

# EMREF - SEIA RESEARCH REPORT

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*IDRC Grant/ Subvention du CRDI: 109432-001-Think tank capacity building and policy impact (before and after 2020 election)*

# Paracetamol, Cevit and a Boiled Egg:

Daily Life in Rural Myanmar  
in the Time of the Third Wave of Covid-19

Markus Kostner and anonymous authors from the Nyan Corridor

September 2021

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*Markus Kostner<sup>1</sup> and anonymous authors from the Nyan Corridor*

September 2021

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<sup>1</sup> Markus Kostner is a Senior Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation, New York University.

## Acknowledgement

This research was conducted with the support of the International Development Research Centre, IDRC, which has implemented the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar programme. The authors are very grateful for this support.

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## Key Takeaways

Health is currently the top concern for villagers in Myanmar. The general health situation in the villages has been worsening and the public health system has been unable to cope with the pandemic. While people have been acting responsibly and trying to work together to overcome the covid pandemic, public covid management has been very weak, many hospitals remain closed, military checkpoints restrict access to health services, and the military has been interfering in the work of volunteers and health workers who are trying to help covid patients.

The economic crisis in Myanmar continues to get worse. All sixteen research villages reported poor economic conditions. As a result of the overlapping crises emanating from the pandemic and the coup d'état of 1 February 2021, stemming in particular from travel restrictions, people are struggling to find jobs, markets are distorted, food is increasingly unaffordable, and credit is becoming harder to access. Without access to loans, future harvests are at risk, which in turn would further increase food insecurity.

The social fabric of villages is ever more brittle. Social interaction between coup-supporters and coup-opponents has practically ceased. Villagers have been working together on health-related issues but the ubiquitous fear of military informers has suppressed their willingness to collaborate on all other village affairs.

Changes to the local administration that were introduced by the State Administration Council soon after the coup have undermined rather than reinforced government legitimacy. Newly appointed Village Tract Administrators are generally neither recognized nor trusted by villagers. They are not able to mobilize their communities, and often live in fear.

Security is a major concern in most of the villages and fear of arbitrary arrest by the military is pervasive. Such fear is stifling even such well-intentioned activities as working as volunteers in local quarantine centers as these may be perceived as working against the government. As a result, the mental health of villagers continues to suffer.

The coup d'état broke the trust people had had in their government. Combined with the resentment people feel against the heavy-handedness of the military's interaction with them, support for the National Unity Government has continued to grow.

## Overview

***“There are many challenges but the biggest one is that I want to live peacefully and be comfortable like before.”***

Farmer, male, Kachin State

Two months after the coup d'état of 1 February 2021 researchers from the Nyan Corridor undertook research into its socio-economic impacts in a small, diverse sample of villages across Myanmar. As the report<sup>2</sup> noted: “The research identified four different forms of impact and their proximate causes: 1) behavioral changes and mental stress out of fear and a feeling of uncertainty; 2) loss in production and income due to road blockages, factory closures and people’s participation in the resistance; 3) the fragmentation of the social fabric as a result of the polarization between those supporting and those opposing the coup; and 4) deepening distrust in government authority following the dismissal of elected village tract administrators.”

Four months on, Nyan Corridor researchers carried out the second socio-economic impact assessment, presented in this report. The research, which was undertaken in a similar sample of villages, found that most of the trends that started soon after the coup have continued, and intensified. However, there have also been significant deviations from some trends that emanate from the spread of the third wave of the coronavirus disease 2019 (covid-19), which started to take hold in May.

### **Health has become villagers’ biggest concern ...**

***“We could run away from the bullets, but we cannot do so from covid.”***

Funeral society volunteer, male, Kachin State

By the time of the military takeover, the second wave of covid had largely ebbed. The weeks and months following the coup were marked by numerous demonstrations large and small across the country, including in research villages. Few villagers kept following instructions to prevent covid. Compared to the first few months after the coup, most villagers have since taken a step back from politics as health has taken over as their highest priority. Most research villages have experienced cases of covid-19 and the majority of villagers is again wearing masks, staying at home as much as possible, washing hands, and taking other preventative measures.

What is remarkable is that villagers have adapted their behavior to the third covid wave out of their own volition and initiative; the government has been practically absent from any covid management. People in several villages have even developed their own covid management plans and set up their own quarantine centers as they had received no government guidance or support. For so doing, they needed to seek approval of the township authorities, a step few had imagined they would ever undertake considering the unpopularity of the State Administration Council (SAC).

While villagers have been acting responsibly, they are also suffering from an increasing lack of medicines and continued lack of health services for covid-related and other illnesses. Many hospitals remain closed due to staff having joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) whilst those that are still open, or have re-opened, generally experience shortages of doctors and nurses, equipment and drugs. Resources are so inadequate that doctors often have to send covid positive patients home with only fever medicine and vitamin C tablets for the journey. Many villagers, therefore, focus on staying healthy by, for instance, eating healthy foods and taking traditional medicines. Nevertheless, the general health situation during this monsoon season appears worse than in other years.

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<sup>2</sup> *Damage Irreversible: Coup d'état and Daily Life in Rural Myanmar*. Nyan Corridor, April 2021.

The absence of any meaningful policy response to the third covid wave has led numerous villagers to believe that such has been a purposeful decision by the SAC to weaken the resistance. Rather than undermining it, however, the resentment of people has only been deepening. A sense has developed that taking care of themselves now and putting political beliefs second is a priority so that people can keep resisting for the long-term.

**... but worries about livelihoods have not taken a back seat**

*“Livelihoods are most difficult. You cannot buy what you want at the market. There is also no money to buy things, not even baby food. Even children are eating sparingly.”*

Daily laborer, female, Magwe Region

The economic crisis that has befallen rural Myanmar over the course of the past 18 months is increasingly taking its toll. All 16 research villages reported poor economic conditions. All groups are struggling – farmers, laborers, fishers, small businesses – but small farmers and laborers are the most affected and vulnerable. Whereas the situation showed some tentative signs of a recovery after the second wave of covid, the coup and later the third wave have led to a reversal of this budding trend, and to deeper misery.

The woes of the rural economy remain manifold. Jobs are scarce everywhere. Production costs have been increasing, leading farmers to reduce the area under cultivation. Traders are no longer visiting villages to buy crops and sell goods because of travel restrictions related, initially, to the coup, and later on also to covid. Consumer prices have kept rising whilst local stocks of many items are running low. A new wave of returning migrants started after the coup, and many of them are still staying in their village without work or income. Those who have remained, or returned to, their places of work experience great difficulties transferring remittances due to the closure of banks. Worryingly, credit is drying up, the sign of an ominous economic prospect.

Villagers have been reducing expenses more and more, cutting back on items that they consider less essential, which includes not using mobile phones or the internet anymore. Villagers have been reducing the quality and increasingly also the quantity of food, many surviving on rice, *ngapi* and vegetables only. At the same time, supplementing meager incomes with doing odd jobs, like collecting firewood or making charcoal, has also become more difficult due to travel restrictions. Even pawning valuables and selling land are no longer reliable coping strategies as pawn brokers and prospective buyers are facing financial difficulties as well.

These developments have combined to exacerbate the food security situation. With very few exceptions across research sites, some or most villagers fear not having enough to eat. The most at-risk group are casual laborers who are more and more relying on the generosity of fellow villagers to not go hungry. At the time of research, there were localized but not yet widespread food shortages. However, compared to the first socio-economic impact assessment a couple of months after the coup, villagers’ worries have noticeably increased.

**The social fabric of villages is ever more brittle ...**

Six months after the coup villagers find themselves in an ever more complex web of mutating social relations. On the whole, social relations are strained and trust is shallow in all but one of the villages. The one village where both social relations and trust are strong is an outlier; it has only about 30 households, most of whom are related. Reactions to the coup still divide villages, with those opposing the coup outnumbering those who support it. Critically, the ubiquitous fear of military informers has

suppressed villagers' willingness to collaborate, and even communicate. In the research villages, the tensions, while on occasion tangible, have not, however, devolved into outright hostility or conflict – yet.

The third wave of covid-19 has had a perceptible impact on social interactions, in three directions. Firstly, fear of infection combined with restrictions on physical distancing have led many villagers to again withdraw from village life. Secondly, as during the first two waves of covid, infected villagers have felt ostracized, leading other positive patients to not report their symptoms and trying to treat the disease themselves. Thirdly, absent government guidance, people have agreed to work together to organize a covid response in their villages, bridging, at least temporarily, the political divide. Mutual help continues to be an important element in managing the multiple daily challenges although it has diminished in villages that are in increasingly dire straits.

### **... while formal village leadership has remained contested all along**

The decision of the SAC in February to appoint new Village Tract Administrators (VTA) continues to have a most profound impact on everyday village life. The administrative landscape at the village level is highly complex, however. Township General Administration Departments (GAD) have appointed new VTAs in seven of the research villages and confirmed the previously elected VTA in another five villages. Four villages do not yet have an approved leader: the incumbent has either not been informed by the GAD or stepped down without the GAD having replaced him so far.

Newly appointed VTAs have generally weak relations with the villagers, and trust between villagers has been eroded. In these cases, VTA relations with informal leaders such as religious leaders and village elders and respected persons are commonly also frayed. Individual new VTAs are trying to serve their village's interests but these efforts are generally not appreciated; too great is the distrust in anything and anyone linked to the SAC. Others do not attempt to take a leading role, a trait shared by several confirmed VTAs who, while trusted by villagers, do not feel comfortable in their role under the SAC. Even though clarity about local-level government representation has improved in most instances compared to the first socio-economic impact assessment, this leadership vacuum has meant that little is being achieved beyond the administrative minimum.

### **Villagers' perception of insecurity is unabated, and of government dismal**

*“If I am asked what the current difficulty is, I would like to choose ‘politics’. Everyone keeps saying it’s ‘health’ but I would choose ‘politics’. It’s because covid is a wave of a health problem. According to the nature of a wave, it will fall, if there is a rise. In the case of politics, the future will be lost, if the country has a bad government.”*

Volunteer, male, Tanintharyi Region

The aggressive stance of the military towards demonstrations has combined with the third wave of covid to lower the cases of active resistance in the villages considerably. This does not, however, mean that villagers feel safe, or are safe from persecution. To the contrary, the sense of insecurity is pervasive, with people in only three villages feeling safe. The concerns villagers expressed are similar when compared to earlier this year: the long shadow of military informers; the presence of the police or military in or near the village; arrests by the security forces for alleged opposition to the government; military checkpoints, where in addition goods are reportedly being confiscated not infrequently; and fear of being forcibly recruited as porters for the military.

Villagers' mental health continues to suffer, expressing itself, for instance, in depression, sleeplessness, and aggression. Fear for one's safety has been interfering with the covid response as well. Village

volunteers who are providing support to quarantine centers, infected patients at home, or the families of the deceased may find themselves accused, by this very act, of opposing the government. This perception may have its base in the fact that many volunteers had also supported the CDM. Regardless, however, all volunteers are at great personal risk these days. Inevitably, many have stopped providing support, or have to do so clandestinely, which only increases their risk.

By the same logic, by order of the township GAD, at least in some research villages support or covid prevention committees are not allowed to include members who had protested against the government. Needless to say, this both makes the committees unrepresentative and shuts out expertise that would be critical for their proper functioning.

People have distrusted the SAC from the moment of its creation. With distrust already running very deep a few months after the coup, the government's performance with regard to managing covid-19 has added extensive bewilderment. People are in disbelief how a government, the role of which is to protect them and help them to prosper, can show such disinterest in their wellbeing. This profound resentment against the SAC has inevitably translated into support for the National Unity Government (NUG) even though people recognize the limits of the NUG's remit.

Half a year after the military takeover villagers are caught in an ever denser web of deprivations both social and economic, anxieties about health both physiological and mental, and a lack of leadership both local and national. People in the research villages have shown extraordinary resilience in the face of this turmoil. Villagers asking more frequently for how long they will be able to withstand it is a frightening sign of possible things to come.

# Introduction

## Context

Just several weeks after the coup d'état on 1 February 2021, which brought the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, to power, a research team from the Nyan Corridor undertook the first round of a socio-economic impact assessment (SEIA-1). The aim of that research was to understand how people in rural areas reacted to the coup, how it affected their daily lives, and what their concerns were about the future. This report captures the findings of the second round of SEIA, undertaken about six months after the military takeover.

## Methodology

The research team followed a qualitative approach and used an interview guide that was updated from the first round in order to capture recent developments. The guide featured open-ended questions along four areas: 1) health and covid-19; 2) livelihoods and coping; 3) social relations; and 4) leadership and security.

The research covered a broad geographic spectrum and included Ayeyarwady, Magwe, Sagaing and Tanintharyi Regions and Chin, Kachin, Kayin and Rakhine States. The research thus covered all three major agroecological zones: the dry zone, the hills, and the coastal areas. Two villages in one township were selected within each of these eight States and Regions. Thirteen of the research villages were the same where round 1 had been undertaken.

The team carried out a total of 81 phone interviews in 16 villages in late July and early August 2021. Five villagers were interviewed in each village (and six in one village). Thirty-nine of the respondents were female and 42 were male. The team interviewed ten village leaders and four women leaders as well as livelihood representatives, teachers, and youth, among others. The research team is grateful for the spirit of collaboration and trust it has received from all respondents.

As with SEIA-1, the research carries the obvious limitation of a small sample size. Consequently, the findings present a picture of the situation in the research villages but cannot be considered representative of the experiences of rural residents as a whole; such was not its purpose. Furthermore, the research captured a moment in time in an environment that continues to change rapidly.

That said, most of the impacts that SEIA-2 research has identified are not specific to one particular village even if their individual expressions often differed. Taken together, these expressions present a panoply of how villagers experience reality about six months after the military coup. It is not unlikely that many of these impacts have occurred in different manifestations across Myanmar's rural space.

## Village profile

Economically, the research villages are typical of rural Myanmar. Agriculture is the predominant livelihood in most villages, with some villages producing two rice crops a year. A wide array of other agricultural products is grown across the research sites, for the market or own consumption, from sesame and corn in Kachin, *petai* beans and legumes in Chin, and peanuts and cotton in Magwe. Fishing is prevalent in coastal areas, and livestock is reared in all agroecological zones. Casual laborers live in all villages. Families in many villages have one or more members who migrated to other parts of Myanmar or abroad, and thus depend on remittances, sometimes heavily so. Local shops, such as for groceries or motorcycle repairs, can also be found in all villages.

Regarding ethnicity, three villages are Bamar only, seven villages are mixed Bamar and non-Bamar, and six villages are non-Bamar (either mixed or monoethnic). The main ethnic groups in the villages are Bamar, Chin, Zomi, Kachin, Rakhine, Karen, Mon and Dawei. Half of the villages are Buddhist only and Buddhists and non-Buddhists (mostly Christians) are living in another five villages. There are no Buddhists in the remaining three villages. Five of the villages are remote, requiring a travel time of 45 minutes or more to reach the nearest marketplace.

### **Report structure**

The structure of the report is as follows. The next section presents the situation regarding health and covid-19. Then, the report discusses the livelihood challenges that people are facing and the coping mechanisms that they are employing. The evolving impact of the coup on intra-village social relations are analyzed in the subsequent section, followed by insights into village leadership and security. Finally, the report sheds some light on how villagers perceive the present government, and what they expect of it.



## Health and Covid-19

### Villagers' general health

At the time of research, the general health situation in the villages was, on the whole, not good. All respondents noted that many households in the villages had at least one sick person due to what they believed was the seasonal flu. In a village in Ayeyarwady, villagers reported that there was more rainfall during this monsoon season, which is why more people got ill. While the flu and covid symptoms are similar, there has been hardly any testing of villagers. It is, therefore, not known how many of these “flu” cases were actually covid.

Most often, villagers have not been going to a clinic or hospital at the time of research for a range of reasons that include the closure of hospitals because of CDM, a shortage of medical staff, fear of being infected with the virus at a health facility, high treatment costs for covid or other diseases, and military checkpoints. As a result, many were taking a range of traditional and western remedies to cure themselves. For instance, when they feel sick like having a running nose and a cough, people stay at home, take basic medicine, and eat healthy foods. They also take remedies they found on Facebook, such as drinking boiled betel leaf juice, eating onions and garlic, gargling with brine, and inhaling vapor. Others bought medicine in pharmacies where available. Villagers generally stay at home until they feel better.

To make matters worse, respondents in many villages reported that medical supplies were running low. Many people stocked up on medicine to the extent that they could afford it and medicines were available. However, they were concerned that villagers with chronic diseases like diabetes would soon run out of medication where the pharmacies in town were closed, as experienced in a village in Kayin, or where road closures led to a rise in drug prices as well as drug shortages, as mentioned in a village in Sagaing.

### The third wave of covid-19

***“We are afraid of being infected by the covid virus. We hear that many deaths have been reported in Yayway cemetery in Yangon. It is happening in Magwe as well.”***

Village leader, male, Magwe Region

Few of the research villages had experienced covid cases during the first and second waves. By contrast, the virus has spread to the majority of villages during its third wave. In several villages, people were not prepared for the third wave; they had not taken the virus seriously before the caseload was rising. Respondents in other villages observed that villagers had been listening to the news and already started to take precautionary actions before the virus arrived. Either way, the severity of the outbreak soon

became clear across the villages and with every new case, villagers grew more frightened, and had many harrowing stories to tell (Box 1)

#### **Box 1: Covid spreads by stealth**

In a village in Kachin, the Myitkyina General Hospital instructed covid patients who did not suffer from severe conditions to stay at home. On 29 July, a woman who suffered from low oxygen levels went to the hospital, only to be told to go home and return the following day as there was not enough oxygen available. She died on her way back to the village.

At first, the villagers were not sure whether or not the woman had died of covid. Nevertheless, when feeling sick, they started to go to the local grocery stores to ask for help to prepare medication, drink boiled betel leaf juice, and take folk medicines.

A few days later, her husband also experienced low oxygen levels and was admitted to Myitkyina General Hospital. But, on 5 August, he passed away at the hospital. It was then that the villagers learned that the woman had died of covid-19. The outbreak in the village started in the middle of July. At the time of research, there were 26 positive patients of whom three had died of the disease.

Respondents regularly compared the third wave to the first two waves that struck Myanmar during 2020. For instance, compared to 2020, there was no awareness raising in anticipation of the third wave. Moreover, security measures resulting from the coup got in the way of covid preparedness and prevention. Respondents in a village in Ayeyarwady, for instance, reported that the VTA instructed villagers to remove their satellite dishes, which they did out of fear. As a result, however, they were no longer able to access the news channels they had been using, and lacked information about covid.

At the same time, respondents in several villages indicated that people received information about covid prevention and treatment from social media, especially Facebook. A volunteer worker in a village in Kachin, for example, learned about the rapid spread of the virus on Facebook and prepared oxygen cylinders for emergency use by villagers in need.

#### **Covid prevention and preparation**

During the third wave of covid, in the majority of research villages most people have been following prevention measures, especially wearing a mask when going out, washing hands frequently, and staying at home as much as possible. The most notable difference to the first two waves has not been that more people adhered to the rules. Rather, it has been the absence of any meaningful instructions by the government.

Consequently, most prevention and preparedness measures observed in the research sites have been the result of the initiative of villagers and their leaders, and of villagers' own conscientiousness. As a female shop owner in a village in Ayeyarwady fretted: *"The villagers are worried. For that, they abide by the rules of not going out of the house without a good reason. This isn't like the first and second waves. Now, we have to take care of ourselves. It's more like protecting ourselves rather than obeying orders."*

#### ***Village-level collaboration***

Respondents stated that local covid response committees were set up in several villages. (It is worth noting that none of these villages had a newly appointed VTA.) In villages in Magwe and Chin, the committee comprises between 9 and 20 members and coordinates the activities of formal village

leaders, village elders and respected persons, religious associations and youth groups. Tasks that committee members in Chin undertake include fundraising, buying medical products, setting up gates at the village entrance and regulating access to the village, including for traders and visitors from other villages, testing villagers suspected of having contracted the virus, providing vitamins to those who have tested negative, isolating covid positive patients at the station hospital, and referring severe cases and patients requiring oxygen to the general hospital.

Village leaders and villagers collaborated in villages in Kayin and Magwe to develop and implement their own covid prevention plans. These were based on previous practices and included numerous provisions: villagers have set up a covid-19 checkpoint at the entrance to the village; anyone leaving or entering the village must wear a mask – if the person does not have a mask, the guard team at the checkpoint will provide one; every visitor is recorded; traders are allowed to buy and sell only at the checkpoint – they are prohibited from entering the village; and no overnight guests are allowed. Furthermore, migrant workers need to show their covid test result and if they do not have any, they are required to stay in the isolation tent outside of the village for 14 days. In one village in Magwe, the village administrator was planning to fine villagers for not wearing masks when going outside.

In a village in Kachin, one of the Gurkha communities raised funds and rented an empty house in the village to provide adequate care in case someone from their community was infected by covid-19. They prepared some medicines, PPE clothing, and other equipment. There was no Gurkha patient at the time of interviews, however, and no one has stayed in the house yet.

### ***The importance of leadership***

Many village leaders have taken the initiative to protect their villages from the pandemic. In a village in Ayeyarwady, for instance, the VTA issued rules to avoid the spread of the virus, including for the quarantine of travelers. In another village in Ayeyarwady, the VTA instructed the village crier to walk around the whole village and announce covid-related information. In a village in Magwe, prevention guidelines are announced by loudspeaker twice daily.

In several villages, such as in Magwe and Ayeyarwady, villagers decided to set up their own quarantine center as they had received no guidance from the township GAD. Village leaders sought permission from the respective government offices to this end, for instance, from the Department of Education to use the village school since it was closed. In a village in Tanintharyi, village elders requested permission from the police to set up a quarantine center at the village school, which was granted but only on the second attempt.

Village leaders are also supporting villagers in more personal ways. In a village in Kachin, respondents indicated that leaders were helping needy families to buy food and other essentials. And a new VTA in a village in Rakhine, who is not well liked by villagers in general, said: *“As a village tract administrator, I receive 70,000 kyats a month as salary and 50,000 kyats for small items such as stationery, but I have nothing left for this month because I donated everything for the oxygen plant.”*

The lack of instructions from the government has spawned not only initiative, however, but also paralysis. Respondents in a village in Kachin stated that village leaders and village volunteers did not dare work on covid prevention without formal permission.

***“We are villagers, we are scared people. So, we obey the rules. But we can't obey some rules as we have to work to make ends meet. Some have to go to the stream to work.”***

Farmer, female, Ayeyarwady Region

People are deeply worried. This worry has led to behavioral changes to minimize their risk of exposure to the virus. Among others, villagers do not travel to town or other villages anymore unless it is for a really important matter. They stay at home when they catch a cold or feel ill so as not to pass on to others whatever it is they have.

Several respondents observed that villagers started to become more cautious about their health in order to prevent, or manage, a possible covid infection. Many started to eat healthier foods, sleep regular hours, and take supplements, both traditional and western, to enhance their immune system. Others have purchased covid prevention products like masks and hand gels. In a village in Magwe, respondents reported that villagers keep *dregea volubilis* (*gway dock* in Myanmar language) and sweet basil in their homes, ready for inhaling when needed as oxygen is difficult to get in the village.

Across the research villages respondents also pointed out that not everyone can follow covid prevention measures: livelihood pressures are simply too great. Casual laborers and small farmers and fishers are particularly vulnerable groups. As a farmer in a village in Chin noted: *“Where can we get food if we are staying at home and cannot work? We are told to wash our hands often. When can we farmers work if we have to wash our hands all the time?”*

Price increases for covid prevention items are another reason why many villagers are unable to follow all guidelines properly. A women leader in a village in Tanintharyi lamented: *“A box of masks was sold at a price of 3,000 kyats. The price has now gone up to 6,000 or 7,000 kyats.”* Many poor villagers cannot afford such expenses regularly and find themselves using disposable masks much more often than once. Similarly, the price of oxygen has exploded, making it unaffordable for most. A respondent in a village in Magwe reported that the cost of the smallest oxygen tank rose from 100,000 kyats to 500,000 kyats due to rapidly increasing demand.

In several instances, covid prevention measures were also discarded in favor of traditional burying practices. In a village in Sagaing, for instance, a family paid five villagers 40,000 kyats each to bury a family member outside the village, without permission, and without any protective clothing. People are upset with the family as the five men may have spread the virus in the village.

### **Health services are found wanting**

At the time of research, health services were difficult to access in most villages for all kinds of illnesses, but especially for covid treatment and often regardless of the severity of the disease. Respondents observed that most of the village clinics were still closed as a result of the CDM. The few district and township hospitals that had remained opened, or have re-opened, were understaffed and the services they were offering were limited. There were also reports of private clinics being closed because staff were afraid of contracting the virus, such as in a village in Sagaing. Pharmacies in town were reported closed in Kayin.

In a village in Magwe, respondents expressed concern about the need to register pregnancies with the local hospital, which is commonly required in Myanmar lest hospital staff may refuse to accept the patient. This requirement can have harrowing consequences (Box 2).

### **Box 2: A desperate journey to delivery**

About a month ago, while there was no covid positive case in the village, the virus was spreading in the towns and cities and there was a lot of fighting in Magwe Region. At around 7 pm one night, Ma Htar Khin (not her real name), the wife of a disabled man who is in her thirties needed to be hospitalized because it was not easy for her to deliver their second child. In such cases, villagers usually rely on the station hospital in a nearby village for medical treatment, and so Ma Htar Khin was sent to the station hospital with a three-wheeler. However, she had not registered her pregnancy with the station hospital.

Upon their arrival at the station hospital, therefore, the medical staff turned her away and sent her to the hospital in Magwe. To reach the hospital, Ma Htar Khin, the village leaders and other villagers who accompanied her would have had to cross Magwe bridge. However, the bridge can be crossed only from 6 am to 6 pm, and it was already getting late in the evening. As they felt it was not safe to attempt a crossing during this time of conflict, Ma Htar Khin was taken to Minbu hospital instead even though it is farther away.

Upon their arrival at Minbu hospital, the staff did not accept Ma Htar Khin, explaining that there were not enough doctors available; most of the doctors and medical staff from the hospital were participating in the CDM. There were also many soldiers guarding the hospital, so they did not dare press their case for admission, inquired about a private hospital in Minbu, and left. However, they could not afford the high cost of childbirth at the private facility, and had to return to the station hospital in her village tract.

As they worried that the medical staff from the station hospital was going to refuse again to help her to give birth, the village administrator begged them to allow her to deliver the baby there. But the medical staff were unable to help with the delivery because they did not have enough equipment in the surgical room. So, the hospital staff issued a medical permit and arranged an ambulance to drive them to the hospital in Magwe. Ma Htar Khin gave birth on the way to the hospital. As it was not possible to continue to Magwe, they had to drive back to the station hospital. The further delivery process was finally done at the station hospital early the following morning and both mother and the baby were doing well.

Suspected patients were tested for covid in several villages or in nearby towns but there was no systematic approach to testing across the research sites. Furthermore, during the first two waves of the pandemic, the government organized quarantine centers across the country which were often managed by or in cooperation with civil society organization. During the current third wave there has been no such policy.

The services positive patients received were commonly insufficient. For example, a general hospital in Magwe has been conducting tests at its outpatient department. Because of resource limitations, it could only accommodate patients with severe conditions who were in need of oxygen. Hospitals are so under-resourced that doctors are forced to send patients who tested positive home for self-quarantine with little support (Box 3).

### **Box 3: Paracetamol, Cevit, and a boiled egg**

A female casual laborer in a village in Magwe observed: *“Even when people are admitted to the hospital, the staff provides only paracetamol and Cevit. Apart from that, it provides nothing. If you have money, you visit private doctors.”*

Similarly, a male teacher in a village in Sagaing stated: *“Even though we go to the government hospital, they do not do anything special. The hospital gives us paracetamol, Cevit, and a boiled egg only. There have been a lot of deaths in Sagaing hospital but we cannot rely on them”.*

A particular challenge for people was access to oxygen, which most villages lacked. Villagers would have to travel to town in order to buy or refill oxygen cylinders, which is both expensive and complicated for remote areas, especially during the current monsoon season. An exception was a village in Ayeyarwady where people had bought two cylinders of oxygen and kept them at the monastery. Anyone can rent the cylinders for free but needs to refill them after use, which, however, only delays the challenge of locating oxygen.

In several villages, as for example reported in Magwe, Sagaing and Tanintharyi, nurses and doctors living in the village, including those on CDM, have provided medical treatment at either their home or the patient’s home. These village-based healthcare staff are putting their lives on the line in at least two ways. Firstly, they may be arrested by the government, which is a main reason why many local charitable organizations have reduced or stopped their work on covid prevention and treatment.

Secondly, they are at a greater risk of contracting the virus. As a nurse in a village in Kayin mentioned: *“As covid cases are increasing at the moment, we are not sure whether our patients have covid or only the flu. We have only masks to protect ourselves. We don't even have level-2 PPE. But, if we don't attend to our patients, they have no place to go for medical treatment. So, if they come to us for medical treatment, we have to cure them.”*<sup>3</sup> In Tanintharyi, respondents indicated that healthcare workers would undertake home visits only if a patient could show a negative covid test.

The lack of government attention to covid management has led many villagers to take matters into their own hands. Both villagers and medical staff have demonstrated pragmatism. A respondent in Chin, for instance, recounted that village elders and respected persons requested both CDM and non-CDM medical staff to reopen the township hospital when the third wave of covid struck the area. CDM staff accepted the request and provided treatment for covid patients. However, they have not officially returned as non-CDM staff.

In another instance, a district hospital in Tanintharyi was closed as the doctor had joined the CDM. Policemen and soldiers broke into the hospital and destroyed whatever they could find. Later on, the doctor reopened the hospital as he feared he would be arrested by the SAC. The villagers, however, were dissatisfied with his decision and did not allow him to return to the hospital. Nevertheless, when the infection rate was getting worse by the day, the villagers agreed to call him back to the hospital and also asked him to help at the quarantine center.

### **Fear and anxiety are pervasive ...**

*“I don't even know how to self-motivate myself so it is impossible to motivate others.”*  
Volunteer, male, Kachin State

Across the research sites villagers’ worries have deepened since SEIA-1. Three interrelated causes can be identified. Firstly, villagers’ fear of being infected with covid has been increasing in line with rising mortality rates in their area and nation-wide. Many are deeply worried and cannot sleep at night when a family member catches the seasonal flu as it might turn out to be covid. The elderly and those with underlying health conditions are particularly concerned about their risk of getting infected. As a leader

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<sup>3</sup> Level 2 personal protective equipment (PPE) includes a surgical mask (level 1) as well as eye protection, a disposable apron and gloves. Level 3 protection includes a higher-quality mask and eye protection, gloves, and a long-sleeve fluid repellent gown.

in a village in Magwe explained: *“The elderly are so worried that they cannot sleep at night. When family members go out, they keep reminding them of the do’s and don’ts to prevent covid.”* Moreover, schools are closed and children are not allowed to play outside and so parents worry about disruptions to their children’s education and mental and physical development.

Secondly, villagers in all livelihood groups are upset and suffer from depression because of the difficulties they face in making money to survive. Farmers are staying at home and worry that they will not be able to finish planting the seeds on time. Casual laborers can barely find jobs either in the village or beyond. Many of them had taken out a loan from farmers and other lenders prior to the current farming season with the agreement to repay it when they are hired to work the fields. However, demand for labor has dropped sharply. Even when they are still able to buy on credit in village shops, some items are out of stock whilst the price of others has risen. Money lenders have no peace of mind and are greatly worried about repayments as long as the economic crisis persists. Many villagers have started to wonder for how much longer they can resist this condition without government help.

Thirdly, the evolving effects of the military takeover continue to frighten villagers. These include in particular fear of arbitrary arrest and, especially in villages affected by conflict in Kachin, Kayin and Rakhine, trauma from active fighting nearby. (These effects are discussed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter.)

The collective impact of this triple crisis on people’s mental health manifests in several ways. For example, people become more irritable on the one hand, or withdrawn on the other hand. A respondent in a village in Kachin, for instance, recounted an occasion where villagers who had been known for their calm and measured demeanor entered into a heated argument with and became violent toward each other. More often, as already observed during earlier waves of covid, people fear stigmatization and avoidance if they contract the virus. Respondents in several villages affirmed that villagers who lost their sense of smell did not report it, or that villagers did not disclose that they were treating an infected family member at home.

### **... while the government has been absent from covid management**

***“The military junta does not do anything. Instead of building a hospital, they built a cemetery. The government does not provide enough medicine, nor has enough oxygen. I think the government only intends to kill people.”***

Housewife, Kayin State

Due to ever increasing numbers of covid cases, medical supply shortages, the inability to provide services in hospitals, and the failure to make available much-needed oxygen, almost all respondents expressed their view that the government has been completely absent from any covid prevention or preparedness activities.

What is more, the military is seen as actively interfering in the covid efforts of volunteers and *parahita* groups across the country. Since it arrested many such community social workers fewer *parahita* and other community-based groups are able and willing to operate, for instance, transferring patients to hospitals, carrying oxygen, and helping with funeral arrangements.

The political crisis has impacted the way people are living with covid in other ways as well. For instance, the first covid patient in a village in Tanintharyi died at 9.00 pm. Villagers then contacted a volunteer group in town which advised that the deceased should be buried immediately. However, this was not possible because of the curfew imposed by the military. The family could bury its loved one only the following day.

Many respondents pointed to the lack of awareness raising by the government prior to the onset of the third wave – in fact, since the military’s takeover of power in February –, and what they consider as purposeful misinformation since the virus spread. Lack of health knowledge and awareness resulted in many people not wearing masks or following proper procedures early on when caring for a sick patient at home, and getting infected

Respondents took particular aim at the reporting on government radio and TV channels regarding, for instance, the preparation of quarantine centers and the provision of medical supplies and oxygen. They felt that such reporting bore no relation to the actual situation on the ground, and thus misled citizens. The one exception was a retired female school teacher in a village in Ayeyarwady who felt that what the government was doing was sufficient: *“We can only listen to the news on the radio. I only listen to the Myawaddy channel. There are others who listen to radio channels like the BBC. The news from these channels makes me sad, so I only listen to Myawaddy.”*

There is a widespread perception that the government has not assumed any responsibility for the third wave of covid-19. Contrary to the response during the first two waves, covid tests are no longer free; in a village in Tanintharyi the cost varied from 10,000 to 20,000 kyats, a significant amount for a poor villager. The distrust in the government has also come to encompass the staff in public health facilities who did not join the CDM. As a male motorcycle workshop owner in a village in Kachin expressed it in drastic fashion: *“If I get infected by covid, I will not go to the hospital and will isolate with my family instead. I have no trust in them. If I am to die because of not going to the hospital, I will choose to die.”*

### **The dilemma with vaccinations**

People’s distrust in government has been extended to their distrust in the government’s vaccination program. The SAC government has eventually continued the covid vaccination plan that the previous government had initiated. Since Thingyan, more vaccines have become available and vaccinations have been rolled out in townships in July, starting with people aged 65 and older. The age limit was subsequently reduced.

In a number of villages, USDP supporters and government staff were vaccinated. However, few if any of the other villagers came forward to receive the vaccine. But, vaccine hesitancy is not only rooted in distrust in government. Most respondents indicated one or more of the following other reasons: people believe that they can be killed by an injection, that the vaccine is not effective, and that the cold chain procedures are not followed properly. Moreover, people pointed out that that vaccines are made in China (and by implication, are not trustworthy), that travel to town to get vaccinated is too expensive, and that relatives from abroad are discouraging family members from getting vaccinated. Social media have played their role in sharing information, and also spreading rumors, about vaccines.

Nevertheless, the main objection to people getting vaccinated was resistance to the government. Many respondents noted that villagers would be willing to get vaccinated if a democratic government or a trusted international organization (such as the ICRC or WHO) administered vaccinations. A VTA in Rakhine summed up this dilemma: *“The nurse explained to villagers that the covid vaccine was bought by the NLD government and that it was safe to get the shots. But the villagers still did not want to get vaccinated because they do not trust the new government. Actually, there are around 700 people in my village who are eligible for vaccination. Only about ten went and got vaccinated.”*



## Livelihoods and Coping

*“The economy isn’t great. We are facing difficulties. But we don’t see them that big because all of our minds are in politics and we feel like we will get food on the table with whatever we have.”*

Day laborer, female, Tanintharyi Region

### An economy fallen

The rural economy keeps getting worse as a result of the intensifying consequences of the military coup and covid-19. Without exception, all respondents in the research villages reported that the economic situation in their village was poor. All livelihood groups have been affected by the prolonged crisis in similar ways. That said, casual laborers were considered amongst the most exposed to hardship in all 16 villages, and small farmers and fishers in 15 villages. Respondents deemed returned migrants, small shop owners and government staff on CDM amongst the most vulnerable in five or fewer villages.

Villagers who had been better off before the first wave of the pandemic hit Myanmar in March 2020, especially larger farmers, have generally fared less poorly over the past one and a half years. In many ways, larger farmers have been the backbone of the rural economy, providing reasonably stable job opportunities to landless laborers. SEIA-2, however, demonstrates that they are no longer able to perform this important function.

### *Farmers*

Although the overall situation of farmers is similar across the country as both covid and the military coup are nation-wide events, specific experiences also depend on location. Farmers in various villages had already been facing economic hardships last year due to insect infestations, droughts and heavy monsoon rains, phenomena linked to climate change. During the first and second covid waves, they could largely resist these difficulties. However, at the same time as such natural events continued during 2021, the intensifying political crisis after Thingyan dragged the village economy down further. With their economic defenses already weakened, the third wave of covid has struck hard.

Across the research sites, respondents pointed to an increase in input prices, especially for fertilizer and pesticides, that threatened the already thin profit margin of many farmers. A respondent in a village in Ayeyarwady, for instance, observed that input costs more than doubled from 50,000 *kyats* to over 100,000 *kyats*. Furthermore, heavy rains forced farmers to replant their paddy seeds, increasing production costs even further.

Farmers in several dry zone villages in Magwe and Sagaing have adapted to the deepening financial difficulties by reducing the area under rice cultivation, switching to vegetable cultivation for own consumption, or switching to crops that are less expensive to grow, for instance beans.

Farmers in a village in Kachin find themselves in a very particular quandary. Back in 1997, the Tatmadaw confiscated about 300 acres of farmland from over 200 households in order to expand the air force base. Villagers moved to a nearby location. The military fenced off the area but granted permission to farmers to grow crops during specific times. Already in the past, the military would close the gate intermittently for about 10 days before again allowing farmers access. After the coup, due to security restrictions and later covid measures farmers lost complete access to the fields and could not undertake any farming activity there.

The least impact on farming was reported in villages in Kayin where farmers typically grow rice for home consumption with less chemical fertilizer, which also reduces their need for loans. Farmers in the villages in Chin were able to plant the seeds without interruption but suffered from crop damages and declining yields prior to harvesting. As the number of local infections grew and covid prevention measures were introduced anew, fewer workers were able to weed the fields and protect the crop from wild animals.

### ***Laborers***

Casual laborers have been hit the hardest by the crisis. Job opportunities have dried up for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, farmers have no longer been able to offer reliable jobs, if they were able to hire any laborers at all. Furthermore, many shops and businesses had to close. In most villages the scarcity of jobs had a profound impact on the wage rate. The daily wage dropped by between one-quarter to one-half in the research villages (with the exception of one village in Kachin, where it remained about the same) and generally reached no more than 5,000 *kyats* for men, and 4,000 *kyats* for women.

As has often been the case, laborers can get advance wages from farmers against a commitment to work the fields when required. Presently, laborers are facing a very high discount rate of as much as 50 percent, as noted in a village in Ayeyarwady. That is, for every 1,000 *kyats* they receive, they will have to pay back 2,000 *kyats*. Some farmers in a village in Magwe even switched to paying laborers in kind, for instance rice and cooking oil, for want of cash.

A female day laborer in Magwe explained the interdependence between farmers and laborers: *“As it was the season for green peas, we collected as many peas as we could to send them to the market, but the brokers in town said that they would not take them. They said the roads were closed and they had no money. So, the farmers keep the green peas at home. We daily workers didn’t earn any money as we will be paid only once the peas are sold.”*

The dire situation was compounded further by covid-19 as laborers who fell ill could not even take advantage of any job opportunity that might exist, as was reported in a village in Chin.

The lack of employment is not a unique experience of casual laborers, however. As a respondent in a village in Tanintharyi indicated, skilled laborers like masons and carpenters have been facing a similar predicament for a variety of reasons. Construction sites had to be closed because of covid, raw materials were in short supply or no longer available, or people no longer invested in building new homes as uncertainty reigns.

### ***Fishers***

Fishing has been affected strongly by covid and political instability as well. Since the second wave of covid, fish and fish products could not be exported to international and domestic markets such as Yangon. Therefore, the catch is being sold locally, at prices more favorable to buyers, like in Rakhine. In addition, the number of days people could fish at sea has been limited and small-scale fishers have thus not been able to catch as much fish as before. As a VTA in a village in Rakhine explained: *“People are in debt; they cannot pay the loans back. The laborers are having a difficult time. Due to bad weather, the boats cannot go to sea. So, they have no income.”*

A respondent in a village in Tanintharyi mentioned that a rumor spread among fishers. It said that the SAC arrested some fishers at sea and demanded money for their release. Because of this rumor, many laborers refused to work on boats, which in turn left big boat owners without a crew. In the same village, the authorities closed the thriving fish market and those fishers who did go to sea to fish were not able to sell their catch, and cover the cost of their trip.

### ***Small businesses***

After the second wave of covid businesses were slowly improving but with the coup and the third wave, the situation has gone from bad to worse. Many local businesses have already shut down or are close to shutting down due to travel restrictions, lockdowns, rising fuel prices, military checkpoints, and checkpoints set up by villagers to protect their villages from the spread of covid: from restaurants, construction sites, and motorcycle taxis to beauty salons, motorbike workshops, clothes shops, and local traders.

For instance, people in a village in Sagaing used to produce the local milk jam and exported it across the country. They had to reduce production as they can no longer sell it. Similarly, in a village in Rakhine, most of the households used to produce *mohinga phat* (local noodles) for sale in nearby towns and villages. They, too, had to shut down their business as orders have dried up and transport has become too cumbersome. And for families in a village in Kachin, raising livestock has become uneconomical. Pig breeders were keeping their animals in the hope of a good price but realized that feeding the pigs has become too expensive. As a result, they started to sell them at a loss whenever they can find a buyer.

In some areas, shops were ordered to close due to the high rate of infection. Consequently, like in a village in Sagaing, vendors are out selling goods every two days to help villagers to cover at least their essential needs. Village shops that are still operating are often low on supplies. The only lines of businesses doing comparably well are food stores and pharmacies.

### **Market prices**

Respondents throughout the research villages reported a sharp increase in the price of inputs and consumer goods, continuing a trend that already started with the outbreak of the pandemic and worsened with the coup d'état. Price increases are less a function of increasing demand. On the contrary, prices are rising despite plummeting purchasing power. The multiple crises have led to severe disruptions in transporting goods to and from markets. With train transportation shut down after the coup and no regular truck services available, prices were rising almost by the day.

This contrasts starkly with the prices of goods the rural economy produces. Because of the same travel restrictions, traders are no longer visiting villages to buy the crop or other products. Moreover, traders have been finding themselves in financial difficulties and are increasingly unable to fulfill their vital role. This has led to a significant decline in the prices of local products.

The coup and covid have combined to disrupt local market prices to an extent that endangers people's resilience. Villagers are squeezed on both sides with little hope that either of the price dynamics will improve soon. Box 4 presents some of the findings.

#### **Box 4: Squeezed by price scissors**

*"Commodity prices have risen a lot. The price of a pack of sweet powder was 700 kyats and now it is 1,500 kyats. The price of an egg has risen from 120 kyats to 200 kyats. Medicines are expensive. A packet of medicine that cost 200 kyats is now 500 kyats."* Women leader, Magwe Region

*"In the past, a packet of paracetamol cost 200 kyats, but now it is 3,000 kyats. Previously, cooking oil cost 3,000 kyats per viss and now it goes up to 4,500 kyats."* Farmer, female, Chin State

*"The price of dried swine feed used to be 30,000 kyats per bag, but now it is 40,000 kyats and it has to be ordered in advance as it is not available at the available time."* 100 household leader, male, Kachin State

*"Last year, the price for one djenkol bean was 10 kyats and for a bunch of rambutan it was 500 kyats. But now it is 5-6 kyats for one djenkol bean and 200-300 kyats for a bunch of rambutan."* Volunteer, male, Kachin State.

*"We went to the forest to collect bamboo shoots and got mosquito bites and scratches from thorns. We need to boil the shoots carefully before we can sell them. We now get only 300 kyats for a viss of bamboo shoots. It not worth selling anymore."* Housewife, Ayeyarwady Region

*"Previously, the price of a chicken was 8,000 kyats per viss; now they sell it for only 5,000 kyats."* Farmer, Ayeyarwady Region

#### **Migrants and remittances**

There are essentially three forms of migration in Myanmar: commuting daily to a nearby town, seasonally or permanently migrating to other parts of Myanmar, and seasonally or permanently migrating to another country. In most of the research villages, people who had migrated for work either within Myanmar or abroad, such as to China and Thailand, were the main driving force of the village and family economy prior to the onset of the pandemic in the region. Starting with the first wave of covid in March 2020, many of them were forced to return home, which affected their families severely as, firstly, migrants were no longer sending remittances, and, secondly, they encountered great difficulties finding a job locally.

The post-coup political instability and the third wave of covid, with their tighter restrictions on both travel and physical distancing, have further exacerbated the livelihoods of migrant households and those of the villages whence they originate. As a result of the renewed closure of restaurants, shops, factories and construction sites in towns and cities, many migrant workers have again returned to their villages in early 2021.

Across the research villages, many of the returned migrants are still staying there and are forced to compete in the severely suppressed local labor market. They have to take odd jobs to make ends meet, especially in farming but also on construction sites, carrying bricks, painting, or mixing cement.

In some townships, the authorities announced the limitations on the time people were allowed to travel. This meant that daily commuters were only able to work half-days, and thus for half the wages. As a women leader in Magwe lamented: *“People who went to town for work could earn 7,000-8,000 kyats per day. Now that the travel time is limited, they can only work in the mornings, which is not convenient.”* Similarly, laborers are not able to find work in neighboring villages or tracts when there are positive covid cases in the village where they live.

Some migrants who remained at their place of work were able to hold on their regular job whilst many others did not. Some have been unemployed for half a year by the time of research. As a female day laborer in Magwe noted: *“People who went from our village to Myeik to work on fishing boats are also not working yet. It has been two months now and they still have had no job. They can't send any money back.”*

A respondent in a village in Ayeyarwady observed that some employers were still paying for the food of workers who were staying in the cities despite their work being on hold. Either way, however, very few migrants are able to send part of their salary or savings back home. In a village in Kachin, respondents stated that before covid-19, migrants who went abroad could send back 100,000 to 300,000 *kyats* to their families every month. Since they lost their regular employment due to covid, they have been sending only 50,000 to 100,000 *kyats* every two to three months. The considerable drop in remittances has affected families with elderly members and casual laborers the most.

The ongoing bank closures have made money transfers by those migrants who still earn a salary uneconomical and thus unattractive. Various respondents indicated that Wave Money was the only way available to transfer funds. However, the agents' charges were very high – reportedly 10 percent in a village in Tanintharyi and 12 percent in a village in Ayeyarwady. Most migrants were not willing to pay such high fees except for emergency situations. What is more, several shops have limited the amount of money a recipient can withdraw – 3 lakhs in the village in Ayeyarwady – because they themselves are suffering from a shortage of cash.

## **Debt**

In many ways, debt has been the engine of Myanmar's village economy. The debt—harvest—repayment cycle has sustained agricultural production for generations. Informal lenders, often larger, better-off farmers, would commonly charge 2-5 percent per month with collateral, and 10-20 percent without, rates that are still valid today. The role of debt has become even more prominent with the emerging availability of more affordable terms. The introduction of microfinance institutions, that started with the opening of Myanmar's economy in the early 2010s, has made borrowing cheaper, with rates as low as less than 1 percent per month. All the while, the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB) has been lending at low rates (currently 5 percent per year) but only to farmers who are cultivating specific crops, first and foremost rice.

A common feature of village lending is that borrowers need to repay an outstanding loan before being able to receive a new one. The informal credit market has suffered various crises emanating from borrowers' inability to repay, such as following Cyclone Nargis that hit the Ayeyarwady Delta in May 2008. Past crises were more localized and could thus be overcome more easily. Today, the engine of rural growth in Myanmar is sputtering noisily.

### ***The broken cycle***

The debt—harvest—repayment cycle is broken in all research villages. Due to a variety of reasons – some environmental, others covid-related, yet others political – numerous farmers, fishers and small

business owners are no longer able to repay their outstanding debt. As a result, people in all villages are finding it increasingly difficult to access new loans. In villages in Ayeyarwady and Rakhine, for instance, respondents observed that about half of the farmers have not been able to repay MADB loans. In a village in Chin, two-thirds are reportedly unable to repay loans.

To cope with debt, farmers in a village in Ayeyarwady are increasingly renting out land as they cannot afford to cultivate it themselves. As a farmer reported: *“Some can’t repay the debt. As they don’t have money for farming, they had to rent their farmland to others. Nearly half of the farmers do it that way.”* Respondents indicated, however, that there have not yet been many land sales mostly because there are no buyers.

### ***Credit is drying up***

With the outbreak of the third wave of covid a worrisome trend has become more obvious across the research villages: informal lenders have become reluctant and increasingly unwilling to give new loans. Farmers and fishers are as much affected by this trend as casual laborers.

In a village in Magwe, respondents indicated that the MADB was not giving loans even to farmers who had repaid their previous debt. In Sagaing, villagers could access neither MADB nor other lending sources. In Kachin, moneylenders and pawn shop owners were themselves facing financial difficulties and were thus unable to lend. In a village in Tanintharyi, lenders fret that would-be borrowers may be wanted by the SAC and would thus not be able to repay their debt in case they were arrested. Lenders were also worried that if war broke out and people needed to flee, the debt could not be collected anymore. In another village in Tanintharyi, lenders give loans only to people to whom they are very close.

As a result, disputes between lenders and borrowers have been on the rise, and financial trust between villagers has been eroding. Shop owners and moneylenders know that they cannot go to court over non-payment; they understand the situation borrowers are finding themselves in and try to resolve the issue through negotiations. VTAs are often called upon for help.

Many village shops are also no longer selling on credit as much as in the past, whether pesticides to farmers, gear to fishers, or daily necessities to laborers. Small farmers may still be able to buy some inputs. However, they would, for instance, buy one packet of pesticide instead of the normal two. For laborers, the scarcity of jobs has drastically reduced their creditworthiness as without a job, they cannot earn enough to repay what they bought on store credit.

Some creditors have thus taken to lending money to families with a guarantee of repayment, for instance, that at least one person in the household is working abroad and able to send money back home. Others have agreed to accept interest payment only and defer repayment (Box 5). Borrowers often plead with lenders for an extension of the repayment dates. As a female day laborer in Magwe put it: *“Villagers are worrying about how they can repay their debts. I still have to apologize to the lender for not being able to repay the loan. I just apologized recently.”*

#### **Box 5: Travails of an informal lender**

Malay Nge (not her real name) lives in one of villages in Rakhine. Her husband has been working in Malaysia for about seven years now. Malay Nge lives with her mother and 2-year old son. Malay Nge is worried that her mother, who has heart disease and kidney disease, may catch the virus. The covid situation in Malaysia is also critical so her husband could only work for a few hours per day, and she worries about him.

Malay Nge's husband used to send up to 10 lakhs per month, so the family had some extra money to save. Malay Nge put a sum aside every month and gave loans to the people around her with the extra money, especially to small fishers and day laborers in the fishing industry. Now her borrowers are in a difficult condition and cannot pay both the interest and the loan. She understands the situation they are in, gives them time to pay, and accepts only interest payments as well.

*"Since the brokers in Yangon have closed their markets, and even though the roads are reopened, people are not going to Yangon so the fishery products from the village are not being sold. In addition, weather at sea has been bad this year so it is difficult for the workers to go fishing. The daily laborers are the ones who suffer the most at the moment. Some of them go up to the mountains and collect bamboo shoots to sell. Some of them have nothing to eat sometimes", she said.*

It has been three months already that her husband has not been able to send money back home. So, she is using her savings to feed the family now. She is using her money wisely and has reduced expenses for food because her other income from giving loans to others is not going well.

In addition, Malay Nge is concerned about the safety of the family. She is worried about being robbed at this time of crisis because there is no man at home. *"There have been more thefts in the village such as stealing a motorcycle, cash, and mobile phones. Nobody knows who did that so it's difficult to report. Since we are only women living in the house, I am worried about that. I am worried that robbers might hurt us, too."*

Respondents in several villages, including in Ayeyarwady and Magwe, added that microfinance groups and savings and loan groups have stopped lending over the past half year. The VTA in a village in Rakhine recounted the challenges that an increase in microfinance institution has brought to his village. There were six microfinance groups and when the situation worsened, villagers started to borrow from one source after another until they found themselves out of options: *"About 70 percent of villagers now have difficulty repaying their loans. Only 30 percent can still do so"*.

A farmer in a village in Ayeyarwady mentioned yet another reason why informal lenders are reluctant to give new loans: *"They do not even dare say that they have money. During this difficult time, they are afraid of being robbed."* At the same time, respondents in a village in Kachin indicated that some villagers have stopped taking out new loans; they are afraid that they will not be able to repay them and then be forced to sell of valuable property, like people in a village in Magwe who had to sell their houses.

### ***The politics of debt***

Beyond the economic difficulties people encounter for repaying outstanding debts, the political crisis has added to villagers defaulting. In March, the NUG announced that people should not repay outstanding loans to the MADB, and extended the repayment date from April 2021 to April 2022. Out of solidarity with the CDM, many farmers have followed the announcement, in essence joining the CDM themselves. A respondent in a village in Tanintharyi mentioned another sign of resistance to the SAC. A majority of villagers started to imagine that the SAC, which they despise, would use the money from loan repayments to buy bullets. Consequently, they refused to repay their debts to the MADB.

The SAC announced in May that it postponed the repayment date, and that farmers who repaid MADB loans by September 2021 could access new loans. Farmers who could not or refused to repay their debts were not eligible to receive new MADB loans and are thus facing greater difficulties for buying farming inputs. As a 100-household leader in a village in Magwe observed: *"In May of this year, the SAC*

*made an announcement that farmers who took MADB loans have to repay them. About 180 people had taken MADB loans in the village but only 30 paid back. The government intended to give new loans to those who had repaid their loans. The rest of the people did not pay back.”*

## **Coping strategies**

People in the research sites are still coping with the overlapping crises, although for many the effort is intensifying. Villagers are reducing expenses and augmenting incomes through a variety of activities.

### ***Reducing expenses***

People have been progressively reducing expenses for items that are not considered essential. This includes, among others, not buying new clothes, snacks that have no nutritional value, or cosmetics. Others have stopped using mobile phones, the internet or TV channel services. Keeping pets has also become a luxury as a male farmer in a village in Chin explained: *“As I can no longer afford to buy soap and shampoo, I have to filter ash with water and then use it as soap and shampoo and for washing clothes. I have a dog that eats as much food as a human, and I need rice. So, I sold it to buy rice. In the past, I used one viss of oil in a week. Now I have to weigh it with a spoon and use it economically.”*

The picture is mixed with regard to healthcare. In some villages, such as Chin, villagers refuse to go to a hospital when ill and try to cure themselves in order to save money. In another village in Chin, people would borrow if they had a health emergency. In a village in Kachin, in contrast, villagers have set money aside for health emergencies.

That said, covid restrictions and fear of virus transmission have meant that villagers had fewer expenses. For instance, even though the petrol price has been rising, people are staying at home and not using their motorbikes, thus reducing their need for petrol. Similarly, with restaurants closed, people cannot go out and have a meal outside the home.

In terms of nutrition, rice is the priority for villagers in all but some coastal villages, and people try to keep enough at home. However, they have had to change their meals. In the past, villagers would eat meat or fish several times a week. Nowadays, they can rarely afford such proteins. They supplement rice with fish paste and vegetables. Depending on the location of the village, they can add bamboo shoots which they find in the forest or shrimps that they collect in the streams. Whenever they still can, they buy food from neighborhood stores on credit.

The situation is seemingly deteriorating, however. Even in a village in Ayeyarwady, Myanmar’s rice bowl, villagers have started to eat less. They consider the situation worse today than during the first two waves of covid. As a male farmer explained: *“Some cannot afford to eat nutritiously. There are some people who only eat vegetables. If one meal cost us 1,000 kyats in the past, we now have to make it happen with 400-700 kyats.”*

### ***Supplementing meager incomes***

Pawning is an established practice for rural households to tie them over fluctuations in income. Many families have been pawning, or outright selling, some of their property, from motorbikes and animals to jewelry and gold. Some land has also come on the market. A male teacher in Ayeyarwady lamented: *“My occupation is a teacher. My wife doesn’t work. As we depend solely on my salary, we need to pawn our possessions during some months when we face financial difficulties.”*

Raising money this way has become increasingly difficult, however. During the first two waves of covid, pawn shops were willing to do business and better-off families in the villages invested in real estate. Now, both groups are facing financial difficulties themselves. First, interest on pawned goods has increased markedly, if shop owners in the village agree to do business at all. People do have the option of pawning or selling their valuables in town. However, they are afraid of being robbed either on the way, or at checkpoints.

Second, there are no buyers for village land. Another complication is that land sales require a formal village leader to witness the transaction. But, in villages where there are no formal leaders in place or where the VTA is not trusted, such transactions could not take place even if there were buyers.

Before Thingyan, villagers could supplement meager incomes by doing odd jobs like collecting firewood or bamboo, making charcoal or growing vegetables. Since the outbreak of the third wave of covid, however, traders have no longer been coming to the villages due to covid- and coup-related travel restrictions. This has robbed poor villagers of an important emergency source of income, and leaves them with no other option than to fall back on any savings they may still have.

### **Concerns about food security**

***“If I could only eat when I have work, I would have nothing to eat by now.”***  
Casual laborer, Ayeyarwady Region

The diversity of the research villages is exemplified by the diversity of villagers’ concerns about food security. People in only three villages, all villages with strong social relations, are not worried about having enough to eat; this includes the two villages in Tanintharyi where villagers mostly depend on the sea for a living. In five and eight villages, respectively, most and many people are worried.

There is also diversity within the villages. In general, farmers are considered less at risk of food insecurity because they can grow their own rice. In a similar vein, some villagers have very personal perceptions. As a male teacher in a village in Ayeyarwady expressed: *“I’m not that worried because we are living in a village. There are people who sell fruits and vegetables. We can also search for food. The same is true for fish and poultry. There is no need to worry as long as we can eat rice with ngapi [fermented fish or shrimp paste] and roselle leaves.”*

And yet, casual laborers are greatly worried. While facing huge uncertainties about what will happen in the coming months with the coronavirus and its impact on livelihoods, they are forced to focus on their day-to-day survival more than ever before. In a village in Magwe, respondents noted that many villagers have started to cook only two cups of rice when they used to have four cups before. Elsewhere, some are reported as barely being able to afford food due to the third wave of covid. In such instances, village solidarity may be their only hope. As a trader turned casual laborer in a village in Ayeyarwady sighed: *“According to village tradition, if one doesn’t have anything to eat, the other cannot watch him hungry. So, we are sharing food.”*



## Social Relations

Tensions had already started in some villages during the election period last year, such as in villages in Kachin, Magwe, and Rakhine. They came to the fore strongly in most villages after the military takeover with opponents regularly outnumbering supporters in the research sites. Oftentimes, but not always, those in favor of the coup are viewed as supporters of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and those against it as supporters of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Since the coup d'état, the social fabric in rural Myanmar has been in constant flux. Social relations have also become more complex as the third wave of covid-19 has both exacerbated and ameliorated the negative social impacts of the coup.

Overall, social relations are considered strong in only three villages and moderate in another six villages. At the same time, villagers in only five villages trust each other like before. In the other eleven villages, mistrust reigns even where villagers agree to cooperate in order to manage the pandemic.

### Reactions to the coup still divide villages

***“Unity has fallen apart.”***

Village administrator, male, Rakhine State

Compared to two months after the coup, political differences have not worsened over the following quarter but they are still felt keenly in many villages. The break in social bonds between supporters and opponents of the SAC manifests itself in different ways. A common occurrence is villagers being mindful of what they say to each other, which has led to a breakdown in communications as well. In several villages, people are also no longer cooperating on village development activities or across groups. A housewife in a village in Tanintharyi expressed it as follows: *“We ignore the people who do not share our opinion. We just ignore them and don’t fight with them.”*

On occasion, tensions have become tangible. In a village in Chin, for instance, non-CDM staff forced CDM staff and patients to leave the hospital where they were treating/being treated for covid. In a village in Rakhine, there is social punishment for people who visit shops run by USDP supporters or talk to them. In a village in Ayeyarwady, USDP youth have taken it upon themselves to help implement the government’s policy of school opening and in so doing antagonized both villagers and village leaders (Box 6); a similar event happened in a village in Magwe. A more pervasive concern is the lack of trust between the two groups. In many villages, there are open or hidden accusations of people being *dalan*, i.e., informers for the military, which has led many coup opponents to shift their activities into hiding, including for village social affairs.

### **Box 6: Government supporters take matters into their own hands**

*“When the school reopened, the youths who support the USDP gathered to guard the school, saying that it was for the safety of the students. However, they did this without the administrator’s permission. The administrator couldn’t say anything, and neither could villagers. The teachers didn’t like the youth coming to school either. They told them off by saying that they could manage their own students and their help wasn’t necessary. Still, the youth kept guarding the school. This affair was put to an end only when the schools had to be closed again because of covid.”* Farmer, female, Ayeyarwady Region

By and large, however, villagers are living side by side, suspicious of each other but avoiding direct confrontation as much as possible. As a farmer in a village in Ayeyarwady observed: *“Being careful means no matter how much we don’t like them, we don’t say any bad things about them in front of villagers who do like them. They do the same to avoid conflict. They don’t cross the line.”* Thus far, therefore, no case of communal violence has been reported in the research villages.

### **The third wave of covid-19 has inconclusive effects**

*“If I may say, the relationship between the villagers has improved since before Thingyan.”*  
Covid volunteer, male, Tanintharyi Region

The third wave of covid-19 has had a noticeable impact on villagers’ social interactions. Yet again, the research found much variation in people’s responses and social perceptions. Two broad trends can be observed. On the one hand, fear of covid has brought villagers closer together in prevention activities even where political differences have remained. On the other hand, fear of covid has drawn villagers further apart due to both the need for social distancing and worries about being infected. On balance, the latter trend appears to outweigh the former in the research villages.

Respondents in all villages considered the government’s response to the third wave as wholly inadequate. Absent any meaningful support from the outside, villagers in several research sites have accepted that they must work together in order to prevent the disease from spreading and causing even more harm. This was observed by respondents in six villages that had two things in common: many villagers have been following covid prevention measures (regardless of the number of cases), and trust is lacking.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that, regardless of political views, people in these sites place greater importance on the safety of the village.

Examples of collaboration include the following. In a village in Chin, a youth organization is helping to organize funerals. Although this is also a place where social relations are fragmented as people avoid talking to each other and gathering in crowds, formal and informal village leaders are collaborating with health workers and youth to fight the pandemic. In a village in Magwe, villagers from both groups are taking turns to guard covid checkpoints. And in a village in Tanintharyi, villagers have re-established the emergency response team which had been dissolved by the SAC, and are carrying out virus screening, distributing food and medicines to poor patients, and advising positive patients on how to self-manage the disease. All these activities have lessened intra-village tensions.

The negative impacts of covid-19 on social relations, witnessed during the first and second waves, have reappeared. The loss of social interaction has weakened communications and made people feel more

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<sup>4</sup> In one of the research sites, villagers maintain business relations across groups. However, they distrust each other when it comes to covid as they fear that they might contract the disease from someone.

isolated<sup>5</sup> – places of religious worship are closed, wedding ceremonies canceled, traditional funerals not allowed, home visits prohibited, and village development activities interdicted. Many villagers feel that relationships are frozen. Moreover, in villages in Kachin and Sagaing, suspicion has grown because they fear others who are less careful will get infected with the coronavirus and transmit the disease to them. As during the first two waves of the pandemic, these effects on social relations are expected to be transient and disappear once the restrictions are lifted.

One village in Sagaing, home to a small Muslim population, has witnessed a more serious situation, however. Respondents indicated that the virus spread the day after the Eid festival and that villagers have accused their Muslims neighbors for making home visits and not complying with prevention measures.

### **Mutual help remains strong**

Sharing with people in need is a custom in every village in Myanmar, and one that remains an important element of daily life, today's multiple challenges notwithstanding. Mutual help was reported in about half the research villages, some of which have strong relations, others weak ones. In most of these villages people share food with poor villagers. Collecting donations for medicines and funerals is also common.

In a village in Chin, for example, villagers help families who are sick with covid by feeding their pigs and doing their laundry. The needy can also borrow money from the Church fund. Youth are often very active in social affairs. In a village in Tanintharyi, the local *parahita* group is solving covid related issues, such as transporting patients, spraying houses, donating for covid testing fees and medicine, and queuing for oxygen.

Lack of mutual help does not indicate disregard of needy villagers, however. Rather, the economic situation in a good number of villages is so desperate that few people can afford to share food or make donations. In a village in Kachin, for example, villagers can only afford to help family members who are sick and there are no Church funds available that could be donated. People in several villages who cannot afford to donate have instead opted to participate in the covid prevention efforts as volunteers. However, as a female volunteer in a village in Tanintharyi observed: *"Most people are afraid of covid and do not want to take part in person."*

### **There have been few reported cases of domestic and gender-based violence**

***"My husband and I did not get along at first because we had to stay in our own house. But now, I'm okay with him. We have become more united as the family is the only thing we can rely on during this time."***

Retired school teacher, Ayeyarwady Region

Previous post-coup research indicated that cases of domestic and gender-based violence were on the rise. This research cannot confirm this trend but acknowledges the difficulty of collecting such information. On the one hand, respondents were not always very comfortable with answering all questions by phone. On the other hand, domestic and gender-based violence is an internal family matter and due to covid restrictions, respondents have less information about what is happening inside other people's homes.

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<sup>5</sup> Respondents noted the same effect as a result of livelihood pressures in villages without new covid cases; villagers struggling for food simply had no time for socializing anymore.

Only one case of rape was reported. The perpetrator, who apparently also intended to kill both his wife and stepdaughter, was reported to the police and has been in prison for the past three months. The trial has not yet started. Intra-marital quarrels, by contrast, were observed in numerous villages but with no increasing frequency. These are generally resolved with the help of village leaders, family members, and/or neighbors.

Respondents in Magwe indicated two reasons for quarrels between husbands and wives. First, drinking and gambling by men, although it was noted that women also gamble. Gambling refers primarily to playing cards in a quiet house at night. When people lose, they sell or pawn their phones, household items like pots or pans, or other goods. Second, increasing financial difficulties since Thingyan are said to have intensified intra-marital quarrels. Respondents in Tanintharyi added that, because of the dire job situation, some men feel inferior to their wives as women can make more money than they do. Again, this can lead to intra-marital trouble.



## Leadership

*“As long as the administrator doesn’t try to stir up any problems with the villagers, we are okay.”*

Gardener, Ayeyarwady Region

### Variations in leadership changes

Village tract administrators are the government representatives closest to the people. Even though their powers are limited, they traditionally exercise an important influence on all facets of village life. The decision by the SAC to replace, through the township GAD, elected VTAs, generally with individuals who support the USDP and used to be VTAs in the past, has thus had a far-reaching impact. Research undertaken within two months of the coup indicated that villagers deeply resented these forced changes in local leadership, and that social relations between villagers were normal mostly in villages where VTAs had not (yet) been changed.

Leadership changes continued after Thingyan. The current picture is more nuanced, not least because social relations are considered strong in only three villages. More importantly, however, in other parts of Myanmar newly appointed VTAs have been killed over the past several months. While no such incident was reported from the research villages, several VTAs have stepped down whilst others refused to accept their appointment.

The picture that has emerged in the research villages is as follows: newly appointed VTAs are in place in seven villages; previously elected VTAs have been confirmed in five villages; in two villages, the previously elected VTAs are still in place informally but the GAD has not yet made a decision; and in another two villages there are currently no VTAs in place as the previously elected ones had stepped down with the GAD not yet having made a decision.

The research observed much variation within these four categories of leadership status. In several villages, the GAD asked previously elected VTAs whether or not they would agree to continue in their role; they all accepted. In one of these cases, the incumbent consulted with village elders before making the decision; time was too short to consult villagers directly as he had wished to do. In another village, the elected VTA did not want to continue to serve. However, villagers requested him to do so, thus he agreed. In yet another instance, villagers who generally support the NLD had elected a candidate from the USDP as he is from the village, which they preferred; he is still in office.

The killings of newly appointed leaders elsewhere in the country has had an impact on how leadership has evolved in the research villages. For instance, the GAD confirmed one previously elected VTA because it was concerned that appointing someone else might lead to violence, notwithstanding the

fact that the incumbent did in fact not want to continue to serve. In another case, the GAD intended to appoint a new VTA. Because the villagers were against him, he did not accept out of fear. The GAD eventually confirmed the previously elected VTA. On the other end of the spectrum, a villager accepted his new appointment as he feared that if he did not accept it, the village would fall into the hands of a troublemaker.

Two more cases from different villages in the same township are worth reporting. In one village, the elected VTA stepped down and joined the CDM despite the fact that the GAD had confirmed him. He argued that he only wanted to serve under the people, not the SAC. Thereafter, the GAD asked villagers to select a new leader. However, no one wanted to take the position. As a result, the village currently has no formal leader. In the other research site, the whole village demonstrated against the newly appointed GAD. Policemen and soldiers then came to the village and handpicked a USDP supporter from the village as the new VTA. He has received no recognition from the villagers.

### The role of Village Tract Administrators

*“The administrator only does things that are related to the help offered by the government. The government at the moment doesn’t do anything for us, so he does the same.”*

Gardener, Ayeyarwady Region

The role of VTAs includes, in principle, a whole host of tasks. Of particular importance are recommendation letters that allow villagers to travel, authorizations of land sales, resolving problems between villagers, and supporting village development activities. Regardless of their status, VTAs perform only some of these duties in the research villages. Even many VTAs who had been elected and then confirmed by the GAD refrain from engaging too actively in village affairs. There are seemingly two reasons behind this passivity: first, VTAs on the whole prefer to keep a low profile in these trying times; second, to date, the GAD has issued only few instructions.

Respondents in Kayin reported that the township GAD instructed VTAs to focus on covid prevention and refrain from supporting village development activities. This seemingly happened in other States and Regions as well as no development activities appeared ongoing at the time of research. In a village in Rakhine, for instance, a VTA showed no interest in completing several development projects even though they were at an advanced stage of implementation.

The GAD focus on covid prevention does not, however, imply that all VTAs are actively engaged in fighting covid. In a village in Sagaing, the VTA delegated responsibilities to religious leaders; respondents indicated that he was afraid of contracting the disease and thus isolated himself. At the same time, the GAD also instructed VTAs to establish village support committees to assist them in administrative matters, including the screening of suspected covid patients, as reported in Rakhine.<sup>6</sup>

Individual VTAs are willing to take on an active role across a whole range of village issues, from social welfare to religious matters and village development. Some help villagers upon request to resolve debt issues or overcome livelihood difficulties. This has seemingly happened more often in villages where the previously elected VTA was confirmed. Conversely, the two villages without a formally recognized VTA are the most disadvantaged administratively as the informal leaders are not authorized, not even to issue travel recommendation letters.

In some instances, covid prevention has brought villagers together, not just across different groups but also with their formal leaders. In a village in Tanintharyi, for example, people who otherwise do not like

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<sup>6</sup> As instructed by the township GAD, committee members must not have supported or participated in protests against the coup.

their new VTA listen to and accept what he says about covid because it is for the better of the village. Elsewhere, villagers take advantage of the coup. In a village in Sagaing with poor relations all around, a small number of villagers who feel close to the new VTA requested a recommendation letter from him for their application to positions 'left vacant' by CDM staff.

### Relations between leaders

As would be expected, relations between formal and informal leaders tend to be better in villages where the previously elected VTA was confirmed and worse in villages with a newly appointed VTA. In the former cases, leaders tend to work together on a range of issues and resolve tensions among themselves easily. One exception was reported in a village in Ayeyarwady where leaders had disagreed about the distribution of covid aid in 2020;<sup>7</sup> they continue to cooperate on village matters regardless.

In villages with new VTAs, respondents observed little cooperation. In one village in Magwe, for instance, village elders are leading village affairs as villagers do not accept the VTA. In a village in Sagaing, there is no collective action between formal and informal leaders, and in a village in Rakhine, the new VTA takes decisions without consulting other leaders. Political differences split unity among village leaders in a village in Kachin.

Village elderly and respected persons can play an important role in, in a sense, mediating between villagers and their formal leaders. In a village in Tanintharyi, for instance, people ask them to resolve conflicts between them rather than the new VTA, whom villagers do not trust. In Sagaing, they encourage people to behave well and not engage in infighting, especially in this time of political upheaval. As a female nurse explained: *"The tiger snatches the cow that has dispersed from its herd. So [the village elders] teach us not to quarrel with one another."* The engagement of village elders and respected persons is generally accepted, even sometimes welcome, by formal leaders, and greatly appreciated by villagers.

### Relations between villagers and leaders

The variety of cases makes it difficult identify the overall impact of leadership changes on village life. That said, this research shows a clear relationship between the status of the VTA on the one hand, and trust between villagers and relations between villagers and VTAs on the other hand. Specifically, in six of the seven villages with a new VTA, trust between villagers is lacking. The seventh village is small and mostly inhabited by relatives; villagers thus trust each other but not the VTA. Similarly, relations between villagers and new VTAs are weak in six villages. The remaining village is situated adjacent to a Tatmadaw base and villagers are observing the VTA with caution without actively opposing him.

Villagers' poor perception of VTAs is in good measure a result of their disinterest in village affairs. In a village in Kachin, the new VTA issues orders and restrictions but does not help villagers. In a village in Kayin, village elders are in charge of village affairs, filling in for a VTA who lacks recognition. In villages in Rakhine, VTAs are considered selfish and distant. In a village in Sagaing, the VTA only supports a small group of people who want to benefit from him. Respondents there also reported that the VTA's wife manipulates her husband and takes decisions on village matters.

A fisherman in a village in Rakhine summed up the perceptions of villagers toward their VTAs: *"If you like the principle [of the GAD appointing new VTAs], you naturally like the person. But people who don't*

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<sup>7</sup> When the NLD government provided cooking oil, onions and other basic food items, two village elders suggested that the aid be provided to everyone who is really in need rather than to the beneficiary categories identified by the government. The VTA and three other village elders decided to follow government rules.

like the principle have no reason to like the person. Since the principle is not good, it's impossible to work with the person in that position." Box 7 captures these complexities.

**Box 7: What villagers say about a newly appointed VTA**

*"People pretend not to see them. They just take him as air."* Restaurant owner, female

*"Nobody wants to collaborate with the new VTA, not even for covid protection. People are afraid that they will be taken advantage of by him. So, if someone collaborates with him, it can create the impression that people have started to warm up to him, and that they are siding with the SAC. That's what I don't like about it. There are also some village elderly and respected persons who no longer wish to take part in any of the village's social groups."* Volunteer, male

*"About 70 percent of villagers do not support the administrator. They do not accept him. People just use him 'as needed' as his signature is essential for enabling them to travel to town. He might think people have begun to support him. In fact, we're just using him because we need him."* Casual laborer, female

*"We can say that he is a quiet person. He seemed okay when we came running back from town after having joined demonstrations. He doesn't point fingers and says which person is hiding inside which home. He pretends like he doesn't know."* University student, female

*"If he hears that the military and police are checking for overnight guests in other villages, he asks those who need to hide to hide and tells their family members, if asked about their whereabouts, to say that they have already left for work. I think they have not stormed into the village yet because he hasn't spoken a word."* Women leader

*"One of my nephews got detained in town while he was participating in a demonstration. The VTA went to town to negotiate with the police, telling them that he wasn't part of the demonstrations but just a visitor to town. So, he was released. But we didn't get the motorcycle back. It cost about 26 lakhs. They have taken it."* Women leader

These findings do not, however, imply that villages with confirmed VTAs enjoy solid relations between villagers and their formal leaders. Again, the research found a panoply of local experiences that make drawing general conclusions difficult. Relations were considered strong in only two of the five villages where the GAD had confirmed the incumbent VTA, and moderate in another three, the main criterion seemingly being the extent to which the VTA actively pursues village affairs.



## Perceptions of Insecurity

*“Everyone is afraid of covid. We are afraid of both covid and the war. There is no place where we feel safe. There is no security. We live with anxiety.”*

Farmer, male, Kachin State

### Concerns about security

Fear due to a profound sense of insecurity became pervasive with the coup as reported in SEIA-1. This feeling of insecurity has gone from bad to worse since – not solely in the sense that new concerns surrounding the third covid wave have arisen, but also that the degree of people’s exasperation with the ongoing uncertainty has increased. This chapter investigates the impact of political developments on people’s perceptions of insecurity.

Villagers in only three villages reportedly felt safe at the time of research. These villages have in common ethnic and religious homogeneity as well as previously elected VTAs confirmed in their position. In the other thirteen villages people worry for their lives to varying degrees. People in the five villages with the greatest sense of uncertainty have lost trust in each other, and most of these villages have a newly appointed VTA or poor relations with the VTA.

The primary reason for the continued sense of insecurity in the majority of research villages is the concern about informers who could report someone to the military for any number of reasons at a moment’s notice. In a village in Magwe, for instance, a respondent stated that USDP supporters had made a list of villagers who had joined protests against the coup, which they could transmit to town. In a village in Sagaing, people held night rallies against the newly appointed VTA, which a *dalan* reported to the military. Troops then descended on the village and arrested several participants. In other villages, as was reported about non-research villages in Tanintharyi, the VTA himself has secretly informed the military when strike leaders or protesters were in the village so that they could be searched and arrested.

People living in those villages where the military or police are present, are at direct risk. For instance, the military set up camp at a police station in a village in Tanintharyi after the coup and threatened activists with arrests. The activists had no other option but to go into hiding. Although the camp is now closed, they still cannot return as the police station is still operational.

*“Two or three military vehicles went around the village tract. The soldiers demanded new recruits for the military. No village has provided them the new recruits but people are really cautious at night for fear of being dragged away.”*

Women leader, Magwe Region

Inhabitants of villages located near towns as well as near roads feel unsafe as well. As numerous respondents observed, being close to a road means that any tensions can spread quickly and that the military can deploy easily, which gives villagers no warning to flee. Proximity to roads also makes it easy for the military to move in and out of village tracts on patrol. Respondents in a village in Magwe recounted people’s fear of the military entering the village at night and recruiting them as porters, as apparently happened in nearby villages. In this research village, people built a new road to the pagoda so that they would no longer have to travel along the main road where they can be seen easily.

The concern is even greater in villages with military bases or border guard forces nearby. Several villagers in the research sites in Kachin, where fighting in the area has been frequent, have built bomb shelters under their houses for protection and prepared emergency bags with their national registration cards (NRC), household lists and emergency items in case they have to flee quickly. Conversely, villagers located close to areas controlled by ethnic armed groups noted that their presence both reduces feelings of insecurity and increases the risk of fighting.

Omnipresent are military checkpoints that villagers fret crossing for health, business or personal purposes, and not solely for fear of arrest. There are reports from some research villages of the military confiscating goods and cash from travelers. The procedure for receiving travel recommendation letters from the VTA is also invasive. Villagers need to submit their name, NRC number, phone number, home address and signature. In signing the letter, the VTA must confirm that the person has not participated in any protest. The letter is then stamped by the police.

While villagers in principle do not have to pay for such letters – though a fee of 500 *kyats* per letter was reported in a village in Magwe –, they are valid for a limited time only, and can be taken away at checkpoints as well. A respondent in Tanintharyi mentioned that the military may confiscate the traveler’s NRC or ask for money when s/he cannot produce said letter. And villagers without a travel recommendation letter or for exceeding the time limit for returning to the village may be fined at checkpoints.

Several consequences of the feeling of uncertainty and fear can be observed. In a village in Magwe, protests have stopped since Thingyan though discontent with the SAC continues. Youth who had been involved in social affairs in a village in Sagaing are hiding in the forest whenever troops arrive as they fear being arrested for the organization work they have done. Indeed, respondents in a village in Tanintharyi observed that members of a social welfare organization had been arrested and the organization’s property destroyed. As a result, similar organizations have stopped their work.

The heavy-handedness of the military’s interaction with the people has a deleterious effect on covid prevention, which is even more disconcerting given the SAC’s abysmal record to manage the third wave. In another village in Sagaing, no one has been leading covid prevention activities as the third wave spread because people were afraid of being arrested. Similarly, in a village in Rakhine, youth involved in protests remain on the run and cannot actively engage in covid prevention activities. Those who are not in hiding still have no contact with the VTA and refuse to participate in any activity that comes from the SAC.

Examples from the villages in Tanintharyi shed light on two specific issues: the risk to the integrity of community-led prevention measures and the risk to volunteer health workers.

When someone actively involved in protests who is wanted by the SAC helps or is isolating at a quarantine center, infected villagers do not dare come and stay at the center. They worry that, if the SAC finds the CDM staff, it will not only come and arrest the wanted person but also destroy the center. In fact, as reported from a non-research village, the military broke into a local quarantine center one night to arrest a wanted person who was isolating himself. Therefore, villagers fret about the inability to guarantee the safety of patients and CDM staff at their own center.

***“We are even more worried now as I have formed a charitable group with my friends. We collect donations and provide some food such as rice and oil to those who need help in the village. We don’t know whether or not we should inform the village administrator. We are afraid that we could be arrested as they might charge us with organizing or campaigning in the village”.***

Teacher, male, Sagaing Region

With regard to the risk to volunteers, a respondent from another village in Tanintharyi summarized his personal dilemma thus: *“Just because I have provided help as I am a parahita member, my act of kindness can be perceived as taking sides [with the SAC]. This affects my image and won’t get me anywhere in the future.”* Even more worryingly, volunteers risk their lives because of misperceptions and disinterest on the part of the military, as Box 8 explains.

#### **Box 8: Taking risks to fight covid**

*“It just happened yesterday. A volunteer returned from the quarantine center after delivering food. He was a bit late after 8 p.m. Then, he met soldiers on the road who pointed a gun at him and interrogated him. The volunteer explained his situation many times but the soldiers didn’t believe him. He was finally released after the village elders went to get him out. The soldiers don’t know anything and you can even get shot if they just feel something is on their minds. So, I told [the volunteers] to carry their group’s name card around their necks at all times and to finish all their work before 7:30 and return home by 8 p.m. I really don’t want to say a word [to the soldiers]. When I went to town and I saw them with guns on the way, I was angrier more than I was afraid.”* Casual laborer, male, Tanintharyi Region

#### **Crime**

***“We no longer allow Burmese people to sell things here since we heard that a pistol suddenly fell out from an ice cream seller’s clothes in a nearby village.”***

Teacher, male, Chin State

Soon after the coup, villagers were starting to get worried about a rise in crime. Six months after, their fear has increasingly materialized. Thefts and robberies have been reported in or near research villages in Chin, Kachin, Magwe, Rakhine, and Tanintharyi. In some instances, people are less worried about crime in their villages but instead about being robbed on their way to or from town.

Respondents felt that livelihood difficulties were a primary cause. In Kachin, they observed an increase in the number of drug users which led to more crime; the rehabilitation center had been closed at the onset of the third covid wave, leaving drug users to fend for themselves. Female headed households are particularly worried not just about robbery, but also that thieves might hurt them in the act.

One particular issue that facilitates criminal activities is apparent impunity as the police do not investigate reported crimes. This was mentioned in villages in Kachin and Sagaing, and in turn

discourages villagers from reporting them; it also leaves them uncertain whom to rely on. In a village in Kachin, when villagers reported drug related crimes, the police gave many reasons for not attending to the matter: they were concerned about covid, they were unable to come due to the political instability, they were afraid of the Kachin Independence Army, and they had too few policemen available. The police told villagers that it would take action only if the villagers caught the drug dealers first and sent them to the police station.

A male engineer in Sagaing explained it more graphically: *“The police said, ‘don’t come and report any crime, even rape cases, just take care of such issues on your own. You can kill each other, too, but we are not here to solve your problems.’ The police chief in the local station has changed frequently as well. If a police chief becomes too close to the villagers, they replace him.”*



## Perceptions of Government

***“Under the rule of the military council, nothing is going right.”***

Day laborer, female, Magwe Region

It is difficult to overstate the distrust that people have in the government. Whereas during the first few months after the coup a majority of villagers rejected the SAC, the lack of a government response to fight the third wave of covid-19 has made people deeply angry and resentful. The majority of respondents blames the government for all ills, for making the impacts of covid worse, and for taking no responsibility for its lack of action. They regularly draw comparisons to the then-government’s response during the first and second waves, which they appreciated and considered helpful. As a woman leader in a village in Magwe expressed: *“I’m very sad. Many people are dying. I don’t know what’s going on in the minds of those who are in power. They have no compassion at all.”*

Various respondents observed that villagers do not believe the information that the SAC is broadcasting (Box 9). They also feel alienated by the fact that the government not only is not supporting the needy during the third wave. It is directly hurting people’s livelihoods by demanding payment on outstanding electricity bills and repayment of MADB loans even though villagers’ desperate financial straits are well known.

**Box 9: *“The people are being ignored.”***

*“It’s hard to imagine how much [the SAC government] prioritizes the citizens with their actions. They offer no covid treatment. In addition, the spread of the disease is out of control. I heard on the news that they are also infected. They are strong only in terms of issuing documents and announcing rules but in reality, they are also infected. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that they have ignored the people regarding covid-19. This is just my opinion. It can be said that their response to this pandemic is not perfect. The announcements that they used to make on Myawaddy television seem so smooth. If we listen to Zaw Min Tun’s press conference [1], what he said seems that they are doing everything for the people. Everyone knows what is happening in the hospitals. In reality, they are not doing anything. That’s why I said that the people are being ignored.”* Casual laborer, male, Ayeyarwady Region

[1] General Zaw Min Tun is Deputy Minister of Information under the SAC government.

In all research villages, this resentment against the SAC government has translated into support for the National Unity Government – even though people recognize that the NUG has not yet been able to be effective inside the country due to the restrictions imposed on it by the SAC. That said, USDP supporters see the SAC not as a military government, but as a civilian one similar to the government under Their Sein, which was in office from 2011 to 2016.

The research did not investigate people's interactions with higher-level government offices yet revealed a few examples. Although the same officials are in place (except for staff who have joined the CDM), their behavior and attitudes have evidently changed taking into account the new set of instructions that they have been receiving since the military takeover. Box 10 serves as an example of how the political changes have affected bureaucratic effectiveness.

**Box 10: A government for itself**

Ko Tun Tun (not his real name) and his family of four moved to the village years ago. He has built a medium-sized fishing business. Ko Tun Tun heads one of the local loan groups and is in charge of disbursements, collection, and record keeping. He is also the one who took the initiative to secure loans from the Department of Fisheries for a group of over 130 fishers, which has helped them run their businesses for the past four years.

This year, Ko Tun Tun could not repay the loan, so he took a loan from a friend with interest and repaid the old debt to the Department of Fisheries. The Department then issued a new loan three days after it had received his payment.

Ko Tun Tun had a relatively close relationship with the staff of the Department of Fisheries. However, a few days before the coup, his fishing net was pulled off by a ship. He reported the incident to the Deputy Director of the Department of Fisheries who said that he would meet with the ship's agent and solve the problem. But then the coup happened and the Deputy Director told Ko Tun Tun that he should contact the agent directly and try to solve the problem face-to-face; he himself would not intervene anymore.

In the past, the Department of Fisheries was involved in such matters and helped the fishermen to get about 50 percent as compensation. Now that it is no longer negotiating between the parties, the ship's agent does not want to pay compensation to Ko Tun Tun, so he lost about 30 *lakhs*.

In addition, fishermen are always in contact with the navy and the port police. Before the coup, Ko Tun Tun had built a good relationship with both of them. However, after the coup, the relationship has changed. They started to communicate with Ko Tun Tun by shouting. In addition, work has gotten more difficult due to various types of bribery that now are apparently required, and new inspections undertaken by the Department of Fisheries.

***“What I expect is, let's say there are six members in a family, two parents and four children. If the father is the head of the family, I want him to do things that will help his children to prosper. I don't want him to step on the children so that he himself can prosper.”***

School teacher, male, Ayeyarwady Region

Villagers' expectations of their government reflect their current predicament. They want it to help them get through the pandemic and overcome the livelihood challenges they are facing. Many respondents do not believe that the SAC is capable of carrying out these tasks and thus want the military to return to their barracks and accept the people's choices.

In several villages, respondents observed that people want to get vaccinated – a clear sign that they are not against the vaccines as such, but rather the way they have been administered after the coup. Although many villagers place more hope in the NUG for steering the country through these trying times, others are more nuanced in that it matters less who the government is, and more what it does. In the words of respondent from a village in Ayeyarwady: *“We want a government that has good intentions towards the people and puts its efforts into the development of the country.”*

## Conclusions

Since the first round of socio-economic impact assessment two months after the coup d'état everyday life in rural Myanmar has gotten progressively worse in all its facets. On its own, the third wave of covid that started to spread in May would have had significant effects on the health and livelihoods of villagers, much like the first two waves had in 2020. The economic ramifications could perhaps have been more intense as household resources had already been much depleted at the beginning of 2021. The reverberations of the coup, however, have made a bad situation worse.

The overlapping and worsening crises of covid and mental health, economic challenges for daily life and fear of arbitrary arrest as well as nearby fighting all mean that daily lives are more challenging now than they were in the early days after the coup. Within this broader reflection, this research has uncovered several perturbing trends.

The overall health situation in villages has been deteriorating. With the public health system unable to cope with the pandemic, many physiological illnesses either go untreated or are self-treated. Mental illnesses go entirely untreated. What is worse, the military has been interfering in the work of volunteers who are trying to help covid patients. Consequently, the health situation may get even worse in the near term, and impact the productivity of the rural workforce in the longer run.

The economic situation has not stabilized around a new normal and continues to worsen. The safety net that the NLD government had provided during 2020 broke with the coup d'état. This begs the question for how much longer people can sustain their lives unaided. The rural population has shown remarkable resilience in the face of these unprecedented shocks. But, there is no denying that more and more households can no longer put enough food on the table.

Covid-19 is an important reason for this predicament, which the coup has exacerbated. Covid has again reduced travel but, with the required precautions, it would have been possible at a reduced scale during the third wave and trade could have remained the transmission of the rural economy. Alas, military checkpoints and deep fear of arbitrary arrest have conspired to paralyze trade, with two interrelated consequences: firstly, the income of most economically active rural residents has been curtailed, often severely so; secondly, with markets interrupted, prices have become exceedingly distorted. To make matters worse, credit, the ubiquitous lubricant of Myanmar's rural economy, is increasingly drying up.

Unless free and safe travel is reinstated soon, taking covid prevention measures duly into consideration, the rural population will face a stark choice. They will have to risk their personal safety, physical health and family wellbeing in exchange for restarting their livelihoods, or simply for employing more perilous coping activities. Once the covid situation has improved, cross-border migration may again play its role of safety valve for rural unemployment but it will do little for rural wellbeing unless the banking system in Myanmar is operating again effectively.

Social relations between villagers remains badly strained with no anticipation that they will improve anytime soon. The divide between coup supporters and coup opponents, which broke open on 1 February, is here to stay as long as the SAC is in power. The presence, or just the fear, of military informers has already frozen social interaction between villagers. Villagers have retained a sense of health as a common good, and have collaborated to contain the virus even if their political views diverged. Given the traditionally strong solidarity in rural Myanmar, such collaboration by necessity will likely continue in the future. However, it alone will not mend distrust.

The decision by the SAC to replace previously elected VTAs has proven to be disastrous in every respect. Newly appointed VTAs are rarely recognized or trusted by villagers and carry no practical authority.

Even those VTAs who were confirmed by the SAC, who oftentimes have the support of the people, have frequently refrained from taking much initiative out of fear that they might antagonize this or the other group in the village. Most of them fear for their lives, sadly, with good reason. The conundrum in many instances is two-fold: on the one hand, village leaders are not able to mobilize their community – even where informal leaders are still trusted; on the other hand, villagers have no one who speaks up for or defends them.

This lack of social cohesion and legitimate leadership has important implications for aid projects, whether humanitarian or development. Participation is risky; villagers are keen to avoid visibility lest they fear they will come to the attention of the military. People may engage in project activities if their leader is recognized by both them and the SAC, but leaders can be replaced easily. Any project would, thus, require both a detailed analysis at every intervention site and site-specific adaptation. If not, projects may damage the social fabric even more.

Since the military takeover of government three features stand out: firstly, the oppression and violence the population of Myanmar has been experiencing at every level; secondly, the absence of any effective government policy for covid management in terms of treatment, testing, or vaccines; and thirdly, the apparent disregard for people's needs. While the SAC has, of late, tried to manage the pandemic, these seeds of a public health policy cannot grow in soil that is depleted of trust and confidence. The research indicates that trust in government can only be rebuilt by one that is of, by and for the people. Until such time, the prospect for ordinary villagers remains bleak.