



DEMAC

DIASPORA
EMERGENCY ACTION
& COORDINATION

DIASPORA
ORGANIZATIONS
AND THEIR
HUMANITARIAN
RESPONSE IN
MYANMAR



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This real-time review is part of the Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination initiative (DEMAC) “Research study on diaspora humanitarian response and engagement”.

The review focuses on the period from November 2021 until January 2022, providing a snapshot of the humanitarian response of Myanmar diaspora organizations to the current crisis. The purpose of this real-time-review is to better understand diaspora activities supporting the humanitarian response to the crisis in Myanmar and border regions.

The real-time review was undertaken by a team of consultants from Alinea International, an international humanitarian consultancy, supported by a field researcher from Myanmar based on the border of Myanmar and Thailand. This study applies a mixed methods approach, analyzing quantitative and qualitative data from social media accounts, interviews and academic and grey literature.

The research team undertook an initial rapid review to map the structures and activities of 30 diaspora organizations involved in the response. The research team then conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 people representing diaspora organizations, international humanitarian organizations and people affected by the crisis. Social media posts from the Facebook accounts of 30 diaspora organizations were also monitored over the six-week period of the review.

Across the period of the real-time review, Myanmar diaspora organizations were actively engaged in the humanitarian response. They were fundraising, providing assistance and advocating to their country of residence governments. Their activities did not intersect with the broader international humanitarian response. While international humanitarian organizations were aware that diaspora organizations were engaged in the response, they were not aware of how the diaspora was organized, nor their activities in response to the crisis.¹

In Myanmar and border areas, diaspora organizations coordinate with local operational partners such as community-based organizations and churches, identifying needs and channelling financial and other humanitarian assistance through them. There was almost no coordination between diaspora organizations and the international humanitarian response in Myanmar. Just one diaspora organization reported indirectly coordinating with an INGO.² International humanitarian actors have not mapped diaspora communities supporting the humanitarian response, a key entry point to establish coordination.

Most diaspora organizations have very informal accountability systems as compared to international humanitarian organizations. This is reflected in the size and nature of the diaspora organization. For smaller organizations, often a verbal or brief written confirmation that funds have been received by the local partner is considered sufficient, with reporting then given to the diaspora organization membership and donors at the next networking event.³

Myanmar has an extensive, active and committed diaspora. The type of support prioritized is independent of international aid categories of humanitarian assistance, human rights, protection or direct support for politics and civil disobedience. Some organizations interviewed for example have a particular focus on reporting human rights violations⁴, while also providing life-saving assistance and support to the civil disobedience movement. Diaspora organizations are keen to explore any additional opportunities, including humanitarian ones, to provide the necessary support to people in need. They are exhausted and depleted following years of attempting to meet critical needs for assistance.⁵

The international humanitarian community recognizes the unique value offered by diaspora organizations—their reach in areas inaccessible to international actors, access to real-time information and people, some of whom may move regularly⁶, and capacity to act informally and relatively quickly, unrestrained by formal bureaucracy. They have an ability to meet needs that are impossible for the international community to address.

Unsurprisingly, the key challenges for diaspora organizations are funding and resources. Many organizations operate on a voluntary basis⁷, necessarily limiting the time available from their members. Like international humanitarian organizations, diaspora organizations are also challenged by access. For diaspora organizations supporting the civil disobedience movement, providing support can be particularly dangerous, especially when using Hundi and communicating through underground networks.⁸

¹ Humanitarian Organization Interviews 1, 4, 5.

² Diaspora Organization Interview 8.

³ Diaspora Organization Interview 6, 8, 10.

⁴ Diaspora Organizations Interview 7 and 8.

⁵ Diaspora Organization Interview 8, 9, 10.

⁶ Humanitarian Organization Interview 2, 4, 5.

⁷ Diaspora Organization Interview 7.

⁸ New York Times (2021) *They Wait Hours to Withdraw Cash, but Most A.T.M.s Are Empty*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/07/world/asia/myanmar-cash-coup.html>



Recommendations

- 1. Protect the unique value of diaspora organizations.** Diaspora organizations have information, access and capabilities that international humanitarian organizations do not, often due to their existence outside of the formal international humanitarian system. Diaspora organizations can address important gaps in the humanitarian response. In order to protect this value, do not formalize broad diaspora organization engagement as part of the international humanitarian system.
- 2. Informally connect to progress mutual objectives of information, advocacy, access and inclusive assistance.** Build on the mutual desire for diaspora and international humanitarian organizations to strengthen engagement with each other, beginning with awareness of priorities, messaging and activities. This may help to strengthen the response through addressing gaps and duplication, and providing a cross-check on perspectives of the situation and needs.
- 3. Formally connect where it is safe to do so:**
 - a. Connecting the international with the local. Diaspora organizations are well connected with various communities and community organizations within Myanmar. They may be able to assist international organizations to identify which community organizations are increasingly capable of receiving international assistance, and which the international community may be interested in connecting with formally.
 - b. Draw on the UN's successful engagement and coordination with the private sector for disaster preparedness, response and recovery.⁹ There are many similarities between the private sector and diaspora, in that they are keen to engage and will do so regardless of the international humanitarian system; they both offer unique value to the response and do not necessarily adhere to humanitarian principles.
 - c. Connecting the diaspora with the private sector: the private sector is increasingly engaged in international humanitarian assistance. It often has resources but may lack local connections and information.
- 4. Engage in mutually beneficial ways.** An important caveat for international humanitarian organizations when connecting with diaspora organizations. Diaspora organizations are often over-worked and under-resourced, usually seeking connections to raise funds and progress advocacy. It is important to respect expectations that any engagement will be mutually beneficial.
- 5. Be explicit about the impact of humanitarian principles.** International humanitarian organizations who aim to adhere to humanitarian principles may need to explain what this means for their ability to engage with diaspora organizations upfront. This will make it easier for international humanitarian organizations to determine how they might be able to engage.

⁹ See for example the Connecting Business Initiative: <https://www.connectingbusiness.org/>



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