
the

Humanitarian Leader

Beyond the 'Egosystem': A case for locally led Humanitarian Resistance

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THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER: Beyond the 'Egosystem': A case for locally led Humanitarian Resistance

WORKING PAPER 041
NOVEMBER 2023

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Acknowledgements

I appreciate the opportunity provided by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership to speak about this subject at the 2023 Humanitarian Leadership Conference in April 2023, and for their encouragement to continue writing about it. I would also like to express my gratitude and admiration to Myanmar's Resistance Humanitarians and those who have been supporting them in their relentless journey towards resilience and justice. Their principled approach has redefined the practice of humanitarian principles by traditional humanitarian actors. Their strong sense of solidarity, ingenuity and adaptability are strengths to be reckoned with and supported, not ignored. These courageous individuals and organisations are the primary reason for my continued quest and advocacy for a locally led Humanitarian Resistance. My thanks also goes to Professor Hugo Slim for coining the term 'Resistance Humanitarianism' and for persistently making it clear that this form of humanitarianism is worthy of support.

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Production Editor: Cara Schultz

Translation: Benoit Glayre and Isaline Doucot

Layout: Diana De León

ISSN: 2653-1011 (Online)

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present.

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Cover image: Medical volunteers from 'Nway Oo Sayy aid' take care of a Karen refugee in an IDP camp in Kayah State, Myanmar. © SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Live News

Abstract

This article invites readers to consider a new form of humanitarianism that has emerged out of people's resistance to military atrocities—called Resistance Humanitarianism—with a particular focus on the crisis in Myanmar. In that country, Resistance Humanitarians are challenging traditional aid actors because their operational presence and coverage can go deep inside the hardest-hit areas, which are usually inaccessible to the large INGOs and UN. This gives Resistance Humanitarians significant operational advantages, particularly the acceptance of the population, access, and data that reflects ground realities.

Meanwhile, most international aid actors continue to try and gain access to affected communities through Myanmar's oppressive and illegitimate military junta, constraining their ability to reach those most affected by crisis and potentially aiding the junta's violent cause. The paper suggests that this vertical, top-down, 'neutral' approach to aid access taken by many international actors may deepen the conflict, as it pushes people away from their determination for a systematic end to injustice. The paper also argues for the urgent need to critically rethink the humanitarian approach for the Myanmar conflict, and suggests a new type of aid architecture—a locally-led, horizontally-constructed ecosystem that builds on and supports people and organisations on the ground and prioritises inclusivity, diversity and collaboration at its heart. If the aim of external international actors is to build resilience, they must rethink their approach and support military-avoiding Resistance Humanitarianism.

Leadership relevance

This article challenges readers to think outside the traditional forms of humanitarianism and explore a new type of humanitarianism that has emerged out of the people's resistance movement in Myanmar. Resistance Humanitarians have been breaking down the barriers between aid providers and recipients, removing the rigid sectorisation of human rights, humanitarianism, development and peace, and developing new norms, notably solidarity, ingenuity and adaptability. This phenomenon encourages traditional humanitarian actors to rethink their approaches so that they fit better into the contexts where they operate, properly address humanitarian needs and build strong community resilience.

The paper is an updated version of a keynote presentation delivered during the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership's 2023 Humanitarian Leadership Conference on 26-28 April 2023 in Melbourne, Australia.

Introduction

As I was preparing my keynote speech for the 2023 Humanitarian Leadership Conference on the morning of 11 April 2023, the Myanmar military junta conducted brutal air strikes on Pa Zi Gyi village in the Sagaing region. The massacre killed close to 170 civilians. 40 of them were children and the youngest victim was a 6-month-old baby (*Progressive Voice*, 2023). It was the deadliest air strike since the February 2021 military coup d'état.

I am using this ongoing crisis in Myanmar and the international response to it as a case in point to demonstrate that the current aid system is ill-suited to deal with an emergency of this kind. The paper argues for the urgent need to critically rethink the humanitarian approach for the Myanmar conflict, and suggests a new type of aid architecture—a locally-led, horizontally-constructed ecosystem that builds on and supports people and organisations on the ground and prioritises inclusivity, diversity and collaboration at its heart.

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The coup that led to humanitarian catastrophe

Following the coup d'état on 1 February 2021, when the Myanmar military illegally seized power just a few hours before the newly elected parliament was due to convene for the first time, the country turned into a slaughterhouse. The military junta, which is known as the State Administration Council or SAC, has killed at least 4,000 people, detained at least 19,000 (AAPP, 2023), and massacred, tortured, and inflicted violence on citizens nationwide. Villages have been reduced to ashes by military arson attacks and airstrikes.

At the time of writing, Myanmar ranks just behind Ukraine in experiencing extreme violence and deaths from conflict (ACLED, 2023). So far in 2023, Myanmar has suffered the highest number of civilian casualties by airstrike in the world. The scale, frequency and severity of violence inflicted after the coup attempt alone make the military junta criminally liable for war crimes and crimes against humanity (OHCHR, 2023b). The article in the *New York Times*, 'The Country that Bombs its Own People', aptly describes the military junta's indiscriminate campaign of violence against the Myanmar people (Willis & Cai, 2023).

The United Nations has estimated that 17.6 million people—or nearly a third of the country's population—are in need of humanitarian assistance this year (UN Myanmar, 2023). At least 1.9 million people have been forced into internal displacement (OCHA, 2023c). However, these are conservative figures, as the data provided by local groups show that the number of people displaced in some areas of the country could be more than double the figures published by the UN (KPSN, 2022; Kantar, 2022; KPSN, 2023).

On top this, over a million Rohingya refugees (UNHCR, 2023b) have sought temporary refuge in crowded camps in Bangladesh since the 2017 genocide, with an increasing number seeking refuge via the high seas (UNHCR, 2023a). Hundreds of thousands have spread out into neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia, India, Thailand and Indonesia, and the number continues to grow. Further compounding the situation, Category 5 Cyclone Mocha made landfall in May 2023 on Myanmar's west coasts, causing massive devastation in many townships across Rakhine State and adding to Myanmar's severe humanitarian needs and challenges (Hlaing, 2023).

Illegal, illegitimate and unconstitutional

The military's seizure of power on 1 February 2021 and suspension of the elected parliament have been widely condemned as illegal under both domestic and international laws. Legal analysts called the coup attempt a violation of the flawed 2008 Constitution that the military itself imposed (ICJ, 2021), while the Inter-Parliamentary Union called it a clear violation of Article 21 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that states "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government" (IPU, 2021).

The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar has specifically described the military administration as "illegal and illegitimate" in his report launched on the second anniversary of the coup. "The conclusion is clear—the SAC's military coup was illegal and its claim as Myanmar's government is illegitimate", he said. The Special Rapporteur also argued that under international standards, the international community must reject the junta, and recognise and engage the National Unity Government, or NUG, which represents the will of the Myanmar people (OHCHR, 2023b).

And while the UN's 2005 Responsibility To Protect (R2P) principle¹ has been badly received among many developing countries in the world in view of fears about

¹ The Responsibility To Protect (R2P) principle holds that "State sovereignty carried with it the obligation of the State to protect its own people, and that if the State was unwilling or unable to do so, the responsibility shifted to the international community to use diplomatic, humanitarian and other means to protect them" (United Nations, 2005).

the abuse of this concept, in Myanmar we see and hear people clearly calling for protection under this mandate (Okoth-Obbo, 2023; Gareth, 2021).

Rejected by the people

The people of Myanmar have universally and overwhelmingly rejected the coup (SAC-M, 2022). Anti-coup movements involving largely peaceful mass protests, work stoppages and vast civil disobedience measures have been met with brutal military crackdowns against protestors and those suspected of leading and supporting the people's movement. Since the coup, more than 24,800 people have been arbitrarily arrested, and over 19,000 of them are still detained (AAPP, 2023).

The military brutality has fuelled an unprecedented and nationwide pro-democracy resistance movement that continues to persist and grows stronger by day. The coup has brought together the majority of the people and an array of ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, to stand united against the military dictatorship. Determined to put an end to 70 years of military oppression, Gen Z youths play a key role in the people's movement. "You messed with the wrong generation", has become one of the most-repeated slogans against the military dictatorship (*The Irrawaddy*, 2021).

The Spring Revolution, as it is known, is distinct from the previous anti-junta movements and uprisings. It is horizontal, not vertical. It does not cling to one political figure. It is a leaderless movement, ignited by young people and fortified by previous generations of anti-junta movements. It challenges Myanmar's patriarchal, military-ruled society that is vertical, hierarchical and centred on the Bamar Buddhist majority. Instead, it emphasises horizontal relations, promotes universal values and social justice, and is more inclusive of all members of society (Jordt et al, 2021).

Doing more with less

The Myanmar crisis is among the world's most neglected humanitarian crises. While Myanmar and Ukraine share equal numbers of people in need, the disparity in aid resources between the two countries is stark. The budget for the UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Ukraine is five times larger. Last year, only 28% of the response plan for Myanmar was funded, compared with 73% for Ukraine (OCHA, 2022).

Even more grimly for Myanmar, the UN is targeting significantly fewer people for aid this year: 4.5 million people with severe needs, compared with 6.2 million last year. Eight months into 2023, the combined US\$887 million Humanitarian Response Plan and Cyclone Mocha

Flash Appeals remain critically underfunded, with only 25% of the required funding received (OCHA, 2023c).

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A study by independent research group Humanitarian Outcomes examined the coverage, operational reach and effectiveness of humanitarian aid in Myanmar (Harvey et al, 2023). The study reveals that the operational presence and reach of the formal aid sector in Myanmar is limited and is not poised to improve, and therefore it makes little sense to focus all the planning and resource mobilisation efforts on the formal aid response. The study further indicates that the localised and informal aid, much of it driven by cross-border entities, is reaching significantly higher numbers of people and has room to further scale up.

The junta access obsession

Yet despite the recognised illegitimacy of the junta, the widespread knowledge of its ongoing campaign of violence and brutality, and the limited funds available for aid, international actors, including aid groups and UN agencies, continue to rely on the military for access into the country and travel authorisation to distribute aid to the people and areas affected by the crisis.

However, expecting that the military junta—the perpetrator of the humanitarian catastrophe—will cooperate and expand the space for humanitarian action is either a hallucination or a self-serving strategy that neglects the calls of Myanmar people (Kamal, Hser Hser & Ohmar, 2022).

First of all, the military junta is neither trusted nor accepted by the populations most severely affected by the crisis. And trust and acceptance are the cornerstones of humanitarian assistance. As in all conflicts and wars, how aid is provided and who is providing it are much more important than the aid itself (Kamal, Hser Hser & Ohmar, 2022).

Second, according to reporting by the UN, the only areas that are 'accessible' to the UN Country Team without challenges in 2023 are Yangon, Naypyitaw, and parts of Bago, Mandalay and eastern Shan State. Around 2.3 million people who have been prioritised for assistance by the UN live in areas that are difficult or very difficult to access for the UN, because the junta either delay or refuse travel authorisations (OCHA, 2023a, p.50). This

means that 76% of the displaced population identified in the Humanitarian Response Plan are in areas that are very difficult or difficult for the UN to access (UN OCHA, 2023a, p.50).

Third, studies have also shown that in 2022, while the military junta may still oversee key cities, they can only claim to have stable control over 17% of the country and are being actively contested in a further 23% (SAC-M, 2022). Nearly a year since the study was conducted, the NUG has claimed that the resistance forces, including ethnic revolutionary groups, are in control of about 60% of the country's territory (Bloomberg, 2023).

Fourth, the junta will never allow access to these areas since its 'four cuts' military strategy aims to starve populations that resist its attempts to rule by force. The junta will only allow the distribution of aid in areas or in populations deemed worthy of support and only if it is able to gain political, strategic and operational advantages.

Fifth, the Myanmar military junta does not meet the legal criteria for having effective control of Myanmar. The Myanmar military junta is not a legitimate, or de jure, government and it cannot be considered the 'de facto authority' of Myanmar. It has been two and a half years since the failed coup and while it has exerted raw military power through its relentless aerial attacks in areas of the strongest resistance, it has not been accepted by the population as the people of Myanmar continue to resist, it has not demonstrated a level of capacity to function as a government, and it has not had a degree of permanency—all of which are elements required for an entity to claim effective control (SAC-M, 2022). This assessment was conducted by former UN independent experts on Myanmar (SAC-M, 2022), as well as the current Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar (OHCHR, 2023a).

The fraught approach of international actors in accessing populations mainly through the military junta has resulted in very little progress in providing humanitarian aid, with only 25% of IDPs reached within the first half of 2023 (OCHA, 2023b). These data may even be a gross underestimation and are highly contested in reports from local humanitarian actors (KPSN, 2022; Kantar, 2022; KPSN, 2023).

A vertical approach is a misfit

The international community has got it wrong in its response to the Myanmar emergency. Most UN organisations, donor governments and large international NGOs have not been able to quickly adapt their humanitarian approaches to respond to the unique phenomena of this crisis. They continue to attempt to access the crisis-affected population through the military junta—which is essentially the main perpetrator of the humanitarian catastrophe. This is where traditional, top-

down, 'neutral' approaches seriously impede effective humanitarian aid. This approach could even deepen the conflict, as it pushes the people away from their strong self-determination for a systematic end to injustice.

Humanitarian assistance has increasingly become used as political leverage in many crises, including in Myanmar. Humanitarian assistance—or, more accurately, the provision of relief items to people in need, is often used as a convenient political tool or a way of expressing solidarity without addressing the root causes. The provision of assistance in this way—under the rubric of humanitarian assistance—is often considered a quick win. It is supposed to be apolitical, but, in reality, is all too often a political tool.

And when humanitarian aid is used as a substitute for real political action, and when humanitarian actors allow this to happen, what will be achieved is simply propaganda—and has little to do with saving lives, reducing the suffering of the most affected people, and ensuring their dignity. It is the job of humanitarians to ensure that assistance is effectively reaching those in direst need. Progress should be measured by how well assistance is able to reach people in the hardest-hit and most difficult to access areas.

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A better approach

In his much acclaimed book, *Solferino 21: Warfare, Civilians and Humanitarians in the Twenty-First Century*, Professor Hugo Slim writes that "being humanitarian is universal but not uniform" (Slim, 2022a, p.238).

There is indeed a variety of approaches or models of humanitarianism. Most Western humanitarianism holds to a strict model of principled humanitarian action that combines commitments to the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence as championed by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, a model rooted in the political neutrality of Switzerland as its founding state (Slim, 2022a, p.239). However, the 'Swiss Model' of neutrality has never been the only form of humanitarian aid in war, and nor should it be. As Slim argued in his provoking article in the *New*

Humanitarian, “You don’t have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian” (2020).

In the wake of the coup, Myanmar activist and Chair of Progressive Voice, Khin Ohmar, wrote that “there’s nothing neutral about engaging with Myanmar’s military” and that insistence on working through the junta is “a festished notion of humanitarian neutrality” (2021). Her article was followed by a story of five local takes on aid neutrality in Myanmar that concluded that “It’s easy to remain neutral when the act of injustice doesn’t affect you” (Fishbein, 2021).

Neutrality is an operational principle, not a moral value, unlike humanity and impartiality (Mardini, 2022). But neutrality is not for everyone (ODI HPG, 2022). It works well for external humanitarians, but it does not work for local humanitarian actors as many of them, especially those who are still inside the country and are hiding from the military’s scrutiny and atrocities, are themselves victims and potential targets of the belligerent.

The international community should therefore not impose neutrality on everyone. Donors should not use neutrality as the reason for not supporting local actors that decide to take a side and avoid the military regime in order to distribute assistance to their communities.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the people’s resistance in Myanmar led to Professor’s Slim follow-up paper ‘Humanitarian resistance: Its ethical and operational importance’ (2022). He argued that Humanitarian Resistance is an essential, ethical and legal form of organised humanitarianism and that while it’s not neutral, it is humanitarian. In many cases, Resistance Humanitarians are reaching people faster and better than orthodox humanitarians from neutral international aid agencies (Slim, 2022b, p.4).

Slim (2022b, p.7) offers the following definition of Humanitarian Resistance:

“Humanitarian resistance is the rescue, relief and protection of people suffering under an unjust enemy regime. It is specifically organised by individuals and groups who are politically opposed to the regime and support resistance against it because of their political commitments or personal conscience. Humanitarian resistance takes sides and is carried out without enemy consent, often covertly and at great personal risk”.

Humanitarian Resistance in Myanmar

Around the same time Professor Slim’s paper on humanitarian resistance was published last year, I took a heart-breaking but inspiring journey to the Thai-Myanmar border where I met with border-based

local humanitarian actors and networks and IDPs and survivors of the conflict. There, I had the privilege of witnessing a live example of how Humanitarian Resistance is put into practice by local responders. I observed how they organise their work using networks of networks and their wealth of local knowledge and experience to facilitate and deliver assistance to people on both sides of the borders and deep inside the country.

Many of these local groups are refugees themselves or have been running and hiding from military atrocities for months, years or even decades. They operate in areas along the borders that are not controlled by the military junta and they can organise assistance deep into the country, through their informal networks. They do not come in big trucks plastered with UN logos, nor do they wear official uniforms. They often do not declare who and where they are unless they trust you. They are invisible. The locally led, military-avoiding humanitarian approach of these Resistance Humanitarians has saved and sustained hundreds of thousands of lives following the February 2021 coup (KPSN, 2022).

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Myanmar’s Resistance Humanitarians range from human rights defenders who risk their lives to collect real-time evidence of human rights abuses and atrocity crimes in their communities; doctors and nurses who left their government jobs or private practices to join the civil disobedience movement; religious leaders who fundraise and help their communities regardless of their religions and ethnicity; women’s networks who expand their work on gender into aid distribution to fill immediate needs on the ground; LGBTQI+ rights activists who courageously cross checkpoints and borders to get medicine to HIV/AIDS patients; students-turned-youth activists who provide online classes to displaced children while their parents are fighting as part of the people’s defence forces; and many others.

In conflicts and wars, these local responders have the advantage when it comes to having instant access to up-to-date and accurate ground-level data at their fingertips. Networks of networks and coordination among local responders from various professions and backgrounds allow for the collection of multiple levels of data, ground-truthing and the triangulation of information, and most importantly, quick response.

These local responders intuitively and swiftly respond to calls for help from their communities and peers. On the ground, the rigid sectorisation of human rights, humanitarian, development, and peace actors does not exist. Everyone is doing what they can to support their communities.

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Trust is the cornerstone

Many years ago, I participated in an international humanitarian conference in Geneva where I spoke about humanitarian trends. I mentioned three conditions that would be critical for participation in future humanitarian action, and those who could meet all three conditions would play a central role. The conditions are access, data and resources.

When united, Resistance Humanitarians have most of the strengths required for effective humanitarian action.

They have access to people most affected by the crisis because they have one thing others do not have—trust and acceptance. They have the data because they have direct access to people in need and they know exactly what and where their needs are. When coordinated, data is so powerful—for addressing the needs on the ground more effectively, for advocacy purposes, for influencing donors, and for mobilising resources through the people’s movement inside and outside Myanmar.

Resources are the one thing that Resistance Humanitarians needs to work on further, and this is where advocacy matters. The international aid system has broken down but is not entirely wrecked. Donor governments need to give their money directly to those who can deliver better and more effective services. Donors should avoid channelling assistance through the military regime, which is clearly illegal, illegitimate and unconstitutional.

Supporting Humanitarian Resistance

Building on Professor Slim’s work on Humanitarian Resistance and inspired by what I saw on the ground, I wrote a paper describing how Humanitarian Resistance is practiced inside Myanmar and along the borders with Thailand and India (Kamal & Benowitz, 2022). I

challenged the fraught approach of many international aid providers who have been privileging the junta and its allies and using them as their main partner to deliver humanitarian assistance.

A year after my first visit to the border, I undertook another journey as part of my follow-up study (to be published at the end of 2023) that covers other areas in Myanmar where there are active conflicts with severe humanitarian needs, and made a comparison with similar cases in other parts of the world, such as in Syria (Beals, 2023) and Ukraine (ODI HPG, 2022). Unsurprisingly, I found that Humanitarian Resistance is growing much stronger as these crises continue to escalate. The basic operating principles of solidarity, ingenuity and adaptability are inherently present in other areas and countries that I observed.

But I observed a common thread in all of these cases—Humanitarian Resistance is not sufficiently supported, and is often challenged and stigmatised.

Despite various studies showcasing the important role of informal aid and advocacy and the work of Resistance Humanitarians, there has been little progress in further supporting these actors. Responses from the international humanitarian community have varied from scepticism to indifference. One of the cabinet members of the NUG said during an interview with me that when it comes to supporting local Resistance Humanitarians, “there is less of the [political] will and there is more of the concerns” (Anonymous interview, September 2023).

In the case of Myanmar, there is more than sufficient evidence to prove that there are more effective humanitarian agents with deeper and wider operational coverage and the trust of the people than are currently being employed. Humanitarian Resistance is technically feasible and morally imperative, but why are calls to support them falling on deaf ears?

The main reason for the lack of support for Humanitarian Resistance is that it is not a convincing enough alternative for a system that unthinkingly leans towards governments and state-centric organisations with formal and vertical structures, mandates and systems. It is not about whether these local actors are less effective. It is about mindlessly falling back on the system that most people know and are most comfortable with. We are just used to the bigger and more formal aid system—the so-called ‘Humanitarian Giants’—and they have become the impenetrable ‘Ivy League’ of humanitarian institutions.

My belief is that changing a system is rarely an internally driven process. It is almost always disruptive forces from the outside that challenge the status quo. Realistically, not everybody within the dominant humanitarian system will be comfortable about changing the status

quo as there are no benefits or incentives from within the system to do it. Those inside the system obviously don't want to make themselves irrelevant.

It also boils down to fear. A contrarian approach like Humanitarian Resistance is perceived as a threat to the system, and is not rewarded. There is little incentive for supporting the road less travelled—apart from the fact that it saves lives.

From 'Egosystem' to Ecosystem

The dominant humanitarian system is highly bureaucratised, with complex standards created by those in superior positions, for those in superior positions to implement.

Based on personal experience, most of those coming from such a 'superior' system also come with a superiority complex. Many expatriate humanitarian heroes come to a crisis-affected country with their 'response cavalry' in tow, offering money, superior technology and expertise that they believe is not available in the country—and even if it is, few are willing to listen to the locals who know otherwise.

This is why I have little expectation of the Grand Bargain (Saez et al, 2021; DA Global, 2021; Metcalfe-Hough et al, 2023), and the ongoing initiative by the OCHA that attempts to 'localise' or rather 'de-centralise' the humanitarian country system in Myanmar. Such localisation efforts will bring little impact as long as the initiatives are driven by those inside the system.

I am not negating the commitments already made through the Grand Bargain and the like. The Grand Bargain is an important international commitment and should be followed by those who have signed it.

Likewise, I am also not suggesting that we should sideline the important role of the international humanitarian sector. The system undoubtedly has its strengths. It brings with it at least three advantages—large-scale funding, aggregated global knowledge and pools of expertise, and governance in terms of principles, standards and accountability.

The system, however, is supply-driven, and those in control make all the strategic decisions and define how resources should be managed using indicators and parameters that they create themselves. As Djikzeul remarks:

“An oligopoly of the main donor governments, UN organisations, and the large international humanitarian NGOs determines the principles and standards of humanitarian action. Consequently, the

humanitarian system tends to be more responsive toward donors than to local actors” (Djikzeul, 2021, p3).

Given the above, the playing field will continue to be dominated by international actors making policy and strategic decisions, defining the success indicators and the graduation points, and deploying their own staff, consultants, people, even at operational and tactical levels, regardless of repeated calls to channel humanitarian assistance directly through local actors.

The international humanitarian system is also a vertical, top-down, supply-driven structure, where those at the highest level of the pyramid will get the most resources and those at the lowest level have to wait until those resources trickle down through the aid chain.

This is reflected in how the international humanitarian system has been responding to the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar.

So, as an extension of advocating for more support for Humanitarian Resistance in the Myanmar crisis, and upon coming upon yet another wall of deaf ears, I began re-imagining the humanitarian architecture itself, and how to change the current humanitarian 'egosystem' into a new humanitarian ecosystem—one that is more inclusive, diverse and collaborative.

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Simple aid

The humanitarian situation in Myanmar was complex even before the February 2021 coup. The heavily bureaucratised, formal humanitarian system is adding another complexity into the equation, muddying the already fragile and complex situation.

The famous African proverb, 'When the elephants fight, the grass suffers', perfectly describes the complexity of the overwhelmed international humanitarian system and its constant lurching from one crisis to the next, its unwieldy form trampling everything underneath, including local responders and affected people. External humanitarians need to seek for simplicity instead (Slim, 2022a, p.243-246) because complexity is the enemy of effective humanitarian aid in wartime.

External humanitarians can provide this kind of simple aid by taking few steps back and supporting those who can do the job better. Direct physical aid distributed by Resistance Humanitarians and actors that are trusted by the people, are critical in sustaining and saving lives in the hardest-hit, most-affected areas. Donors should provide aid through these local actors, and avoid heavily intermediated and bureaucratised systems. In a complex situation, simple aid such as cash transfers, could be the most effective way to save lives.

International actors need to consider that the context of the Myanmar people's movement is horizontal in nature, and therefore the relationship among actors involved should also be horizontal. The recipients should not be placed at the end of the spectrum and considered as passive actors in the relationship. The aid process should be participatory so those affected can also be active participants.

In this way, beneficiaries do not only benefit but can also actively contribute and help others. As shown in other crises, beneficiaries can play a dual role as humanitarians too, thus creating a more equal humanitarian system, and enabling people on the move a more qualified life (Maya, 2022).

A horizontal approach removes the barrier between providers and recipients. Many of the young people and women leaders who have crossed the borders have become indispensable humanitarian actors. They fundraise and mobilise their networks and peers to channel resources into the country using creative ways of reaching crisis-affected people. However, they are refugees too. The doctors and nurses who have joined the civil disobedience movement have been providing medical aid to communities displaced by air strikes while hiding inside the country. This shows that those on the move and in hiding from junta atrocities can still help others, utilising their skills and creativity—though with very minimal resources and under constant pressures.

For local actors, any change happening within the international aid system is most likely out of their control. As such, rather than tinkering with the system, local actors should create a level playing field through networks of networks and work more closely with one another to strengthen their respective systems and capacities. If there is one lesson to be drawn from the COVID-19 response, it would be the importance of building self-reliance and internal capacities.

It is key that local actors in Myanmar emancipate and liberate themselves to become more self-reliant (Kamal, 2020). After all, they understand the context better, have the ability to adapt and change faster, and have the acceptance and trust of the people they serve.

Behind the scenes support

It is too much to expect that local actors can become solo agents for change in complex and fragile settings. But they should be in the lead roles, working with the support and advice of specialised external facilitators, or 'External Humanitarians', who can operate as backroom aids (Seiff, 2022).

These external actors could support locals to facilitate and strengthen their networks, and help connect them with potential supporters and donors in other countries. They could be specialist INGOs providing expertise to local responders in specific areas such as the law, negotiating skills, report writing, mapping, and data management.

They could be international policy strategists with deep insights into the country's crisis and sensitivity to the people's quest for justice. They could help demystify complex international and regional systems, help in policy strategy and formulation, and make Humanitarian Resistance more compelling to donors.

Backroom aids could also be humanitarian practitioners working to help strengthen local actors' systems and standards that are locally contextualised but comparable to international standards. They could be seasoned journalists, helping to bring local voices to the fore by coaching and co-authoring articles with local journalists.

The defining element of these External Humanitarians must be local trust. And importantly, they must be willing to take a seat at the back and provide support under the radar.

Building resilience through Humanitarian Resistance

Ultimately, I like to use the analogy of cosmetic surgery versus muscle building to compare the current internationally led humanitarian approach with the locally led Humanitarian Resistance approach in Myanmar.

One is an expensive procedure designed to appeal to external standards. The procedure is pricy, difficult and dependent on professionals. Once the cash runs out, and you can't afford it anymore, things fall apart.

The other is akin to building muscle. It may take more effort, more patience, more discipline, but in the long term it allows for the sustained care of one's mind and body. It is also incredibly inexpensive and flexible as it adjusts to and can operate in any environment. It is hard

work and can be painful, but it is easier to keep going in the long run as long as there is focus and prioritisation on healthy ways to maintain strength.

While humanitarian aid brought from outside may look nice for photo ops with all the big trucks and flashy flags slathered with logos and sponsorship, it is a cosmetic band aid to a chronic problem. In contrast, Humanitarian Resistance aims to create long term resiliency. It may see even faster progress and become stronger with more funds and increased investment. Locally led Humanitarian Resistance builds on existing community structures, strengthens existing ethnic administrations, and encourages social cohesion. These are the muscles that will build community resilience, sustainable peace and federal democracy from below.

A locally led approach, which is horizontal and builds on the people's resistance movement, is the most suitable, practical and effective approach to deal with Myanmar's humanitarian catastrophe.

There are two key features to successful Resistance Humanitarianism and its partner, External Humanitarianism. One is the self-determination—and active participation—of the disaster or crisis-affected population, where they do not only benefit but also actively contribute. The other is a deep sense of humility, respect for local knowledge, solidarity, partnership and equity on the part of the facilitating actors and external supporters.

This is humanitarianism for the 21st Century.

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This publication is made possible with the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

