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# **POLICY PAPER**

**The next swing of the pendulum?  
Cross-border aid and shifting aid  
paradigms in post-coup Myanmar**

Matteo Fumagalli

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## **Abstract**

The 1 February 2021 military coup in Myanmar confronted the international community, including donors and aid workers, with a significant challenge: how to ensure that relief and life-saving support are delivered to those in greatest need at a time when international attention – and already limited resources – are likely to come under severe stress in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. From the early 2010s onwards, Myanmar had shed its status of international pariah (under western sanctions) to take on the ‘mantel’ of the ‘donors’ darling.’ This reflected an important rapid change from isolation to engagement in the way that many western (and some non-western) actors approached relations with the country. From the late 2000s onwards, international assistance moved from non-governmental organisations in the borderlands – also based in neighbouring countries – to the national government, and from humanitarian aid to development. In the aftermath of the coup the encounter between the international donor community and the people of Myanmar is likely to be re-defined by a triple shift in the aid paradigm putting earlier trends in reverse gear: from engagement to isolation, from development to humanitarian aid and from the state and government to non-state and informal institutions in the borderlands. With the military regime engaged in a de facto aid blockade, cross-border aid is likely to be the most realistic way to deliver humanitarian and emergency aid and relief to local communities, particularly in Myanmar’s border regions. The distribution and delivery of aid will be best served by close cooperation with local migrant-based community-building organisations and civil society groups, and cross-border charities and NGOs based in and around refugee camps, drawing on their networks and experience in delivering aid during previous rounds of refugeehood and displacement.

## **Keywords**

Myanmar/Burma; sanctions; junta; military coup; resistance; international community; cross-border aid; development assistance; humanitarian aid; aid paradigm.

## The military takes over (again) <sup>123</sup>

During the decade from 2011 to 2021 Myanmar experienced some degree of political liberalisation, which was as much heralded domestically and internationally as it was unexpected. A number of significant reforms were introduced, first by then President Thein Sein (2011-2016) and then by the government de facto led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi (2016-2021).<sup>4</sup> The formal handover from direct military rule to a nominally civilian government triggered a dramatic reversal in the posture of the international community, particularly among western states and organisations but also some non-western ones such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Western sanctions were lifted, the country's debt forgiven and a surge in international assistance followed.<sup>5</sup> In the space of very few years the country shed its stigma as an isolated (were it not for a few friendly countries such as China) international pariah under sanctions to become a 'donors' darling.'

The cohabitation between the civilian administration and the military was genuine, but uneasy. Because of both formal and informal considerations (including the military's constitutionally enshrined veto power and the economically-dominant positions of military-affiliated state-owned enterprises), the political dynamics in Myanmar constituted a form of non-negotiated top-down transition, engineered, steered and constrained by the military.<sup>6</sup> Although it was generally presented as a 'transition,' the process was contested. Liberalisation was uneven and unequal, with the extent to which people benefitted depending on their position in the system, their gender, race and class.<sup>7</sup> During this decade pre-existing social, economic and political inequalities were reinforced and at times exacerbated. If anything, it was an instance of authoritarian resilience.

The military takeover of 1 February 2021 compounded the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had put the fragile healthcare system under duress.<sup>8</sup> Far from being a localised issue contained within the boundaries of the country, violence and suffering rapidly spilled over into the neighbouring countries.

The violence the military has unleashed on the population since 1 February 2021 has resulted in over 2,000 deaths and more than 11,000 arrests (of these about 9,000 people remain in detention) and has wrought unspeakable brutality on ordinary people.<sup>9</sup> The UNHCR has estimated some 590,000 newly displaced people since 1 February 2021 among the overall one million displaced people.<sup>10</sup> Violence has escalated on all fronts. Old conflicts and tensions have been reignited, especially in

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1 I am grateful to Michelguglielmo Torri and Giuseppe Gabusi for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

2 The research for this project was supported by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant reference AH/S00405X/1).

3 I examine the coup in greater detail in Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2021: Repression and resistance in a multi-cornered conflict,' *Asia Maior XXXII/2021* (forthcoming).

4 The political opening included, among other things, amnesties and releases of political prisoners, a relaxation of press censorship, the introduction of free elections, the appointment of a quasi-civilian government and then formally a civilian government led by the NLD. The state administration was taken out of military oversight and fully put in civilian hands.

5 Ian Holliday, and Zaw Htet 2017, "International assistance." In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, edited by Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday, 347-54. London: Routledge.

6 Stefano Ruzza, Giuseppe Gabusi and Davide Pellegrino, 'Authoritarian resilience through top-down transformation: making sense of Myanmar's incomplete transition,' *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 49, 2019, pp. 193-209.

7 Kristian Stokke and Soe Myint Aung, 'The transition to democracy or hybrid regime? The dynamics and outcomes of democratization in Myanmar,' *European Journal of Development Research* 32, 2020, pp. 274-293; Soe Ling Aung and S. Campbell 2016, 'The Lady and the Generals,' *Jacobin* 1, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/01/aung-san-suu-kyi-myanmar-burma-elections-military-generals/>

8 Matteo Fumagalli, 'Myanmar 2020: Elections in a pandemic,' *Asia Maior*, XXX/2020.

9 'Myanmar junta killed over 1,500 people, detained 11,000 in year following coup,' *The Irrawaddy*, 1 February 2022.

10 UNHCR, *Myanmar Emergency. Update, 4 May 2022*, available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/92563>

Kayin, Shan and Kachin States and new ones have broken out (in Chin State). Dozens of thousands of Myanmar nationals have found refuge in Thailand and India since the coup, continuing patterns of displacement and refugeehood already established in the early days of independence in 1948 and again after 1975 following clashes between the Myanmar military and the Karen and Karenni ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in the eastern borderlands.<sup>11</sup>

Myanmar is experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe, and the State Administration Council (as the junta calls itself) is engaged in, among other things, an aid blockade, obstructing access to the country and the affected regions by aid workers, destroying infrastructure and requisitioning supplies.

Against this dire backdrop, the coup confronts donors with a new dilemma over how best to continue to support the population without indirectly strengthening or even recognising the military's actions. Crucial questions include the following. Who should the international community deal with on the ground? How is aid best delivered and distributed? Even just posing such questions serves as a stark indicator of how the situation has abruptly changed in the space of just over a year, away from a focus on development assistance shaped by and through the national government to emergency relief via 'anyone but the state.'

This paper intervenes in the debates on 'shifting aid paradigms,'<sup>12</sup> in particular the development versus humanitarian aid debate which has historically accompanied assistance to Myanmar. The cautious opening that followed the Cyclone Nargis catastrophe of 2008 and the reforms in the 2010s led to a dramatic – and rapid – thaw in Myanmar's international relations and a reversal of its (relative)<sup>13</sup> international isolation, leading to a normalisation of aid to the country. Over the span of a decade international assistance came to be characterised by three broad trends: from isolation to engagement; from humanitarian aid to development assistance; and from work with non-state cross-border aid organisations to a centralisation of assistance in the hands of the national government. The pendulum of aid to Myanmar practice is now likely to swing again, from the central government in Nai Pyi Taw to the borderlands and non-state actors, and from development assistance to humanitarian aid. Rather than seeking to reinvent the wheel, the international community would do best to build on and adjust the lessons learnt in previous decades of cross-border aid.<sup>14</sup>

The paper is divided in two parts. In the first I examine the domestic and trans-national fallout from the military coup and the international response. Afterwards, I offer some reflections on how the international community – especially donors – might be able to help, emphasising the salience of non-state governance and the role of local actors, such as community-building organisations and civil society groups, particularly those straddling the Thai-Myanmar border.<sup>15</sup>

11 Not all ethnic armed organisations have taken up arms against the junta. Some have been fairly muted such as the Arakan Army in Rakhine State, while others have sought to negotiate a modus vivendi with the military, such as the Wa State Defence Army, among others (Shona Loong, 'Centre-periphery relations in Myanmar. Leverage and solidarity after the February 1 coup,' *Trends in Southeast Asia, Singapore: ISEAS, Issue 9, 2021*).

12 Woojin Jung, 'Two models of community-centred development in Myanmar,' *World Development* 136, 2020, 105081; Anne Décobert, 'The struggle isn't over: shifting aid paradigms and redefining 'development' in eastern Myanmar,' *World Development* 127, 2020, 104768; Anne Décobert and Tamas Wells, 'Interpretive complexity and crisis: the history of international aid to Myanmar,' *European Journal of Development Research* 32, 2020, 294-315.

13 Relative because even in the period between 1988 and 2010 Myanmar maintained cordial relations with a number of countries, such as China.

14 Cross-border aid refers to "ways to support services for communities in areas where the state has restricted humanitarian access" (Anne Décobert, *The politics of aid to Burma. A humanitarian struggle on the Thai-Burmese border*. London: Routledge, p. 5). Cross-border aid does not simply include assistance provided beyond Myanmar's state borders, in Thailand, Bangladesh or India, but is actually local and transnational at the same time.

15 The research was conducted in Myanmar during the 2013-2019 period and subsequently in Bangladesh in February 2020 and most recently in northern Thailand in March 2022. Discussions on aid need to be embedded in the historical context and recognise the impact and long-lasting consequences of colonial-era knowledge production (Mandy Sadan, 'Why decolonising area studies is not enough: a case study of the complex legacies of colonial knowledge-making in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands,' *New Area Studies*, 1:1, 2020 180-220; Taraphi Than, 'Why area studies need decolonization?' *Critical Asian Studies*, 20 November 2021, <https://crit->

## 2. The international response

Although the origins of the coup and Myanmar's current crisis were domestic, the turmoil had immediate international reverberations. The type and extent of responses varied considerably depending on the political players involved. On 4 February 2021, the United Nations condemned the coup and called for the release of detainees and the restoration of democracy. It also called for dialogue and restraint in the use of force.<sup>16</sup> Russia maintained cordial relations with the junta, as Moscow had been cultivating cooperation and training and had been providing the military with supplies for years.<sup>17</sup> China engaged with the junta, too, but displayed a more mixed approach compared to that of Russia, not least because of Beijing's warm relations with Aung Sang Suu Kyi's government, marking a sharp break from the tense relations during Thein Sein's presidency. Beijing sought to exercise caution regarding engagement with the new regime, although it blocked any strong wording in UN resolutions.<sup>18</sup>

Western countries and organisations were (predictably) firm in their condemnation of the events. The reaction of the European Union was prompt and included sanctions. The US swiftly reintroduced and expanded sanctions against individuals and some entities (military-controlled state enterprises). The UK made similar moves, being historically the 'penholder' in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on drafting positions regarding the situation in Myanmar.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.1. The battle for recognition and the paralysis of the international community

The divisions within the international community were epitomised by the rifts running deep within the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The junta (State Administration Council, SAC) and the parallel anti-military government claiming continuity with the ousted authorities (National Unity Government, NUG) became embroiled in an international contest over who should be considered the legitimate government of the country and who should represent it internationally.<sup>20</sup> Some Myanmar diplomats abroad endorsed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the NUG, as in the case of Myanmar's representative to the United Nations and the Ambassador to the United Kingdom, whose positions were subsequently revoked by the junta. In other cases, such as in South Korea, local authorities allowed the NUG to set up representation.<sup>21</sup>

Recognition of the NUG would be symbolically important and this is what the anti-military movement has been seeking, but it is unlikely – on its own – to change the dynamics on the ground or external diplomatic support. Furthermore, the junta is not short of external supporters, although there is no need for the EU to add itself to the list.

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[icalasianstudies.org/commentary/2021/11/20/commentary-tharaphi-than-why-does-area-studies-need-decolonization](https://icalasianstudies.org/commentary/2021/11/20/commentary-tharaphi-than-why-does-area-studies-need-decolonization)). This point is especially applicable to the question of aid to Myanmar: the categories used in the donor community often uncritically replicate those developed in the colonial area and later perpetuated after independence, such as the dichotomy between a Bamar-Buddhist core and the borderlands, primarily inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities, and typically regarded as sites of violence, resource extraction and insurgency. As Décobert notes, such "interpretive narratives" have been used to make sense of the situation in the country and justify donors' actions and policies (Décobert, 'Interpretive complexity'). For a more nuanced view of Myanmar's peripheries see Patrick Meehan and Mandy Sadan, 'Borderlands,' in Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly and Ian Holliday (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, London: Routledge 2018, 83-91.

16 'UN Security Council condemns military takeover in Myanmar,' *The Diplomat*, 5 February 2021.

17 'Myanmar and Russia's close post-coup relationship,' *The Irrawaddy*, 2 November 2021.

18 Fumagalli, 'Myanmar coup.'

19 Sebastian Strangio, 'China, Russia again veto UN statement on Myanmar conflict,' *The Diplomat*, 30 May 2022.

20 'Quandary at U.N.: Who Speaks for Myanmar and Afghanistan?,' *The New York Times*, 11 September 2021.

21 'Myanmar shadow government sets up office in South Korea,' *Nikkei Asia*, 8 September 2021.

Part of the hesitation on the part of the international community regarding recognition/de-recognition stems from the fact that, no matter how unpalatable, some channels of communication might need to be maintained with the junta (despite requests from the NUG to sever all ties) in order to get a sense of its reasoning and political strategy, to ensure that diplomatic representations remain open and operative on the ground and also to coordinate with whatever actors can distribute Covid-19 vaccines and humanitarian aid in the parts of the country controlled by the military. The junta secured some curious successes in this regard,<sup>22</sup> with the International Court of Justice allowing the military government to represent Myanmar, despite the NUG's attempts to take the seat in a venue in which in 2018 Nay Pyi Taw stood accused of genocide and crimes against humanity in relation to the 2017 'clearance operations' against the Rohingya.<sup>23</sup> UNESCO allowed Myanmar to be represented by the UN Ambassador, who represents the ousted government. In contrast, the UN's Human Rights Council declined to take a position altogether, denying both sides legitimacy. Similarly, the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation refused to decide.

No case better exemplifies the dilemmas and hesitations in the international responses to the coup more clearly than that of ASEAN.<sup>24</sup> Operating by consensus and motivated by a concern about sovereignty and therefore being structurally opposed to interference in a member state's domestic affairs, ASEAN was not the most obvious candidate to take the lead in shaping a regional and international response. On the occasion of a visit by the leader of the junta to Jakarta on 24 April 2021, the organisation and Myanmar announced that they had reached a five-point consensus covering an immediate cessation of violence, the exercise of utmost restraint and dialogue among all parties to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis.<sup>25</sup> On his return to Myanmar, General Min Aung Hlaing reneged on the agreement, stating that these "suggestions" were not binding.<sup>26</sup> ASEAN opted to invite a non-political representative from Myanmar to a summit on 26-28 October, signalling its disapproval of the junta's actions. The organisation's unity was undone when Hun Sen of Cambodia, southeast Asia's longest serving politician (in power for over thirty years) took over as the organisation's envoy to Myanmar. In late spring 2022 Hun Sen visited Myanmar and held meetings with Min Aung Hlaing, but he did not meet either Aung San Suu Kyi or any representative of the NUG.<sup>27</sup> Widely seen as being too close to the junta, Hun Sen was the first foreign leader to visit Myanmar since the coup, and he was given a guard of honour.<sup>28</sup> While his visit involved the delivery of some Covid-related medical equipment, including face-masks, PPE, ventilators and oxygen concentrators, it was also subject to intense criticism even from within ASEAN's ranks, with Malaysia taking a very critical stance.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2. Sanctions are back

The sanctions regime introduced after the 1988 military takeover, the annulment of the 1990 election and the imprisonment of opposition leaders and activists included visa bans and asset freezes on military and administrative personnel, a total ban on arms sales, restrictions on humanitarian aid, withdrawal of the generalised scheme of preferences, embargoes on specific sectors including the

22 Rebecca Barber, 'The people of Myanmar need to be heard, not ostracised, on the international stage,' *Just Security*, 29 March 2022.

23 'Myanmar junta, ousted government fight for recognition at top U.N. court,' *Reuters*, 17 February 2022.

24 Michael Vatikiotis, 'Myanmar crisis highlights ASEAN's identity dilemma,' *Nikkei Asia*, 18 October 2021.

25 ASEAN, 'Chairman's Statement on ASEAN Leaders' Meeting,' Jakarta, 24 April 2021, available at <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>

26 'Myanmar's junta to consider Asean's five-point consensus after 'stabilising' the country,' *South China Morning Post*, 27 April 2021.

27 Sebastian Strangio, 'Myanmar junta decries exclusion of coup leader from ASEAN summit,' *The Diplomat*, 25 October 2021.

28 Delwar Hossain, 'Myanmar crisis and Hun Sen's visit: ASEAN in disarray?' *The Diplomat*, June 2022.

29 David Hutt, 'ASEANs' consensus failure in Myanmar,' *Asia Times*, 5 May 2022.

garment industry, and a ban on the use of US Dollars in international transactions. As Lee Jones shows in his detailed study of the (in)effectiveness of sanctions on Myanmar,<sup>30</sup> these measures had some socioeconomic impact but crucially failed to achieve the political objective: a change in regime conduct.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the regime entrenched itself.

In the aftermath of the 2021 coup the European Union, just like the United Kingdom and the United States, swiftly reintroduced the sanctions that had been suddenly lifted in 2013/2014 to encourage and support the transition. On 22 March, the Council of the European Union raised the possibility of imposing restrictive measures on members of the armed forces and eleven individuals involved in the SAC.<sup>32</sup> In April, the EU extended sanctions to nine members of the junta, the Minister of Information and entities related to the military, including the Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Company Limited (MEH) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), two conglomerates owned and controlled by the armed forces. A third round of sanctions followed on 21 June<sup>33</sup> targeting eight more individuals, three economic entities and the war veterans organisation, which also allegedly supported the coup. In February 2022 the EU imposed a fourth round of sanctions, this time targeting the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), a key source of hard currency revenues for the junta.<sup>34</sup> As of Summer 2022 20 entities and 65 individuals have been targeted.

Breaking the cash flow to the military may not alter its political strategy in the immediate future, but it inflicts punitive measures not only on the armed forces but also on companies that provide it with funds or support its actions. The army top brass hold dozens of bank accounts around the world. These accounts are with banks that have corresponding accounts to conduct foreign currency transactions in Rome, London and New York. These banks can be forced by the EU, the UK and the US to cut the financial flow to the junta. For example, banks in Thailand and Singapore can be compelled by UK regulators to enforce UK sanctions as they conduct transactions in sterling.

All these actions were necessary and are symbolically significant. However, as was noted above, the previous sanctions regime showed that they inflicted damage on people and local businesses whereas the economic impact on the regime was less immediately evident. Furthermore, as earlier rounds of sanctions have shown, it is vital that there is close consultation with Myanmar civil society organisations as they are best placed to advise on which otherwise well-intended actions are likely to have collateral effects on small and medium companies, ordinary workers and the wider population. It is equally important for western countries to closely work with partners such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore, as they have strong business interests in Myanmar, to ensure that there is as close

30 For a critical take on the effectiveness of sanctions, see Lee Jones, *Societies under siege: Exploring how international economic sanctions (do not) work*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

31 As Jones extensively details, during the 1988-2010 period the country's GDP increased by 260% from \$12.6bn to \$45.4bn. Imports rose 1,851% (from \$246m to \$4.8bn) and exports surged a whopping 5,109% (from \$167m to \$8.7bn). Foreign direct investment also grew 207,400% from \$4m to \$8.3bn. Overall, western sanctions effected a reorientation of trade to other Asian partners, and exports grew significantly (Jones, *Societies under siege*).

32 *Council of the European Union*, 'Myanmar/Burma: EU sanctions 11 people over the recent military coup and ensuing repression,' press release, 22 March 2021.

33 *Council implementing regulation EU 2021/638*, 19 April 2021, available at (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/myanmar-burma-eu-imposes-sanctions-on-10-individuals-and-two-military-controlled-companies-over-the-february-military-coup-and-subsequent-repression/>); *Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/998* of 21 June 2021 implementing Regulation (EU) No 401/2013 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Myanmar/Burma, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/21/myanmar-burma-third-round-of-eu-sanctions-over-the-military-coup-and-subsequent-repression/>; *Council of the European Union*, 'Myanmar/Burma: Council extends sanctions for another year,' 29 April 2021; *Council of the EU*, 'Myanmar/Burma: EU imposes sanctions on 10 individuals and two military-controlled companies over the February military coup and subsequent repression,' *press release*, 19 April 2021.

34 *Council of the EU*, Myanmar/Burma: EU imposes restrictive measures on 22 individuals and 4 entities in fourth round of sanctions, 21 February 2022, press release. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/21/myanmar-burma-eu-imposes-restrictive-measures-on-22-individuals-and-4-entities-in-fourth-round-of-sanctions/>

coordination and concerted action as possible in the imposition of bilateral and multilateral sanctions on military interests.

### 3. The pendulum swings again: Triple shifts in the aid paradigm towards Myanmar

In the months following the February coup a new wave of refugees sought safe haven in adjacent Thailand and India.<sup>35</sup> In a May 2022 report, the UNHCR reported around 590,000 estimated refugee movements to neighbouring countries since the coup out of a total 937,000 estimated internally displaced persons. Of these, 234,600 are located in south-eastern Myanmar and 227,300 in the north-western part of the country.<sup>36</sup> The border with Bangladesh has remained relatively quiet this time. China and Laos have kept their borders closed, partly as a result of their policies to contain the spread of COVID-19. 14 million people in Myanmar are in need of humanitarian aid, and of these 6.2 million require urgent support, six times more than before the coup.<sup>37</sup>

Donors have withdrawn and disassociated themselves from the junta. Myanmar's armed forces have imposed travel restrictions on domestic and international humanitarian workers and blocked major roads and aid convoys, thus disrupting supply chains. Physical attacks and arbitrary arrests have been carried out against healthcare and humanitarian workers.<sup>38</sup>

The humanitarian situation in Myanmar is dire and the immediate prospect of political change is bleak, but there are areas in which action could be taken rapidly and in a targeted way so as to increase the impact. This, however, requires a radical rethink of how aid is delivered compared to the past decade or so.

Assistance to Myanmar has tended to have a cyclical nature,<sup>39</sup> oscillating between isolation and engagement, mostly depending on domestic political developments. Aid has tended to fall in two main categories: international development and humanitarian assistance. As Décobert (2020 and 2021), Nilsen (2020) and Jung (2020) explain, there has been a 'conflict' between development and humanitarian aid to Myanmar, with the latter going to community organisations in border and cross-border regions.

Although Myanmar has been regarded as a "true aid orphan" for much of the post-independence period,<sup>40</sup> the reality on the ground has been more complex. During the period between 1990 and 2010 when the country was under western sanctions, international donors and aid organisations unable and/or unwilling to set up bases and operate within the country established logistic and administrative bases in neighbouring countries, typically in Thailand. Funds, supplies and technical assistance on the ground could be channelled across the Thai-Myanmar border, de facto working alongside non-state organisations and alternative governance systems often aligned with armed ethnic organisations. This system enabled funding, supplies and technical support to be channelled to local organisations already operating in the borderlands. Typically operating from and around the Thai border town of Mae Sot, such initiatives were in all respects transnational endeavours with operations straddling the Thai-Myanmar border rather than being simple operations outside

35 'Desperate Burmese refugees flee to Thailand and India to escape crisis,' *The Observer*, 3 April 2021.

36 UNHCR, 'Myanmar Emergency Update.'

37 Irwin Loy, 'Multiple crises spiral in Myanmar one year after coup,' *The New Humanitarian*, 1 February 2022.

38 Loy, 'Multiple crises.'

39 Holliday and Zaw Htet, 'International Assistance.'

40 Holliday and Zaw Htet, 'International Assistance,' p. 349.

Myanmar's borders. This allowed donors to work alongside a whole range of local actors including community-building and civil society organisations, particularly in the education and health sectors.

The humanitarian catastrophe unleashed by Cyclone Nargis in 2008 significantly changed the aid dynamics on the ground and also prompted re-assessment by donors of who should be funded and how – and how services and funding should be provided.<sup>41</sup> This led to a growth in international engagement until aid to Myanmar was finally normalised in the early 2010s with the country's debt forgiven and sanctions lifted. This policy re-orientation was the result of a narrative according to which the country had embarked on a path to democratisation and the political battle could be seen in stark – and simple – terms: Aung San Suu Kyi versus the military. This simple simplistic interpretive narrative of events on the ground shaped the donors' attitudes, in both theory (paradigm) and practice (policy).<sup>42</sup> This led to a triple shift in the paradigm and practices of aid to Myanmar: from isolation to engagement, from humanitarian aid to development assistance and from the borderlands and non-state actors to the central government in Nay Pyi Taw. No longer a pariah state, Myanmar became the donors' darling in the 2010s.

The 2021 coup put all these trends in immediate reverse gear. As international companies wrote off their investments in the country and sought to disassociate themselves from financial entanglement with junta-related companies to minimise reputational damage, donors also began reassessing their priorities and objectives. This led to yet another change in the paradigm and practice of international aid to Myanmar. The first shift entailed a sharp disengagement from the junta and a downgrading of ties from engagement to isolation. This engendered a change in priorities away from development assistance (which in the Myanmar context had focused on infrastructure and big projects as much as other issues from health to education) in favour of immediate relief and providing humanitarian assistance. The third brought a move away from the national government, a key interlocutor with donors, especially under Aung San Suu Kyi, to non-state actors in the periphery.

These triple shifts also offered donors, aid workers and local communities the opportunity to revitalise ties that had been developed before 2011, particularly along the Thai border.

With the junta obstructing the delivery of aid within the country and the NUG demanding that this be avoided in any case,<sup>43</sup> donors need to refocus their attention on alternative non-state forms of governance and organisations. The Thai-Myanmar border is home to a well-established network of local groups that effectively provided aid in the past. Many of these networks remain largely intact, although they have been under-funded due to the re-allocation of funding to organisations based inside Myanmar over the past decade.<sup>44</sup>

The imperative here is to circumvent military obstruction and offer better and better targeted aid.

Working with non-state actors has been acknowledged by the UN.<sup>45</sup> To do this, as Maung Oak Aww notes, donors can draw on the presence and activities of a wide range of actors on the ground, including:<sup>46</sup>

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41 For an overview of some of these dilemmas, see Marte Nilsen, 'Perceptions of rights and the politics of humanitarian aid in Myanmar,' *European Journal of Development Research*, 32, 2020, 338-358; Mark Duffield, *On the end of 'no man's land' – chronic emergency in Myanmar*. Bristol: University of Bristol, 2008.

42 Décobert and Wells, 'Interpretive complexity.'

43 Tin Htet Paing, 'Entrusting Myanmar's junta with aid distribution created 'more opportunities for injustice, civil society organisation says,' *The Irrawaddy*, 2 June 2022.

44 Interview with the leader of an education organisation operating on the Thai-Myanmar border, Chiang Mai, 1 March 2022; Shine Aung, 'How international donors can better offer humanitarian aid to Myanmar,' *The Diplomat* 6 May 2022.

45 'International humanitarian aid for Myanmar shouldn't be delivered via regime, say NUG and allies,' *The Irrawaddy*, 2 May 2022.

46 Maung Oak Aww, 'Effective third-sector actors in aid on the Thailand-Myanmar border,' *New Mandala*, 29 April 2022.

- Community-building organisations, consisting for example of migrant worker associations in Thailand, which can serve as intermediaries, rather than directly refugee aid providers themselves.
- Civil society organisations based in Myanmar's ethnic states; these have served as essential aid providers over the years, providing relief to Karen and Karenni populations over the decades.
- Cross-border based charities operating in and outside refugee camps in Thai border provinces. Such organisations are familiar with the priorities and requirements of the aid industry, and have a capillary network of humanitarian assistance and aid distribution.

This paper does not suggest that relationships should exclusively be formed and maintained with non-state actors. Cooperation with the central governments – and the local authorities – of Myanmar's neighbours is also essential. China has supplied vaccines to areas controlled by ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), including vaccines delivered by the Chinese Red Cross. The government of Thailand would need to be persuaded to recognise the necessity and advantages of cross-border aid, whereas so far the authorities have refrained from allowing aid to be distributed through non-state organisations along the Thai-Myanmar border. Similar efforts would need to be pursued with India and China too.

#### **4. Conclusion**

More than a year on from the coup, the international community's efforts and actions have been ineffective. As new crises and emergencies have broken out in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Ukraine, Myanmar is now struggling to receive the attention it deserves.

The 2010s saw Myanmar move away from international pariah status to rapidly become the donor's darling. The dynamics are now in reverse gear. A new shift in the aid paradigm is in the making, once again away from delivery of assistance to and through the national government and away from 'development' in favour of humanitarian aid to and through local civil society and community-building organisations in border regions on either side of Myanmar's borders.

There is no easy solution to the plight of the people of Myanmar. As international attention and resources wane – tomorrow's new crisis is always around the corner, overshadowing today's – the efforts of the international community should not be to 'reinvent the wheel,' seeking to come up with something new for Myanmar. Instead, donors should focus on the delivery of cross-border aid in cooperation with and guided by the experience and insights of the actors on the ground, within and outside Myanmar's borders, that did precisely that in the pre-2010s period. Just as Myanmar is home to several competing forms of state-building, it is now high time to engage with non-state governance systems to deliver effective aid to those in need.

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