalization—agrarian transition, new national land laws, the commodification of crops, modernization of machinery, industrialization and so forth—affect the lives of farmers? The policies that governments and NGOs develop must address farmer insecurities resulting from land and water management issues and be informed by local circumstances.

Myanmar is transitioning from an agricultural socialist economy, where the state owns all factors of production, to a market economy based on private and corporate ownership. Although the situation is changing with urbanization and industrialization, rural agriculture is still the most common livelihood in Myanmar for 70% of the population (Griffiths, 2019). However, agriculture is changing fast with modernization, commercialization, and buying and selling of land formerly not allowed under the military regime. Myanmar has embraced economic reforms, including rural development and greater industrialization, after decades of "*socialist*" and other military regimes and a prolonged period of isolation.

The current wave of rural transformation dated from the emergence of market economy reforms under the military government in late 1988

and was enhanced under the quasi-civilian government of Thein Sein (2012-2016) and the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi (2016-2021). Successive governments have placed rural development and agricultural sector transformation as priorities for economic growth, but the progress has been socially and spatially uneven. The coup of 2021 has yet again disrupted any reforms, precipitating a civil war. The army has been bombing, burning and displacing whole villages.

Rural development and poverty reduction were stated policies of Thein Sein Government. Rural economic problems such as land rights, fishing rights and improved rural infrastructure were crucial features of political discourse and budget appropriations while moving towards more varied economic growth. As transnational infrastructures dominate Myanmar's foreign relations, hydropower projects and natural gas extraction, the burden of these developments is most directly placed on rural communities whose livelihoods depend on the land, rivers and markets affected by the projects. Agricultural policy changes have also significantly impacted the rural economy, primarily due to market reforms in the 1990s with much greater exposure to market instability and price fluctuations as agriculture is increasingly commercialized. This risks farmers, particularly when the investment price exceeds the sales revenue. The nature of agricultural livelihoods has changed with traditional agriculture's declining capability and role and increased nonfarm activities. Farmers have encountered new threats associated with global economic forces, market instability, and climate change (Griffiths, 2019).

Today, Myanmar's villages face many pressing issues concerning their land, which is core to a sustainable livelihood in an agricultural mode of production: livelihood insecurity, village economy, land conflicts, inflated cost of agrarian investment and labor, low commodity prices, soil erosion, debt, poverty, and so forth. In my research, I study rural land issues and deterioration of the village economy that are currently arising from these political and agricultural transitions, whether directly or indirectly, with a focus on the life of farmers (alluvial farmers in this case), land access and disputes over alluvial land.

Globalization and urbanization rapidly move people, commodities, money, knowledge, and services. Villages in the Myanmar countryside are changing rapidly. However, in my field site, Sitkone village,

what has always been moving is "the soil" with river flow and floods. Alluvial land keeps moving and constantly changing, along with land use changes. My research is about the life of mobile people moving across changing alluvial land on an island in the middle of the Irrawaddy River that emerged sometime before the colonial period and continues to change shape.

Until recently, alluvial farming land was productive and did not need much investment. But if very few felt they needed to leave the village a decade ago to earn money, the situation is now quite different.

For several reasons, the land is no longer sufficiently productive to sustain local livelihoods. A significant reason is that seasonal floods have become less frequent and no longer occur yearly, so the land is not fertilized as frequently. This means that more investment is now needed to achieve a livelihood. The villagers lack capital and take out ever-larger loans so the majority are now seriously indebted. Also, crops have been fetching lower prices in the market, pushing many to leave their farms and go to cities to make a living. Their lives are precarious and even in danger due to the unsafe working conditions of the unskilled work they seek, such as in mining or across borders such as Thailand or China. During the olden days, the village was the ideal world for all to live in, but this is no longer the case.

THE 'AGRARIAN TRANSITION' CONCEPT

Increasing conflict over alluvial land can be attributed to Myanmar's agricultural transition process. However, it is also a worldwide phenomenon resulting from processes associated with economic growth, urbanization, industrialization and capitalism. Agrarian transition is an essential topic in the literature on rural development. This uneven process is far from complete in five countries of the Mekong region—Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Smallholder farmers still dominate the agricultural sector's development, food security, and economic growth. However, commodifying their crops has drawn subsistence farmers into the national and international economy (Ingalls et al., 2018).

One view is that agrarian transition in rural agricultural sectors is closely linked with processes of change due to urbanization and industrialization occurring in rural agricultural sectors. Byres' (1986) classic understanding of the agrarian transition discusses the penetration of capitalist relations of production into agriculture, the growth of associated social structure, the creation of modern production techniques, and the emergence of urban-industrial societies. He shows how the historical writings of Lenin, Kautsky, and Chayanov explored this transformation in Europe regarding the political capacity of the rural peasantry and the urban or rural working class. Although some later interpreted their study as universal statements on the issues they discussed, their analysis was profoundly concerned with Europe's particular time and place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kelly, 2011).

The agrarian question emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Traditionally, this concerns agriculture, capitalist accumulation and the transition to capitalism. It specifically involved introducing capitalist relations into peasant agriculture, the related transition of agricultural production, and the role of agriculture in industrial development (Byres, 1977). It is held that these processes of capitalist agrarian transition led to "de-peasantization," and the transformation of social classes under the impact of capitalist transition is a central part of the transition itself (Rigg, 2001, p. 10).

The agrarian question is an ongoing and contemporary process marked by various stages of capitalist transition with reduced constraints to accumulation and processes of capitalist transformation and industrialization. However, it is no longer the major topic for academic inquiry in the industrialized Global North that it once was. Many scholars consider the question to have been successfully resolved as it has ceased to be the most important economic activity and no longer dominates rural areas, whether in production or employment. However, the agrarian transition in the developing world is ongoing, where the agrarian question is still essential (Rigg, 2001).

Agrarian transition refers to more extensive societal changes in contemporary thinking. In the age of globalization, these refer to the wide range of specific and intersecting processes that transform an agrarian society economically based on agriculture into an increasingly

urbanized one that relies on industrial production and services. In peasant and agrarian studies, successive writing has engaged livelihood issues, production and technologies, land use, class relations and differentiation, and the government's role. In other words, the core of agrarian literature has been developed by production relations and power relations embedded in them. The critical transition drivers come from increasing commodification (capitalist penetration) and changing technologies (Green Revolution).

The core of rural studies used to be agriculture. Most people in rural areas were engaged in agriculture and its production, and the demands of the agricultural output for tools, services and processing dominated rural settings. Many rural study scholars mentioned that talking about the rural was talking about agriculture and all that was related to land politics and distinctive rural cultures and societies. The nature of these changes, their outcomes and their impacts vary considerably across countries and regions from a global perspective. Although issues of agrarian change have become less significant for the Global North, the reverse is true for most countries in the Global South, and rural studies remain a highly competitive field of scholarly study (van der Ploeg, 1993; Rigg, 2001).

LIMITATIONS OF THE AGRARIAN TRANSITION CONCEPT

Rigg (2001, pp. 7-8) counterargues the classic view of agrarian transition when saying that "agrarian change is non-linear and locally unique" and that local communities are not "outside global processes". They are the backbone of such processes, and their role in global processes and structures impacts their lives but does not govern outcomes. Similarly, Chusak Wittayapak (2011) sees the classical conceptualization as "too unilinear, too structural, and too global". He argues that "agrarian transition involves the wider transformation of agrarian society as it attempts to integrate into the world market economy." (Wittayapak, 2011, p. 1). In the newly industrialized Asian economies, new challenges are arising in agrarian transformation within each specific context.

Modernization and globalization combine to affect all the world's rural areas. Even industrialized countries such as the US and Europe that experienced urban migration during the industrial revolution

continue to share what has come to be called "rural decline", where populations are migrating en masse to urban areas. Such decline is visible in Myanmar, too, now that the rural is being drawn into the international market economy at a rapid pace and is undergoing enormous changes. However, the rural population proportion is still far above most other countries, reduced from over 80 per cent in the 1960s to under 70 per cent today, compared to 50 per cent for Thailand.

Within this global trend, Southeast Asia has experienced the implications of agrarian transitions in social, political, and economic aspects. The region provides various cases from predominantly agricultural societies such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam to those that are somewhat more urbanized and industrialized, such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Southeast Asia's study of rural changes has a long history, and a large body of literature has been developed via empirically rich studies. The countryside of Southeast Asia has been exposed to significant transformations that have transformed rural life in its social, economic, political, and environmental structures for over six decades. The green revolution and agricultural intensification have impacted the agricultural sector, such as the increase in land and labour productivity and the ongoing transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture. Moreover, conflicts over access and the distribution of natural resources, land use issues, and ecological concerns have risen almost everywhere in Southeast Asia. Not all these transformations occurred everywhere at the same time and rate, but these developments were embedded in local economic and political contexts, government change and political transitions (Drahmoune, 2013).

Many changes are also occurring in Southeast Asia's relationship between people and land use. In the book "More than the Soil", Rigg (2001) points out how rural people migrate to urban areas, and the change from agriculture to non-agriculture is becoming more significant. For Rigg, rural Southeast Asia is a complex and diverse region subject to multiple processes of agrarian transition. Rigg addresses the change in attitude to the simple concept or general belief in rural as having mainly to do with agriculture. These days, people can be both rural and urban, and they can be involved in subsistence and generate income in off-farm employment and activities. Rural people can be embedded in the local economy and simultaneously be part of a global

production chain. Moreover, people are being pushed off the land for assorted reasons and are motivated to perform nonfarm work.

Also, Rigg et al. (2018) argue that agrarian change in Thailand does not follow the process of western countries. The process goes the opposite way because farmland size is decreasing, and the number of farms is often growing. The authors focus on debates over agrarian and rural livelihood changes in Asia. They highlight why the farm size transition has not taken hold and rural smallholders persist despite profound structural change. In three rural villages of Northeast Thailand, they researched that most households can no longer be easily categorized as 'farming households', and most household income generated from agriculture is declining. However, their origins and histories are thoroughly agrarian, and these farming communities have had their distinct histories, agro-ecologies and different integration into the broader Thai space economy. Most middle-aged and older generations continue to farm and identify as farmers or peasants firmly attached to their farmlands.

And the shift into nonfarm work is generational. Older villagers or generations who always see themselves as farmers have returned to the village and re-engaged with farming even if they had been working in other sectors or countries for extended periods. Most do not see their land as a commodity and do not want to sell it. But their children are different. They do not see themselves as farmers, have never done farming, and prefer working in other sectors. The authors assert that this is just a product of how generational and era-defining change has intersected in fast-industrializing countries. Overall, the authors assume that a farm-size transition will occur when the older generation passes on. Their children will not take over the land to do farming. Then generational change will become separated and distinct from historical change. Nevertheless, if nonfarm occupations remain uncertain and social safety nets remain thinly woven, the older people will persist. Therefore, they argue that Thailand's farm size transition will take a long time.

Rigg's arguments are based on Thailand, which has already transitioned to a capitalist economy. But Sitkone village is situated in a transitional economy only recently opened to the global market and under market liberalization and land legal reforms to invite and attract foreign investors in large-scale agricultural plantations since around

the 1990s. Capitalist agriculture is rooted in rural Myanmar and has reached the village.

On the other hand, Vicol et al. (2018) studied the upland transitions of Chin State, one of Southeast Asia's isolated upland regions of Myanmar, through recent livelihood changes and land tenure issues. They argue against a mainstream analysis of the agrarian transition process and rural development narrative that over-emphasized and places agricultural commercialization and cash crops as the key method for rural development, especially in upland regions of Southeast Asia. They argue that it is inappropriate to explain processes of upland agrarian change utilizing a cash crops narrative as the dynamics of land, agriculture and livelihood transformations in Chin State are more diverse and uneven. Their findings show that the southern Chin will likely continue to follow a mixture of swidden cultivation, cash cropping, livelihood diversification, migration and traditional food purchasing strategies.

Similarly, the agrarian transition process in the Myanmar valley alluvial context differs from the highland Chin, other regions in Myanmar and Southeast Asia. The authors cited above recognize that agrarian transition does not occur everywhere at the same rate and that the process differs in each context. Based on the reviews of the above papers, my study seeks to identify analytical challenges that arise from the diverse aspects and entwined nature of agrarian change in Southeast Asia and fill the literature gap on how agrarian transition is progressing, especially in the alluvial context of Myanmar.

I use the structuring processes of "agrarian transition" to understand how immense changes happening on a global scale might also affect alluvial farming in Sitkone Village. It will also help to analyze how differently the agrarian transition process is occurring in the alluvial land context of Myanmar from other parts of Southeast Asia and the West. Besides, crucial external factors such as climate change, mechanization, urban pollution, markets for cash crops, timber and minerals, and foreign direct investment certainly affect alluvial farming. Deforestation, mining, and hydropower dams cause landslides and soil erosion.

CONCLUSION

As Mann (1986, pp. 5, 35, 74) put it, "civilization" starts with alluvial farming. The great kingdoms of Myanmar, including the kingdom of Bagan, would not have existed were it not for the region's surpluses produced by alluvial farmers.

In this paper, my primary goal was to explore how alluvial farmer life-worlds are affected by larger events, such as those related to the concept of agricultural transition. From an existential point of view, I have raised the idea that the "agrarian transition" concept comes secondary to the primary continuous "alluvial transitions" experienced by alluvial farmers. I discussed the nature of alluvial farming and its practices, and I then drew attention to the plight of alluvial farmers today, especially since 2015. After discussing the limitations of the agrarian transition concept, I discovered that this is not the most helpful model for understanding changes in alluvial farming. Also, it is not the most useful concept to project these farmer practices into the future. Many studies on agricultural transition were funded by organizations such as the World Bank, IMF, and WTO (Toporowski, 2000, pp. 116-117).[8] These organizations have US- and developed world-centered agendas that do not align with the interests of Myanmar's alluvial farmers.

The current idea underlying agrarian change is that Third World countries must catch up with submitting their predominantly agricultural mode of production to a capitalist model (Mohanty, 2016b, pp. 1, 3). However, Bernstein (2016, p. 75) follows Byres in noting that only three countries—Japan, Korea, and Taiwan—ever completed the transition as conceived in the Twentieth Century: ("Japan from the late nineteenth century and post-war Korea and Taiwan which were the only cases of completed transition in the capitalist world in the twentieth century").

Why project an end destination only attained by a few as an ideal model for agriculture for the developing world? Furthermore, climate change shows that the neoliberal way of life is not sustainable long-term: we

---

8. 'Current efforts at facilitating a successful capitalist agrarian transition in contemporary poor and transitional economies are dominated by the initiatives of the World Bank and supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the major capitalist economies.'

continue encouraging monocropping and reducing biodiversity on our lands. We need a new model to conceive sustainable agricultural practices that do not damage our climate. We also need one that meets the diverse aspirations of mobile people following different agrarian models, including alluvial farmers.

The current agricultural transition model is not the best concept to understand how alluvial farmers face a transition. What is the point of projecting "agrarian transition" along a now outmoded capitalist model? Without alluvial farming and a surplus to sustain today's complex society, where do we aim to end up after the projected "agrarian transition" is complete?

If Myanmar's alluvial farmers, who farm the most fertile lands in the country, are failing, as they have since 2015, what does this signify for the country's "agrarian transition" as a whole? Climate change, continued military intervention, land grabs, pandemics and civil war make it impossible to plan for any concept of agrarian transition.

As Byres (2016) put it, after the prehistoric agricultural transition came the socialist transition, the capitalist transition, now followed by the neoliberal transition. The neoliberal transition leads to climate change. Are we ready for another fifth, more sustainable, climate-friendly agrarian transition concept? Might such a transition have something to do with the advent of blockchain technology, which is today revolutionizing the finance industry but is also beginning to impact agriculture worldwide?[9]

---

9. Blockchain technology improves the following areas within the agricultural sector: Optimization of the Food Supply Chain – Reducing the time of food origin tracing to a matter of seconds — ensuring safety and improving efficiency. Crop Insurance – Communicates loads, geo way-points and basic compliance information with carriers and registers the quality of the product, its price, location, and parties involved. Transaction – Helps farmers to sell commodities at fair prices and lowering transaction fees thereby supporting smaller farmers to enter the market. Traceability – Smart contracts insure a farmer's crops and claim damages thus replacing old and burdensome insurance processes, which could take up to months (for details see https://www.startus-insights.com/innovators-guide/8-blockchain-startups-disrupting-the-agricultural-industry/). See also: https://www.fao.org/e-agriculture/blog/how-blockchain-can-help-smallholder-farmers

If Myanmar can overcome its civil war, blockchain technology promises to do away with expensive intermediaries between farmers and their markets over the following decades. It also can help manage land rights better and offers better facilities for micro-loans and repayments. So, the old concept of agrarian transition may not continue to have the same overall relevance in the future. Things are beginning to look very different from the model we are still working by.

REFERENCES

Allaverdian, C. (2019). *Land Allocation on Alluvial Land: Land and Livelihoods*. Yangon: Gret Myanmar.

Bernstein, H. (2016). Revisiting agrarian transition: Reflections on long histories and current realities. *Critical Perspectives on Agrarian Transition*, 67-91.

Byres, T. J. (1977). Agrarian transition and the agrarian question. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, *4*(3), 258-274.

Byres, T. J. (1986). The agrarian question, forms of capitalist agrarian transition and the state: An essay with reference to Asia. *Social Scientist*, 3-67.

Byres, T. J. (2016). Foreword. In Mohanty (2016: xiv-xxiv).

Chatty, D. (2002). Mobile Peoples and Conservation. *Anthropology Today*, *18*(4), 1-2.

Cho Ma Ma. (2007). *History of the Lower Riverine Region in the Later Konbaung (1852-1885)*. Ph. D. dissertation, University of Mandalay, Myanmar.

Drahmoune, F. (2013). Agrarian transitions, rural resistance and peasant politics in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, *32*(1), 111-139.

Griffiths, M. (2019). Networks of reciprocity: Precarity and community social organizations in rural Myanmar. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *49*(4), 602-625.

Hein Thar. (2019, 15 August). A deadly fight in Magway Region for the Ayeyarwady's 'gold.' *FrontierMyanmar*. Retrieved 22 April,

2020,   from   https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/a-deadly-
fight-in-magway-region-for-the-ayeyarwadys-gold/

Ingalls, M., et al. (2018). *State of land in the Mekong Region*. Bern Open
Publishing, Bern, Switzerland.

Ivars, B. (2020). Alluvial Tactics: Land Access and Control on the
Ayeyarwady River. *Journal of Burma Studies 24*(1), 37-78.
doi:10.1353/jbs.2020.0003.

Kelly, P. F. (2011). Migration, agrarian transition, and rural change
in Southeast Asia: Introduction. *Critical Asian Studies*, *43*(4),
479-506.

Khin Su Wai. (2019, 16 May). Sagaing pledges to prioritize farmers in
leasing alluvial land. *Myanmar Times*. Retrieved 9 April, 2020,
from https://www.mmtimes.com/news/sagaing-pledges-prior-
itise-farmers-leasing-alluvial-land.html

Mann, M. (1986). *The sources of social power, Vol. 1: A history of
power from the beginning to A.D. 1760.* Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press.

Mohanty, B. B. (2016a). *Critical Perspectives on Agrarian Transition:
India in the global debate.* Oxon: Routledge.

Mohanty, B. B. (2016b). Introduction in Mohanty (2016a: 1-40).
London: Routledge.

Rigg, J. (2001). *More than the soil: rural change in SE Asia*. London:
Routledge.

Rigg, J., Salamanca, A, Phongsiri, M. & Sripun, M. (2018). More farm-
ers, less farming? Understanding the truncated agrarian tran-
sition in Thailand, *World Development, Elsevier, vol. 107(C),*
pages 327-337.

Sam   Aung   Moon,   Geddie,   J.,   &   McPherson,   P.   (2020,   4
March). As Myanmar farmers lose their land, sand
mining for Singapore is blamed. *Reuters*. Retrieved
10   May,   2023,   from   https://www.reuters.com/article/
us-myanmar-sand-singapore-insight-idUKKBN20R0C1

Siok Hwa, C. (1965). Land Tenure Problems in Burma, 1852 to 1940. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *38*(1), 106-134.

Sopher, D. E. (1965). *The Sea Nomads: A Study Based on the Literature of the Maritime Boat People of Southeast Asia*. Book SG. Singapore.

Toporowski, J. (2000). *Political economy and the new capitalism: Essays in honour of Sam Aaronovitch.* London: Routledge.

Vadddhanaphuti, C., Wittayapak, C. (Eds). (2011). *Revisiting Agrarian Transformations in the Greater Mekong Sub-region: New Challenges.* Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Van der Ploeg, J. D. (1993). Rural sociology and the new agrarian question. *Sociologia Ruralis*, *33*(2), 240-60.

Vicol, M., Pritchard, B., & Htay, Y. Y. (2018). Rethinking the role of agriculture as a driver of social and economic transformation in Southeast Asia's upland regions: The view from Chin State, Myanmar. *Land use policy*, *72*, 451-460.

Yee Ywal Myint. (2019, 15 June). Farmers can apply for 50 acres of land. *Myanmar Times*. Retrieved 9 April, 2020, from https://www.mmtimes.com/news/farmers-can-apply-50-acres-land.html

INDEX

Triple Crisis in Myanmar delves into Myanmar's most pressing challenges: the February 2021 coup, the Covid-19 pandemic, and climate change. The book sheds light on the coup's impact and the pandemic's toll on the nation, emphasizing the role of civil society and the plight of displaced migrants. It also explores human rights violations against Myanmar's migrant workers in Thailand and climate change effects on vulnerable communities. This analysis offers a multifaceted view of a country grappling with complex overlapping crises.