

Myanmar COVID–19 Monitoring Community Assessment

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Executive Summary



This report represents the main findings from the first round of village-level community assessment of the economic and social impacts monitoring of COVID-19 in Myanmar. A total of 224 individuals (four per village, selected for their knowledge of the situation of the village, and representativity of key sub-groups), were interviewed across 56 villages, in two townships in every state/region across the country.¹ All interviews were conducted by phone in July 2020 and lasted approximately one hour each. **The below findings are a snapshot of the situation as of July 2020, prior to the surge in case numbers in late August, at a time when many travel restrictions were lifted and the official number of COVID-19 cases was around 350.**

Myanmar reported the country's first cases of COVID-19 in late March 2020, followed shortly thereafter by confirmation of community transmission. In the following months, though testing was initially extremely limited, the Ministry of Health and Sports responded with robust contact tracing and

¹ Two townships were selected in each of the country's 14 States and Regions. For each State and Region, one of the townships was selected based on participation in the NCDDP. Two villages were then selected from each township primarily based on prior contact through previous research.

implemented strict quarantine protocols for travelers entering Myanmar from abroad (primarily Myanmar citizens returning home), and for domestic and international cross-border migrants returning to their villages. Restrictions on domestic and international travel, as well as curfews and closures of businesses and schools, were implemented across the country before they were relaxed in June and July 2020. In April 2020, the Union government issued the COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan, which included steps taken by the government to control transmission and mitigate the economic and social impacts of both the virus and measures implemented to control its spread. Assistance from the Union government included provision of foodstuffs to poorer households, a moratorium on debt collection, a one-time cash payment to households in need, and a top-up in existing cash transfer programs targeting pregnant women, nursing mothers, and the elderly.

Respondents indicated that fear of contamination was by far the main concern of villagers. However, evidence suggests that adherence to social distancing measures and government regulations waned over time. Compliance with government instructions was higher during the early stages of the pandemic response following the discovery of the virus in Myanmar. As the pandemic continued, and contamination risk remained low (at the time of the interviews), villagers' compliance with social distancing, mask wearing, and other preventative measures to control the spread of the coronavirus, waned. A village administrator, describing the progressive change in behavior commented:

“At first, everyone wore a mask when going out. Now, they don't wear masks. My family looks at me like I am strange if I wear a mask to go out”.

In July 2020, the fear of COVID-19 and restrictions to control the spread of the virus was already impacting the availability of, and responsiveness to, non-COVID-19 related health services across the country, even in areas with little to no community spread. Villagers in areas without health centers are required to travel to another village or the township center for routine and emergency health-care, which was at times complicated by a lack of inter-regional transportation, quarantine regulations on return to their village, and imposed curfews. According to village representatives, there were numerous instances where mobile clinics, midwives, and township health officers refused to travel to some of the villages partaking in the study due to a fear of COVID-19 contamination. Instead, villagers in need of routine healthcare checks were referred to township hospitals, where villagers incurred significant debt in order to pay for higher standards of care than may have been necessary.

COVID-19 has taken a toll on rural livelihoods. According to village representatives, the economic situation had already worsened by July 2020 in all but one of the 56 research villages. The timing of COVID-19 impacted both the harvest and the planting season; negatively affecting travel of both migrant labor needed for harvesting, as well as, agents buying crops and selling inputs, often leaving farmers without labor to harvest and plant or otherwise without cash to pay workers or buy inputs. A female respondent confirmed the increasingly dire situation: *“Right now, I am mentally very tired. As one day ends, I always find myself worrying about how I will eat the next day—even at night I cannot sleep thinking about it until dawn breaks.”*

Traditional methods of meeting economic needs such as migration and receiving advanced wages before the harvest, were severely impacted by COVID-19 related travel restrictions. Without the usual safety nets or stop gaps, village representatives indicated that villagers were living on fewer resources and increasing their debt burdens. Most village representatives reported that households were seeking to reduce their expenses, wherever possible, by living on less food, purchasing lower quality food or increasing consumption of foodstuffs that could be foraged locally rather than purchased. Villagers were frequently also drawing down their savings and selling or pawning assets other than land in exchange for cash.

The economic impacts of the virus have been particularly felt in areas that were already vulnerable, such as villages: (i) typically affected by natural disasters (flooding, drought, pests, or poor weather); (ii) with a recent history of poor harvests leading to increased debt burdens; (iii) reliant on border trade; (iv) villages near active fighting or land mines making foraging in nearby forests dangerous; (v) reliant on brokers for inputs and market access; and (vi) with large populations of casual laborers or households reliant on remittances from migrant workers.

The pandemic has significantly increased debt burdens and impaired villagers’ abilities to repay their existing debts. To make up for the shortfall in income and remittances, village representatives reported that a significant number of villagers—in three-quarters of villages with available data—tried to take out new loans to cope with the crisis. A respondent reported:

“What can we do as the debts must be paid back? We have to take out new loans from different sources again to repay back old ones and also apologize to others and try to postpone payments for a while.”

Notwithstanding the prolonged and sudden stressors faced by villagers, social relations in the villages partaking in the study remained remarkably strong. Socially diverse villages appeared to fare slightly better. In those village where relations worsened, two factors contributed: first, for a temporary period, returning migrants were treated with suspicion in many villages due to fears that they may be inadvertent carriers of COVID-19; second, whether perceived or real, the opaque distribution of aid using the government's eligibility criteria, coupled with the seemingly poor organization of the aid mechanism, led to tensions in various communities. Not all of these could be resolved amicably despite the efforts of local leaders to mobilize additional resources from within the village.

However, the research suggests that women are disproportionately affected by the crisis. Concerns over money and food security disproportionately impact women, who are often those responsible for household finances and cooking. As one respondent explained: *"Women are the most affected by this outbreak. They have so many burdens, as managing money and preparing food are their duty, they worry about debt and food shortages."*

Local leaders collaborated with each other in 40 of the research villages. There is strong evidence that where leaders collaborated, villagers received more aid. Trust in local leadership had an important effect on how villages perceived and accepted COVID-19-related health measures.

Most research villages received some form of aid, but aid was generally viewed as supplementary, rather than a sufficient source of support for families during the April–May lockdown period or thereafter. An aid recipient of the 15,000 kyats cash transfer noted:

**"What can be done with this amount of money?
I mean thank you, but it is like ringing a bell
with a leaf—no sound comes out."**

01

PAGE 05-07

Background & Methodology



Photo by bckfwd on Unsplash

The World Bank launched an initiative in June 2020 to monitor the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in Myanmar. Its objective is to identify how households, firms, and communities across Myanmar are preparing for, experiencing, and responding to the pandemic and its impacts, and to monitor the evolution of these impacts over time.

The initiative includes two complementary and parallel activities: (i) a high-frequency phone survey of households and firms implemented in eight rounds over the course of six months, in order to assess economic impacts on households' welfare and firms' activities; and (ii) a community-level assessment, conducted through several rounds of phone interviews with community representatives over the course of one year. This monitoring system seeks to provide data to the government and development partners in near real-time, to support an evidence-based response to the crisis and to inform all stakeholders on policy and programming to mitigate the short- and medium-term impacts of the crisis. Thematic Briefs will consolidate findings from the surveys and the community

assessment for a deeper analysis on specific strategic issues. This report presents the findings of the first round of the community-level assessment.

The community-level assessment investigates the impacts of COVID-19 in six focus areas: (i) health and behavior; (ii) livelihoods and migration; (iii) coping mechanisms; (iv) social relations; (v) leadership; and (vi) aid. In addition, the research was designed around several factors (markers), that may contribute to either deepening or mitigating the impacts of the pandemic.

These factors included, whether or not a village has participated in the National Community Driven Development Project (NCDDP), as a marker for participatory governance,² distance to the nearest marketplace (a village is considered remote if the travel time to the nearest marketplace is over 45 minutes), whether or not a village is affected by conflict (a village is considered conflict-affected if it is located in an area administered, in part of wholly by an ethnic armed organization, or located in an area with active conflict), natural disasters (villages are considered disaster-affected if they are in an area that has been affected by a major disaster), the agroecological zone (coastal, dry, hill), the degree of economic diversity (a village is deemed economically diverse if it has at least one other livelihood in addition to the primary livelihood, excluding casual labor, buying and selling, and economic migration), the level of migration (the level of migration is calculated as the percentage of villagers, who had migrated prior to the pandemic, in relation to the village population. For example, moderate migration is defined as 6–15 percent of villagers having migrated prior to the pandemic), and the degree of social (ethnic and/or religious) diversity (social diversity is defined as two or more ethnic groups, and/or two or more religious groups, living in a village).

The unit of research of the community-level assessment is the village. Two townships were selected in each of the country's 14 States and Regions. For each State and Region, one township was selected based on participation in the NCDDP. Two villages were selected from each township, based on the ability of the research team to contact respondents which was dependent on both phone coverage and—considering the complexity of interviews by phone—established prior contact through previous study rounds. The convenience sample comprised 56 villages.

The research used two different instruments for data collection: (i) a mostly structured questionnaire, administered to village heads; and (ii) an interview guide, predominantly comprised of open questions, administered to three informal representatives (key respondents), per village. Key respondents were drawn from representatives of ethnic and religious minorities, livelihood groups, women's groups, as well as poor or vulnerable villagers.³

² The NCDDP builds participatory village and village tract leadership structures. All villages in project townships receive annual block grants for four consecutive years. The NCDDP villages selected for this research have completed at least three grant cycles.

³ During round one preparation, researchers contacted village heads and requested contact information of informal leaders among the identified groups. Based on this information the research team selected the survey respondents.

Interviewees were asked about their assessment of the situation in their respective village, as well as, some questions regarding their personal experiences. The interview guide for the key respondents also included targeted follow-up questions for women and minority ethnic and religious respondents to elicit a deeper understanding of their experience, and how it may differ from men and respondents from the majority religious or ethnic group.

All interviews were conducted by phone during the month of July 2020 lasting approximately one hour. The findings below represent a snapshot of experiences by villagers in selected villages as at July 2020. All but two of the 56 village heads interviewed were men. By contrast, 75 of the 168 key respondents were women. In all, 224 interviews were held during round one of the research.

The sample is not intended to be representative. Rather, it is designed to provide insight into Myanmar village life during the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to unpack community level dynamics and their evolution as the crisis unfolds.

Annex 1 provides more detail on the methodology and defines the aforementioned village markers.

02

PAGE 08-14

Health & Behavior

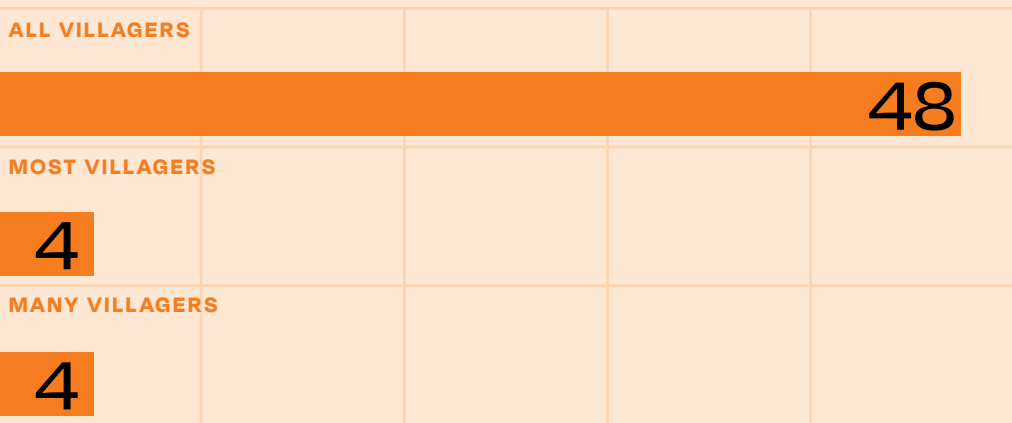
2.1 Knowledge of the Disease



All village representatives indicated that there was some knowledge of COVID-19 in their village, but the extent and accuracy of that knowledge varied. In 48 villages, village heads reported that all villagers knew of the virus (Chart 1), while 8 representatives estimated that not all villagers knew of the virus in their village. The research showed that in some villages, there was some confusion about the incubation period of COVID-19 and the purpose of quarantine, with villagers questioning why people returning to the village had to be quarantined if they were asymptomatic. As a woman from a village in Mon State explained: *"We have to go to the sea to work in our village, we are not likely to get infected by the disease. Few of us are very scared. It's also due to not knowing what to fear. We have few educated people. Most people are casual laborers. Only young people who have information are scared."*

CHART 1

Number of Villages where Village Heads Estimated Villagers knew of the Coronavirus



2.2 Compliance with Government Instructions

The government of Myanmar issued a range of instructions to contain the spread of the virus. In several cases, local authorities (at the township or village tract level), added further directions, particularly with regards to the movement of people. The research identified a total of 12 directions for villagers to follow, including the frequent washing of hands, keeping a physical distance from others, wearing a mask outside the home, not gathering in groups or attending social or religious events, and avoiding unnecessary travel. According to respondents, villagers have been able to access information about COVID-19 relatively easily and with regularity. The most reported means of communication were loudspeakers, television, Facebook and the radio. Village leaders used loudspeakers almost every day to communicate government directions to curtail local transmission.

Researchers asked village heads which directions villagers continued to follow in July 2020, noting that this was over four months following the start of Myanmar's COVID-19 outbreak, and at a time when there were some 350 cases officially reported nationwide. In response, village heads reported that villagers in 42 villages followed government instructions only to a limited extent (Chart 2). In thirteen villages, instructions were followed to a moderate extent. In only one village did villagers follow the majority of instructions.⁴ The most frequently followed instructions were, not gathering in groups (32 villages), washing hands (31 villages), wearing masks (27 villages), and avoiding social or religious gatherings (20 villages).

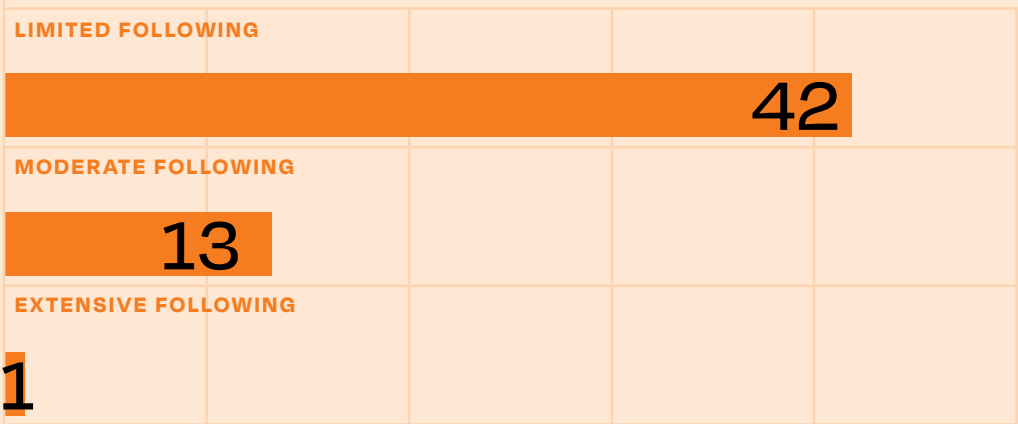
Adherence to government regulations waned over time. Compliance with government instructions was higher during the early stages of the pandemic response following the discovery of the virus in Myanmar. As the pandemic continued and

⁴ 'Limited' is defined as villagers following three or fewer instructions, 'moderate' as villagers following 4–6 instructions, and 'extensive' as villagers following seven or more of the government's instructions.

there were no local transmissions in villages or townships, villagers became complacent about social distancing, mask wearing, and other preventative measures to control the spread of the coronavirus. For example, at the beginning of the restrictions, farmers in a remote, conflict-affected village in Shan State thought that they had to remain at home and could not help fellow villagers with clearing their fields. Subsequently, those farmers felt that gathering for work with others within the village was not sufficiently risky and they returned to their normal work habits. In a village in Kayah State, villagers no longer wore masks unless they had to pass a checkpoint to another village or township. A respondent described the situation in his village as at July 2020: *“Currently, people are no longer wearing masks. When one mask used to cost 700 kyats, everyone was wearing them. Then the price lowered to 100 kyats, and now no one wears them. But, if they travel to town, they wear them, just not around the village. But everyone is following the rules less and less.”*

CHART 2

Village Head Estimates of Number of Villages with Villagers Following Instructions



The findings indicate that disaster-affected villages were seemingly better prepared for the crisis. Noticeably, all of them had a health post compared to less than half of the villages not affected by a natural disaster. This finding also helps explain why health workers were involved in the COVID-19 response in all disaster-affected villages, but in only about half of the other villages. Villagers in disaster-affected villages also followed government instructions to a markedly higher degree. This would indicate a greater procedural and mental preparedness in disaster-affected villages, to external events and threats.

2.3 Engaging with People in Quarantine

At the time of the interviews in July 2020, there were villagers in quarantine in only 10 of the 56 villages under research. However, the majority of villages reported having had people quarantined in their village, or their villagers quarantined in a nearby village at some point since April 2020. In several research villages, migrants were given a deadline by which they had to return to the village to avoid quarantining. Those returning to the village after the deadline were required to quarantine in whatever venue the village had made available.

Those villagers with sufficient means supported their quarantining neighbors in villages with dedicated quarantine centers for those returning from Yangon or other larger towns and cities or from China or Thailand. In a village in Bago Region, villagers provided food and even cell phone minutes. There, some families also shared some of the aid they had received. In a village in Mon State, villagers provided food, water, and clothes. Support was provided either personally, by the monastery, or through the local COVID-19 protection committee (more information provided below).

As of July 2020, respondents observed that villagers in all villages were worried about the future. By far, the most common concern revolved around the possibility of being infected with the virus. Respondents in 47 villages felt that the majority of villagers shared this concern, common also among by local health workers. At the time, it was generally believed that the virus came only from abroad. Villagers thus stigmatized migrants who returned from outside of Myanmar and treated them with suspicion. In a village in Chin State, although church youth and relatives helped with agricultural duties of quarantined people, and village elders shared food with those in quarantine, villagers blamed not only the returnees from abroad for COVID-19, but their family members as well. In a village in Yangon Region, relatives refused to welcome returning family members. Villagers also monitored the quarantined migrants closely so that they completed the full quarantine period. Similarly, villagers in a village in Mon State, with otherwise stable social relations, did not greet returning migrants, avoided them, and blamed them for coming back and potentially spreading the virus. In a very remote village in Tanintharyi Region, for instance, there was some initial discrimination against returnees in quarantine. In this case, villagers' concern also centered around the cost of quarantining people; nothing had been budgeted, and the returnees did not have enough money to buy food. Largely attributable to the intervention of the village head to raise awareness about the process, villagers' attitudes changed and a group of volunteers accompanied the village head to collect donations.

CASE STUDY 1:

Fear of contamination from returnees in quarantine

A returnee family from Myawaddy was required to quarantine in a bamboo forest on the outskirts of their village in Yangon Region, however did not own their own bamboo forest. None of the other villagers were willing to let them quarantine on their own bamboo forest plots. A compromise was reached which allowed the family to quarantine in their own home for the mandated period. They did not have enough money for food to last the entire quarantine period, during which they were unable to work. Other villagers provided them with rice, oil, and other supplies for the duration of their quarantine. However, the family did not have their own water source on their plot, and neighbors did not consent to providing access to their water source due to fear of viral transmission. To resolve the issue, the village administrator had to arrange for the installation of a pipe from the neighbor's water source to their home.

There was a correlation between the level of concern of villagers and the extent of migration where, the more extensive migration in a village, the greater the concern regarding infection risk. This concern among those villages which saw greater migration and mobility trends was so strong that in a village in Yangon Region with extensive migration, villagers were resisted joining the local COVID-19 prevention committee.

However, the distrust of migrants was temporary and did not evolve into long-term ostracization of returnees. Social relations with migrant workers generally recovered after the quarantine period ended and, sharing food with people in quarantine was a widespread occurrence in the research villages. In a village in Bago Region, for example, respondents reported that social cohesion even improved as a result of the support provided to quarantined families (see section 5 below on Social Relations).

2.4 Health Impacts

The research suggests that fear of COVID-19 and restrictions to control the spread of the virus may also have impacts on other areas of health. Village representatives reported that there had been a closure of local health centers and clinics and limited space at hospitals due to attempts to enforce distancing between patients. They also reported difficulties in accessing routine care such as contraceptives. For villages without a health center, villagers may have had to travel to another village or the township for routine and emergency health-care, but with villages restricting access from outsiders, difficulties were reported in seeking routine, non-emergency care. For chronic illnesses, surgeries, or other procedures, travel to larger cities, state capitals or even Yangon or Mandalay have become commonplace, but due to quarantine rules, villagers travelling to these cities must quarantine after seeking healthcare outside the village. For those otherwise in poor health or recovering from a procedure, quarantining in a shared facility or a remote location could prove difficult. Furthermore, mobile clinics and traveling midwives or health officers in some instances, refused to travel to villages and made villagers come to them, or referred them to township hospitals.

CASE STUDY 2:

The Impact of COVID-19 on Healthcare

A respondent from Kayah State shared his recent experience seeking healthcare. In the early stages of his wife's pregnancy, they had regular check-ups with midwives at the rural dispensary located in the village tract.

The couple requested for the midwives to let the wife deliver the baby at the rural health care center, but their request was rejected. The respondent indicated: *"I am not sure why they rejected us to deliver the baby in the village health care center. Maybe because they are afraid of the virus. Actually, we prefer to deliver our baby here in the village. Because normally most of the villagers give birth at this rural health care center as we cannot do it in our homes".* They were referred to Loikaw general hospital, where the couple opted for an individual room in order to minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure, incurring significant unexpected debt.

03

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Livelihoods & Migration



According to respondents, long-term economic disruption due to the pandemic was the second most important concern after fear of contamination in villages. Overall, respondents indicated that the majority of villagers, in 20 of the villages under study, expressed significant concern regarding economic hardship.⁵ As a village administrator in Ayeyarwady Region described, “*Business is not very good. The paddy didn’t come up, the price of rice isn’t good. Those who work in Yangon are having trouble; there are some hardships in repaying debts. Overall, it is getting more difficult for the village.*”

⁵ There was some variation, however. Wealthier villagers seemed to be more afraid of being infected, while the poor were preoccupied with concerns about not having enough to eat or not being able to support their families and service debts.

3.1 Livelihoods

CCOVID-19 had already taken a toll on rural livelihoods. According to respondents, the economic situation worsened in all but one village in Sagaing Region, since the beginning of the outbreak. The timing of COVID-19 and related social distancing measures has impacted both the harvest and the planting season. Further, restrictions on travel of key personnel such as laborers, agents, buyers, as well as the drop in demand for export crops, had led to cashflow shortages for farmers to sufficiently prepare for the next season. The economic impacts of the pandemic have been particularly felt in areas affected by natural disasters including those affected by pests and poor weather, villages with a recent history of poor harvests, villages reliant on border trade or brokers for market access or near active fighting or land mines making foraging in nearby forests dangerous, and villages with large populations of casual laborers or households reliant on remittances from migrant workers.

Rural livelihoods in Myanmar have changed drastically over the past decade due to a variety of factors, from increased legal migration to neighboring countries, to transitioning from labor-intensive to mechanized agriculture. Local farms using machinery for planting and harvesting need fewer casual laborers, thus villagers have turned to internal and cross-border migration to support their families. The relationship between mechanization and reliance on inputs, shifts from subsistence to plantation agriculture, and migration, were cited in most research locations. Most areas reported local outmigration, in search of agricultural work or to cities due to lack of opportunities in agricultural work at home. Some areas, like Kachin and Kayin States, also reported local farmers' reliance on seasonal migration by agricultural workers from Ayeyarwady Region and the Dry Zone. Respondents in border states in particular Mon and Kayin States, stressed the importance of migration to Thailand and other countries as a response to a lack of local employment and livelihood opportunities.

The economic impacts of COVID-19 on all occupational groups need to be seen and understood in the context of a dynamic local economy. Certain trends, such as increased mechanization in areas with labor shortages, or where increases in agricultural productivity have already led to outmigration, seem to have been accelerated or reinforced by the pandemic. Others, such as a decreasing debt burden due to the arrival of more affordable credit, have been reversed. For migrant workers returning home in need of work, some villages were able to accommodate in agricultural short-term or casual work on family landholdings, however other sectors had a shortage in work opportunities. As such, many returning migrant workers were unable to be absorbed into the Myanmar labor force and were unable to make up for the loss of income from remittances.

3.2

Income and Job Losses

Villagers experienced income and job losses in all but five villages of the 56 research villages. Respondents attributed income losses to a wide range of causes including: lockdowns preventing them from reaching work in other villages; physical distancing limiting certain kinds of activities; lack of inputs needed for agriculture; lack of buyers of agricultural products; significantly reduced remittance flows from migrants; and work suspensions, particularly on construction sites and on plantations with export crops. Some areas were particularly affected as the imposition of movement and physical distancing restrictions coincided with the planting season, for instance in villages in Shan State. As seen in Case Study 3, personal experiences can be devastating.

CASE STUDY 3:

Travails of a Woman Headed Household

Ma Hla Hla is a 30-year old woman who lives with her elder sister and younger siblings in Rakhine State. She and her elder sister work in agricultural jobs and sell the seasonal edible leaves they collect from the forest to support the family unit. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, they have had difficulty securing food sufficient to feed the family due to government instructions preventing their travel beyond village boundaries in search of casual work. "For those who have nothing, at least before if they couldn't get a job, they could go and look for a livelihood elsewhere. Now they cannot go anywhere, and they can't work. The poor living from hand to mouth are facing the most difficulties."

Previously, Ma Hla Hla and her sisters were able to get advance payment from the farmers they worked for before the harvest. However, as farmers have been unable to offer advance payments during the pandemic, the sisters have been had to accept lower wages, sometimes securing only 2,000–3,000 kyats per day, when they may have been paid 5,000 for the same work prior to COVID-19.

When they do not have any daily wage job, they try to scavenge for frogs and small fish in the rice fields during the monsoon season. The sisters are currently surviving by buying food on credit from three different shops in the village. The shops have a limit on how much credit they can allocate to customers, so sometimes, they stop selling to them. If one shop does not sell to them, the sisters try their luck at another shop.

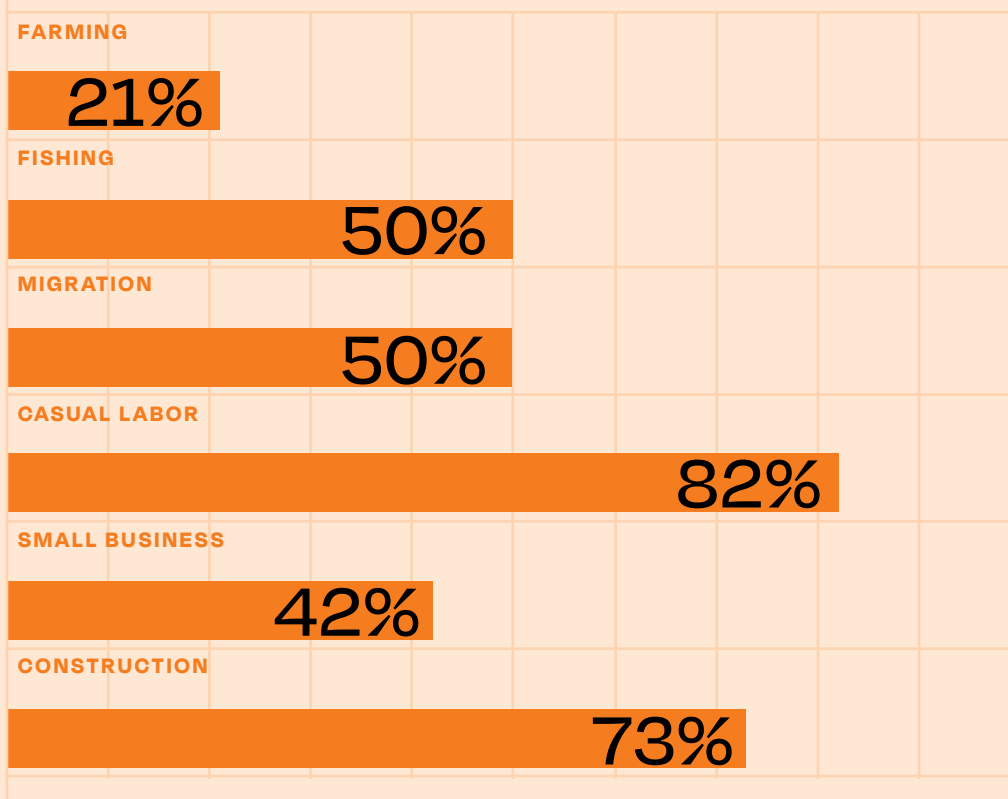
Ma Hla Hla's little brother cannot attend Grade 7 because his sisters are unable to pay the tuition. Ma Hla Hla and her sister reported high levels of stress and exhaustion due to the current situation: "Right now I am mentally very tired. As one day ends, I always find myself worrying about how I will eat the next day—even at night I cannot sleep thinking about it, until dawn breaks."

3.3 Farming and Casual Labor

The study found that casual laborers' income declined in 45 of the 56 of villages, regardless of their degree of economic diversity (Chart 3). In relative terms, the second most affected occupation group were construction workers, who lost income or jobs in almost three-quarters of villages with this occupation. Fishers, migrants, and small business owners lost income in about half of the villages with these occupations. By contrast, shopkeepers could benefit from the pandemic in the short-term due to panic-buying behaviors of villagers as was reported in village in Shan State, for instance. However, in the longer run, they too suffered due to cash-shortages thereby limiting the ability to procure new goods, and generated less sales due to villagers' suppressed incomes.

CHART 2

Percentage of Villages with Income or Jobs Lost by Occupation in the 56 research villages



In areas severely economically impacted such as the townships studied in Rakhine State, conflicts arose between casual laborers due to scarcity in paid work, resulting in some laborers to accept working for less wages in order to secure wages. A related example was noted by respondents in an economically diverse village in Kayah State. There, casual laborers were accepting jobs offered by better-off families that they had previously shunned in favor of higher-paid jobs in town. As one villager noted:

“A lower paid job is better than getting a loan.”

The impacts on casual laborers and farmers are interrelated. Respondents across States and Regions and across agroecological zones, suggested that due to falling prices and a reduction in sales, as well as environmental factors such as reduced rain fall or increased pests, have resulted in cash poor farmers not being able to afford the employment costs of casual laborers in the same numbers as in previous years. In one example in a village in Kachin state, farmers did not hire the usual number of daily laborers citing concerns over travel restrictions and used machines instead. Where in the past farmers in this village may have relied on 10 workers, they now reported using 2–3 workers with mechanization, drastically decreasing the availability of local jobs. In places where local laborers were hired, multiple villages in the study indicated that farmers could not pay the cash advance they often made to laborers before the harvest, thus cutting off a key safety net and source of credit for farm laborers.

COVID-19 impacted the supply of labor, inputs, cash, credit, and getting products to market. Physical distancing and travel restrictions exacerbated existing labor shortages, supply chain issues, and farmers' cash flows during the critical moments of both harvesting and planting for several different crops from paddy to watermelon. In some areas, larger landholders filled the labor gap with an increased reliance on mechanization. In other areas, returned migrant workers filled the labor gap, weeding fields in their villages when agricultural laborers from nearby villages were unable to travel for such work. Unable to sell crops, procure inputs, or pay for labor, farmers made tough choices on whether to sell their crop at lower prices or to sow fewer acres.

The type of crops and livestock farmers produce, as well as the size of their holdings, may play a role in how farmers are faring in the COVID-19 period. Village heads in only 10 villages reported that farmers had lost significant income. Respondents in Mandalay, Sagaing, and Tanintharyi Regions, for instance, noted that farmers growing betel nuts or leaves were the most affected occupational groups in their villages. Betel leaves need to be picked every 15 days but because of COVID-19-related mobility restrictions, farmers lost multiple harvests. To make matters worse, betel nut farmers are not entitled to borrow from the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB). Deprived of accessing such low interest loans, betel nut farmers were consequently slipping deeper into debt.

Respondents in some villages reported that the price of paddy fell and there were too few buyers and too many sellers. In some instances, external brokers and buyers decided to forgo the advance they had paid to farmers and did not come to the villages to take possession of the crops. Those selling export crops, such as, corn, watermelon, betel nut, tea, and rubber to China have also been hit by a fall in prices due to border closures and delays in border trade, resulting in rotting crops or sales at lower prices to the local market. Farmers in other areas reported that the price of agricultural inputs has increased, likely due to the same supply chain issues that have caused difficulties in getting export crops to market.

Upland farmers practicing shifting agriculture (taungya), found that their produce ripened as restrictions on movement were implemented, meaning they could not travel to other villages or markets to sell their produce. The nighttime curfews have also impacted farmers taking their produce to cities or larger markets. Previously, they may have sold their produce at larger wet markets from 2:00a.m.–5:30a.m., but due to the nighttime curfew the earliest they can leave home is at 4:00a.m., which does not give them enough time to sell all their produce. In the Shan State research villages, about half of the villagers who relied on weekday markets to sell their produce, reported losing half of their income.

Smallholder farmers often rely on additional income sources in order to make ends meet, and these may have also been affected by COVID-19. Village livestock farmers have lost income as there are no large-scale ceremonies or festivals and, therefore, fewer sales of livestock. Households raising pigs, for example in a village in Kachin State, were unable to sell their livestock at a good price, which forced them deeper into debt. Some farmers also work as wage laborers on plantations or on fields in other villages, but travel restrictions prohibited them from reaching their other labor sites. Additionally, many farming households who suffered bad yields prior to COVID-19, were forced to work as laborers themselves to make ends meet, as happened, for instance, in a village in Kayin State.

3.4 Fishing

Villages reliant on the fishing and seafood industry were also greatly impacted by COVID-19 response measures, due in part to the timing during the busiest part of the fishing season. In some villages in the Ayeyarwady Delta and in Upper Myanmar, villagers expressed fears that fishermen would bring the virus back to the village with them if they left to fish. In Yangon Region, villagers were allowed to leave the village to fish, but only if they returned the same day. Normally they would spend 2–3 nights at sea.

The restrictions on leaving the village may not have had much impact as market prices for fish, shrimp, eel, river prawns, and crab dramatically fell, with shrimp prices reportedly down to 3,500 kyats per viss,⁶ from 8,000 kyats previously, longfin eel fell to 9,000 kyats from 27,000 kyats, and crab prices reduced from 18,000 kyats to 8,000 kyats.

Respondents in fishing villages in the Delta region reported that the drop in market prices for fish and seafood was mainly due to movement restrictions and the nighttime curfew that caused issues in transporting the catch to markets in Yangon, as well as, restrictions on movement and restaurants in Yangon that decreased demand. In Mon State, respondents reported that villagers were dependent on selling their catch to China year-round, and when China stopped importing fish, the sale price decreased 20–30 percent.

⁶ Myanmar traditional unit of measure corresponding to about 1.6kg

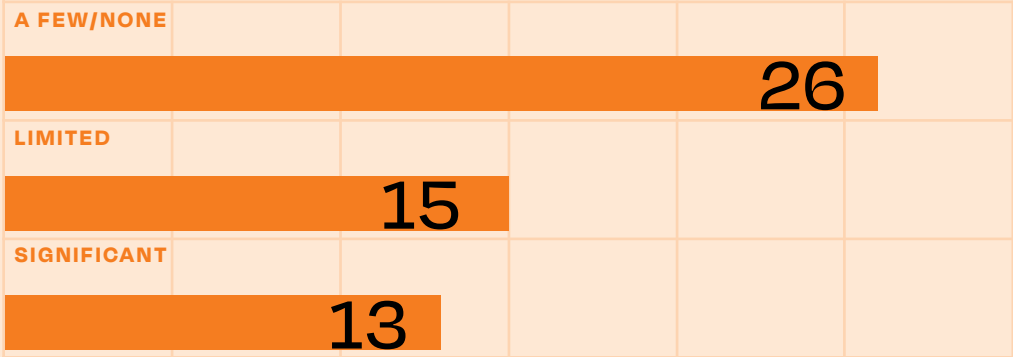
Subsistence fishing has been a common coping mechanism for casual laborers in the Ayeyarwady Delta; it helped many a poor household overcome the most severe effects of Cyclone Nargis in 2008.⁷ Now, as then, in addition to working long days, villagers turned to an illegal fishing method at night, battery fishing,⁸ to put some food on the table and service their debt. This was, for instance, reported in a village in Ayeyarwady Region where villagers were very concerned about not having enough food to eat.

3.5
Migration
and
Remittances

Over Thingyan,⁹ many migrants had come back to their villages to celebrate the holiday with their families. Some returned to Myanmar because they were afraid when they heard confirmed cases had been found in the country. Others returned to their villages after losing their jobs, either temporarily or permanently. Of those who returned to the villages, by July 2020, village heads in about half the villages indicated that most migrants had already returned to their place of work (Chart 4). Migrants who could return to Yangon or other areas left the villages when it became feasible to do so, but those who had returned to the villages from Thailand or other foreign countries could not return as easily because borders remained closed and thus, remained behind in the village.

CHART 4

Number of Villages with Returned Migrants Staying Behind



The more reliant a village was on migration, the fewer migrants stayed behind. In most villages with extensive migration, few if any migrants stayed behind. Migrants whose work had been suspended or temporarily closed seemed more likely to return upon reopening, but for migrants whose work had been seasonal, or who had lost their jobs, they remained in their villages, often in dire circumstances without valuables to pawn. These individuals were doing casual labor to pay their debts and support their extended families.

⁷ See, for example, Kostner, Markus, Min Min Han; and Samuel Pursch. 2018. Meandering to Recovery: Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring Ten Years After. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29782/125702-WP-24-4-2018-14-20-58-SIMPrintversion.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

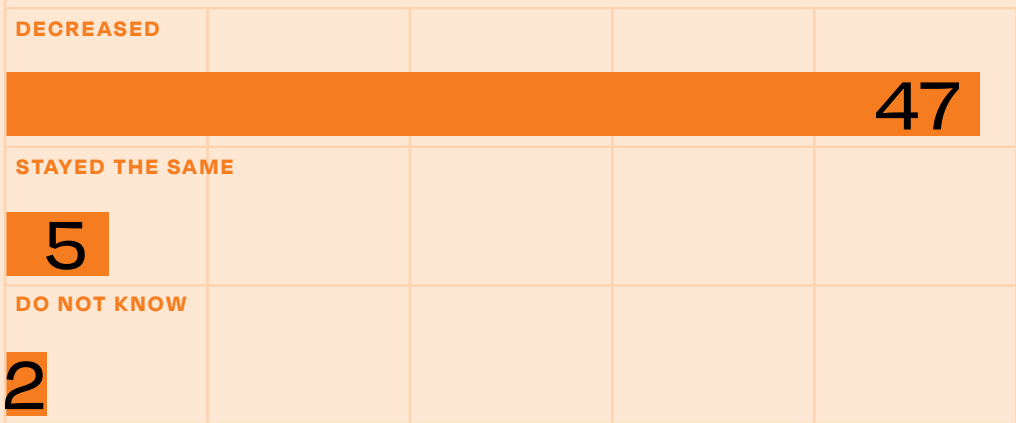
⁸ Battery fishing involves putting lines of wire into the water, connecting the two ends to a battery in the boat, and then passing an electric shock into the water. This stuns the fish, which then float to the surface, see Wai, Khin Su. 2015. "Battery Fishing Begins at Home, Study Finds." Myanmar Times, January 15, 2015. <https://www.mmmtimes.com/national-news/12771-battery-fishing-begins-at-home-study-finds.html>.

⁹ Thingyan is the Burmese New Year Festival that usually occurs in the middle of April. It is a Buddhist festival celebrated over a period of four to five days, culminating in the New Year.

Compared to early Tabodwe,¹⁰ (January), village heads reported that remittances had decreased in 47 villages of the 54 with available data, and stayed the same in only five villages, four of which had only limited migration (Chart 5).

CHART 5

Number of Villages Where Remittances:



A lack of remittances affected families in diverse ways. Many families reliant on remittances from family members working abroad have had to remit funds to their family members stranded abroad without work. For instance, one family in a village in Tanintharyi Region sold their cow and sent the proceeds to their son, a migrant worker stranded in Malaysia who was without work. Similarly, a respondent in Magway Region relayed that restrictions on international travel caused considerable debt for migrant-sending households who had already

CASE STUDY 4:

The Lack of Remittances adds to the Debt Burden

Daw Win is 45 years old and a mother of three living in Bago Region. As her family does not have a farm of its own, she and her husband work as casual laborers. Before the COVID-19 period, her oldest son relocated to Malaysia to support their family by way of remittances. To support the relocation, Daw Win and her husband sold possessions and secured loans from any source possible. Shortly after her son started working in Malaysia, COVID-19 measures in Malaysia prevented him from securing ongoing employment.

“When I video chatted with my son, he said his boss doesn’t allow them to work anymore and put him and other people in one room and feeds them. And he was told that he will be allowed to work only after the situation is stable again. Even though I don’t have to send money to my son, as I paid for his travel to Malaysia by taking loans, I now have to pay back those debts in many ways. What can we do as the debts must be paid back? We have to take out new loans from different sources again to repay back old ones and also apologize to others and try to postpone payments for a while.”

Her life would be much easier if her son’s work started again, she explained, *“we can breathe freely when our oldest son’s work restarts again.”*

¹⁰ Tabodwe is the 11th month of the Burmese calendar, here corresponding to January 2020.

3.6

Food
Security

borrowed up to 20 million kyats to remit to family members in Malaysia or elsewhere. Burdened by debt and without the comfort of international remittances to repay loans, debt-stress led to families working multiple jobs to meet repayment obligations. Similar anecdotes were repeated across many villages.

For the villages under study, food shortages primarily meant **lack of access to rice**. As one village head in Yangon Region said: *“It’s a village: as long as there is rice, villagers can find the ingredients for curry on their own.”* A village resident in Ayeyarwady Region made a similar remark: *“In the city, it is not possible to live without money, but in the village we can still find food without spending money. There are a lot of vegetables in the village. Fish and shrimp can be caught from the stream. The main thing is to have rice. In the city, food cannot be searched for like that.”*

Nonetheless, at the time when the interviews were conducted, there was relatively little concern about food security. Respondents in 32 villages noted that villagers were not worried about shortages of essential food, whilst respondents in 24 villages noted that villagers expressed some concern. By contrast, respondents in 36 villages expressed concern that villagers may not have enough money to buy food. Respondents tended to worry more about food shortages in remote villages, and more about lack of money to buy food in conflict- and disaster-affected villages.

Concerns about food shortages seemed to depend on the primary livelihoods and type of agricultural production in the village, rather than concerns over food shortages generally. For example, villages where cash crops like rubber or tea were grown, had fewer, if any, local families growing paddy. Those villages instead relied on selling their cash crops to buy rice. In villages that practiced cultivation shifting or used forest products, sufficient levels of dry rice supply for village needs was a material concern. In pre-COVID times, villagers relied on a mixture of locally planted upland rice and selling agricultural produce to purchase rice.

Concerns over food shortages manifested in panic behaviors including stockpiling dry goods and basic necessities. This may be more attributable to fears around lockdowns, store closures, price inflation, and lack of transportation to markets rather than longer term fears about food security. Worries over food were often about the cost of food and the necessity of buying food in cash for those who did not have stores of rice. Respondents’ concerns regarding food were for the medium-term rather than immediate.

04

PAGE 22-29

Coping Strategies



There are multiple means by which villagers are coping with external shocks in Myanmar, centered around three main strategies: (i) borrowing; (ii) seeking alternative income sources; and (iii) reducing expenses. By July 2020, although the economic impacts of the crisis could be felt throughout the research villages, the majority of respondents indicated that they had been able to handle the situation without drastic effects on their wellbeing, at least in the short-term.

4.1 Borrowing

Borrowing and pawning assets are customary practices used by villagers to meet financial difficulties in Myanmar.¹¹ Such practices also underlie farming and the livelihoods it sustains. Farmers commonly borrow funds to plant and harvest, and with the sale of the crop, repay their creditors. As a respondent in Kayah State noted: *“Debt is the normal way of life.”* However, when the economic situation deteriorates, or the debt-harvest-repayment cycle is broken, the pressure to borrow more to repay existing debt and secure new debt to meet everyday cashflow shortages intensifies at a time when villagers faced an increasingly tight credit market. This has been apparent in the research villages since the start of the pandemic.

Difficulty repaying pre-crisis loans

According to village representatives, villagers often took out loans from multiple sources to meet their financial needs as credit from microfinance groups was insufficient, or because of onerous terms and conditions. In addition, loans from microfinance groups were initially mostly for investments but were later provided for consumption, such as improving one’s home without collateral, including for casual laborers. Such practices had already severely compromised the viability of household finances in many villages prior to the outbreak. A village head in a village in Rakhine State explained: *“A manager of a microfinance organization told me that he wanted to come and lend money within the village. When I heard news about the organization from neighboring villages, that people who borrowed money from it were in trouble after getting loans, I refused his request to come and lend money. Without daily income, we could be in trouble.”*

As emphasized by a village head in the Ayeyarwady Region:

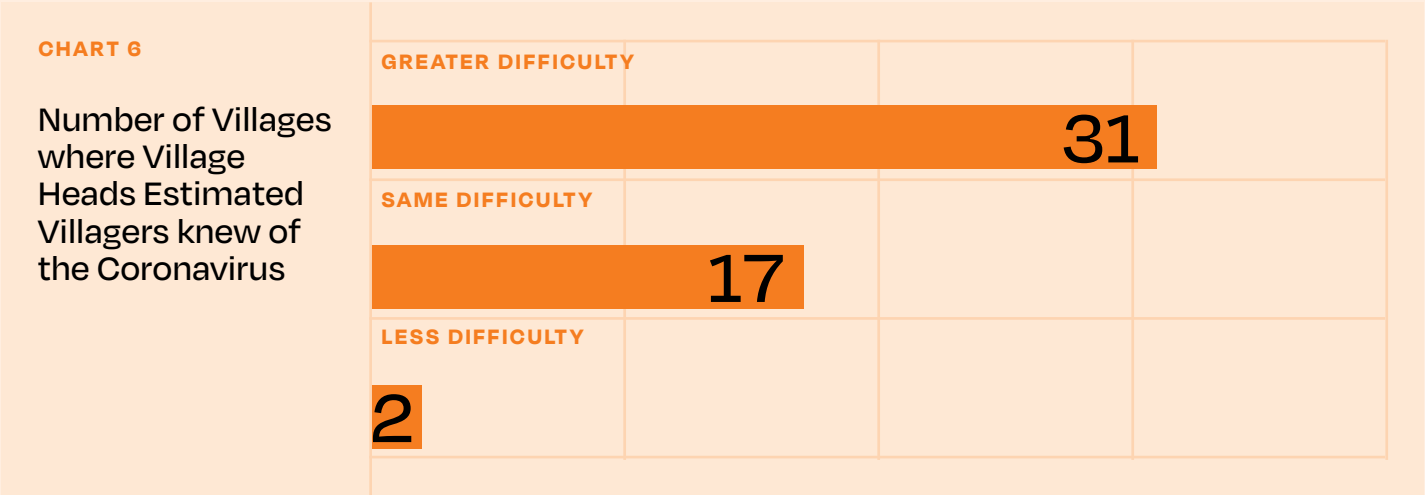
“It is easy to borrow, but difficult to pay back.”

Following the rapid onset of the economic crisis, respondents noted that villagers in 31 of 52 villages have had greater difficulty repaying their pre-crisis debts (interest and principal); in 17 villages difficulties remained the same (Chart 6).

The causes of these difficulties were similar across all research villages: the sudden loss of a job or income, and the sudden reduction in remittances. Villagers who could still receive remittances from their relatives abroad, such as in a village in northern Shan State, encountered yet another problem: an unfavorable exchange rate for remittances from China due to the appreciation of the kyat against the yuan.

¹¹ World Bank and GFDRR. 2014. *Another Nargis Strikes Every Day: Post-Nargis Social Impacts Monitoring Five Years On*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://www.gfdr.org/sites/gfdr/files/publication/Another-Nargis-Strikes-Every-Day.pdf>.

Lenders have responded to repayment problems in different ways. Some microfinance groups in various villages extended repayment periods which brought temporary relief to villagers. In research villages in Ayeyarwady and Yangon Regions, similar groups were not as forbearing, refusing to extend or defer repayment periods. Extensions seemed to be short-term, for example, in villages in Mon State and Sagaing Region. In other instances, such as in a village in Bago Region, the repayment of debt coincided with the beginning of the planting season resulting in increased capital needs among farmers, who were already in arrears on low-interest loans from the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB).



CASE STUDY 5:

Running Away from Debt

In one village in Yangon Region with extensive migration, six families had taken out group loans with other families from microfinance groups to finance the costs of a family member to migrate abroad. They suddenly found themselves unable to repay their debts due to a lack of return-remittances. The loan group demanded that they pay but without any money, the six families decided to flee from the village to Hlaing Tharyar in Yangon City to escape debt repayments. The other households in the loan group had to cover their repayments or risk defaulting for the whole group, which would disqualify them from other loans in the future.

Taking out new loans

To make up for the shortfall in income and remittances, in 36 of 49 villages with available data, village heads stated that a significant number of villagers had tried to take out new loans to cope with the crisis. In many instances, people—especially the poor and landless laborers but also often returned migrants—borrowed simply to buy food and other staples. Villagers in all disaster-affected research villages took out new loans, compared to just over two-thirds of villages not typically affected by disasters. This finding may be the result of greater worries over economic hardships and having enough money to buy food in disaster-prone villages.

Particularly for the poor but also for returning migrants, a frequent form of borrowing across the research villages was buying on credit from village shop owners. The common arrangement was that borrowers would repay the loan when their livelihoods resumed. Interest rates varied from shop to shop, with some owners providing interest-free credit, while in a village in Bago Region, a shop owner collected 35,000 kyats for a bag of rice that originally sold for 20,000 kyats.

CASE STUDY 6:

A Small Business Pushed into Debt

Daw Mya lives in Tanintharyi Region, is 53 years old and was widowed 18 years ago. She supports her family by selling breakfast foods such as mohinga and coconut milk noodles in the morning and Dawei traditional snacks in the evening at the village's bus terminal. This is her family's primary income. After her husband died, she has lived with her son and two daughters. Her eldest son and youngest daughter, and their children, are still economically dependent on her.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the village's bus terminal was thriving, and Daw Mya's typical daily income was around 70,000–80,000 kyats. However pandemic-related restrictions on sitting and dining at food shops, and the decline in travelers because of movement restrictions, have greatly decreased her sales. Sales declined to such an extent that Daw Mya suspended business for two months. During this period, she was struggling with debt repayment obligations of loans secured to fund her business, as well as more recent loans to alleviate cashflow shortages while the food stall was unable to operate. It was not difficult for her to borrow money from her friends, but she worried for the long-term. *"Since my husband died, I have been struggling and I do not have anything to sell and solve my problems like others."*

As a shop owner, she did not qualify for government assistance and was not eligible to receive food or cash support from the government during her business closure. Daw Mya relayed, *"For me, whether I am supported or not, I am solving my family's livelihood issues by myself through borrowing. That's all I can do."* At present, although selling noodles and snacks is not as lucrative as in the past, Daw Mya prays for the situation to improve so that she can pay back her debt.

Village representatives reported that, where available, villagers preferred microfinance groups due to lower interest rates. However, many villagers were constrained by the fact that they were in default on pre-existing loans, hence limiting access to new funds. In such circumstances, villages desperate for additional finance resorted to informal moneylenders. With a mortgage, interest rates could be as low as 3 percent per month but would more commonly be between 5 and 10 percent. To lower the rates, villagers sometimes pawned their assets, including gold, silver and motorcycles. Without a mortgage or other assets that could be used as collateral, interest rates charged by informal moneylenders could be as high as 15–20 percent per month.

In 22 of 35 villages with data on villagers seeking out new loans, village heads indicated that villagers seemingly did not face greater difficulty borrowing.

Rather, difficulty increased with distance from a marketplace, which is likely due to restrictions on travel that prohibited microfinance lenders and private moneylenders based outside of villages from visiting more remote villages for business and lending purposes.

CASE STUDY 7:

No choice but to borrow at high interest rates

Daw Khaing Khaing is 55 and her husband is 70. Neither are in good health, and they depend on the wages of one of their daughters for everyday needs. When the husband of that daughter died, she and her children moved in with Daw Khaing Khaing.

Daw Khaing Khaing's daughter has worked as a kitchen assistant at a restaurant in Taungoo and earned 110,000 kyats per month. She would send her salary back to her parents, retaining only 10,000 kyats for personal use. Following the closure of the restaurant due to COVID-19 it has become difficult for the family to make ends meet.

Before the restaurant closed, Daw Khaing Khaing had expended her savings for the family. She had resisted borrowing but as the restaurant has remained closed, taking out a loan became the only viable option. As she did not have anything to use for collateral, the loan carries an interest rate of 20 percent per month. Since her loan amount is 1 lakh, she now has to pay 12,000 kyats per month for 10 months to pay back the loan. She said: *"Even though I wanted to live a life without debt, I could not do so. They say that my daughter will have a job by the end of this month. Only by then will I be able to pay my debt."*

Growing debt

Village representatives observed that villagers were getting deeper into debt in at least 54 of the 56 research villages. The most affected group were casual laborers who were faring worse in 37 villages. A common strategy in rural Myanmar to manage debt is to borrow from a source at a higher interest rate, to repay debt that carries a lower rate. Villagers do not want to risk defaulting on the low-interest loans for fear they will not be able to access them again and will take out a higher interest loan to avoid defaulting.

CASE STUDY 8:

Borrowing at Any Rate

One women loan group leader in Magwe Region explained the choices borrowers made: *"Due to the coronavirus, many people lost their jobs and had to borrow frequently. Some are borrowing from one organization to repay another. Previously, you could borrow from a savings and loans organization with 2 percent interest monthly, then 5 percent from a village money lender. Then 3–4 microfinance organizations arrived in the village, most families had 2 family members borrowing from these. If they had work, it was fine, they could keep going like this borrowing from these groups, but due to the*

disease, there is no work, so they have to borrow from other lenders with daily repayment schemes. If you borrowed 1 Lakh for ten days, you needed to pay 10,000 kyats in interest, so 1,000 kyat per day. It could also be more. The lenders actually didn't demand that interest rate. Instead, the borrowers themselves offered to pay it because they wanted to be able to settle their debt with the microfinance group when it became due. If they didn't repay their debt, they would fall into disrepute with the organization and no one in the village would want to join them to borrow from other organizations in the future. Therefore, they decided to borrow at any interest rate and repay their more affordable debts."

4.2 Seeking alternative income sources

Although the economic situation had worsened in almost all research villages, as of July 2020, village heads indicated that villagers in 20 villages had not yet undertaken significant coping activities by seeking alternative ways of generating income. The main coping activities employed in the remaining 36 villages were the use of savings (18 villages), and the selling or pawning of assets other than land (15 villages), particularly gold. At that point in time, the research found few widespread attempts at working longer hours, changing occupation, or selling or pawning land, most likely due to the lack of job opportunities for casual laborers and the lack of money to pay for labor, causing issues on both sides of the labor market.

Returned migrants who were not able to return to their places of work in their home villages took on agricultural work or casual labor in, or near, the village tract. Due to an oversupply of labor, villagers worked for reduced wages, while in other cases where there were labor shortages due to restrictions on travel, farmers used machinery, cows, and their relatives to complete the necessary work. In one village in Kachin State, casual laborers were out of work due to flooded fields and inoperative rubber plantations, and local farmers could not afford to pay wages. Some jobless villagers resorted to working in return for rice, others found odd jobs such as furniture repair, or cleaning the yard or garden of a wealthier family.

Commonly pawned or sold assets included cows, goats, chickens, and other livestock, gold, silver, motorcycles, stored rice, and other personal property. Selling and pawning of other goods and property was not without adverse impacts. As farmers sold livestock as a coping strategy, the sale price of cows and goats decreased considerably. For example, in a remote village in Magwe Region, an animal which may normally sell for 100,000 kyats may sell for half that price. Villagers in a village in Bago Region, where casual laborers found themselves deeper in debt, had a similar experience when pawn brokers were increasingly less willing to accept more goods.

As of July 2020, selling or pawning land was reported as a coping activity in only a few villages. In a village in Yangon Region, one respondent reported that migrants who pawned their land or borrowed against their house to raise funds to travel abroad but who have subsequently been unable to send remittances to make debt repayments have lost their houses and farms to unpaid lenders. In Magway Region, respondents reported that some residents were pawning or selling their house near the center of the village and buying a cheaper house closer to their fields as a coping strategy. In a village in Sagaing Region, a village representative estimated that about 10 percent of villagers had sold land to cope with COVID-19 economic pressures.

4.3 Reducing Expenses

As of July 2020, reducing expenditures was a central coping strategy. Village heads in 41 out of 49 villages with available data reported that villagers reduced expenses as a coping strategy. The most common reduction of expenses included: decreasing the quality of meals (23 villages), reducing non-food consumption (21 villages), and reducing social expenses (14 villages). Other expenditure coping activities mentioned included, reducing the number of daily meals, forgoing investments, forgoing health care, and considering taking children out of school,¹² but these were less prevalent as of July 2020.

Farmers significantly reduced expenses by sowing seeds themselves or hiring an oxen, buffalo, or mechanized plow, for the planting season instead of hiring casual laborers. Some farmers have chosen to plant less acreage due to the increased cost of inputs such as seeds and fertilizer. Another means of reducing expenses was to rely on food villagers could procure without spending money. Respondents across the country noted an increase in fishing, crabbing, hunting small game, and foraging in the fields or forests for food.

For many villagers, reducing expenditures meant cutting back on purchased meat and fish, and increasing foraging for edible plants and growing vegetables in their own gardens. In a village in Yangon Region, villagers have turned to cheaper foods such as, *ngapi* (fish paste) and vegetables. Others found ways to reduce consumption by reducing consumption and purchasing of goods such as oil. In Ayeyarwady Region, a village administrator reported:

“villagers are cutting food costs by foraging for vegetables and having vegetable curries instead of meat curries. Only one in 10 meals has meat. They don’t spend money where they don’t need to, they keep it for food. They’ve also reduced going out and social affairs.”

¹² Taking children out of school is a frequent coping strategy in times of distress. For this first round of interviews, it was not yet relevant as the school year had ended following final examinations in March 2020. While the normal academic year begins in June, by the time of round one research, schools had yet to open, thus, no impact could be identified. High schools that passed safety inspections (about 6,500 of 7,173 schools nationwide) opened seven weeks late, in mid-July, but government and private high schools were closed by the government on 26 August due to a surge in cases. As of September 2020, middle schools and elementary schools remained closed. Respondents in Bago, Sagaing, and Mandalay Regions and Kachin, Shan, Kayah, and Chin States specifically voiced education-related concerns. Parents were also worried that their children would fall behind due to school closures. This topic will be further explored in the next round of interviews.

Respondents in multiple villages also suggested that the virus originated from meat and fish likely due to concerns over the wild animal trade. As a result, some villagers have reduced their intake of fish and meat in response.

While reducing food consumption was found across the country, the reasons for the reduction and the means of reduction varied widely. In one example, villagers in a remote, hilly, tea growing village in Shan State, can only buy rice when they have sold their tea crop, but the tea price has decreased drastically leaving them with little money to buy rice. Without enough rice, they have taken to mixing corn and other available vegetables in with the rice as it cooks to make up for it.

Others cut back on meals, eating less than three meals a day, particularly casual laborers. In all, respondents in only eight research villages observed that villagers have reduced the number of meals per day. All of these villages are located in States, including: Chin, Shan, Rakhine, Kayin, and Kayah. All but one of them were affected by conflict and/or benefitted from the NCDDP, a program that targets the poorest townships in a Region/State, which may explain the use of this coping activity. In a remote Rohingya village in Rakhine State, villagers went even further, by reducing meals from twice a day to once a day.

The main method of decreasing social expenses in the village was to reduce costs associated with weddings, childbirth, and funerals and religious events like novitiation and donation ceremonies, and pagoda festivals.¹³ For instance, where funerals would normally require feeding guests for days, only the family and specific other volunteers dealt with funeral arrangements. In some areas, as restrictions were lifted in June and July, funeral processions resumed as before. In Christian villages, due to restrictions on gatherings, villagers did not go to the church for a wedding ceremony or hold a reception but just signed a marriage contract.

However, the decrease in social expenses was not always only a cost-saving measure, as it also impacted the incomes of casual and ritual workers who assist in wedding ceremonies, pagoda festivals, *nat pwe*, donations, and novitiations. This is presumably more noticeable in areas with large pagoda festivals and high rates of domestic pilgrimages such as Sagaing and Mandalay Regions, and parts of Mon State. For example, in Sagaing Region, one of the villages usually holds a 15-day pagoda festival for Kasone in May, which was cancelled this year. Respondents lamented about restrictions on gatherings limiting important life cycle, religious, and cultural events.

¹³ Novitiation is a ceremony where a young boy joins a monastery as a novice, most often for a short period.

05

PAGE 30-36

Social Relations

5.1

Social Cohesion



Photo by Ban Yido on Unsplash

Collaboration is a traditional aspect of Myanmar rural life. As one female respondent in a remote, disaster-affected village in Chin State noted: *“If we do not share and help each other, how can we survive? We need to care for our neighbors. When they have no rice to eat, we give them three tins even if they are not able to give the same back to us later.”* Respondents indeed observed food sharing in 22 villages. Case Study 9 offers a powerful example of food sharing in practice.

Village heads indicated that since the beginning of the crisis, social relations were reported to be unchanged in 36 villages; better in 11 villages likely due to increased collaboration and mutual support; and worse in two (Chart 7). For example, in a village in Shan State, villagers encouraged collective patience and compliance with directions to prevent the spread of the virus. In a village in Tanintharyi Region, villagers shared information about COVID-19, and together guarded entry points to the village. There, village leaders also raised funds to assist the poor with the active participation of villagers, even prior to the arrival

of government assistance programs. Where villagers recognized that the crisis could not be dealt with individually, neighbors in a village in Mandalay Region implemented a system that when someone went to town, they bought foodstuff for others. In a village in Mon State, where small farmers and casual laborers were sliding deeper into debt, after the initial fear had subsided, farmers returned to wage work and provided daily jobs to poor casual laborers.

CASE STUDY 9:

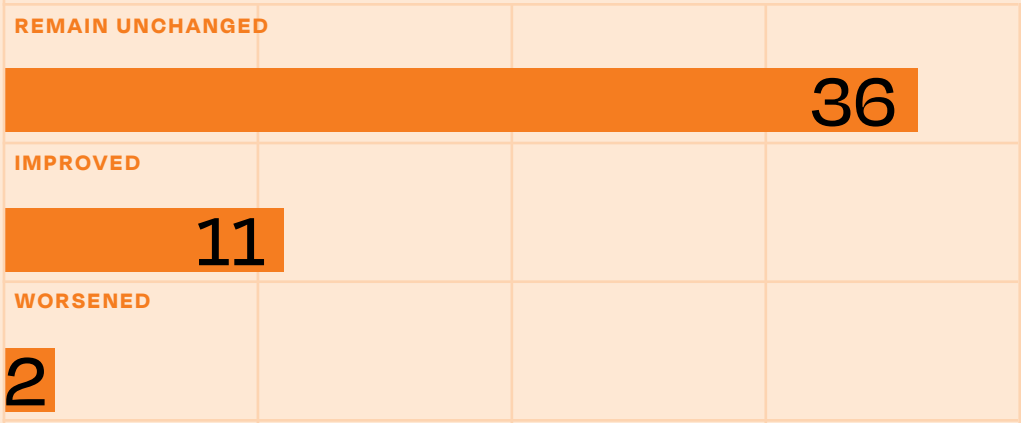
The Power of Collective Action

An ethnically diverse village in Kayah developed a specific mechanism for sharing food with the most vulnerable. There, villagers save one-tenth of the harvested paddy from their fields every season to contribute to the “Village Paddy Collective.” The intention is to mitigate the risk of the village running out of rice during the year and to support households facing difficult situations. A household can take out a maximum of six rice sacks per year from the collective. Non-rice farming families can take out paddy in case of need; as can food insecure families can borrow on a needs basis, only requiring to repay the cost of the borrowing with very low interest, when their paddy crop is harvested.

Villagers who have seriously suffered from COVID-19 were aided with the collective. The village head noted that *“during the COVID-19 period, rice in the collective has not run out even though there is no farming work. Thankfully, we have the Collective Paddy”*.

CHART 7

Number of Villages Where Social Relations...



Social relations remained strong and stable overall but mistrust developed in various instances, especially at the beginning of the outbreak. In two remote villages in Ayeyarwady Region, some villagers installed fences around the perimeter of their property to deter unwanted visitors. Village heads also reported high number of phone calls to the village COVID-19 prevention committees to report a suspected illness after hearing a neighbor cough or sneeze. These behaviors eased as the situation evolved.

As of July 2020, the research did not reveal serious instances of discrimination as a result of COVID-19 between different ethnic and/or religious groups present in a village. However, villagers were cognizant of underlying community tensions. In a very remote village in Chin State, the minority religious group had already felt discriminated and ostracized by the majority group before the pandemic. Since the beginning of the outbreak, members of this religious group reported feeling treated with suspicion and caution due to the disease even though there was no positive case in the village. On the other hand, relations improved in a village in Kachin State, with increased collaboration and sharing of resources. Further, in a village in Kayah State, a majority ethnic group—despite reporting receiving insufficient aid themselves—did not object to the poorer ethnic minority group receiving proportionally more aid. These instances indicated a general willingness of some communities to collaborate to overcome the economic effects of the pandemic on a collective level.

A mixed picture emerged with regards to how villagers experienced religious and social events during the pandemic, which reflects the diversity of local instructions that complemented government directions to contain the virus. Overall, villagers in 20 villages were reportedly avoiding social and religious events as of July 2020. Across many research villages, religious buildings were largely closed for service, and social and religious gatherings were discontinued in line with government instructions. In a village in Kayah State, while churches were closed, 2–3 families would come together and pray at someone's house. Some churches in two villages in Chin State were open for prayer but with fewer worshippers permitted to attend, whilst churches in the other Chin villages were closed. Important family events were celebrated, but not in the traditional way. For instance, in Kachin State, couples would sign a wedding contract without a ceremony whereas in a village in Yangon Region, where weddings were not allowed, funerals took place with only immediate family members able to be present, and mandated to wear masks and maintain a social-distance of six feet. In a village in Chin State, weddings proceeded but only with close relatives present, and funerals were undertaken but were limited to one day in duration rather than three (if the deceased was an adult).

However, social distancing had no impact on social relations in a village. Respondents indicated that villagers understood that everyone was in the same situation because the whole village was affected by the crisis.

5.2

Impact on Women

The research suggests that women are disproportionately affected by the crisis. Concerns over food were disproportionately borne by women, who are often responsible for household finances and cooking. As one respondent in a village in Rakhine State explained:

“Women are most affected by this outbreak. They have so many burdens, as managing money and preparing food are their duty, they worry about debt and food shortages. The men in this village do only agricultural work and cattle grazing, and the rest are women’s duties.”

Women respondents pointed to increased workloads, stress levels, and fewer outlets for stress relief and support. In a village in the Ayeyarwady Region, every man interviewed said that the crisis did not create specific difficulties for women, but a woman respondent from the same village, speaking to the uncertainty and mental strain the pandemic has brought, had a different view: *“Women are busier with housework than before. Women have to keep an eye on their children not to go out and play anywhere. They have to take care of their children’s hygiene. While family relations remain as good as usual, women’s roles in the community decreases. We cannot do social and religious duties as usual. We cannot pray and recite the Buddha’s teachings together with the women’s groups. We cannot get merit in the same ways as before, so we don’t feel good about that.”*

There were, however, instances of women’s increased agency and involvement in the community through COVID-19 prevention activities. For example, in a village in Mandalay Region where there was otherwise limited collaboration among leaders, women helped to disseminate information about washing hands and wearing masks in the village. In a village in Magway Region, it was reported that women were participating in guard duty, undertaking preventive care, mobilizing funds (for example, to buy soaps and masks), and making donations themselves.

The result of households' financial strain and economic hardship was often described as taking a toll on intra-household relations. In villages from Sagaing and Magwe Regions, to Chin and Mon States, respondents reported more frequent arguments between husbands and wives. As one male farmer in a village in Sagaing Region summarized: *"Marriage is a matter of economic well-being."* Even though respondents noted that marital arguments tended to be resolved rather quickly, oftentimes with the involvement of the village head, they feared a continuation of the crisis would further strain intra-household relations. Other respondents, however, cited the lockdowns and travel restrictions as increasing family harmony, as families spent more uninterrupted time together.

CASE STUDY 10:

Fear of Infection adds to Marital Stress

At the onset of the crisis, a respondent's husband returned to his village from the petroleum site where he had been working and staying on-site for long periods. After staying in the quarantine center for 14 days, he returned to his home to stay with his wife. She assumed a greater share of household and domestic responsibilities while the husband remained docile by sleeping, eating and loitering in the village. His wife became anxious about her husbands' laxity around virus-prevention measures, reminding him of personal hygiene standards, the use of a face-mask and hand-washing routines. Fears escalated as to the risk of exposure to the virus on occasions when the husband would return from being out in the village, to the extent that the wife refused to be touched by him on his return. The husband reacted strongly saying: *"Even though I have my own house, I cannot stay at home and always have to work. But when I have come home to rest, I am not allowed to touch you. I am going to divorce you."*

Village representatives in three villages observed a noticeable increase in domestic violence and some increase was reported in another five villages.

Global evidence suggests that individuals generally underreport incidences of domestic violence, oftentimes victims do not speak out or seek help for fear of reprisal. Even though the sample included a significant number of women, this research likely suffers from the same limitation. The pandemic compounds the existing difficulties in addressing violence in the home, particularly sexual or gender-based violence (SGBV) because stay-at-home orders increases the time spent at home, and decreases the available service opportunities for victims. Women may also be less likely to seek out SGBV and health services due to fear of infection, severely limiting agency in reproductive and healthcare choices.¹⁴ Where women are responsible for cooking and securing food, food insecurity may place women at a higher risk of domestic violence.¹⁵

¹⁴ Fraser, E. 2020. "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women and Girls." VAWG Helpdesk Research Report No. 284. March 16, UKAID.

¹⁵ GBV Sub-Sector Myanmar. 2020. Guidance Note on GBV Service Provision during the time of COVID-19.

Drugs continued to be a problem and were linked to domestic violence.

Village representatives in one of the villages in Tanintharyi Region, where no crime had been reported, noted that drug-related issues have decreased during the crisis due to lockdowns, restrictions on travel, and heightened security in the village. The village head remarked that *“it would be great if the government-controlled drugs like this COVID-19 management.”* However, restrictions may indeed have decreased flows of drugs into villages but, they have also increased the time addicts spent around their families, potentially putting them at risk. A respondent in a remote village in Shan State reported a domestic violence case during the research period where a drug addict was arrested for beating his wife who had recently given birth.

5.3 Crime

Villagers in several States and Regions, including Chin, Rakhine, Kayin, and Mon States and Mandalay Region, noticed a rise in opportunistic thefts in the village since the pandemic began. In particular, thieves targeted motorbikes, livestock and livestock feed, and women’s purses. Village representatives interpreted this perceived increased in crime as a result of the economic hardship faced by some villagers. A respondent in a fishing village in Ayeyarwady Region reported that they were concerned about thieves, so rather than leaving their fishing nets where they would typically do so, some fishermen dragged nets back to their homes for safekeeping on a daily basis.

5.4 Relations Between Villages

While this research focused on the village as the unit of analysis, villages in Myanmar are organized into village tracts as the unit of government administration. Whereas social cohesion within the research villages has been subject to a dramatic decrease, relationships between nearby villages may face strain due to the location of quarantine centers, lack of mobility, lack of ability to travel between villages for work, accusations of theft, and fear of the virus.

In areas of the country with long-running conflicts or high distrust between ethnic and religious groups, the virus may also serve as both a catalyst for renewed enmity, and exclusion.

CASE STUDY 11:

Inter-Village Relations

In a village tract in Rakhine State, relations between Rakhine villages and a village self-identified as a Rohingya village were strained following the arson of the Rohingya village in 2012. Following 2012, villagers were no longer allowed to enter Rakhine villages or travel to Kyauk Taw and were referred to as "Bengalis". More recently, the Rakhine population has been referring to them as "Muslims" and some villages have asked the Rohingya to return to work in Rakhine villages. However, following cases of infected returnees arriving from Bangladesh, Rakhine villages refuted the permission to work in their villages and did not allow Rohingya to enter the villages at all, making them effectively trapped in their community and even causing difficulties in buying food. In July 2020, the villagers have been accused by a nearby Rakhine village of stealing their cows, leading to further tensions.

At the time of interviews, the village head, and two out of three other respondents, reported having a long-lasting fever that did not respond to traditional remedies. They said the whole village was ill with fever for quite some time, and when the village head asked the local midwife from the township health department to report their symptoms and come and check their health status, she responded that it was just seasonal flu and refused to examine the villagers. The village head despaired, saying: *"I'm so fed up of living like this that I don't even want to return as a human in the next life. I've had a fever for about a month now, and I don't even have permission to seek treatment. I really want to go to a clinic in Sittwe, but we can't go. We only have some paracetamol for treatment and the fever either doesn't go away, or goes away and returns."*

By the end of August, the village head reported that most of the villagers' symptoms had resolved, but there were some who remained ill with a slight fever.

06

PAGE 37-41

Leadership

6.1

Leaders in the COVID-19 Response



Photo by Anastasia Popova on Unsplash

Village tract administrators or village heads were involved in leading the virus response in all but three villages. Village health workers played a leading role in 35 villages, as did other informal leaders (10 and 100 household heads) in 31 villages, village elders and informal leaders in 25 of the villages, and religious leaders in 13 villages (Chart 8). Religious leaders were particularly active in organizing food aid and other donations and offering their premises for use as quarantine facilities. Other groups active in COVID-19 response include midwives, the Red Cross, the local fire brigade, militia (*pyithu sit*), youth groups, and women's groups. Involvement by the Ta'ang health team, a local NGO supporting health care in Ta'ang communities, and the Karen National Union, were also mentioned.

According to village heads, leaders in National Community Driven Development Project (NCDDP) villages were noticeably more engaged in enforcing government instructions, compared to non-NCDDP villages. The most common task undertaken by leaders was the sharing of information (in 36 villages), through mobile announcements and pamphlets; enforcing government instructions (in 31

villages), including night-time curfews, limits on travel, mask-wearing, restrictions on gatherings, handwashing, and body temperature checks; distributing aid (in 24 villages); and providing instructions on quarantining (in 22 villages), which may also include establishing quarantine centers, educating individual villagers about the requirement to quarantine, or providing food for villagers in quarantine (Chart 9).

CHART 8

Leaders Involved in COVID-19 Response (Number of Villages)

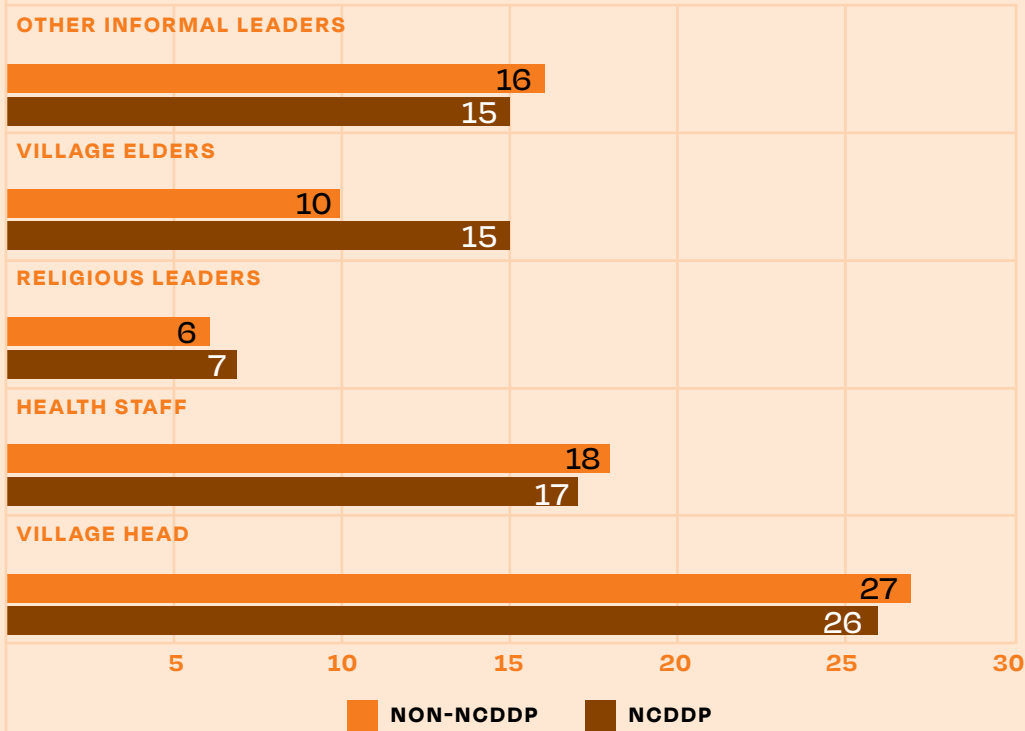
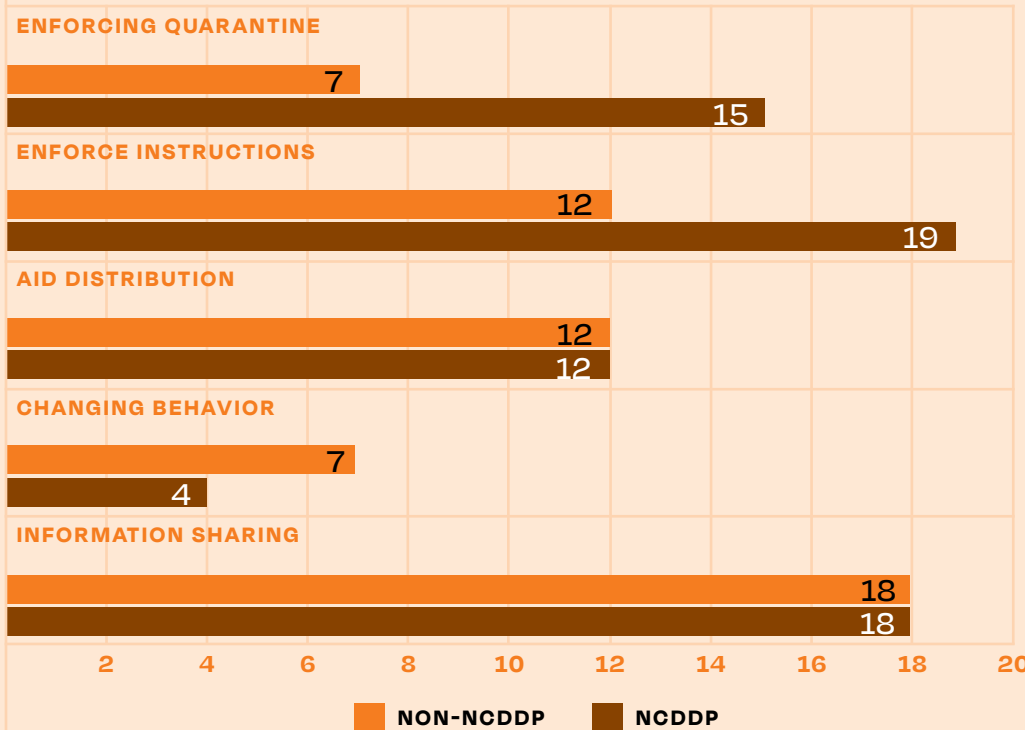


CHART 9

Number of Villages with Leaders Performing Tasks



Trust in local leadership, or a lack thereof, had an important effect on how villages perceived and accepted COVID-19-related health measures, as illustrated in Case Study 12 below.

CASE STUDY 12:

Lack of Trust, Lack of Compliance

One of the research villages in Chin State was the location of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Myanmar. Upon his return from the United States, the case-01 patient fell ill and was referred to the township hospital where he was tested. Upon confirmation of the disease, the authorities instructed the village tract administrator to find the people with whom the infected person had been in contact. Among those, another three tested positive and were referred to the hospital, whilst other contacts who had not tested positive were sent to the local quarantine center.

Neither the case-01 patient nor the contacts believed that they were infected. Instead, they believed that they were accused of having COVID-19 because of a personal vendetta the village head harbored against them. In fact, most of the villagers did not believe the news and disagreed with the measures taken by the village tract administrator and government authorities. Negative opinions about the incident were posted on social media and social relations in the village deteriorated.

6.2 COVID-19 Protection Committees

Following the first cases of COVID-19 in Myanmar, the General Administration Department, through its township offices, instructed village tract administrators to create COVID-19 protection committees. Administrators, then, instructed village leaders to form these committees at the village level. These committees usually consist of the village head as chair, health care workers, headmasters, and other influential local leaders. The committees focus on more official responsibilities, including announcing and enforcing government instructions, encouraging behavioral change, and sharing information concerning the virus.

COVID protection committees were established in 33 research villages, 30 of which included female members. Disaster affected villages were more likely to establish a committee than villages that had not suffered from a major natural disaster. This discrepancy may be due to an increased level of awareness in disaster-affected villages for the need to be prepared to respond to external shocks because of their prior experience dealing with disasters.

Committee membership and make-up, as well as women's representation, varied between villages. The four research villages in Yangon Region provide good examples of the varied committee memberships: two of the committees were led by women village tract administrators; one of the committees, located in a larger town with a hospital and a high school, had no women; and the fourth village had a committee led by a male village tract administrator, and included women healthcare workers.

It should be noted that women committee members often also served in other professional roles, as healthcare workers (midwives), or teachers, which is particularly relevant because schools were often used as quarantine sites. Villages in two different townships in Magway Region intentionally included women committee members who were not teachers or healthcare workers, whereas in some areas in Mon State, they involved the Mon Women's Association and the Maternal and Child Welfare Team in the committees.

6.3 Collaboration Among Leaders

In 40 of the research villages, village heads observed that leaders in their village collaborated.¹⁶ The research found that there was more collaboration between leaders in villages covered by the NCDDP, with village elders being far more engaged in these villages (see Chart 9 above). This increased engagement may be a reflection of the local leadership structure that the NCDDP aims at strengthening in participating villages. Collaboration between leaders was also reported in higher numbers in conflict-affected villages. The increased collaboration in conflict affected villages, in areas of mixed administration between ethnic armed organizations and the Myanmar government, may be the result of their recognizing the need for, and importance of, local leadership and continuity.

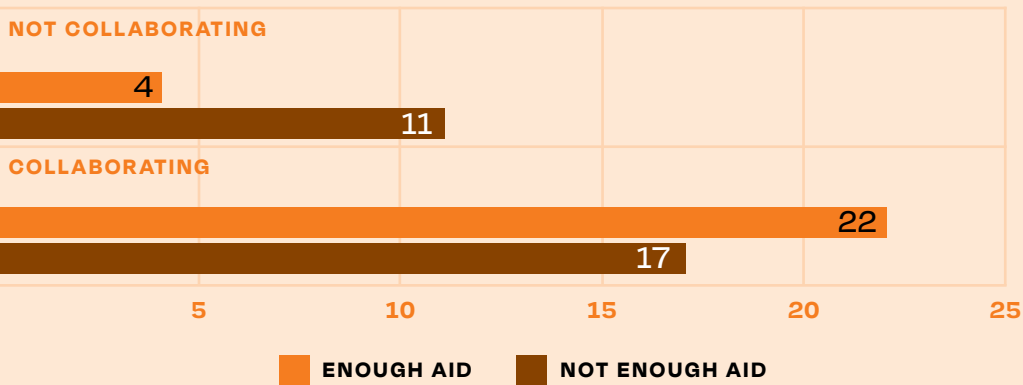
There is strong evidence that where collaboration between village leaders was reported, villagers also reported receiving enough aid. In over half of villages with collaborating leaders, villagers felt that they received sufficient aid, compared to only a quarter of villages where leaders were not collaborating (Chart 10). This relationship is even more apparent in disaster-affected villages—compared to villages not affected by a disaster. The higher degree of collaboration among leaders translated into more villages considering the aid they received as being sufficient, as receiving greater support from their State/Region government, and a greater probability of receiving the government's second-round cash aid.

The study found a link between villages with improved social relations and those where leaders were more likely to collaborate. Leaders in all 11 villages with improved relations also reported increased collaboration. On the other hand, relations worsened in only one in eight villages with collaborative leaders, compared to one in four villages where leaders did not collaborate. Furthermore, it was observed that villagers in villages with collaborating leaders were more likely to follow government instructions to contain the virus, compared to villages without collaboration.

¹⁶ If, in addition to the village head, local health worker, religious leaders, village elderly or respected persons and/or other informal leaders were involved in the COVID-19 response, leadership in a village is considered collaborative.

CHART 10

Number of Villages with Leaders Collaborating



CASE STUDY 13:

A Female Leader Leaves Her Mark

One disaster affected NCDDP village in Yangon Region elected the township's first ever female village tract administrator in the 2016 elections. The village is very proud of her and noted her strong consultation and collaboration with monks, village elders, teachers, and the local administration body in all issue affecting the village. As one of her constituents commented: *"There is no administrator like her. She is clever, she does her best. When she was first nominated as village administrator, I thought it was not a good idea for a woman to have this position, as she could not go around with a knife or a spear, so I protested [her nomination]. Now, I regret that I objected."*

This village tract administrator, in her handling of the COVID-19 crisis, in addition to those she normally consults on village issues, also brought together health workers, village members, and leaders of local philanthropic organizations (*parahita*). She led the team through a participatory discussion and division of responsibilities to handle the village-level response to the pandemic. This village reported improvements in social relations, with villagers indicating that they had received sufficient aid.

07

PAGE 42-47

Aid



Overall, as of July 2020, the aid effort by the government and others was significant. Villagers received aid in 54 out of the 56 villages under research. This was true even for the five villages with a travel time to the nearest marketplace of two hours or more. Respondents in only two villages reported not receiving any aid; both were socially homogenous, ethnic minority villages, one in Chin State, the other in Shan State. However, the aid effort was not without issues and limitations.

7.1 Aid Providers

Village heads reported that the Union government provided aid in 50 of the study villages. These included all research villages in conflict affected areas despite the fact that some of these are administered, in part or wholly, by ethnic armed organizations. In the remaining four villages that reported receiving aid, the aid was provided by township authorities (two villages), the State/Region government (one village), and the Tatmadaw (one village) through a military tea factory in Shan State. In total, the State/Region government provided aid in four villages and private donors in 10 villages. Township authorities used the mobile application, Viber, to communicate with village tract administrators concerning aid disbursements, including the need to create and submit lists of households eligible to receive aid.

In addition to government aid, some villages also received aid from private donors. Private donors include religious organizations, religious leaders, or private individuals. These donors were not always from the same village receiving their donation, in some cases, coming instead from a nearby town or township seat. In general, the private donors were a more important source of aid for remote villages. It is unclear if these private donors gave to multiple villages across a specific area, or selected specific villages to receive their donation. One village in Bago Region reported that a wealthy man arrived in their village accompanied by his assistant, and after touring it with the village elders, he selected the poor families to offer assistance to.

7.2 Types of Aid

As of July 2020, the Union government had provided a one-time food package and a one-time cash payment to villages across the country since the start of the pandemic. All but two villages received food aid from the Union government. This food aid was distributed in April 2020 throughout the country and consisted of rice, oil, salt, beans, and onions. Thirty-three of the research villages also received cash aid in the amount of 15,000–20,000 kyats in June 2020. In villages that received food and cash, some village administrators worked to redistribute aid to more households by allocating cash payments to households who had not made the previous list to receive food aid. In other villages, some households received food aid and cash payments, but there were no villages in the research where every household that received food aid in April also receive cash payments in June.

Villages have also received specific support through the various social security programs. While groups such as, the elderly, pregnant women, and mothers with children under two years of age, normally receive quarterly social security payments of 10,000–15,000 kyats each, they were provided with an additional

one-time payment of 30,000 kyats. Some non-profit groups and women’s organizations in Kayah and Chin States also donated sanitary products to women. Discounts on electricity bills were also reported.

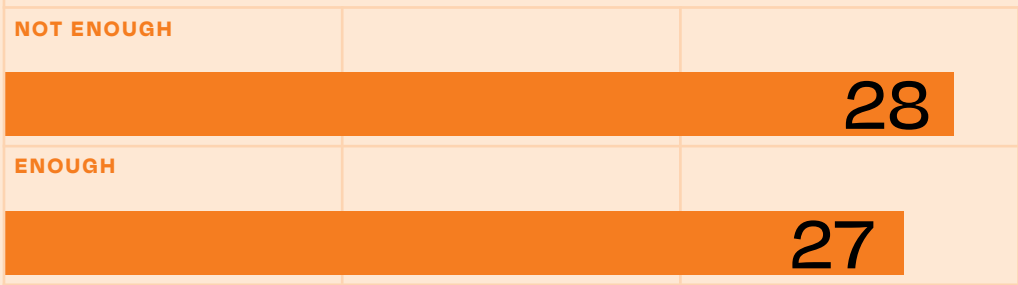
The quality of in-kind aid was not always up to standard. In some villages there were complaints that the rice received was of such low quality that it was inedible and was instead used to feed livestock. In a few areas, the seeds provided by the State/Region government to smallholder farmers were either of low quality or not of the type of crop normally grown in the village. For example, in one village in Yangon Region, which received aid from multiple sources, the paddy seeds provided were of poor quality and mixed with grass, so instead of planting it, villagers ground it into flour to eat.

7.3
Adequacy of
Aid

Village heads considered the aid as sufficient in 26 villages and insufficient in 28 villages, with no distinction seen between Regions and States (Chart 11). NCDDP villages reported having received less aid compared to non-NCDDP villages. There are two possible reasons for this variance: First, since NCDDP villages are, by design, located in poorer townships, their perceived needs may be higher for the same amount of aid received; second, noticeably more non-NCDDP villages received aid from private donors, which may be due to the fact that NCDDP villages were already being supported by the Union government. Respondents in disaster-affected villages, who have experienced aid efforts in the past and who may have a better sense of how much aid can be expected in emergency situations, considered the aid as sufficient more often than in villages not affected by natural disasters.

CHART 11

Number of Villages Where Villagers Received Enough Aid



Overall, most villages viewed the aid as supplementary, or as a few days’ worth of food supplies, rather than being a substantial support during the lockdown period. An aid recipient of the 15,000 kyats cash transfer noted:

“What can be done with this amount of money? I mean thank you, but it is like ringing a bell with a leaf—no sound comes out.”

The distributed food packets and cash were the same for each household, regardless of the number of individuals the households contained. As such, respondents in multiple villages noted that smaller households could subsist for 1–2 weeks on the aid packages, while for larger families, the aid would only last a few days. Respondents indicated that villagers needed longer term solutions, such as, access to employment/income: *“It is better that the government create job opportunities rather than support with basic foodstuffs. If they can work on plans for employment opportunities that would be even better.”*

7.4 Aid Recipients

Cash and food aid were targeted at the poorest households without access to a stable income. According to village heads, poor households were targeted to receive aid in 53 villages; in the remaining village, women headed households were targeted. Overall, only in two, ethnically homogenous villages in Chin State, did all villagers reportedly received aid.

The most significant problem observed was the time constraints put on village heads to submit to the township authorities the lists of households in their village requiring aid. For example, the village head in a village in Shan State indicated that he was informed at 11a.m. to make a list of the most vulnerable/poorest households and submit the list by 4p.m. the same day. This short timeframe resulted in an incomplete list being submitted. Similar time pressures were also noted in Sagaing Region, Mon State, and elsewhere, suggesting that as village heads across the country worked to meet a short deadline, some households were left out. This tight timeframe may have contributed to the reported lack of aid in two villages, also located in Shan State. Lack of proper documentation further complicated access to aid.

CASE STUDY 14:

Civil Documentation and aid limitations

An additional issue with aid is that, in most villages, it was determined by relying on documents such as the household list, a document which many in Myanmar do not have due to migration, not owning property, fire, war, and natural disasters, or even family matters such as divorce or polygamy.

Myanmar expanded its old age social pension program to provide an additional one-off cash payment to the elderly to help them cope with COVID-19, but this was only available to those with a household list. One elderly woman in a village in Yangon Region was in desperate need of support but did not have a household list. The village tract administrator reported this issue to the township officer, who said that if the immigration department gave their approval, the woman could receive the social security payment. At the time of writing the administrator had plans to meet with the immigration officer to resolve this case.

The time pressures on village heads to submit lists of vulnerable households resulted in most respondents reporting that not all those who needed aid received it. In some cases, households simply did not make the village head's list, in other cases, these households were on the list, but the aid that arrived was not sufficient to cover all their needs. For instance, in a village in Sagaing Region, several casual labor families were omitted from the list and complained to the village head. Eventually, the families accepted his apology for excluding them inadvertently because he had been given only half a day to draw up the list.

The Union government made a 12-point list to identify households for aid.

Generally, it was accepted amongst villagers that only those worst off would receive aid. As a farmer in Sagaing commented: *"In this period, we farmers are facing serious difficulties. But if we don't have anything to eat, we have something to sell—we still have cows. The poor, living hand to mouth, have nothing. We didn't get anything [aid] but they did, which is fine—I'm happy about that."*

However, the generic eligibility criteria to identify households to receive aid was not appropriate in all local contexts.

For example, some farmers may have land but no crops, or recently returned migrants may have a nice house but no job, these individuals were ineligible according to the criteria. Households receiving pensions, or where there was a government or formal employee, were also excluded, even if all the other household members were now out of work and dependent on the one income. A respondent commented: *"Some vulnerable people did not receive aid because of the government's rules. Some farmers have farms in their names but pawned them or gave them to others as they may have difficulties, for example, they cannot work anymore or something. They did not get any support even though they should have."* Conversely, some casual workers included on the government's list, who seemed to be doing just fine, did receive aid. This situation led to gossip in the villages concerning those who received aid and those who did not. aid. There were also a number of accusations that those who were seen as undeserving of aid but had a close relationship to the village head, or close affiliation to the ruling party, were more likely to receive aid.

To remedy these limitations, not all village leaders distributed aid according to the government criteria, instead, they employed other methods to target the poorest in their village. Some discussed the distribution of aid with village elders and other informal leaders in order to distribute the aid equally to each household in the village. Other village heads discussed aid distribution with villagers directly and jointly decided which households should receive aid. For example, in one village in Bago Region with strong leader collaboration, leaders distributed food aid to some small landholders as they were seen to have little acreage and many mouths to feed. In other villages, aid recipients shared what they received with those who were not included in the recipient lists.

7.5 The Impacts of Insufficient Aid

Insufficient aid either strengthened or weakened social relations within villages, depending on the specific context. When aid was deemed insufficient, respondents in villages in Bago and Yangon Regions, and Kayin, Shan, Chin and Kachin States, and elsewhere, reported that villagers shared food, either from one's garden or harvest, shared a few days' worth of rice with those who needed it, or systematically redistributed the government aid so that more villagers received a share. In a socially diverse village in Shan State, some villagers donated a portion of the aid they had received to those who had not received any aid. There were, however, numerous other instances where insufficient distribution of aid contributed to the fraying of social ties in the village. In most cases, the government's eligibility criteria were the cause of the breakdown in social ties. Several respondents reported conflicts between the village head and those who did not receive aid, or feelings of jealousy towards households who had received aid. A village head expressed concerns:

“I worry when aid and support are not sufficient. That is why, sometimes, I think it would be better for us not to receive any aid at all unless it is enough for everyone. I have no idea which people to choose. I'm afraid that there will be a fight among the villagers. Shall I give them a lucky draw?”

Village leaders worked hard to resolve the conflicts, which arose in their villages, with many respondents reporting that they observed no long-term enmity between villagers or towards the village head, even when the aid seemed insufficient. Oftentimes, volunteer committees managed to collect donations in the village to help those who needed it, even if they had already received government support.

Annex 01

PAGE 48-51

Village Markers & Profiles

ANNEX 1.1 Village Markers



Photo by sippakorn yamkasikorn on Unsplash

Across the research areas the community assessment aimed to identify whether or not the impact of the coronavirus was differentiated by certain village characteristics, or by markers, i.e., whether or not these markers seemed to mitigate or contribute to the impact of the virus. Table 1 defines these markers.

TABLE 1

Definition of Village Markers

Marker	Definition (Number of Villages)
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – NCDDP: located in a township that has benefitted from at least three annual block grant cycles under the NCDDP (28) – Non-NCDDP: located in a township that has not benefitted from the NCDDP (28)
Remoteness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nearby: travel time to the nearest marketplace of 45 minutes or less (38) – Remote: travel time to the nearest marketplace over 45 minutes (18)
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Conflict-affected: located in an area administered, in part of wholly, by an ethnic armed organization, or located in an area with active conflict (7) – Not affected by conflict: located in an area not controlled by an ethnic armed organization or not in active conflict (49)
Disaster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Disaster-affected: located in an area affected by a major disaster (tropical cyclone) or recurrent disasters (mudslides, floods) (48) – Not affected by a disaster: located in an area not affected by a major or recurrent disaster (8)
Agroecological zone	<p>Villages were classified according to their specific agroecological location, not the zones States/Regions they are commonly associated with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – coastal zone (21) – dry zone (15) – hill zone (20)
Economic diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not diverse: no other livelihood in addition to primary livelihood, excluding casual labor, buying and selling, and migration¹⁷ (18) – Diverse: at least one other livelihood in addition to the primary livelihood, excluding casual labor, buying and selling, and migration (38)
Migration	<p>Calculated as the percentage of villagers who had migrated prior to the pandemic in relation to the village population:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – limited: 0–5 percent (27) – moderate: 6–15 percent (19) – extensive: above 15 percent (8)
Social diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Homogenous: only one ethnic group and one religious group (28) – Diverse: two or more ethnic groups and/or two or more religious groups (28)

¹⁷ Casual labor in rural areas is a derivative of other livelihoods, in particular farming, whilst buying and selling is a regular feature throughout rural Myanmar and, thus, does not add to differentiation. Migration is a reflection of employment opportunities outside the village and is, thus, not a local livelihood.

ANNEX 1.2

Village Profiles

Fifty of the 56 research villages are farming villages. Four villages have fishing as the primary livelihood, whilst migration is dominant in two villages; in all six of these villages, farming is also practiced. Casual laborers are present in all villages, and there are migrants in 44 villages. Buying and selling, a staple income source for rural communities, exists in 31 of the research villages.

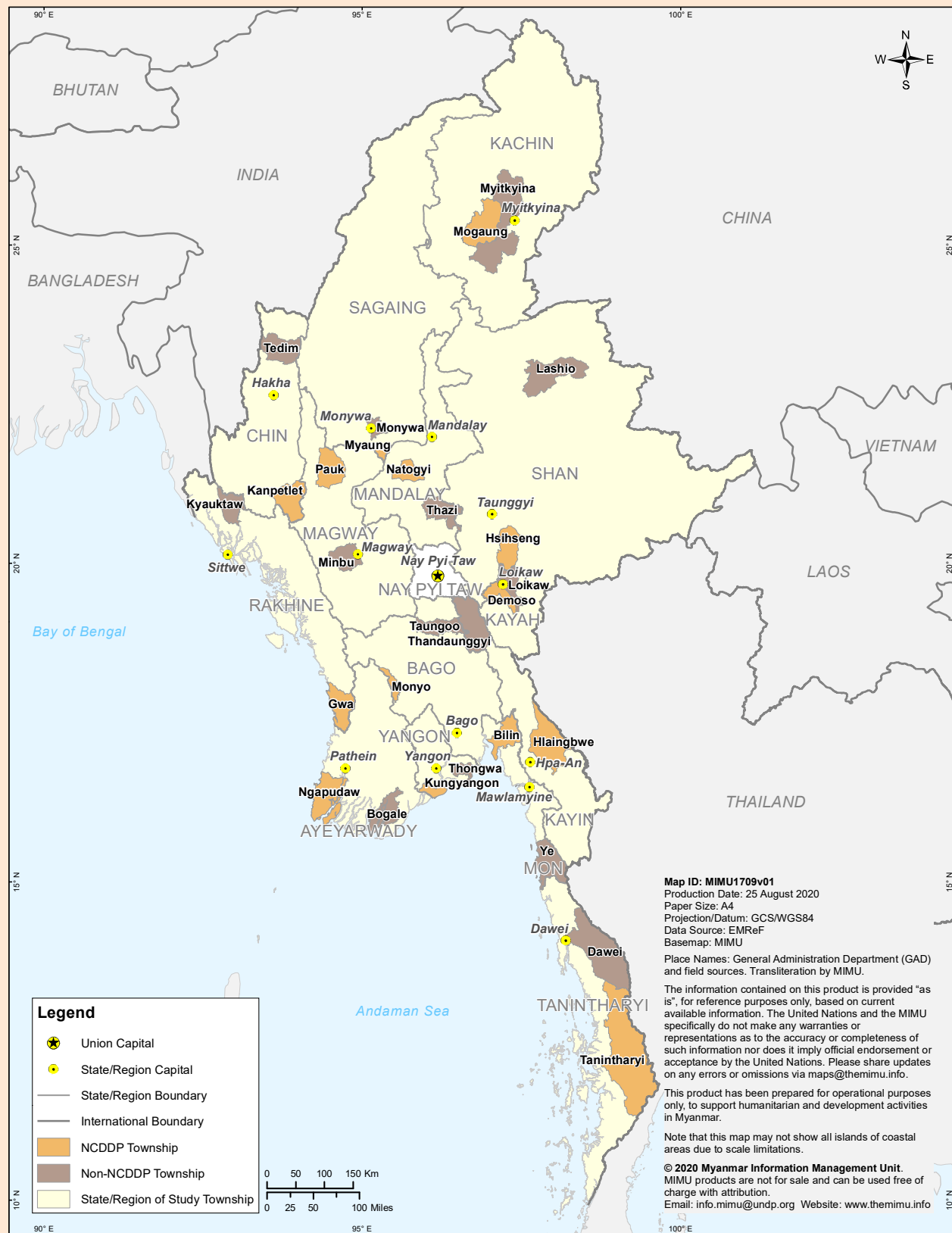
The most important secondary livelihoods are small businesses (found in 12 villages), and construction work (found in 11 villages). The yield and quality of the most recent harvest before the interviews was reported as good in 12 villages, fair in 24 villages, and poor in 20 villages. Only 29 of the villages contained health posts.

The research villages included 32 villages that are ethnically homogenous and 24 that have at least one other ethnic group present. The ethnic majority in 27 villages is Bamar. The sample also included eight Karen ethnic majority villages. Other ethnic groups, namely the Bamar (Dawei), Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayan, Kayaw, Mon, Pa'O, Rakhine, Rha, Rohingya, Shan, Shan Ni, Ta'and, and Zomi, form the majority in 1–3 villages each. Other ethnic groups present in the research villages are the Jingpho, Li Su, Rawan, Ga Ra Khar, Dine Nat, Maru, Lhachid, and Ganan. Bamar majority villages appear to have less religious diversity than Karen majority villages but are more economically diverse.

Moreover, there are 16 religiously diverse villages and 40 religiously uniform villages in the sample. In 30 villages, Buddhism is the sole religion, and in another 10 villages, it is the majority religion alongside other faiths. In eight villages, a Christian faith is the sole religion, and in another four, it is the majority religion. In addition, there are three majority Muslim villages and one majority Laipian village.¹⁸ Animists are present in one village. Christian majority villages seem to be more ethnically diverse than Buddhist majority villages. There appears to be no distinction in economic diversity between Buddhist and Christian majority villages.

¹⁸ The Zomi are an ethnic group living in Chin State, part of Sagaing Region and part of Rakhine State, as well as, in border areas in India and Bangladesh. Pau Cin Hau, a Zomi leader, founded Laipian religion in 1888. He also invented the Laipian script. See: <https://zomiusa.wordpress.com>

Myanmar COVID Socioeconomic Monitoring Study Townships



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