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# Listening for Coronavirus in eastern Bago and Mon

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Centre for Good Governance is funded by the UK Government and  
managed by Cardno in partnership with Mercy Corps and PACT



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This report complements policy advice on responding to the social and economic impacts of coronavirus pandemic, provided by Covenant (/CGG) to four Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) in southeast Myanmar.

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## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b><i>Executive Summary</i></b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Introduction	3
1.2	Methodology	3
1.3	Summary of findings	4
<b>2</b>	<b><i>Insights from Kyauk Kyi</i></b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	Context	5
2.2	Kyauk Kyi - KNU Response to Coronavirus	5
2.3	Kyauk Kyi - GoM and KNU Coordination	6
2.4	Kyauk Kyi - CIDKP Response	7
2.5	Kyauk Kyi - Youth Groups' Responses to Coronavirus	8
2.6	Kyauk Kyi - Myanmar Red Cross Response to Coronavirus	9
2.7	Kyauk Kyi - CSO (Gaia Organisation and Sittaung Thanzin Social Network) Response	10
<b>3</b>	<b><i>Insights from Mon</i></b>	<b>11</b>
3.1	Context	11
3.2	Community Responses to Coronavirus	12
3.3	Mon - GoM and NMSP Coordination	12
3.4	Mon - NMSP Response to Coronavirus	12
3.5	Mon - Mawlamyine CSOs Response	13
<b>4</b>	<b><i>Questions for Discussion</i></b>	<b>15</b>

## Acronyms

CBO	Community Based Organization
CGG	Centre for Good Governance
CIDKP	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People
COVID -19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization
GAD	General Administration Department
GBV	Gender –based Violence
GoM	Government of Myanmar
HURFOM	Human Rights Foundation of Monland
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
INGO	International Non-governmental Organization
JCSDO	Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organization
KDHW	Karen Department of Health and Welfare
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
MNHC	Mon National Health Committee
MOHS	Ministry of Health and Sport
MP	Member of Parliament
MRCA	Myanmar Red Cross Association
MVs	Mine Victims
MWO	Mon Women's Organization
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NRPC	National Reconciliation and Peace Centre
PA	Public Address
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
QC	Quarantine Centre
QS	Quarantine Stations
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SP	Screening Points
TB	Tuberculosis
WHO	World Health Organization

## 1 Executive Summary

This report examines the impact of coronavirus on communities in Eastern Bago and Mon between June-August 2020, in government-controlled areas, and areas under mixed Government-EAO control. During this period Myanmar had recorded less than 300 cases of coronavirus.

This listening project seeks to capture a ‘snapshot’ of local understandings, narratives and activities in response to the coronavirus pandemic. It focuses specifically on examining the limited examples of cooperation or coordination that have emerged between different Government and EAO authorities and stakeholders.

Key Findings of this Report:

- Lockdown measures to contain the pandemic exacerbated already precarious livelihoods situation of poor and marginalised communities across southeast Myanmar, with food shortages occurring in several areas. To maintain often precarious livelihoods, after initially complying with coronavirus travel and other lockdown restrictions, by August many people had started to ignore the threat of Covid 19.
- A few examples of ad hoc local collaboration emerged in response to the pandemic, including coordination between GAD and CSOs, local KNU and Tatmadaw leaders collaborating to establish Screening Points in a conflict-affected area; KNU support to a government quarantine centre in Kyauk Kyi; and several instances of coordination between the NMSP, KNU and Myanmar Army to avoid clashes at screening points in sensitive areas.
- Most respondents believe the government did not provide adequate leadership or coordination (or public health messaging, or protection measures such as PPE materials), even at Screening Points and Quarantine Centres.
- There was initially no systematic collaboration between the Myanmar government and KNU in responding to the pandemic, but limited support now appears to be provided by the GAD and Ministry of Health.
- The KNU and NMSP health and social welfare wings responded quickly and relatively effectively to the threat of pandemic. Local CSOs often took leading roles, particularly in the early days of response, as did the Myanmar Red Cross Society. Some CSOs responded jointly, including an example of collaboration between different faith-based groups.
- Many respondents believe the Myanmar Army had sought to suppress local attempts to coordinate in responding to the coronavirus, particularly in the Kyauk Kyi area, where KNU screening points were destroyed on more than one occasion.



Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organization providing PPE to a local beneficiary

Key Insights for the Ongoing Pandemic:

- **Improved GoM and EAO Coordination is Needed:** For an effective and coherent response to the pandemic, it is important to strengthen collaboration and coordination between EAOs and CSOs, and between government and CSOs and EAOs. This will require the Union and State/Region governments to issue clear instructions (including to the GAD) to coordinate coronavirus response activities with CSOs, and relevant EAOs (or their health and welfare line departments) - particularly NCA signatory groups like the KNU and NMSP. There is also a need for sub-national coronavirus response coordination platforms, at the State/Region level (and also possibly at township level).
- **Adapting Responses to Local Contexts is Critical to Ensure an Effective Response:** In remote and conflict-affected areas, where people often live communally, are poor, and live in smaller dwellers, social distancing measures are difficult to implement. Furthermore, lockdowns and other restrictions have major impacts on livelihoods, which are often dependent on supply chains to neighbouring and more distant areas. How can lockdown rules be adapted, to be more appropriate in such contexts?
- **Social Media Continues to be a Critical Source of Information Sharing:** Social media can attract and influence very large numbers of people quickly, and can be a useful tool coordination and information sharing. Use of Facebook to disseminate trusted information and counter misinformation is essential. However, it is important to guard against the spread of hate speech and fake news.

These learnings and reflections provide valuable insights as Myanmar appears to be entering a “second wave” infections.



## 1.1 Introduction

This research was conducted between June-August 2020, during a period when Myanmar had reported less than 300 cases of coronavirus, with low testing rates.<sup>1</sup> These findings, and associated learnings are valuable as Myanmar enters a “second wave” infections in September 2020.

The aims of this listening project were:

- To capture local understandings, narratives and activities in response to the coronavirus pandemic;
- To find examples of cooperation or coordination between different authorities and stakeholders in the coronavirus response;
- To complement policy advice on responding to the social and economic impacts of coronavirus pandemic, provided by Covenant (CGG) to four EAOs in southeast Myanmar;
- To capture learnings for future pandemics.

## 1.2 Methodology

A team of local and international researchers conducted 15 face-to-face and online interviews with a range of stakeholders in and around Kyauk Kyi (Bago Region) and in southern Mon State, in addition to follow-up discussions with EAOs. The research team included Karen and Mon researchers, over half of whom were women.

Local researchers adapted these topic points and questions, depending on their research and interview contexts. Findings were written-up in a reporting template, then synthesised for this report.

Three clusters of local researchers conducted interviews, face-to face and also online.

Researchers conducted interviews in and around Kyauk Kyi and Mawlamyine, in Yangon and online; for a total of 15 in-depth interviews (including a focus group discussion with NMSP leaders) in June-August 2020. Most of those interviewed were key actors in CSO, national NGO or EAO response to coronavirus, and thus highly knowledgeable about their respective areas. Ashley South also conducted follow-up interviews with KNU and NMSP officials, and several CSOs. In addition, the four main local researchers added their own reflections, based on first-hand experience of coronavirus response.<sup>2</sup>

These interviews were supplemented by follow-up conversations and review materials posted on social media.<sup>3</sup>

The research was directed and findings synthesised by Dr Ashley South, with help from Michael Woods.

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<sup>1</sup> “By early June, over 10,000 quarantine centres had been established across the country, at some points housing over 60,000 people ... heavy use of law enforcement to implement the lockdowns has led to overcrowding in already full prisons... In March, 67 websites - including prominent sites representing ethnic minorities, which often report human rights violations - were blocked by internet providers at the behest of the Myanmar government, citing misinformation and ‘fake news’ about a COVID-19 as a justification.” - Saferworld, *Responses to COVID-19: ‘Building back better’: the security sector after COVID-19* (July 2020, p.4).

<sup>2</sup> In and around Kyauk Kyi (eastern Bago Region) interviews were conducted with villagers, CSOs, the KNU and its main relief and development wing, the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), in areas of KNU control and “mixed administration”. In Mawlamyine, interviews and reflections focused on central-southern Mon State, including NMSP areas. These are some of the areas where Covenant had networks when the pandemic became a concern, and Myanmar entered varying degrees of lock-down. No claims are made for comprehensive or inclusive information or analysis, but we believe these snapshots are interesting and instructive.

<sup>3</sup> Additional interviews were conducted with teachers in and around the Karen State capital of Hpa-an.

### 1.3 Summary of findings

- Lockdown measures have exacerbated the already precarious livelihoods situation of many poor and marginalised communities across southeast Myanmar, with food shortages occurring in several areas.
- In many areas, after initially complying with coronavirus travel and other lockdown restrictions, people started to ignore the threat of Covid 19.
- Local researchers report strong impressions that the government has not provided adequate leadership or coordination (or public health messaging, or protection measures such PPE materials), even at Screening Points and Quarantine Centres.
- In general, despite limited resources and training, the KNU and NMSP health and social welfare wings responded quickly and relatively effectively to the threat of pandemic.
- Local CSOs often took leading roles, particularly in the early days of response, as did the Myanmar Road Cross Society. Some CSOs responded jointly, including an example of collaboration between different faith-based groups.
- After some time, local government authorities (particularly the GAD and Ministry of Health) became more active. Nevertheless, coordination was patchy, depending on the initiative of local people, and local conditions, with no clear leadership overall. Lack of cooperation from Tatmadaw extended to the destruction of several EAO-administered Covid-19 response facilities.
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Mon Women's Organisation providing hand sanitizer in public hospital, Thanbyuzayat Township



## 2 Insights from Kyauk Kyi

### 2.1 Context

Kyauk Kyi Township in the government's territorial administration is divided into 2 KNU Townships: Lerdoh and Mone Townships. For the KNU, this is Kler Lwee Htoo (or Nyanunglebin, in Burmese) District, one of the seven districts of Kawthoolei (the KNU free state). This corresponds to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) 3 Brigade. (Kyauk Kyi and Lerdoh mean "big rock", in Burmese and Sgaw Karen respectively.)

The flatlands to the east of the Sittaung have mostly been government-controlled for many years, with the foothills and more remote villages constituting areas of "mixed administration", under the authority of (and receiving some services from) both government and the KNU. Further to the east in the higher hills, the rest of the township is controlled by the KNU (Kler Lwee Htoo District, 3 Brigade). This is the southwestern portion of the KNU's last substantial "liberated zone" (ceasefire area), backing onto the 5 Brigade (Mudraw/Papun District).

Kyauk Kyi is mixed Karen-Bama town. The majority of townspeople (including many Karen) are Buddhists, with a large Christian quarter (mostly but only Sgaw Baptists), and some Shan. The many outlying villages Karen, mixed Karen-Bama, and some Burmese, with a mixture of Christian and Buddhist, with some Karen animists, especially up in the hills. The great majority of people in the eastern, upland conflict-affected part of the township are Karen, predominantly Sgaw Christians, and also more remote locations many animists.

The multiple clashes in 3 Brigade and on the (KNU) borders with 5 Brigade over the past two years, mostly instigated by Myanmar Army aggression, has seriously undermined trust and confidence in the peace process.

In 3 Brigade/Lerdoh Township the number of IDPs is estimated by CIDKP at 16,500 (with 5,700 in neighbouring Shwegyin Township). Although, since the ceasefires, the incidence of serious human rights abuses has abated across much of southeast Myanmar, the situation in the hills behind Kyauk Kyi remains highly concerning, with regular Tatmadaw attacks on civilians communities. These communities are traumatized, impoverished and exhausted by decades of human (and civil and economic) rights abuses and underdevelopment.

### 2.2 Kyauk Kyi - KNU Response to Coronavirus

The local KNU administration established a Working Group to address the Covid 19 situation in the District and KNU Townships. They follow advice from KNU HQ (General Secretary Office) and the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW, the KNU health social welfare department), in accordance with WHO guidelines. In KNU 3 Brigade as elsewhere, the local KNU has planned and established Screening Points (SP) and Quarantine Stations (QS), trained volunteer workers, and shared information with the community. These efforts have been severely challenged by opposition from the Tatmadaw, including the destruction of two SPs.

*"Chaung Wah Screening point (in Shwe Kyin Township) was destroyed by the Tatmadaw on 2 June 2020. Waboe Daw Junction Screening point (also in Shwe Kyin Township) was destroyed by the Tatmadaw on 16 June 2020"*

- local KNU official.

Despite this, with support from international partners, the KNU/KDHW has provided their Screening Points and Quarantine Stations with masks, hand gel, and limited amounts of other PPE and digital thermometers. Coordination efforts, let by the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), included engaging community (with workshops to teach sewing of approved-design masks), and gaining the support of (and donations from) the local MP and a private company.

According to the local KNU, the most seriously affected people in the township are those who rely on obtaining food in the forests, and then selling/trading these peri-urban areas. They could not travel to markets, so had to sell at lower prices at SPs. Goods for sale at SPs, for transport into KNU-controlled areas, were also sold at higher than normal prices.

*“As Mone Township is the place I belong, I felt that I have a responsibility to do something in response to Covid-19. I requested my supervisor to ask for help [in the Quarantine Centers]. This crisis is challenging all of us. Not only government but also business, EAOs and even individual we have to work together to response it”*

- (company) donor.



KNU Nyaunglaybin District (3 Brigade) officials distributing rice and cash in Keh Doh Village Tract

## 2.3 Kyauk Kyi - GoM and KNU Coordination

*“Until now, there is no systematic collaboration between the Myanmar government and KNU. At the community level, along with the KNU Covid-19 emergency response team, the KNU has organized Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) awareness-raising activities”*

- local researcher

The District KNU did not accept or receive support from Myanmar government or Myanmar Army. In April the Lerdoh (Kyauk Kyi) Township KNU wrote a letter to the Kyauk Kyi Township GAD, about setting up SPs and coordinating coronavirus response. Although there was no official response, the GAD and KNU did informally discuss setting up an SP at Muthae, near the ceasefire “frontline”. The research team discovered some examples of local flexibility and conflict resolution. This is mostly limited to informal coordination between local KNU leaders, and government (GAD) officials and Tatmadaw builders. In at least one instance, they decided not to release information in the public domain regarding establishing a SP and QC in a sensitive area, in order to avoid any misunderstandings.

There was also some cooperation between the KDHW/CIDKP and the government township authorities (including Department of Health) around possible transfer protocols for patients. Thankfully, so far these have

been unnecessary. Beyond this, little cooperation or coordination was reported between the government and KNU.

*“For each screening point, a committee was formed with 6 members from KNU department of health, transportation, local security, education, and village leaders. After the SP was set up, people from the government-controlled areas could not pass the SP [to enter KNU-controlled areas] and villagers from KNU areas could not go to government-controlled areas. For urgent cases, people had to ask for permission with a recommendation letter from local authorities.*

...

*In Kyaung Pyar village tract the Tatmadaw base did not agree to set up a local SP. However, after discussion with village elders and the Village Tract GAD head, the local Tatmadaw commander allowed to set up the SP”*

- KNU official.

*“We still have fighting in [neighbouring] Brigade 5. Actually, the Tatmadaw should not destroy our screening points”*

- P'doh Wah Re Toh, Chair of KDHW and Covid 19 Emergency Response Team, Nyaunggaybin District.

As the immediate threat of the pandemic receded (in July-August), the district KNU maintained screening Checkpoints, allowed villagers to pass more easily. After the KNU rebuilt the two SPs checkpoints destroyed by the Tatmadaw, there was no further disruption.

## 2.4 Kyauk Kyi - CIDKP Response

The CIDKP is the KNU's main relief and development body, under overall authority of the KNU Central Committee and Secretary's office. The CIDKP has a strong presence in Kyauk Kyi and KNU 3 Brigade.

The CIDKP and the KNU District and Township Covid 19 Emergency Response Working committees have supported IDPs and other vulnerable civilians in 13 villages, and also provided digital thermometers to a quarantine center in Kyauk Kyi, in cooperation with the government.

Main CIDKP activities have included fund-raising, awareness raising (with facilitators/trainers provided by the KDHW, CIDKP and CSOs) and material support. Practical support involved fund-raising, and the purchase and distribution of soaps, hand gels, chlorine powder, thermometers, and antiseptic spray equipment<sup>4</sup>, as well as masks and blankets donated by UNHCR. They helped to set up screening check points in several villages. Despite donations from several sources however, there were not enough hygiene and PPE supplies for most communities.

The CIDKP was also involved in coordinating responses to Covid 19 through participating in meetings organised by the Nyaunggaybin District KNU, and working with Myanmar Red



CIDKP distributing relief in Kyauk Kyi

<sup>4</sup> During April and May, school buildings were used as QS. As schools were due to reopen in June, the Township coronavirus response committee decided to move people to monastery. They used chlorine to clean the vacated school rooms.

Cross Association (MRA - see below). The CIDKP director in Kyauk Kyi supported the KNU at District level in responding to pandemic, and identifying possible funding sources.

CIDKP leaders felt that local government's lack of policy and clear procedures to address the pandemics resulted in wasted time and resources. Better coordination among different organisations, and between the government and relevant KNU departments could ensure a more effective and productive response to Covid-19.

Important social factors to note were that that villagers were united in obeying lockdown rules (largely due to fear of the virus). However, poorer and marginalized people, who often live day-to-day in terms of livelihoods, faced severe difficulties.

*“Both government and KNU should have clear policies in responding to such kinds of crisis. Because of not having this policy, there were many wasted resources (budget, time, labour etc). Working with government staff, we saw their suffering under a top-down system that was not good in responding emergency actions”*

– CIDKP official.

## 2.5 Kyauk Kyi - Youth Groups' Responses to Coronavirus

Several respondents reflected on how communities helped each other during this time of dire crisis. As in other disasters, 'first responders' (in Mon and Karen, and no doubt other areas) were local people, helping and supporting each other.

A number of CSOs operate in the Kyauk Kyi area. Those sampled below are based in government-controlled areas (mostly based in the town), but often work in “mixed administration”, and sometimes in KNU-controlled areas. Other CSOs work in more directly conflict-affected areas, in partnership with the KNU.

Kyauk Kyi is not generally the site of intercommunal clashes, but tensions do exist between religious (Christian, Buddhist etc) and different ethnic-national communities. It is therefore encouraging that the three youth groups studied in and around the town included Karen, Burmese and Buddhist groups, often working together to raise awareness of the pandemic and appropriate responses in their area. They were, however, only partly successful in obtaining official (GAD) support. These CSOs are confident in their ability to assist official efforts in future, if government is willing to work with them. During the period of the study, they conducted a range of activities including distributing information leaflets and masks, and providing information through a PA system in a large market and several villages.

*“Before the government authorities took initiative toward Covid-19, young people from N-G- village organized themselves to do public awareness raising. They hired a PA system with their own money, and announced information and knowledge related to Covid-19 in the village. Some consultation with local GAD officials was possible, but generally the GAD ignored their efforts. Nevertheless, young people from N-G- formed a temporary response committee and collected donations from villagers and business owners.*

...

*We understand that it was the duty of the State to raise public awareness regarding important issues. In this case, the initiative of our government was very limited and slow. We saw the information related to Covid-19 in other countries through media and we worried about our society. That's why we did as much as we can”*

- Karen youth leader.

...

*“We live in the same community, so have should have unity and solidarity in this crisis. Covid-19 could be the starting point toward solidarity and unity of our community”*

– Youth Volunteer.



## 2.6 Kyauk Kyi - Myanmar Red Cross Response to Coronavirus

The Myanmar Red Cross Association (MRCA) cooperated with the government, NGOs, CSOs and the CIDKP. MRCA staff obtained and distributed hand gel, masks, soap, PPE, information - and supported Myanmar workers returning from neighbouring countries. The MRCA also took responsibility for collecting returnees who came back from the Thailand and China borders, and ensuring that they entered quarantine of returning to Kyauk Kyi.<sup>5</sup>

MRCA staff also noted the lack of coordination between government and EAOs. The Kyauk Kyi MRCA provided four volunteers daily to provide services in Kyauk Kyi and Mone quarantine centers. In order to get materials related to Covid 19 prevention, the MRCA coordinated with the CIDKP, Samaritan's Purse (INGO), Gaia Organisation (see below) and Karen Development Network (national NGO). The MRCA also had an outreach program for public awareness of Covid-19 prevention and protection.



Local company donation to MRCA

<sup>5</sup> For migrant workers who returned to Kyauk Kyi through official arrangements, transportation was arranged from Myawaddy to Paryargyi, and from Paryargyi to Kyaukkyi by the Township Covid-19 Protection and Control Committee - with full PPE. Trained MRCA volunteers assisted in this process.



## 2.7 Kyauk Kyi - CSO (Gaia Organisation<sup>6</sup> and Sittaung Thanzin Social Network) Response

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, places where most [landmine] Mine Victim (MVs) live were locked-down by order of the KNU, as part of coronavirus control restrictions. During that time, MVs could not enter the forest to harvest vegetables or make charcoal, to support their livelihoods. Gaia Organisation discussed this issue with the Sittaung Thanzin network members, with whom they had worked together on a social harmony research project in 2019. The two CSO then worked together to distribute basic need to MVs. They also coordinated with village tract GAD to support them in distribution.

With the support of Norwegian Peoples Aid, Gaia and its partners (CSOs, individual and religious leaders) contributed their time. During this period, Gaia closely worked with Village Tracts GAD officials, Sittaung Thanzin network members and MVs. For the general public, Gaia provided awareness about Covid-19. The two CSO then worked together to distribute basic need to MVs. They also coordinated with village tract GAD to support them to distribute pamphlets, and raising awareness regarding operation procedures checkpoints, based on WHO and MOHS information and guidelines. Together with Village Tract GAD officials and the MRCA, CSO distributed PPE to four QS based in government schools in Kyauk Kyi Township. Gaia also provided rice, potato and soap to MV during the lock-down period.



Gaia Sustainable Development Organization distributing support to landmine victims

<sup>6</sup> Gaia Organisation (Gaia) is a newly-registered organisation working to empower grassroots and marginalized communities through strengthening civil society actors to address poverty and enhance their capacity to help themselves; to influence local level policy making processes; to influence local markets and build a fair trade culture by promoting socially responsible community-led enterprises for economic development; to create spaces for dialogue between different stakeholders in order to build relationship, trust and understanding, toward positive social change. Gaia also implements peace-building projects to enhance an inclusive peace process through multi-stakeholder dialogue, in Bago Region and in Kayin State.

The Gaia Organisation and its partners from eastern Bago and northern Karen initiated the Sittaung Thanzin network in 2013. The Sittaung Thanzin Social Network represents 13 CBO/CSOs and individuals, including faith-based organisations. The Sittaung Thanzin network creates informal spaces for local dialogue, and facilitates advocacy mechanisms to engage the public and other key stakeholders.

## 3 Insights from Mon

### 3.1 Context

Since 1995, the NMSP has maintained an (often very) uneasy ceasefire with the government and Tatmadaw. Although political relations broke down in 2010, and tensions remained high for some time, fighting did not break out again. Mon civil society actors developed close relations and much overlap between those working ‘inside’ Myanmar and those operating out of the NMSP-controlled ceasefire zones and in neighbouring Thailand.

The reflections below were collected by Mon CSO members, operating in and around Mawlamyine, the Mon State capital. Most of these reflections are based on the situation in peri-urban and rural areas, including those under the control of the enemy’s pay and areas of “mixed administration”.

For IDPs in southern Myanmar the economic consequences of lockdown have often been devastating, and are exacerbated by stringent restrictions on freedom of movement intended to curb the spread of the virus, in addition to the mandatory quarantine for the thousands of returning migrant workers (nearly 100,000 migrants returned to Burma/Myanmar through border checkpoints between 22 March and 10 June). According to the Human Rights Foundation of Monland, “many of the most vulnerable are being left behind [especially IDPs] ... the economic consequences of COVID-19 are having a significant and detrimental effect on the everyday lives of villagers, leaving many close to destitution, without access to livelihoods or emergency relief aid.”<sup>7</sup>

The NMSP ceasefire zone consists of 12 positions agreed under the June 1995 ceasefire with the then-military government (the SLORC), plus two more positions negotiated in April 2012 under the renewed bilateral ceasefire agreement. These NMSP administered areas include resettlement sites, to which refugees and IDPs were moved in 1996.

Some villages have a single village leader, who engages with government and NMSP authorities (and sometimes also the KNU). Others have multiple village leaders for meeting with different authorities. In order to access NMSP-controlled areas, the Myanmar government (and Army) has to request permission via the NMSP Liaison Office (primarily the main LO in Mawlamyine). This is also the case for international development partners and other visitors.<sup>8</sup>



Temperature checking at an MoE school in Mon State (with and without social distancing)

<sup>7</sup> HURFOM, *How IDP Communities in Southern Burma/Myanmar are Struggling to Survive during COVID-19* (July 2020).

<sup>8</sup> An assessment of NMSP governance and services delivery is available from the NMSP, on request.



### 3.2 Community Responses to Coronavirus

Initially people responded to news of Covid 19 by regularly hand-washing, wearing masks and social distancing. As time went on, this was largely forgotten as people returned to their normal pre-occupations of making a living - mostly because of an absence of coronavirus cases in Mon State. Village Administrators, CSOs, the government and the MRCA all played a part in responding to the pandemic. However, CSOs felt that cooperation between government and other interested parties was not adequate.

Many communities face considerable difficulties obtaining adequate food due to the lockdown. CSOs reported limited communication from government about the nature and danger of Covid-19, so there has been limited understanding at the community level of the risks, and appropriate responses. The government also did not provide enough food for those who were identified as needing support. There was also a reported increase in thefts at this time (presumably connected to the dire economic situation of many).

Many people no longer regard coronavirus as a major threat, as demonstrated by most people no longer wearing masks. Life has returned to normal, with people gathering for trainings and attending events at Monasteries (for example). It appears the limited government messages are being ignored, with people prioritizing economic survival. The government policy of lockdown is seen as unrealistic.

*“The initial civil society response led to the formation of some social media groups (see below) and the distribution of flyers to explain the risks of coronavirus, and how to respond. This has now largely stopped especially in the villages, people mostly go about their everyday business”*

- Mon CSO worker.

### 3.3 Mon - GoM and NMSP Coordination

On April 28 the government formed a committee to coordinate and collaborate with EAOs to respond to COVID-19. Since, then the NRPC-led committee has held various meeting with EAOs (mostly online) to coordinate and cooperate on a COVID-19 response. The NRPC coronavirus response committee donated 200 masks to the NMSP, together with other PPE, including nets and blankets for 17 people. The NMSP also received 100 million Kyat (about \$70,000) from the government, which was used to provide support to villages in Bee Ree (NMSP headquarters area; Ye Chaung): c.15,000 Kyat/person [50,000 Kyat/family].<sup>9</sup> Some Mon CSOs observed that the NMSP did not engage very deeply or systematically with civil society in the coronavirus response.



Mon Women's Organisation handing out hand sanitizer in quarantine center, Waikarao village, Thanbyuzayat Township

<sup>9</sup> 8 out of 10 NCA signature EAOs accepted funds for coronavirus response from the government (not including the KNU or RCSS).

### 3.4 Mon - NMSP Response to Coronavirus

Despite limited resources, the NMSP responded to pandemic in a low-profile and generally successful manner, with some local examples of cooperation to defuse tensions. In total, the NMSP established 17 coronavirus screening points.<sup>10</sup>

In Kya-in Seik Gyi Township the GoM, KNU and NMSP have collaborated on COVID-19 response activities, including in areas where the two EAOs have previously clashed (with the Myanmar Army and Karen Border Guard Force, in late 2019). In late May at Palaung Japan, on the borders of Karen and Mon State (where clashes previously occurred) the NMSP agreed to cooperate and relocated its COVID-19 checkpoint (targeting mostly returning migrant workers from Thailand) after the Myanmar Army protested that the original location was in an area of 'mixed administration' and outside the NMSP's demarcated ceasefire zones. Such positive interactions have helped to resolve many local conflicts around the COVID-19 response and have the potential for further joint actions.

At the government's request, the NMSP closed checkpoints and border crossings between Myanmar and Thailand, in its areas of authority or influence. Under NMSP coronavirus movement restrictions, some village shops were closed, and it was difficult for people in villages to access advice from outside the community, which unavoidably contributed to local livelihoods problems.

The GoM Ministry of Health agreed to accept referred Covid patients from the NMSP's Mon National Health Committee (MNHC) and local health committees. As in the Kyauk Kyi case study, such referral agreements were the only concrete example of coordination between the government and the NMSP.

During this period, the NMSP Mawlamyine Liaison Office had three meetings with the Myanmar Army Southeast Command. Although contacts exist, and the relationship is generally fairly constructive, the NMSP noted that it was quite difficult to engage with the Mon State government in the coronavirus response.

### 3.5 Mon - Mawlamyine CSOs Response

The initial civil society response led to the formation of some social media groups (see below) and the distribution of flyers to explain the risks of coronavirus, and how to respond. This has now largely stopped.

CSOs reported limited communication from government about the nature and danger of Covid-19, so there has been limited understanding at the community level of the risks, and appropriate responses. Many people do not regard coronavirus as a major threat, as demonstrated by most people no longer wearing masks.

For CSOs, the appropriate/preferred response is to: (1)strengthen the health system to deal with any Covid cases; (2) Ease lockdown policies in areas/regions unaffected by the virus (to allow economic activity); (3) Plan to address the impact on community livelihoods, health impacts, and an increase in domestic violence. The problem of income reductions post-coronavirus is central to many concerns, together with inadequate provision of health-care for existing problems such as TB, and potential social problems that could result from lock-down policies, such as an increase in domestic violence. In this context, Mon CSOs initiated various activities to raise community awareness, and to provide food aid and other support to the most vulnerable and marginalised people.

*"For food distribution - of course we cannot provide to all the families, so we chose the most vulnerable, especially women-headed households. This was really difficult, as so many people wanted support"*

– Mon CSO worker.

<sup>10</sup> For further details and analysis of impacts on communities, see HURFOM (July 2020).

## Mon Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organisation and Mon Women's Organisation Response to Coronavirus

Several Mon CSO played leading roles in responding to coronavirus, in partnership with communities. As elsewhere in Myanmar (and beyond), local people shared food and information, and supported each other - often with little external support. These activities included lending money, either informally to and through family members, or commercially through lenders. Two Mon CSOs participated in this research: the Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organisation<sup>11</sup> and Mon Women's Organisation.<sup>12</sup>



Mon Women's Organisation staff and women group from Abaw village, Ye township preparing for food distribution

*"Moneylending can impact both negative and positive. It can help supply urgent needs, but it can be a double burden for the poor people if they earn inadequate income for their living and to pay back moneylending due to economic crisis"*

– Mon CSO leader.

<sup>11</sup> The JCSDO is a local civil society organisation set up in 2012 with a vision to build up a peaceful, developed and sustained democratic society full of harmony and respect, encouraging communities to change their attitude toward democratic value and empower people's capability through education channel and building local human resources. It targets vulnerable local people: youth, farmers and women's not only leadership and management skills but also women's meaningful participation and achieving leading role. The JCSDO has partnership with various CSOs, and plans to report to state parliament and government at governance and especially rule of law to practice cooperation and collaboration with the government for the peace and democratisation transition.

<sup>12</sup> Mon women have been prominent in the peace process, particularly in relation to community development and education activities. The MWO is mainly focussed on women's participation in decision making and leadership roles, as well as women participation in the peace process. The MWO, founded in 1988, has helped to develop space for female empowerment and agency by assisting women to access legal clinics, and following-up on individual cases particularly with local NMSP authorities - demonstrating the influence of MWO in the Mon nationalist community, despite some underlying tensions with the NMSP. Another area where MWO have supported community empowerment and widening democratic participation is voter education, together with Mon Youth Educator Organisation for the upcoming 2020 election.



Several Mon CSOs established a coordination group: the Mon Emergency Response Team Covid-19 - which, with support from UNDP, distributed basic needs such as food, mask, soap, and hand sanitizer to needy communities, and advocated for hand-washing, mask-wearing, and using hand sanitizer (when available). Some of this funding came from Mon communities abroad.

The Mawalamyine UNDP office cooperated with local CSOs. Trocaire (INGO) supported through its partners: JCSDO, MWO etc. The UNFPA supported on GBV issues through JCSDO. Personnel from the MRCA Ministry of Health staff have supported day-to-day activities, especially around Quarantine Stations. UN Habitat also supported Mon CSO coronavirus response activities.

*“Some women have got chance to meaningfully participate in coronavirus response activities, meaning they got chance to make decision, give suggestion, actively participate doing activities etc.”*

...

*“In some villages, local groups set up rules on mask-wearing, and punished those who did not, by making them do exercises in public. But this only worked at the beginning. One day, when local activists stopped a girl who did not wear a mask, she accidentally fell off her bicycle, and then called the police. After that, activists did not take action on wearing mask anymore”*

**– Mon CSO worker.**

*“People were afraid the pandemic just at the beginning. After a month, people were no longer afraid of it because they saw that the disease was not present in the area. Villagers believe this pandemic will not happen at their village”*

**- Village Health Worker.**

## 4 Questions for Discussion

- *Public health messaging:* what is the best way for people in remote and conflict-affected areas to respond to the threat of pandemic? How can lockdown rules be adapted where people live communally, are poor, have limited living space?
- How can people access financial services in order to cope with reduced incomes? More information is needed regarding the roles of government and CSOs, and moneylenders in providing intellectual assistance, and also on the impacts of growing indebtedness.
- Targeting assistance: should help be provided primarily to the most needy (based on assessment), or is it better to give assistance to all people in a community, in order not to incite divisions but rather support norms of solidarity and cohesion?
- What roles did Mon and/or Karen diaspora communities play in coronavirus response - e.g. fundraising? (Economic and forced migrants in Thailand, &/or further afield including refugees in Europe and North America.)
- How to strengthen collaboration between different CSOs, between EAOs and CSOs, and between Government and CSOs and EAOs?
- Is there a need for sub-national coronavirus response coordination platform, at State/Region level (and also at township level)?