



ActionAid Myanmar Newsletter

JAN - MAY 2020

By 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) a 'global emergency' after its rate of infection and fatality had risen exponentially since it was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. On 7 March 2020, the WHO appealed to world leaders for the implementation of robust containment protocols to be put in place to slow down its spread. Following suit, several countries progressively sealed their borders, put a halt to connectivity by air, land and sea and imposed a lockdown. Country by country, the world has come to a halt. Recently, UN chief Antonio Guterres dubbed the coronavirus pandemic as the 'worst crisis' since WWII. In all fairness, while these were the right measures to take to contain the virus, in order to buy more time until a mass vaccine is ready, it is equally important to analyse the human-rights dimension and the implication of such COVID-19 response measures on civil society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought enormous changes to our lives. The outbreak has affected so many people that it stands as a pivotal point in history, forcing us to question the way we work and connect with each other. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of access to basic government services and of social cohesion. In Myanmar, COVID-19 has not become a health emergency. However, it has and will have a devastating impact on people's livelihoods. Since March 2020, ActionAid Myanmar's (AAM) response has been to focus on maintaining the livelihoods of the most vulnerable people in the country, as well as addressing the unintended effects of lockdown on the mental, emotional and physical well-being of women at risk of gender-based violence and as well as that of the youth.

ActionAid Myanmar Covid-19 responses



Contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decrease morbidity and mortality.



Minimize the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods



Protect, assist and advocate for refugees, internally displaced people, migrants and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.



Working to support women migrant workers in Yangon's peri-urban areas in light of COVID-19

ActionAid Myanmar and our partners will continue our rapid response to COVID-19 by raising awareness and through the provision of cash transfers to 1,000 women garment factory workers for three months which serves as a lifeline to those who have lost their jobs.

AAM is working to support the most vulnerable communities in Hlaingthayar that have been impacted by COVID-19. This work is done through our SECURE project partners, including Cooperative Committee of Trade Unions, Future Lights Center, Legal Clinic Myanmar, WE Generation Network, and thanks to LIFT funds. Before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Myanmar, the economic consequences were already felt here. Disruption in supply chains from China led to mass factory closures and saw thousands of factory workers lose their jobs, without any compensation. This was further exacerbated, seeing thousands of workers lose their jobs when the epicentre of COVID-19 shifted to Europe, resulting in countries across Europe cancelling orders with Myanmar factories.

With funding from LIFT, ActionAid Myanmar initiated rapid response through our local SECURE Project partners to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on factory migrant workers in

Yangon's Industrial Zones: Halingthayar, Dagon Seikkan, South Dagon and Mingaladone.

Legal Clinic Myanmar responded by empowering migrants and those at risk to exercise their legal rights. Through the provision of their central hotline phone support, Legal Clinic Myanmar was able to educate migrant workers on their labour rights in accordance with Myanmar Labour Law and to provide support in the exercise of these rights, particularly those rights pertaining to compensation. Cooperative Committee of Trade Unions complemented Legal Clinic Myanmar's work by mediating labour disputes and assisting workers to claim compensation from their employers. CCTU further supported those who had abruptly and unfairly lost their jobs through the provision of food assistance – 5 days' worth of rice.

Further support was provided by Future Lights Center which provided hand gel, gloves and masks to migrant workers to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. While WE Generation, with support from the Department of Health, trained volunteers on COVID-19 to support in community protection awareness-raising and correct usage of PPE.

Lastly, ActionAid Myanmar provided thermometers to the Department of Social Welfare in Halingthayar Township and to 10 rural health centres in Pyapon Township which have not yet received support for COVID-19 response to help monitor the health of returnee migrants.



Poster distribution about health precautions in the community



Food distribution for Covid-19 affected migrant factory workers



Pamphlet distribution to migrant factory workers about health safety during Covid-19

Read more: [about AAM's Covid-19 Responses.](#)



AAM and University Students (Youth Group) in Meikhtila test disinfecting tents (stations)

The Meikhtila university youth and an engineering student worked together to develop an innovative COVID-19 mobile disinfection chamber in collaboration with township prevention and control committee led by Township General Administration Department and Department of Health.

[Read more - NewsEleven.com](#)

AAM response to the most vulnerable in Kayin (Karen) State

ActionAid supports requests from vulnerable populations, such as IDPs, returnees and conflict-affected people, to receive COVID-19 prevention information as well as basic services and resources, such as WASH and health services, internet connectivity and dignified housing that enables them to stay healthy.

START initiative is geared towards the early action to mitigate risk of COVID-19 transmission in the hot spots around Thai-Myanmar border and adjoining townships. This project will address the gaps and unmet needs by providing focused support in preparation against COVID-19 in rural and peri-urban border areas.

START Fund was awarded to a consortium of five organisations, including Christian Aid, AAM, KoeKoe Tech, Karen Baptist Convention, Phyu Sin Saydana Action Group (PSSAG) and Myanmar Physical Handicapped Association (MPHA). Considering the limitations with travel restrictions and the challenges with access to regular information, this emergency response brings health technology and gender-based violence prevention and response messaging to the targeted communities.

The START project provides support for Kayin state communities, especially those economic migrants returning to their communities. The project is supporting 3,500 economic migrants that require cash grants to cover for

their needs. The project also provides information materials to prevent COVID and protective equipment for those health workers and volunteers working in hospitals and quarantine facilities. The project also provides digital messages through the KoeKoe Tech app.

Emerging data shows that since the COVID-19 outbreak, reports of VAWG, particularly domestic violence, have increased in several countries as security, health and financial worries create tensions that are accentuated by the cramped and confined living conditions of lockdown.

Read more: about START funds. <https://startnetwork.org/start-fund>

START NETWORK

Successful conclusion of AAM “Southeast Infrastructure Rehabilitation Project (SIRP II)” funded by the Swiss Development Cooperation

For the last four years, the SIRP II project contributed to the economic and social development of vulnerable families and communities through the development of young leaders/change makers Kayin and Mon states in Myanmar.

This project was able combine various approaches such as bottom-up participatory planning, fellowship approach, capacity development of CBOs, community and governance

actors, community mobilization and working on demand (people) and supply (duty bearers) in strengthening the local governance have synergistic impact. We appreciate the support given by the Swiss Development Cooperation.



AAM Social Enterprise responds to COVID

The Myaing township community (Magway region) has put in place two social enterprises: A community-based tourism (CBT) and a community university (CU). Since COVID-19 started, they developed education programmes through social media and the Myanmar national media channel. However, AAM staff found that many people still do not follow the advice of social distancing.

The Social Enterprise then started producing washable and reusable face masks locally to distribute to all

villagers in four communities. More than 20 women who had attended sewing training last year produced cloth masks quickly.

Today, all villagers receive a free cloth mask each and the CBT/CU committee also educates people to use, wash under high temperature, dry and reuse the masks. The total population of the four communities here is 1,180 MMK. It cost 500 MMK (30 cents) for each double-layer handmade cloth mask.



Volunteers learning to make masks for distributing to the community



Women in the village making masks at home for the community use

AAM Social Enterprise started producing face masks made of cloth in villages in Myaing township, Magway region, Myanmar, as an emergency response to prevent COVID-19 virus infection.

Check out CBT facebook page to learn more: <https://www.facebook.com/CommunityBasedTourism>.
ActionAidMyanmar



Recycled textile material used for mask making.



Distributing masks among the community members



AAM continues its work and understanding towards greater democratic space for civil society

The ongoing shutdown of all internet access in parts of northern Rakhine State and Southern Chin States has meant that some of the most vulnerable people to access crucial information related to COVID-19 response in these locations.

AAM is conducting a research on civic and political rights during COVID. We are monitoring how government authorities, civil society and media are responding to the threats posed by COVID-19. The research also follows laws and policies put in place during COVID-19 to assess whether they are abused or extended, or serving to centralize power. The findings from this research will be disseminated on a monthly basis with our CSO network to support the work we do strengthening the democratic space in the country.

Members of civil society in Myanmar are among key actors for social and political transformation to promote peace, democracy and development. Civil society, as an autonomous arena of uncoerced, voluntary collective actions around shared interests, purposes and values, has interacted with government authorities, contesting, complementing, correcting and cooperating with them on social and political issues.

On 28 March 2020, civil society actors in

Myanmar including 22 AAM civil society partners, issued a joint statement with an extensive list of concerns about the measures taken by the Myanmar authorities to prevent the spread of the coronavirus or COVID-19. The CSOs expressed concerns that the unchecked power exercised during the crisis sometimes erodes human dignity and democratic values. Furthermore, they cautioned that any solution with no regard to values on human rights, human dignity, democracy and justice will not only amplify the current suffering but will seriously hamper the future recovery efforts. In short, using the crisis as a pretext to infringe civic rights will have far-reaching and amplified implications. Also, at a time like this where people are unable to leave their homes, the internet and online spaces are becoming a 'lifeline' for expression and assembly. However, this lifeline is insufficiently protected (some townships in Rakhine and Chin still don't have access to the internet) and there need to be greater efforts towards supporting grassroots civil society in creating a strong online presence and promoting a culture of debate and dialogue and of holding the government accountable.

Thanks to technology and social media, netizens in Myanmar can access available information and exchange opinions (related to the virus and crisis) in real time. Any attempt to put an end to these platforms and the freedom of expression exercised on them would erode the trust in authority. In fact,

evidence shows that ensuring freedom of expression, transparency and empowering civil society to cooperate during emergency responses result in stronger and more effective action.

Thanks to the European Union funding, AAM was able to continue its long-term commitment to strengthening Myanmar democratic space. These ECCSO project concluded at the end of February 2020.

Read more: <https://myanmar.actionaid.org/publications/2020/strengthening-responsive-diverse-and-democratic-civil-society-myanmar>

How Covid-19 can be an opportunity for Myanmar governance actors and civil society to move toward a mature democracy.

Read more on our website
🌐 myanmar.actionaid.org



Who cares and who pays? How COVID-19 can have a long-term impact on Myanmar's debt and taxes

AAM advocates for more investment in public services financed from better debt management. A strong, progressive tax system is long overdue in Myanmar and the current crisis only makes the current problems more urgent.

As part of its work in Governance and Youth, ActionAid Myanmar promotes universal access to quality, gender-responsive public services and other key social protection measures. This crisis makes it clear that these are crucial especially during these times – both for softening the social and economic impact of this health emergency on women and other vulnerable groups and for tackling the problem of unpaid care work in the long term.

The comprehensive COVID-19 Economic Response Plan (CERP), unveiled last week by the Ministry of Finance and Planning, contains many important measures, such as recruiting more medical staff, extending some social security benefits to the unemployed, and providing food and cash transfers for the most vulnerable households. But more is needed, especially in terms of response to the increasing domestic gender-based violence. Even before the first impact of COVID-19 was felt in the country, the chronically underfunded public services have been holding back social and economic development,

perpetuating reliance on women's unpaid care work and exacerbating gender inequality. Since the beginning of the year, Myanmar has also taken on new loans from the World Bank and the IMF, and more are being discussed. But while the funding is direly needed, loans also carry a risk. According to ActionAid and Jubilee Debt Campaign's calculations, in 2019 Myanmar was spending almost 17% of government revenue on debt servicing, which is more than what the IMF considers a sustainable level of debt. This is significantly more than what is allocated to health care. ActionAid's recent global report *Who cares for the future* highlights how countries that spend more than 12% of their revenue on debt payments invariably have to cut funding for public services. It is crucial to consider how, after the crisis is averted, Myanmar will deal with the increased debt burden, while ensuring sufficient funding for public services essential for the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. While many civil society groups, including ActionAid, have been calling for debt cancellation, the response has so far been disappointing. The G20 has announced suspension of debt payment for 6 months, which Myanmar might be able to benefit from, but this sets the problem aside temporarily rather than solves it.

Coronavirus Disease Covid 19 Situation Report

Read more: <https://myanmar.actionaid.org/news/2020/coronavirus-disease-covid-2019-situation-reports>

Unpaid care work is just as real as paid work and takes up a significant amount of time, especially for women.

The UN estimates that globally women spend on average over 4 hours a day on unpaid care work, compared to 1.7 hours for men, further exacerbating the inequality women face in the formal job market.

With the closing of schools and other measures undertaken by governments to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the burden of unpaid care work has rapidly increased.



Global Platform Myanmar and Arloo Phote Kya Mae informing youth through technology

At Global Platform Myanmar, we have been reinforcing channels of communication via our Facebook Messenger platform, encouraging youth to tell us what they would like to see from GP and offering to phone them if they have any questions about our current activities, applications and programmes.

Our **Youth Diaries** series collects the thoughts of youth through video, typed messages, photographs and phone or internet calls. Outstanding entries are selected, and the makers are offered prizes in the form of mobile phone data allowance in order to support and encourage their efforts to share larger files, videos and correspondence with us. We have also been reaching out to frontline workers and youth actively involved in COVID-19 response to collect their 'diaries'. Through ongoing correspondence online, we aim to identify any needs they may have where GP Myanmar can support them.

We will be hosting our first-ever webinar series, **COVID-19 & Mental Health**. Four webinars featuring mental health experts and the host of Arloo Phote Kya Mae, Thinzar Shunlei Yi, will be held on Facebook live, offering guidance, referral pathways and a space for live engagement by youth. These webinars will be translated into three ethnic languages and disseminated across the country.

Our **ARTivism** Grants now have an online application form and video guidance. Applications are also being accepted from youth with creative digital ideas for COVID-19 response. GP Myanmar is planning to support Youth Response, an initiative by a youth member of GP focusing on utilizing an online/offline approach to collect and analyse data collected on the ground of gaps in COVID-19 response across Yangon.



"I want to hang out and eat out as I'm young. But I'm following every rule, like washing hands to have good resistance as I've never experienced this before. I'm worried that my job has to deal with many people. But, I assume there are both good and bad sides. I feel more close to my parents and I get a chance to spend time usefully staying at home."

-Thay Eh Hse, 25, Airport ground staff, North Okkalapa



Youth Diaries Series highlight the thoughts and experiences of youth during the global pandemic

Check out our Facebook Page to learn more: @ArlooPhoteKyaMae



Covid-19 & Mental Health offer webinar series featuring experts to offer guidance



Poster calling for entries on how the pandemic lockdown is affeting the youth



Migrant worker's plea about wage theft by owner

Watch Video: <https://www.facebook.com/ActionAidMyanmar/videos/2332125250414505/>



Migrant worker's plea on safety from COVID-19

Watch Video: <https://myanmar.actionaid.org/news/2020/workers-have-right-safe-working-and-living-conditions>

Covid-19 Myanmar Highlights

UN OCHA reported the following,

- As of now, **187 cases** have been confirmed, with **six fatalities** and 97 recoveries across the country, with a relatively low number of new cases in the last two weeks (37 cases since 1 May). As of 18 May, there have been no confirmed cases in camps or displacement sites for internally displaced people (IDP) or in communities affected by conflict.
- Around **80,000 migrants have returned** since March, according to initial estimates by IOM, although the number is difficult to verify.
- World Food Programme (WFP) has launched **weekly humanitarian relief flights** between Kuala Lumpur and Yangon. Suspension of regular international flights will continue through 30 May.
- Myanmar Armed Forces announced **unilateral ceasefire** until the end of August to coordinate the COVID-19 response (excluding Rakhine and Chin states).
- COVID-19 response and preparedness **coordination with ethnic armed organizations** (EAOs) is ongoing in Kachin and Shan by the Government Committee for Coordinating and Cooperating with EAOs for Prevention, Control and Treatment of COVID-19, including cooperation on border control measures and provision of government funding to support the EAO-run quarantine centre in Kachin.
- A total of US\$47 million has been contributed to the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), including \$11 million to the HRP COVID-19 Addendum (18 per cent funding of revised total requirement of \$262.3 million) – FTS

Source: UN OCHA COVID-19 Situation report 04 (18 May 2020).



May day marks pain, not celebration for workers hit by virus.

Read more: about the story on newswire Associated Press (AP) regarding AAM's work.

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