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Climate change actions in conflict affected contexts

Insights from Myanmar after the military coup

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CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED CONTEXTS

Insights from Myanmar after the military coup

Violent conflict and state oppression in Myanmar demonstrates the importance of placing conflict analysis and people-centred approaches at the centre of international programming on climate change and environmental protection.

In 2021, the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that the impacts of the climate crisis will be particularly pronounced in poor and conflict-affected countries. Research also identifies climate change as a 'threat multiplier' that, in combination with socio-political factors like poverty, state incapacity and inequality, can intensify violent conflict. However, gaps remain in how to address the increase in climate change vulnerabilities in contexts with violent conflict and state oppression. This is evident in Myanmar, where a historically repressive military regime is threatening to cause longer-term 'climate collapse'. Since a military coup in February

RECOMMENDATIONS

for climate change actions in conflict affected contexts

- Design of climate change support should integrate in-depth conflict analysis, including of the power relations, political contestations and multiple stakeholders impacting environmental protection and natural resource extraction.
- Implementation should shift away from top-down, state-centric and purely technical solutions to people-centred approaches with flexible funding and reporting requirements that fit a volatile and insecure context.
- Climate change support should integrate assistance to pro-democratic movements in developing equitable policies and actions linked to core areas of land rights, environmental protection and natural resource sharing.

2021, extractive activities and war economies are destroying the natural environment and placing communities at further risk of displacement, violent persecution and food shortages. These effects of conflict are reducing local people's capacity to adapt to climate change and threatening civil society's efforts to protect the environment. Under such conditions, climate change programming needs to place conflict analysis at its centre stage and substitute state-centric and purely technical approaches with people-centred ones, in alignment with the localisation of aid agenda.



The violent reimposition of military rule has drastically undermined the civic space for environmental and climate justice actors, which during the 2011-2020 reform period provided some degree of protection to customary lands and the environment.



Climate change vulnerabilities in Myanmar

In the 2021 Global Climate Risk Index, out of 183 countries Myanmar is ranked the second most vulnerable to extreme weather events. With more frequent heatwaves, floods, cyclones, droughts and rising sea levels that impact production, food security and land scarcity, climate change poses a severe threat to livelihoods and sustainable development. Myanmar is simultaneously rich in natural resources and home to some of the largest remaining areas of contiguous biodiverse-rich rainforests in Southeast Asia, crucial for global climate stabilisation due to their absorption of carbon dioxide. For generations, indigenous communities have protected these forests using local ecological knowledge systems. However, these systems have been perpetually undermined by top-down conservation interventions, extractive activities and conflict dynamics.

Myanmar provides evidence that climate change vulnerabilities cannot be attributed to global changes in temperatures and weather patterns alone, but also to issues related to governance, natural resource use and conflict. The ability of local communities to mitigate and respond to climate change has been severely hampered by decades of authoritarian rule, agrarian land struggles and long running armed conflicts, which have worsened since the coup.

Escalations since the military coup

Research shows that, since the coup, the military has turned to the country's vast natural wealth to fund its regime and violent operations. This reinforces a long history of military exploitation that was only partly tempered during a ten-year reform period. Satellite data reveals the depletion of large patches of rainforest since the coup. Civil society organisations (CSOs) also report a rapid increase in unregulated mining, which is polluting waterways, decimating forests, destroying mountains, and causing landslides

and changes to fragile ecosystems. Military-linked militias and businesses are behind much of this mining, but the escalating violent conflict is also fuelling a war economy where other armed actors engage in unregulated resource extraction. These activities are further degrading the environment and accelerating the longer-term impacts of climate change.

Another concern is that the military junta's plan to revive controversial hydropower dams and palm oil plantations will heavily disturb important riverine

Top-down technical approaches to climate change typically involve investment in and introduction of agricultural techniques and infrastructures to adjust to climate change, which are developed external to local solutions, knowledge systems and context-specific socio-political relations (e.g. irrigation systems, satellite-based early warning systems, sea walls, drought-resistant crops, new seeds, etc.).

A people-centred approach adheres to the localisation of aid agenda, by involving local people and their knowledge in decision-making and planning of climate change programmes from the outset. This also includes incorporating context-specific understandings of climate change and drivers of vulnerability into programme design and solutions.

ecosystems and destroy natural forests, in addition to threatening local land rights and livelihoods. Prior to the coup, some hydropower dams were stalled due to protests by local communities and environmental defenders. However, the violent reimposition of military rule has drastically undermined the civic space for environmental and climate justice actors, which during the 2011-2020 reform period provided some degree of protection to customary lands and the environment. The military's brutal crackdown on civil society and environmental activists has also significantly undermined previous efforts to create public climate change awareness and to advocate for equitable climate actions. Since the coup, regulatory and environmental oversight mechanisms have disappeared, meaning that local communities now have nowhere to take complaints about the effects of extractive projects on their land rights, local environment and livelihoods.

In this context, local efforts to adapt to and mitigate climate change are hampered both by the challenges facing the operations of supportive NGOs and CSOs, and by ongoing violent conflicts and displacements. There is also a high risk that natural disaster relief – in the case of, for instance, cyclones, flooding and drought – will be undermined or be used as an oppressive political tool, with the military preventing humanitarian organisations from helping affected populations.

Pre-coup climate change policies in Myanmar

In the current situation in Myanmar there is an urgent need for international donors to rethink conventional climate change programming. This includes a critical reframing of the policies and approaches that were adopted by the civilian government prior to the military coup, based on international technical assistance, such as the 2019 interlinked Climate Change Policy, Strategy and Master Plan, which aimed to create a climate-resilient and low-carbon society.

While recognising the urgency of climate change actions, earlier policies focused predominantly on support through central government departments and on techno-managerial solutions, with a heavy focus on state regulations. These were by and large apolitical and conflict blind. There was no mention of armed conflicts in the border regions, agrarian land struggles,

non-state-controlled areas, or the legacies of authoritarianism, let alone a recognition of how these realities affect the lives of people. Locally-driven climate change adaptation and indigenous natural resource protection were underprioritized in favour of state-centric and top-down solutions. This was evident in the design of several internationally sponsored adaptation projects, some of which were aborted after the coup due to the freezing of aid channelled through government departments. These projects reflected the centrality of technical solutions and involved very little local consultation. They also largely ignored conflict dynamics and failed to target vulnerable populations in areas controlled by non-state ethnic resistance organisations (EROs).

Research also shows that large-scale mitigation projects, like REDD+ ignored local concerns, contributing instead to indigenous communities' vulnerability and a consolidation of central state power at the expense of local conservation initiatives. These projects also had conflict repercussions. There were some exceptions to this dominant trend, such as international support for community-led conservation initiatives. However, much of the climate-related programming failed to acknowledge the socio-political marginalisation and asymmetric power relations that lie at the root of Myanmar's protracted conflicts and authoritarian governance structures.

Ways forward and entry points for programming

Since the February 2021 coup, many international donors have withdrawn their state-to-state aid, including for climate change, so as not to legitimise and finance the military regime. Many of the CSO partners of international NGOs have moved their environmental and climate change work underground. Under these conditions, and with the gaps in pre-coup climate change policies, there is an urgent need to adopt more conflict-sensitive, flexible and adaptive programming:

- 1. Conflict Analysis** should be integrated into the design of climate change programmes, with a focus on mapping the power relations, political contestations and pluralism of actors that are implicated both in environmental protection and in natural resource management and extraction. The analysis should be based on in-depth contextual

and historically grounded understanding that climate-related challenges are deeply embedded in longer-term ethno-nationalist conflicts and the co-existence of state and non-state legal-institutional arrangements (e.g. for the management of land, forests and other natural resources). Particular attention should be paid to EROs like the Karen National Union, which for decades have engaged in natural resource governance in their areas of non-state control.

2. Localisation of programme implementation is important to ensure that support benefits and reflects the needs of local populations. This requires a shift in programme implementation from top-down, state centric technical solutions towards climate change actions that are people-centred and work from the ground up. Flexible funding and reporting requirements that are adjustable to a volatile and insecure context is important to this approach. Entry points for support could include: a) core costs to secure the continued activities of existing environmental CSOs and indigenous-led networks, and their research and policy advocacy for inclusive and community-led climate change mitigation and adaptation programmes and policies; b) funding for the ongoing documentation of indigenous and customary natural resource management and ecological knowledge systems as a basis for sustainable development; c) support for the documentation of environmentally harmful extractive projects; and d) integration of climate adaptation and environmental protection into humanitarian support to internally displaced people and the communities that host them (e.g. in terms of forestry, green energy and waste management).

3. Policy-related support to pro-democratic movements in developing climate change policies and initiatives that support sustainable environmental protection and equitable natural resource sharing, land rights and locally embedded solutions. The ongoing drafting process of a federal democratic charter by the National Unity Government (NUG), in collaboration with the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) and allied EROs, presents an opportunity to provide technical support within the area of climate change. Informed policy advice should support the inclusion of CSOs that have an existing track record for working with climate change and in-depth experiences with environmental protection and familiarity with indigenous ecological knowledge systems. Funds and technical advice should also be targeted to support these groups to engage in international climate-related forums such as the UN's Conference of the Parties (COP) to assess progress and add to global conversations on climate-related programming in conflict affected areas.

While these recommendations are specific to the current situation in Myanmar, they also apply more broadly to climate change actions in other conflict-affected and authoritarian states.



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Cover image: Justine Chambers, DIIS: Flooding in Hpa-an, Karen State, July 2018.

Image, pg 4: WICHAI JUNTAVARO, SEM: Open pit coal mine in Ban Chaung, Tanintharyi Region

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