

PREVIEW

# Protracted displacement, local economies and protection: communities and ethnic armed organisations in Myanmar

Protracted Displacement Economies, Myanmar team

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For more information see <https://www.displacementeconomies.org/>

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Following the military coup of 1 February 2021, some one-and-a half-million people have been forcibly displaced, and at least 3000 killed by the Myanmar Army. The half-million IDPs in the southeast alone include ethnic nationality Karen and Mon communities, where the Protracted Displacement Economies (PDE) team and local partner groups are undertaking research.

The resilience with which communities respond to threats is extraordinary. One of the main themes identified in the PDE research is the importance of faith-based and ethno-linguistic networks. These are key elements in 'social capital' – resources which allow individuals, families, communities and ethnic nations to absorb, adapt to and sometimes transform the hazards they experience, in order to survive. For most communities in Myanmar, protection begins at home, with CSOs, national NGOs and EAOs all playing important roles. As international humanitarian access is very limited, local actors are at the forefront of protecting human rights and helping to ensure the survival of communities. Not surprisingly, given the SAC's continued attacks on civilians, including several well-documented massacres, many are struggling to sustain basic security and livelihoods.

The resilience of communities is shared and enhanced by CSOs and EAOs. Following the coup, several of Myanmar's longer-established EAOs have provided shelter to a new generation of Burmese democracy activists from towns and cities, who have fled the SAC's violence but continue the struggle for democracy.

In addition to offering a relatively protected space, many of Myanmar's EAOs provide health, education and other services to conflict-affected communities. For example, the KNU and NMSP education department separately administer almost 1,500 schools, providing exemplary mother tongue-based and multilingual education to some of the most vulnerable and marginalised students in the country. EAOs such as the KNU and NMSP also offered help in the Covid crisis.

Across much of the country, EAOs are protection actors. However, in other cases EAOs have aligned with the junta. This does not necessarily mean they share in the SAC's abuses, but in many cases armed groups have poor human rights records.

The case studies from Mon and Karen areas illustrate some of these themes. Locations selected reflect the diverse settings in which long-term displaced people live, the challenges they face and the resourceful strategies they adopt.

Our research with local communities, civil society groups and EAOs shows the importance of community agency and 'protection partnerships' with CSOs and EAOs. The challenges and achievements of localisation and resilience are illustrated in the three case studies. Protection means physical security, but also protection of longer-term ('second generation') rights, including access to equitable economies and livelihoods and local development, including mother tongue-based, multilingual education.

These frameworks are significant achievements, especially because most activities are carried out in zones of recent or ongoing armed conflict and violence against communities. In this context, community leaders, civil society actors and EAOs play important protective and mobilisation roles. They need better political, technical and financial support.

International support to local agencies in Myanmar should be a matter of urgency, given the significant needs and proven capacities of CSOs and EAO line departments. This is also an act of solidarity, supporting suppressed people in their struggle for a better life, against one of the most vicious regimes in the world – what Hugo Slim has called 'Humanitarian Resistance'.

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## Imprint



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