REFRAMING INCLUSION: Integrating intersectionality in humanitarian response in Myanmar

PRACTICE PAPER SERIES

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Introduction

There is growing recognition of the importance of intersectional humanitarian approaches in Myanmar, where practitioners are starting to apply an intersectional lens to programming to promote greater inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic, the military coup, ongoing conflict, and disasters such as Cyclone Mocha in 2023 have compounded the existing protracted crisis, and increased the marginalisation of vulnerable groups, reducing the ability of humanitarian actors to meet needs.[1] Effective inclusion in the ongoing humanitarian response remains a key challenge, in particular responding to these cascading crises.

Intersectionality offers an emerging way of thinking about the complexities of inclusion in humanitarian response (see Box 1). An intersectional approach helps connect humanitarian assistance to the multiple forms of vulnerability that people experience. It recognises that people can be marginalised or excluded by any combination of their multiple identities, social factors and related vulnerabilities.[2]

Box 1: What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality, a term first coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, analyses how overlapping social identities compound privilege, discrimination, and oppression, and has roots in the 1850s and 1970s feminist movements.

An intersectional lens involves analysing and understanding how identities (such as gender, age, race, religion, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status), social factors and relationships interact to create unique experiences of privilege and discrimination. An intersectional approach considers the interplay of these factors to inform program and policy design and implementation that helps to address the inequalities and discrimination that people encounter.[3]

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Inclusion strategies within humanitarian response have traditionally relied on a technical approach to identifying and categorising vulnerable groups. However, this approach overlooks the political sensitivity of labeling people by a single characteristic and undermines a rights-based understanding of complex vulnerabilities that specific groups encounter.

Addressing these considerations in the Myanmar context requires a nuanced understanding of how a range of intersecting social identities and factors such as ethnicity, gender, age, ability and displacement status influence the way in which people are identified as vulnerable and receive humanitarian aid. This is particularly important with the intersecting nature of the multilple ongoing crises. With only 21% of funding needs met for the 2024 Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan,[4] it is also critical that intersectional approaches and understandings enable available funding and resources to be directed to marginalised groups and those in vulnerable situations.

WHAT DOES THIS PAPER DO?

This practice paper provides a rapid analysis of emerging evidence to identify promising practices for operational actors and policymakers in applying intersectional approaches in Myanmar. It also provides key opportunities for humanitarian stakeholders to integrate intersectional approaches into programming. Whilst focusing on practice and learning from Myanmar, this paper provides insights that can be applied in other contexts as humanitarian actors look to scale intersectional approaches in crises across the globe.

KEY FINDINGS

This research shows that intersectional practices are emerging in Myanmar including working closely with communities to identify intersecting factors that influence access to aid, tailoring needs assessments and processes, incorporating cultural and religious dynamics into program design, the inclusion of diverse vulnerability factors in programming, and consultation with and integration of the perspectives of communities on intersectionality.

This shows growing recognition of the importance of intersectional approaches in supporting more inclusive response, although challenges remain in terms of understanding and awareness of approaches, resource allocation, technical capacity, meeting full potential of localisation efforts, and the need for stronger partnerships to fully integrate these practices. Opportunities to effectively integrate intersectionality into humanitarian programming in Myanmar are outlined in Figure 1 below.

STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

The paper has three sections. The first section provides an overview of Myanmar's unique context and the case for intersectional approaches. The second section explores the intersectional practices and approaches humanitarian actors are using to address inequalities and marginalisation, along with the challenges they face. The final section outlines opportunities and actionable steps for stakeholders in Myanmar.

Figure 1: Opportunities to strengthen intersectional approaches in humanitarian programming in Myanmar

Understanding and awareness:
Invest in enhancing understanding of intersectional approaches and practices that track the impact on inclusion and effectiveness.

Working with local actors:
Value and resource local expertise to better understand how different identity and vulnerability factors intersect in different communities.

Leveraging the expertise of specialist organisations:
Engage and fund specialist organisations; learn from, and integrate their insights on intersectional approaches for addressing needs into broader humanitarian efforts.

Incorporating intersectionality in needs analysis:
Adapt needs analysis processes to reflect specific community contexts and include strong qualitative assessments.

Strengthening collaborative approaches:
Promote collaborative efforts to integrate intersectionality thinking across partnerships, networks and programming areas, including in donor strategies.

Methodology

This practice paper is part of Humanitarian Advisory Group's Humanitarian Horizons research program. The qualitative research methodology included a document review of key country updates, academic, and grey literature, and key informant interviews with local actors and representatives of national and international non-governmental organisations and donors (June-July 2024). Three sense-making sessions were conducted with local/national and international stakeholders to test emerging findings (August 2024). Figure 2 provides an overview of the methodology.

This practice paper was guided by the following research questions:

- What intersectional practices and approaches are being used in Myanmar?
- What are the key opportunities and barriers to effective intersectional approaches within Myanmar's protracted crisis context?
- What are the practical steps humanitarian actors can take to leverage and scale up intersectional approaches at the community and country levels?

Figure 2: Data collection methods

12
key informant interviews

23
documents reviewed

UNDERPINNED BY ETHICAL RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

3
sense making sessions

LIMITATIONS

Scope: Practice papers are intended to provide short and digestible analysis of relevant current issues that generate conversations for change. This paper provides a broad overview of emerging practices, opportunities and challenges rather than an in-depth analysis of intersectional approaches or factors that influence humanitarian response in Myanmar.

Representation: The key informant interview participants were selected through established contacts and known networks across limited thematic areas and do not represent all stakeholders and views in Myanmar. Communities were not consulted as part of the research process.

Understanding of terminology and concepts: Intersectionality is a concept gaining traction in humanitarian research, academia and international institutions, and is understood as distinct from inclusion. Stakeholders involved in this research used a range of terms that could be considered intersectionality, without specifically referencing it. Findings were analysed with an emphasis on the meaning of intersectionality and openness to variation in expression.

Understanding intersectional approaches in humanitarian response

Intersectional approaches are increasingly gaining traction in humanitarian crisis responses worldwide. This section provides a brief overview of intersectionality or intersectional approaches in humanitarian response, existing guidance and frameworks, and key challenges.

THINKING ABOUT INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

An intersectional lens involves considering how different social identities, relationships and social factors interact in creating inequalities and discrimination, and how these factors should inform humanitarian program and policy design and implementation.[5] Inclusive humanitarian action considers both context and individual experience when designing response programs, as well as socio-economic and political analyses of risk and opportunity as people experience crisis.

Yet response programs and initiatives have traditionally used single categories of identities in targeting programming – such as women, children, internally displaced persons (IDPs), civilians, migrants, or people with disabilities. Intersectional approaches recognise the complex interplay of factors that affect people's access to aid, seeking to enable a more inclusive approach than focusing on single identity categories.[6] Figure 3 provides an overview of these factors and their interrelationships.

Figure 3: Intersectionality wheel[7]
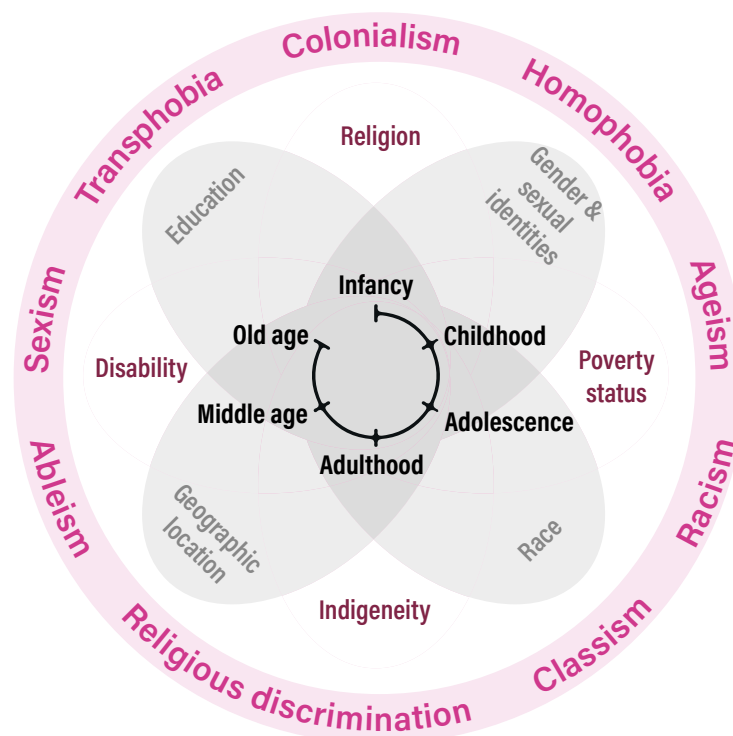
This design is drawn from UNPRPD and UN Women's 'Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit'

APPLYING INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES – WHERE ARE WE AT?

Global guidelines and frameworks for considering intersectional approaches in policies and programs have been introduced. There are also examples of country-level guidance and evaluations, emerging research and donor approaches (as outlined in Table 1 below), though most of this is situated within broader inclusion guidance or diversity, equity and inclusion approaches and research rather than standalone work (for an overview of global guidelines, see Annex 1).

Table 1: Examples of intersectionality being applied or considered in practice in humanitarian and development programming

Type	Example
Guidance	Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit (UN Women, and the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2022)
	Towards more inclusive practices: A Disability, Gender and Age Intersectional Resource (Humanity and Inclusion, 2020)
Organisational frameworks	Islamic Relief Worldwide's Intersectionality Framework (Islamic Worldwide, 2018)
Donor strategies	LGBTQI+ Inclusive Development Policy (USAID, 2023)
	EU's Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (European Union, 2021)
Country-level analysis	Myanmar – Rapid Gender Analysis, Rakhine State (CARE Myanmar, 2020)
	Myanmar – Disability and Aging in Myanmar (HelpAge International, 2018)
	Indonesia – Leaving No One Behind in Indonesia (United Nations Indonesia, 2022)
Response analysis	Women's Humanitarian Voices: Covid-19 through a feminist lens (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2021)

CHALLENGES IN UNDERSTANDING AND USING INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES

Intersectional approaches in humanitarian response remain limited in scale and scope, though a range of actors are increasingly testing and incorporating intersectional aspects in programs. There remains a lack of understanding about what intersectional approaches are, and what makes them effective. Building a nuanced understanding of the intersectional factors in particular contexts, and the ways in which they may conflict with local customs or practices, is challenging.

Additionally, intersectional approaches are often seen as time- and resource-intensive due to their reliance on participatory processes and qualitative insights.[8] There is also some debate about whether intersectional approaches can undermine impartial approaches and/or produce hierarchies of vulnerability that can reinforce the power imbalances they seek to overcome.[9]

The Myanmar context

Socio-political and historical factors such as military coups, colonialism, and diverse ethnicities, cultures and socio-economic groups, as well as conflict and disasters, have historically shaped how communities and individuals access aid in Myanmar. This section provides an overview of key factors influencing intersectional approaches in the Myanmar context.

Box 2: Marginalised groups

There has been a significant rise in humanitarian need following the military coup in 2021, including for particular groups and there is also widespread discrimination on ethnic and religious grounds in many communities.[10] As outlined in the 2024 Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, 'Humanitarian impacts are most pronounced for vulnerable groups such as children, women, the elderly, pregnant women, stateless people, persons with disabilities, persons with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics and other minorities.'[11]

The military regime has targeted civil society organisations through a highly restrictive Organisation Registration Law (2022) that mandates registration for all associations and imposes penalty of criminal sanctions (Figure 4).[12] This has fragmented civil society and reduced the ability to provide aid to those most in need.[13] Many international actors were required to leave the country following the pandemic and the military coup, so many programs pivoted to remote management. Consequently, local actors and national staff are leading the implementation of the majority of programming, along with the increased risks this entails.[14]

Figure 4: Timeline of key events affecting humanitarian aid in Myanmar from 2021-24

February 2021 – The military launches a coup against the elected National League for Democracy government, leading to unrest and violent crackdowns.

April 2021 – The **National Unity Government (NUG)** emerges as a civilian opposition coalition and establishes the armed wing of the **People's Defense Force (PDF)**.

October 2022 – The military junta introduces the **Organisation Registration Law (ORL)**, requiring mandatory registration for aid organisations and imposing penalties for non-compliance.

May 2023 – **Cyclone Mocha** affects 7.9 million people. The junta rescinds the aid distribution approvals of the United Nations (UN) and international organisations.

October 2023 –An alliance of three ethnic armed organisations launches **Operation 1027** against the junta, leading to increased conflict across the country.

February 2024 – The junta implements the **Conscription Law**, triggering forced recruitment and mass displacement internally and across borders.

May 2024 – The total number of **IDPs surpasses 3 million people**, with nearly 19 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.
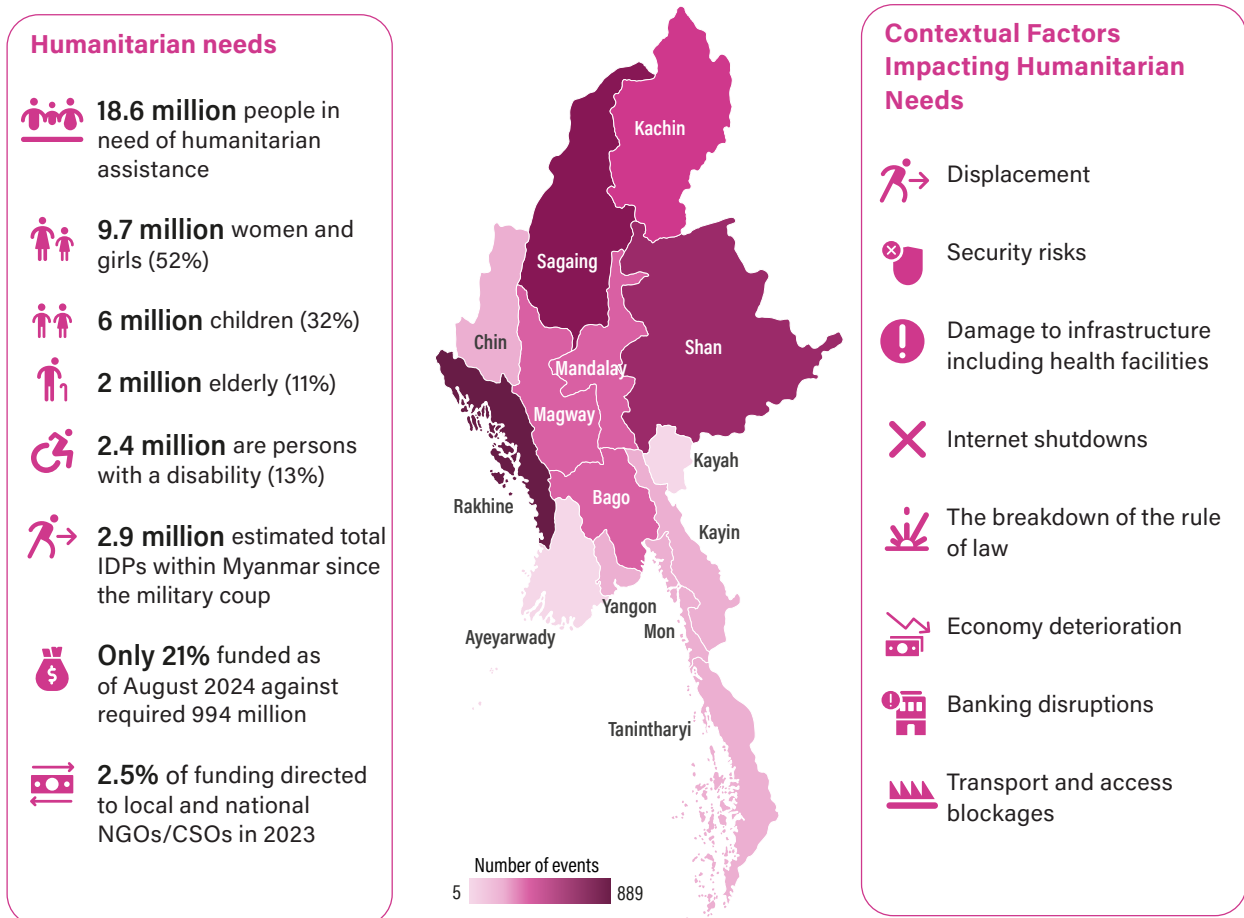
HOW DRIVERS OF INTERSECTING IDENTITIES, CULTURAL NORMS AND POLITICAL CONTEXT AFFECT HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN MYANMAR

Cultural norms, the role of religion and traditional practices, as well as strong community interdependence both shape and are shaped by intersecting identities such as ethnicity, age, gender, religion, disability, and socio-economic status in Myanmar. Conflict-related and political factors also create additional drivers of intersecting vulnerabilities and shape access to aid, particularly given the diversity of ethnicities and cultural groups across the country.

For example, women and girls in rural, poor and conflict-affected areas like Kachin State face higher risks of human trafficking and gender-based violence (GBV) than urban women and children. Cultural stigma and a lack of secure reporting channels often leads to underreporting of different needs and vulnerabilities for individual women in humanitarian assessments. People with disabilities living in poorer and more remote areas face limited access to health services. A higher prevalence of disability among older people further increases their risk of marginalisation and exclusion from aid and these individuals are often overlooked in emergency planning. [15]

Existing power dynamics within communities, as well as strong interdependence within community and family groups also influence these intersecting identities, and how individuals access aid. Compounding these long-standing drivers are ongoing conflict, political instability, and the military's blocking of humanitarian aid and restricting access to remote and hard-to-reach areas, which reduce humanitarian actors' ability to assess needs and deliver targeted aid necessary for effective intersectional approaches.[16]

Figure 5: Map of Myanmar – Humanitarian needs and conflict zones

Humanitarian needs

- **18.6 million** people in need of humanitarian assistance
- **9.7 million** women and girls (52%)
- **6 million** children (32%)
- **2 million** elderly (11%)
- **2.4 million** are persons with a disability (13%)
- **2.9 million** estimated total IDPs within Myanmar since the military coup
- **Only 21%** funded as of August 2024 against required 994 million
- **2.5%** of funding directed to local and national NGOs/CSOs in 2023

Contextual Factors Impacting Humanitarian Needs

- Displacement
- Security risks
- Damage to infrastructure including health facilities
- Internet shutdowns
- The breakdown of the rule of law
- Economy deterioration
- Banking disruptions
- Transport and access blockages

Number of events 5 — 889

Map of Myanmar adapted from ACLED Myanmar Mid-Year Metrics 2024 (political violence by State January to June 2024)

Exploring intersectional approaches in Myanmar

Humanitarian actors are increasingly recognising the importance, and potential, of intersectional approaches in response programming in Myanmar. Many actors acknowledge that the operating context has become very complex, hindering both humanitarian access and the collaboration between actors necessary for advancing intersectional approaches. The initiatives identified below are not widely implemented or integrated across response programming, however there are also key opportunities to strengthen approaches to meet needs and achieve greater inclusion and effectiveness in humanitarian response in Myanmar.[17]

This section explores five key findings about how intersectional approaches are being applied in Myanmar, highlighting promising practices and opportunities for improvement.

Box 3: How the term 'intersectionality' is used in Myanmar

Stakeholders involved in this research use a range of terms that describe an intersectional approach, without consistently referring to the term 'intersectionality' or 'intersectional approaches' (as shown below). The term is more commonly used by international actors and some local actors.[18]

Local framing: The Gender Equality Network has developed the terminology in Burmese language as "လူမှုရေးနှင့် နိုင်ငံရေးဆိုင်ရာ ဝိသေသများ စုဆုံပြီး ခွဲခြားဆက်ဆံခံရမှုများ" which means "the intersection of social and political identities leading to discrimination".[19]

Understandings of the term, and its use in relation to programming, differ. Some actors use it to describe methods of program design or needs analysis, whilst other use it to help frame the context in which they work. It is important to consider these framings and understandings, and how global understandings can be contextualised.

Related terms in use in Myanmar include those outlined in the infographic below:


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1 THERE ARE EMERGING EXAMPLES OF PROMISING INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES IN SMALL-SCALE INITIATIVES AS WELL AS LONGER-TERM PROGRAMS

Organisations in Myanmar described emerging examples of intersectional approaches across their program design and implementation. Approaches identified include working closely with communities to identify intersecting factors that influence access, tailoring needs assessments and processes, incorporating cultural and religious dynamics into program design, the inclusion of diverse vulnerability factors in programming, and consultation with and integration of the perspectives of communities and organisations that represent marginalised groups.

Both international and local actors identified that it was an increasingly common concept used to frame discussions about effective inclusion in response programming within their organisations, within local networks and forums such as the GEN, and UN coordination mechanisms such as the Protection Cluster, as well as with community groups and representatives. This has contributed to building momentum for greater consideration of intersectional approaches across different types of actors, and sharing of emerging positive examples and practices within partnerships and coordination forums.[20]
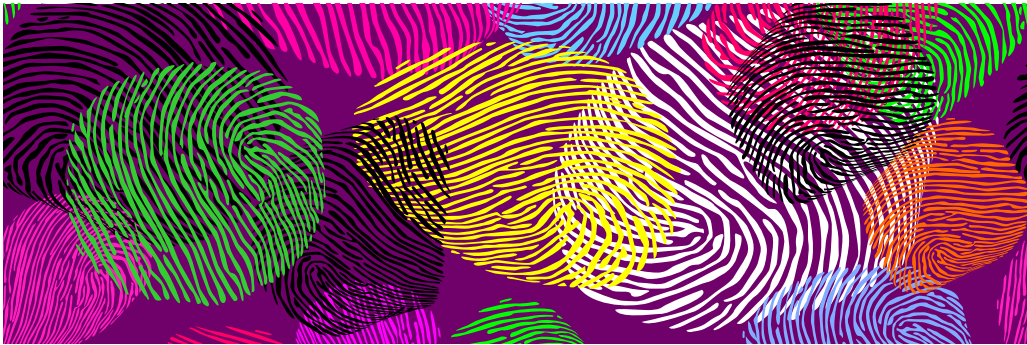
EMERGING EXAMPLES OF INTERSECTIONAL PRACTICES

Identifying needs: Several organisations described contextualised needs analysis and identification processes that allowed them to work with communities to identify how multiple identity and social factors were contributing to marginalisation or vulnerability. One international organisation outlined working with a local partner who led work with communities to identify and respond to the unique needs of different older people. This involved allowing these groups to identify their own needs through self-help groups, and how disability, gender or other cultural factors had contributed to specific vulnerabilities. They provided adapted needs assessment tools for the groups to use, and also worked closely with other specific women's, youth or faith-based groups to understand broader contextual dynamics.

> For the assessment of people with disabilities, we are missing some of the contextual factors in Myanmar. They [the local partner] train us on contextual factors that are missing in the toolkit, for example, for us to know what people with disabilities face in a rural village in Myanmar [from an intersectional perspective].[21]
> (International actor)

Responding to concurrent crises: Actors also described the importance of intersectional approaches in responding to the way in which multiple concurrent crises affect individuals in different ways according to different identity factors. For example, organisations working on gender related issues highlighted how the cascading impacts of Cyclone Mocha disproportionately impacted women, girls and displaced individuals already marginalised by the effects of the ongoing conflict. There was a significant need for an intersectional approach to identify multiple factors influencing vulnerabilities for a range of individuals, including a heightened risk of sexual and gender based violence as a result of the cyclone's destruction of GBV service centres and shelters, as well as latrines in a Sittwe IDP camp. Shifting power dynamics in communities as a result of the impacts of both the cyclone, on top of the conflict, were also an important part of these considerations.[22]

Integrating cultural and social factors: There were also examples emerging of organisations considering the intersection of cultural and social factors in advocating for more effective programs. A local women and child focused group advocated to a UN agency to identify and address specific social and identity factors that were inhibiting women's access to GBV response services. This included building an increased understanding of cultural and social factors such as age, socio-economic background and existing caregiving and community roles, and how programs could better target assistance to account for these intersecting factors. Other organisations described working closely with community groups over time to build a strong understanding of intersecting identities and the unique needs of individuals within specific community groups through less formal approaches.[23]

Box 4. A local gender group's inclusion of diverse vulnerability factors in programming

A local women right's group supports ethnic minority Kachin women in IDP camps through building an understanding of how factors such as being single mothers, elderly women, survivors of GBV or mothers of disabled children influence access to aid, and how access can be improved in their programs. The group recognises that Kachin women in IDP camps often lack confidence due to systemic discrimination, and implement empowerment programs to support these women and provide livelihoods assistance with support from a UN agency.

This shows an example of humanitarian programming integrating an intersectional approach to the complex realities of marginalised women from ethnic groups in Myanmar. By considering multiple layers of identity – such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, cultural factors, and disability – the group tackles the unique challenges faced by these women in a holistic manner.

Contextualising tools: Some international actors noted ongoing processes to contextualise international or agency-specific tools and standards, as well as guidance to consider specific intersectional factors within the Myanmar context. These include incorporating social and environmental factors such as power dynamics, cultural issues and existing marginalisation within specific communities, and working with local actors to discuss how these factors link with and can influence the Core Humanitarian Standards and Sphere Standards.

What has enabled these practices?

These practices were enabled by several factors:

A critical factor is community trust – local organisations with strong local knowledge, networks and the trust of communities can develop nuanced understanding of intersectional issues and how tailored interventions can meet specific needs.

Growing recognition of the importance of intersectionality and how it supports inclusive outcomes among stakeholders also encourages momentum in Myanmar.

Strong partnerships between and among local, national and international organisations that focus on specific issues can increase focus on intersectional issues.

Institutional support and leadership such as the commitment from senior management to prioritise intersectional approaches and allocate necessary resources, can promote intersectional thinking.

Involvement of community groups and community members in program design discussions and environmental analysis has allowed for greater consideration and highlighting of intersectional factors.

Actors noted that an **enabling organisational environment** with specifically articulated intersectional approaches or similar framing in policies and frameworks was also important.[24]

Limited application in practice – why?

Most commonly, these approaches were used in small-scale initiatives and across longer-term programming, rather than in large programs and shorter-term interventions. They are also generally related to one type of program or a particular focus for an organisation (i.e. considering intersectionality in GBV or health programs). Humanitarian organisations in Myanmar struggle to balance meeting specific needs with the complex reality of intersecting vulnerabilities. While some organisations are beginning to integrate intersectional factors, these efforts are not yet comprehensive or consistent, and there remain few examples of actors demonstrating scalable approaches.[25] There is also little evidence to suggest that cross-sectoral approaches that consider intersectionality are being considered in clusters and thematic working groups.

Humanitarian organisations noted that lack of understanding of practical intersectional approaches is a barrier to scaling up. Without this organisational awareness across all staff, not just those whose roles are focused on inclusion or accountability (for example), it is difficult to advocate for changing standard approaches and explore how intersectionality can be integrated across the programming cycle. Intersectional approaches are also rarely included in organisational policies, systems or processes, and are usually specific to initiatives or programs. It is also important for humanitarian organisations to understand and track the impact of intersectional approaches on inclusion outcomes, and outcomes more broadly related to vulnerability reduction and resilience of affected communities. This can include outcomes such as increased participation of marglianised groups in decision-making processes on intersectional programming, enhanced protection for women and girls from gender-based violence and improved access to services for older people.

KEY OPPORTUNITY   **Understanding and Awareness**

Strengthen the understanding of intersectionality, and intersectional approaches across the diversity of humanitarian actors in Myanmar. Share emerging practices in networks and forums, and the ways in which barriers and challenges have been addressed across different types of programming. Invest in both organisational, and sector-wide practices to better understand and track the impact of intersectional approaches on inclusion more broadly, on humanitarian effectiveness and on community resilience.

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2 LOCAL ORGANISATIONS HAVE SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE IN EFFECTIVELY USING INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL BUT ARE UNDER-RESOURCED

This research highlighted strong examples of local organisations using their specific community knowledge, expertise and networks to develop and implement intersectional approaches and meet specific needs at the community level (Box 5). However, there is a need for greater investment in capacity strengthening and institutional support to enhance their ability to respond to rapidly growing humanitarian needs. Local organisations are currently implementing most humanitarian programming because they have greater access, however this also generates greater risks for them, including in applying intersectional approaches which can sometimes be challenging in practice, or heighten sensitivities for communities.

Box 5. Local organisations and intersectional approaches

Local organisations bring deep understanding of the local context and historical knowledge that enables effective intersectional strategies, and have unique strengths in supporting intersectional approaches. International actors recognise this, noting that working with local actors is critical to responding to the context and bringing about social change. Local organisations' strengths in Myanmar include:

Trusted community relationships. Local actors often have established relationships and trust within communities, which can facilitate smoother program implementation and acceptance. Local actors often work through informal networks and collaborations, which are crucial for accessing hard-to-reach populations and delivering aid in areas where formal mechanisms are challenging to establish. This work is shaped by how their own identities are recognised by the communities with which they work, and how their deep awareness of existing community and individual intersectional identities can contribute to humanitarian programming.[26]

Cultural and contextual understanding: Local actors possess deep knowledge of the cultural, social, and political nuances of the communities they work with, and the relative inclusion of intersectional identities within those communities.

Empowerment and inclusion: Local actors have a unique ability to empower marginalised groups by involving them directly in decision-making processes. Local actors' firsthand experience with intersectional issues allows them to tailor inclusive interventions.[27]

Interviewees outlined the need for international actors to play complementary roles in supporting intersectional approaches, including identifying the aspects local actors are best placed to lead and those international actors should lead (e.g. advocacy, which might increase safety risks for local actors).

Supporting local organisations

There is opportunity to strengthen support to and leadership of local actors, and for international actors to work in a more complementary manner to strengthen intersectional approaches. There continue to be challenges in supporting localisation, such as sustainability, insufficient funding, sharing of overheads costs, and investment in organisational development. To date, local and national civil society organisations received just 2.5% of the total amount of humanitarian funding for Myanmar in 2023, as shown in Figure 7.[28] Lack of financial and technical resources constrains local organisations' ability to use intersectional approaches to generate impact.

Figure 6: Distribution of funding recorded for Myanmar in 2023 (OCHA Financial Tracking Service)[29]
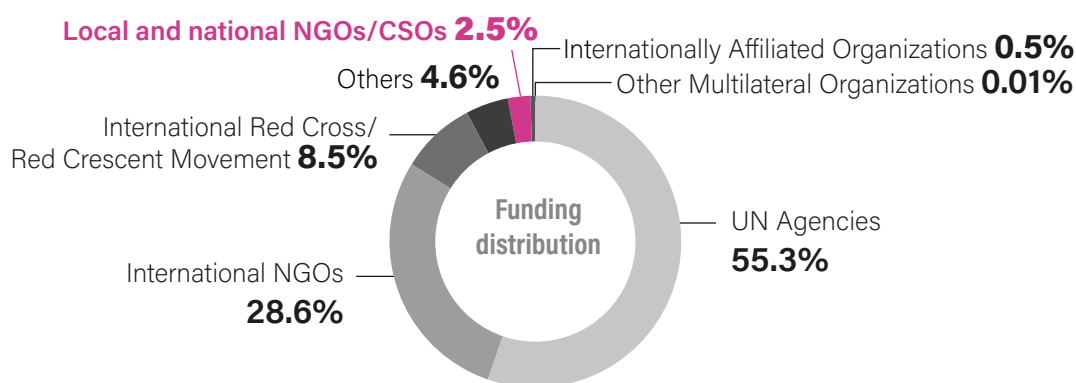
Local actors outlined that there are some extractive practices in the way international actors request information from them to support a better understanding of intersectional factors without adequately compensating or recognising their contributions. There is also a need to strengthen investment in specialist local organisations, such as organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and LGBTQI+ organisations, which provide valuable support to these larger organisations but are often under-resourced.[30]

KEY OPPORTUNITY 🔄 **Working with local actors**

Understand and articulate the complementary strengths of different humanitarian actors in supporting intersectional approaches. Value, and resource the expertise, knowledge and community trust in local and national actors in understanding the diversity of factors that influence intersectionality in different communities. Address and look for ways to share the risks that local actors face in implementing intersectional approaches.

3 SPECIALIST ORGANISATIONS THAT FOCUS ON SPECIFIC GROUPS OR ISSUES PROVIDED MORE EXAMPLES OF INTERSECTIONAL THINKING AND APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

Most examples of intersectional thinking and approaches emerged from specialist organisations, in particular local organisations, that focus on issues such as gender equality, or specific groups such as local OPDs, organisations focused on older people, or LGBTQI+ groups. These actors described an increasing focus on the diversity of identities and other social factors for individuals within these particular groups, as well as understanding how these intersect in creating vulnerabilities and needs that should be recognised in humanitarian response.[31]

Box 6: The evolution of a local OPD: Embracing intersectional approaches

A local OPD has focused exclusively on disability inclusion since its inception. In 2019, it began advocating for election rights for people with disabilities and, through collaboration with gender organisations, gained insights into gender concerns. It recognised the need to consider additional intersectional factors, such as the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ individuals and ethnic minorities who also experience discrimination.

> ❝ When we started [our organisation], we focused on disability inclusion only since we ourselves are people with disabilities but later, we found that we need to consider other intersectional factors as well such as LGBTQI+ and ethnic minorities who also faced discrimination in the society. The types of discrimination may be different, but they all face discrimination one way or another. (Local OPD representative)

Following this, the OPD implemented policies to include more women with disabilities in their programs. It established a Women's Committee comprising staff and members, including men interested in gender inclusion, to review proposals through a gender lens. Additionally, the OPD has enhanced its understanding of LGBTQI+ individuals with disabilities, including them in various groups based on self-identification, incorporating non-binary questions about sexual orientation in needs assessments, and collaborating with LGBTQI+ organisations to raise awareness of LGBTQI+ issues. The OPD's members also worked with other international organisations to provide situation analyses of these intersecting factors for specific townships.

Organisations focused on gender or women's rights organisations provided key examples of intersectional thinking in their approaches. For example, a local gender group described using an intersectional lens to identify the needs of IDPs housed in monasteries in Mon State. Using this information, they were able to arrange separate accommodation for specific groups of women and children, and monks, along with the necessary logistical and financial support.

Some humanitarian actors outlined difficulties in navigating the effects of social norms on intersecting identity factors. Lack of understanding of cultural and social norms, particularly religious views on women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and people with disabilities, is a major barrier to effective action. For example, mindset barriers and unconscious biases within humanitarian organisations could sometimes lead to the inclusion of older people as an afterthought or neglecting the diverse needs and perspectives of different ethnic groups. This lack of understanding is reduced for organisations that focus on specific groups in more depth, creating a more nuanced awareness of related social and cultural norms as they relate to the group.[32] International actors noted that local actors already perform contextualised needs analysis and targeting (as outlined in finding 2), which are key elements of the intersectional approach, and that there is a need to create spaces in which to share these analyses.[33]

Both interviewees in Myanmar and existing evidence globally highlight that feminist organisations, such as women's rights organisations, adopt intersectional approaches through focusing on the needs of marginalised women through the intersection of identity factors such as disability, indigeneity or LGBTQI+ status.[34] This highlights that humanitarian actors using more generalist methods can learn from these approaches and adapt them for their own application.

KEY OPPORTUNITY   **Leveraging the expertise of specialist organisations**

Engage with, and resource specialist organisations who have the relationships and deep understanding of the intersectional factors that influence specific individuals' and groups' access to aid. Learn from, and incorporate their approaches to understanding and identifying specific needs. This also involves supporting these organisations to enable increased decision making of marginalised people about intersectional programming.

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4 NEEDS ANALYSES AND IDENTIFICATION MORE BROADLY CONTINUES TO FOCUS LARGELY ON AGE AND GENDER, WITHOUT CONSIDERING THEIR INTERSECTION WITH OTHER IDENTITY FACTORS

In the Myanmar response, humanitarian actors' approaches to intersectionality in needs analyses and programming more broadly mostly focuses on how two, at most three identity factors – most commonly gender and age – intersect. Overall, however, the research found few examples of factors such as ability, ethnicity and sexual orientation, and how they intersect with age or gender, being considered in needs analyses. Several organisations gave strong examples of how gender and ability are incorporated within program design and implementation and their broader organisational approaches to inclusion, but considerations of intersectionality were largely absent.[35]

Using data

Standard or global approaches to needs assessments that have not been contextualised hinder the use of intersectional approaches to collection information. Effective use of data, including through needs assessments and quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, is critical to designing relevant intersectional approaches and their implementation, including monitoring and evaluation of impact.[36] Many agencies highlighted the complexity of conducting needs assessments in Myanmar, citing a range of factors such as lack of access and sensitivity about how this type of data is collected. They also highlighted that agencies' processes and templates do not facilitate consideration of multiple identity factors and how they intersect. In particular, standard or global approaches that organisations use to collect data at the household level are a barrier in practice as it is challenging to identify the needs at an individual level.

> **"** We globally target [needs assessments] at the household level and intersectionality looks at individual level and needs, so we are hamstrung by the household approach. (International actor)

Including qualitative data in program design and evaluation are essential for capturing the intersecting identities and nuanced experiences of less visible marginalised groups, which quantitative data alone might miss. Needs assessments should consider not just general needs but the personalised needs of specific groups, including mapping existing support systems and environmental factors.[37] For example, one international agency described collaborating with institutions known for their strong qualitative research methods to enhance its nutrition support program and incorporate an intersectional perspective with qualitative approaches into its upcoming country strategy. Local groups also described specific practices in needs assessment phases, with qualitative approaches used to identity how specific identity and social factors influenced access to aid, including through community discussions, mapping examples with individuals, and oral storytelling.

Box 7. Collecting sensitive information

Safe and appropriate collection of data about identity or social factors is critical. These issues can be highly sensitive for individuals and communities for cultural, traditional and safety reasons. Whilst international and agency guidelines for safe needs assessment exist, they must be contextualised for considering intersectionality in Myanmar.

Adopting intersectional approaches in humanitarian aid requires a shift from focusing on single identity or inclusion factors to understanding how multiple factors interact in needs analysis and targeting. While most organisations prioritise inclusive approaches for particular groups or factors (e.g. across gender or ability), it is more challenging for them to nuance and adapt these approaches to address the interconnected nature of vulnerabilities for individuals.[38]

Interviewees expressed a desire for a systematic inclusion framework contextualised to specific needs across Myanmar. This could be used by various humanitarian actors, and draw on elements of intersectional approaches. Evidence about the impact of intersectional approaches is also needed. Outside one-off case studies and anecdotal evidence, there is little data about what is effective, and in what contexts, and how these approaches contribute to broader inclusion efforts. Evidence is also important in showing how intersectional approaches must be adapted so as not to exacerbate tensions or existing conflict within communities.[39]

KEY OPPORTUNITY   Incorporate intersectional approaches in needs analyses

Strengthen needs analysis and targeting to better incorporate approaches to understand intersectional factors and how these influence needs of individuals and groups. This needs to be applied across ongoing monitoring and evaluation as well. Standard organisational or global needs assessment processes need to be adapted to reflect specific community contexts, and also include stronger qualitative analysis, rather than relying on disaggregated data.

5 PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS ARE VITAL FOR ADVANCING INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES

Strengthening intersectional approaches requires collaboration across partnerships, networks and coordination forums, humanitarian, peace and development programs, and sectors. Building partnerships with organisations that have expertise in specific social and identity factors can strengthen intersectional approaches. Larger humanitarian actors that focus on wider humanitarian response issues can engage in longer-term and more equitable partnerships with specialist organisations that already take intersectional approaches (building on finding 3).

For example, an international organisation partnered with a local organisation to establish a local network which can be utilised for referral services for older people to meet specific needs according to gender and ability. Local OPDs collaborating with gender and LGBTQI+ groups (see finding 3) to enhance programming shows that such partnerships improve understanding of community issues and specific needs, which supports a more contextualised approach. This advantage also extends to collaborative efforts across partnerships, in which multidisciplinary teams within the organisation – such as those in health, protection, and gender – work together to inform needs analysis and program design, ensuring a holistic perspective. [40] In addition, networks and forums provide useful platforms for raising intersectional issues, as well as supporting efforts across humanitarian, development and peace programming (Box 8).

Box 8: Case study: Gender Equality Network (GEN)'s approach to intersectional programming

The GEN is a diverse and inclusive network of more than 130 civil society organisations, including both national and international NGOs. The network supports intersectional approaches in a number of ways through developing inclusive materials, promoting dialogue and working with members to develop programming approaches. GEN also offers small grants to organisations that apply an intersectional lens to their work, such as those focusing on LGBTQI+ or disability-oriented issues, and provides local organisations with technical assistance in proposal writing and development. It has also worked with disability groups on addressing specific gender issues within their context, such as developing gender-neutral vocabulary.

Strengthening cross-sectoral consideration of intersectionality is key. Several actors articulated that approaches tend to be siloed within a particular sector (e.g., health) or issue (gender, protection) rather than considering multiple identity factors cross-sectorally, and there is greater need to understand how this can work in practice. [41]

Donor approaches

Donors have an important role in supporting effective inclusion in Myanmar. Approaches to intersectionality are nascent across key donors globally, but foundational thinking and framing is beginning to emerge in strategies, policies and approaches to supporting country-level initiatives.[42] There is an increasing tendency to specify minimum inclusion requirements in funding and reporting criteria, including disaggregated data (usually age, gender and sometimes ability), but little evidence to show how these draw on, promote or relate to intersectional approaches or more effective inclusion generally.[43]

Donors can support the uptake of intersectional planning and action, in particular by proritising intersectionality in policies, providing flexibility and ensuring funding mechanisms support longer term initiatives, engaging with local and specialist actors to understand their approaches and how these might be adapted and scaled in wider response programming. Operational actors also expressed a desire to receive feedback on how donors use inclusion-related data to inform decision-making.

Linking with accountability to affected populations and the humanitarian–development–peace nexus

The potential to strengthen intersectional programming across the humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus to mitigate vulnerabilities and enhance inclusion of marginalised groups was well recognised in the Myanmar context.[44] Intersectionality is a valuable tool to understand the social and economic factors driving conflict, like in Rakhine State. Recognising overlapping forms of oppression and discrimination can be an enabler for promoting peacebuilding and reducing the chances of future violence.[45] However, the research found few practical examples of this occurring and evidence of its impact. In addition, the critical link between efforts to strengthen inclusion through intersectional approaches and accountability to affected populations (AAP) was highlighted as an important topic for future focus.

> " There is an opportunity to use intersectionality understanding for [the HDP] nexus. AAP is a key enabler for the nexus to identify the needs of the community and building trust with people so that their resilience can be prioritised. (International actor)

KEY OPPORTUNITY 🤝 **Strengthening collaborative approaches**

Collaborative approaches across partnerships, networks and across different areas of programming are important, including donors increasingly considering intersectional approaches as part of strategies and reporting requirements. There is potential in the future to look at how intersectional approaches can be strengthened across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

Next steps: Advancing intersectional approaches

There are strong opportunities to build on the learning and approaches from the Myanmar context in the future. Whilst the nature of intersectionality is specific for individuals and contexts, the practices outlined in this paper can be considered by humanitarian actors working across a range of different crisis contexts. The evidence emerging from this study demonstrates that is both possible, and important to drive momentum in practical and applicable approaches that draw on the respective strengths of different types of humanitarian actors. Whilst examples remain small in scale, they show how international actors can work closely with local and specialist organisations to understand unique intersectional factors, and in particular how important this is in the needs identification and analysis stages of programming.

OVERVIEW OF OPPORTUNITIES

To effectively integrate intersectionality into humanitarian programming in Myanmar, opportunities must be leveraged to address the complex needs of marginalised communities. This practice paper outlines key opportunities and practical steps for different actors to advance intersectional approaches in their programs.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

Understanding and Awareness: Strengthen the understanding of intersectionality, and intersectional approaches across the diversity of humanitarian actors in Myanmar. Share emerging practices in networks and forums, and the ways in which barriers and challenges have been addressed across different types of programming. Invest in both organisational, and sector-wide practices to better understand and track the impact of intersectional approaches on inclusion more broadly, on humanitarian effectiveness and on community resilience.

Working with local actors: Understand and articulate the complementary strengths of different humanitarian actors in supporting intersectional approaches. Value, and resource the expertise, knowledge and community trust in local and national actors in understanding the diversity of factors that influence intersectionality in different communities. Address and looks for ways to share the risks that local actors face in implementing intersectional approaches.

Leveraging the expertise of specialist organisations: Engage with, and resource specialist organisations who have the relationships and deep understanding of the intersectional factors that influence specific individuals' and groups' access to aid. Learn from, and incorporate their approaches to understanding and identifying specific needs. This also involves supporting these organisations to enable increased decision making of marginalised people about intersectional programming.

Incorporate intersectional approaches in needs analyses: Strengthen needs analysis and targeting to better incorporate approaches to understand intersectional factors and how these influence needs of individuals and groups. This needs to be applied across ongoing monitoring and evaluation as well. Standard organisational or global needs assessment processes need to be adapted to reflect specific community contexts, and also include stronger qualitative analysis, rather than relying on disaggregated data.

Strengthening collaborative approaches: Collaborative approaches across partnerships, networks and across different areas of programming are important, including donors increasingly considering intersectional approaches as part of strategies and reporting requirements. There is potential in the future to look at how intersectional approaches can be strengthened across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

Annex 1: Global guidelines/toolkits and main themes

Global guidelines/toolkits	Main themes	Created by
The Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit	This guide defines intersectionality as a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power dynamics; dividing the process for creating an intersectional approach to humanitarianism into three key steps: Analyse, Adapt, and Assess	UN Women and UNPRPD
The Guidance Note of Intersectionality, Racial Discrimination, and the Protection of Minorities	Same underlying principles as the Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit; focuses on participation, collaboration, education, and addressing specific intersectional factors like gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and disability	OHCHR
Intersectionality in Gender-Based Violence Programming Toolkit	Focuses on intersectionality in GBV programming, with tools like the Intersectionality Yarn, Mapping Diverse Action, and Creating Ecosystems of Safety and Care, which encourage intersectional awareness	UN Women
The Islamic Relief Worldwide's Leave No One Behind in Humanitarian Programming	Outlines the six 'As' towards creating an intersectional approach to humanitarian projects; Analysis, Adapted assistance, Attention to negative effects, Adequate participation, Accountability, and Adequate capacity	Islamic Relief
Towards more Inclusive Practices: A Disability, Gender and Age Intersectional Resource	Emphasises the importance of understanding lived experiences, the wider environment, social norms, power, empowerment, and participation	Humanity and Inclusion
Out of the Margins: An intersectional Analysis of Disability and Diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression, and Sex Characteristics in Humanitarian and Development Contexts	Emphasises the importance of including diverse perspectives in donor frameworks, developing advocacy and awareness campaigns based on lived experiences, increasing opportunities, and building international organisational mechanisms to be inclusive of people with disabilities and diverse experiences	CBM

Annex 2: Abbreviations

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEN	Gender Equality Network
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
HDP	Humanitarian–Development–Peace [nexus]
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and other gender self-identifications
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

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