



Improving food security and nutrition with cash assistance, cash for work and inputs distribution in Myanmar

Strengthening household resilience to socioeconomic and climate shocks in Rakhine State

Context

Rakhine State, Myanmar, has experienced armed conflict, localized violence, political instability and extremely high levels of forced displacement, together with a heightened vulnerability to flooding. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the local population faced further and compounding disruptions to livelihoods, mobility, value chains, critical services and banking systems, as well as to the functioning of the government and administrations. These challenges, combined with the ongoing conflict, restricted the delivery of aid and support, with significant delays in obtaining travel clearance and authorizations to the project area. The authorities were also very resistant to the provision of cash and fertilizers for fear that these would fall into the hands of armed groups.

The protracted conflict continues to increase levels of vulnerability, especially for the Rohingya, an ethnic group that mostly resided in Rakhine State but emigrated in great numbers as a result of conflict and instability. High food insecurity, heightened economic and social vulnerability and a lack of census and data on the population have made it extremely challenging to identify and provide assistance to those in need of support. During the implementation of the interventions described in this good practice, there were multiple military clashes in Rakhine State with an average of 38 clashes per month, including indiscriminate attacks against civilians, burning of houses, and use of landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) (FAO, 2020a). Since 2019, access to Rakhine State has been restricted, limiting the ability for organizations to provide sufficient and appropriate assistance to affected populations. According to the state’s government, 93 000 people remained displaced at the end of 2020 in 192 sites across Rakhine State (RAFT Myanmar and FAO, 2021). Despite the ceasefire negotiated between the parties in November 2020, residents of the targeted communities continued to conduct their daily lives in fear, threatened by landmines and IEDs in surrounding forests and fields (RAFT Myanmar and FAO, 2021). With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government imposed additional

Key facts



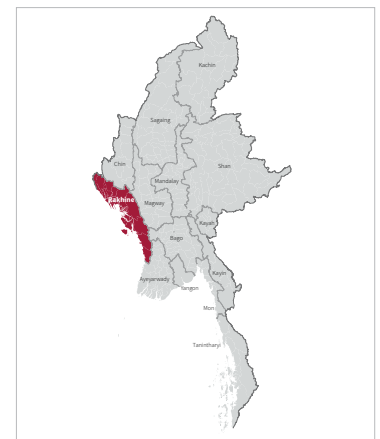
Social protection intervention

- cash assistance to agricultural households
- distribution of agricultural inputs, information materials and hygiene kits
- provision of agricultural training and aquaculture production
- alignment of the cash modality and transfer amount to the social protection programme “Maternal cash assistance for pregnant and lactating women”



Geographical coverage

Rakhine State, Myanmar



Source: United Nations. 2016. *Map of Myanmar*. [Cited 7 June 2023]. <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/myanmar>



Target group

- Unconditional cash transfers to 7 513 households
- Cash for work to 655 workers
- 289 farming and fishing households
- 20 animal care workers trained



Gender

The project prioritized women-headed households ensuring sustainable access to nutritious food, improved incomes and nutrition awareness for pregnant and lactating women.

restrictions on mobility. People could neither move between villages, nor sell their agricultural produce, which caused a sharp rise in prices of goods. Most residents in the rural areas of Rakhine depend on informal and occasional employment, agriculture, micro and small-sized enterprises (FAO, 2020a). With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government imposed additional restrictions on mobility. People could neither move between villages, nor sell their agricultural produce, which caused a sharp rise in prices of goods. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, they were already living economically precarious lives, with more than 80 percent of the rural population classified as either poor or non-poor, and economically insecure and at risk of falling into extreme poverty (RAFT Myanmar and FAO, 2021).





The project and the learning generation process

FAO established links with existing government social protection programmes in Myanmar, which informed the cash assistance modality and the amount of transfers.

Between October 2018 and October 2021, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) implemented an intervention aimed at improving food security and resilience of vulnerable people in northern Rakhine State as part of the broader initiative of the Global Network Against Food Crises Partnership Programme. The programme aimed to increase the resilience of households to socioeconomic shocks and disasters, by focusing on reducing vulnerability to conflict and malnutrition, and bolstering the low agricultural productivity. **The programme also sought to establish links to existing government social protection programmes, which informed the cash assistance modality and the value amount of the transfers.**

A country-level monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) plan was developed in order to track changes in resilience and food security indicators resulting from country investments. Within this framework, a country-specific learning agenda was developed to understand the enabling and/or limiting factors behind these changes, and the conditions for replication and scaling-up potential solutions to food crises. **This good practice brief aims at presenting answers to the learning questions identified, with particular regard to the actual contribution of the interventions to the resilience of targeted communities. The brief also dedicates particular attention to the project's initiatives with respect to conflict sensitiveness and social cohesion through social protection interventions.**

Methodological approach

Coverage

A baseline survey of the population in targeted villages was conducted before the start of the project and revealed that 52 percent were not able to read and write, 38 percent never attended school and 49 percent did not complete the primary education cycle. The survey also registered a considerable gender gap, as only 5 out of 33 women household heads (15 percent) were literate. The average household size consisted of seven members, with an average dependency ratio of 1:2 and 2.5 working members (FAO, 2019).

In each township, FAO prioritized target villages based on their vulnerability to poverty and climate shocks. In each village, beneficiaries were selected utilizing criteria that were publicly presented to the communities by the implementing partners.

The main compulsory selection criterion was household wealth, namely the total stock of assets, in order to prioritize the poorest households in each community. Additional functional criteria were based on the size of the land and the period in which each household planted agricultural inputs.

Furthermore, priority criteria included (RAFT Myanmar and FAO, 2021):

- household headed by women or with orphan(s);
- household with multiple children under 5 years of age;
- household member suffering from chronic disease or disabled;
- household with pregnant/lactating mother; and
- household with reported/identified malnourished children or members that have been admitted to a nutritional/health centre for malnutrition.

Finally, the following suitability criteria had to be satisfied to be included in the final list of recipients:

- being engaged in agricultural production and having access to land for monsoon paddy production;
- being physically able to work; and
- not knowingly providing false information to project staff during any phase of programme.

The list of 6 000 beneficiaries of the unconditional cash transfer was compiled in 2019 and then validated first by the implementing partners in the project villages, and then by FAO staff through mobile telephone calls. The whole process was conducted in close coordination with respective township authorities through telephone calls or face-to-face meetings when possible. Revalidation of the beneficiaries had to be conducted in May 2020 because some beneficiaries were displaced from their villages and had not returned or had decided not to plant crops for the 2020 monsoon season.

Comprehensiveness

The baseline survey showed that the resilience capacity index of female-headed households was below that of male-headed households. In fact, they faced difficulties in accessing basic social services, assets and adaptive capacities. Thus, the project placed specific attention on ensuring that women, particularly pregnant and lactating women with children under

5 years of age, had sustainable access to nutritious foods, as well as improved incomes and knowledge on correct nutrition practices for improved diets.

FAO aligned the cash transfer component targeting pregnant and lactating women to the “Maternal cash assistance for pregnant and lactative women” social protection programme.

The project aligned part of the unconditional cash transfer component targeting pregnant and lactating women to the national social protection programme ‘Maternal cash assistance for pregnant and lactating women’, implemented by the Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement. More specifically, the intervention adopted the same cash modality and set the same transfer value amount of the programme, calculated so as to allow the purchase of nutritious food for three months for mothers and their children.

The project also adopted a cross-sectoral approach by complementing cash transfers with work opportunities, i.e. cash for work, the distribution of farming inputs and information materials, as well as the provision of training. Additional measures were established to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission. FAO developed new guidelines for input and cash distributions, as well as related training. This included the reorganization of the distribution sites (multiplying the number of sites and ensuring washing facilities), the development of information and education materials, the procurement and use of personal protective equipment and hygiene items, and the provision of hygiene and protective kits to beneficiaries accessing the distribution sites.

To evaluate the impact of the project interventions on conflict dynamics, FAO commissioned a conflict-sensitivity assessment to the local organization Respect Accountability Fairness Transparency (RAFT) Myanmar. They conducted interviews and workshops with targeted communities, ensuring a balanced selection of participants based on gender, age groups, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Respondents recognized the positive impact that certain project activities had on conflict dynamics across different religious and ethnic communities. Nonetheless, the analysis noted that, since the selection of beneficiaries for unconditional cash transfers was based on an assessment conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, unconditional cash distributions created tensions between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries within communities (RAFT Myanmar and FAO, 2021). Indeed, the socioeconomic





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circumstances of many non-beneficiaries, including pregnant and lactating women, had significantly worsened during the pandemic, but this was not accounted for and thus they were not entitled to receiving support. The grievance redress mechanism was mostly unsuccessful in solving these issues, hence many village administrators found creative ways to alleviate tensions, such as ensuring that non-beneficiaries of the project received government-led COVID-19 assistance.

Adequacy

The project entailed the delivery of cash assistance and complemented it with additional measures to strengthen household resilience to a broad spectrum of risks, including economic, climate-related and those linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, **6 000 households received one-off unconditional cash transfers of USD 107 coupled with the distribution of hygiene kits** (namely soap and face masks), leaflets on COVID-19, nutrition and climate-smart agriculture, and **monsoon-resilient farming inputs**, which included paddy seeds, vegetable seeds and fertilizer. These inputs were complemented by farming machineries, namely 70 power tillers, 20 rice threshers and one combine harvester, managed and operated by trained members of Village Mechanization Committees across 50 villages. These activities were organized on an ad hoc basis or onboarded where they existed already, giving households the necessary guidelines and training to use the machinery provided. Training was organized by the project in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture of the Rakhine State and was provided to at least two persons per village.

To boost livestock productivity, the project provided 20 community animal health workers with veterinary kits and a five-day training in collaboration with the Rakhine State Livestock Veterinary and Breeding Department. They then conducted training and knowledge sessions in the target villages and provided treatment and vaccinations.

In order to support the few – predominantly Rohingya – households practicing small-scale aquaculture, the project implemented a cash-for-work intervention targeting 97 households with the purpose of restoring household ponds, providing fingerlings and fish feed, and conducting aquaculture training. A second cash-for-work intervention rehabilitated five irrigation infrastructures for agriculture to enhance fresh water management and storage during the monsoon season. This benefited 192 farming households. In total, the cash-for-work sustained the income of 655 workers, of which 49 percent were Rohingya Muslims.

Finally, during the registration process conducted for the provision of agricultural inputs and unconditional cash transfers, the project also registered households with pregnant and lactating women in order to provide 1 513 women and their respective households with hygiene kits and one unconditional cash transfer of USD 65 (aligned to the national Maternal and Child Cash Transfer Programme).

All these interventions were supported and validated by a post-distribution monitoring mechanism, and a feedback and complaints mechanism. The latter had its own standard operating procedures and consisted of a complaint box, a dedicated email account, a telephone hotline and continuous feedback to implementing staff.



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Results and impacts

In 2020, 6 000 beneficiary households received unconditional cash transfers of USD 107. Of these, 79 percent used the amount for rice production, 17 percent used it to buy food, 3 percent for medicines and health, 3 percent for debt repayment, 1 percent on livestock, and 1 percent to pay school fees (FAO, 2020a). Most of the cash was in fact used during the planting season to cover, among others, costs of land preparation and labour (FAO, 2020b). **In addition to cash assistance, FAO distributed 945 kilograms of vegetable seeds during the 2019 monsoon and winter seasons, and 540 kilograms during the 2020 monsoon season (FAO, 2020a).** Moreover, the nutrition leaflets contributed to better inform beneficiaries on nutritional values and health benefits of the three basic food groups; on a healthy, balanced diet and recommended daily dietary allowances; on nutrition of pregnant and lactating mothers; and infant and young child feeding (FAO, 2020a).

In October 2020, 1 513 pregnant and lactating women received USD 65 unconditional cash transfers, of which 80 percent was used to cover their and their infants' nutritional needs. The rest was re-invested into livelihoods, farming, or medicine and health expenditure. The post-distribution monitoring also showed that 91 percent of the recipients were very satisfied with the process (FAO, 2020a).

Beneficiaries acknowledged the positive impact that the project had on conflict dynamics across different religious and ethnic communities.

Some of the cash-for-work activities performed by households in Rakhine, such as drainage clearing and fish pond construction, not only contributed to creating communal assets, but also promoted collaboration among the Rakhine and Muslim villagers from the area. The cash provided helped households to purchase food, medicine and other essential items which would have been otherwise difficult to obtain as household incomes were more limited because of COVID-19 restrictions. **Respondents to the conflict**



sensitivity assessment acknowledge the positive impact that certain project activities had on conflict dynamics across different religious and ethnic communities, particularly cash-for-work developments, mutually beneficial economic activities and donation ceremonies. These included sharing of agricultural machineries between villages, the construction or rehabilitation of village infrastructure or household ponds, trading inputs received by FAO or selling the obtained surplus.

The 20 animal care workers trained by the project provided treatment for 1 641 livestock and vaccinations for 4 139 in their respective villages. Finally, the 70 power tillers provided to the Village Mechanization Committees were used to till a total of nearly 1 035 hectares of paddy fields, servicing up to 1 727 paddy farmers, for a total area that corresponds to 23 percent of paddy fields in the targeted villages. This significantly reduced the time it takes for land preparation, as well as the cost.

Despite these substantial results, FAO conducted an end-line resilience index measurement and analysis, comparing beneficiary and non-beneficiary households. The results from the study provided evidence that resilience and food security declined for both groups within the duration of the project. Unfortunately, the complex circumstances faced by households in Rakhine State during those years make it difficult to isolate the bias effect of the escalation of conflict and of the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, FAO was unable to measure what the change in resilience would have been if the circumstances had remained the same throughout the time period, that is, constant levels of conflict and no impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

An example of integrating community engagement in conflict settings

Given the operational context and the need for a conflict-sensitive approach, **local communities and village leaders (formal and informal) were consulted throughout the project to ensure that perceptions and opinions were incorporated in project interventions to do no harm.**

These consultations were conducted face-to-face by FAO staff or through telephone calls by implementing partners' field staff and they helped ensure activities were designed to address the specific needs, vulnerabilities and interests of the different livelihood, ethnic and gender groups in the targeted villages. FAO staff and implementing partners were guided and trained on effective implementation of conflict sensitivity assessments. Therefore, concrete steps were taken during the project's implementation to minimize the risk of exacerbating tensions and to contribute to addressing the root causes of conflict. For example:

- support provided to targeted villages included both Rohingya and Rakhine majority villages – 47 and 53 percent, respectively;

- some of the agricultural machinery distributed had to be shared by Muslim and Rohingya communities;
- beneficiary selection criteria included land use accessibility instead of land ownership;
- implementing partners held regular community consultations throughout the duration of the project; and
- FAO ensured the availability of communication and outreach channels to promote the project's complaint and feedback mechanism.

Finally, FAO regularly monitored the security situation in the state, together with the UN Department for Security Services, as well as COVID-19-related restrictions and directives established by government authorities. This was complemented by attended regular coordination meetings with partners and continuously monitoring protection-related issues and intercommunal conflict risks in project areas.

Sustainability

The project entailed mainly stand-alone interventions, organized and adapted as a result of conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, and implemented in close collaboration with the local branches of the **Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation**. FAO and implementing partners attempted to refer households that did not benefit from FAO's intervention to government-sponsored assistance schemes during the outbreak but this was not successful because of constraints linked to the conflict.

The cash-for-work component of the project focused on irrigation facilities and the restoration or construction of ponds. This intervention was conceived and implemented so that communities could gain the necessary knowledge to continue operation and maintenance of such infrastructures, including through specific trainings provided on good practices to ensure the maintenance of these community assets and infrastructure over time.

Finally, building the capacity of local implementing partners was crucial in terms of sustainability, replicability and scalability of future interventions in the region.



Replicability and upscaling

The project implementation faced numerous challenges. After the escalation of the conflict in Rakhine State in January 2019, the government restricted international access to the project area. Travel authorizations were suspended for international staff to all project locations, while national staff could travel only in urban areas on an occasional basis. This situation was soon compounded by COVID-19 containment measures and disruptions to banking systems which limited the amount of cash that could be withdrawn by implementing partners; Finally, the breakdown of interactions with government in 2021 further restricted the implementation of activities.

As a result, the implementation strategy shifted to a remote management approach, which mandated a review of the guidelines and procedures with partners, especially in terms of monitoring and evaluation. For example, all telephone numbers of beneficiaries needed to be collected and stored, and monitoring on delivery had to be completed by telephone. Video calls were also planned when an internet connection was available.

Findings and lessons learned from this intervention were used to inform new ongoing cash interventions in the country. In particular, the conflict sensitivity assessment that FAO conducted in partnership with RAFT Myanmar provided numerous learning points. A more incremental approach to integrating social cohesion is recommended for future FAO programmes, starting with strengthening psycho-social and trauma informed programming, intracommunal social cohesion and building toward intercommunal social cohesion outcomes.





Key learnings

To strengthen accountability to affected people emphasis should be placed on:

- prioritizing communication with all the residents in the project areas, including beneficiaries, about planned activities, selection criteria and related rationale, as well as complaints mechanism;
- using mobile messaging or digital technologies to better disseminate information remotely; and
- strengthening capacity of FAO and implementing partners staff on project guidelines and procedures, especially complaints, feedback, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

To improve beneficiary selection and prioritization it is important to:

- understand community dynamics when utilizing existing community structures, or when establishing new ones, to assist with or validate beneficiary selection;
- use mobile data collection tools, instead of paper-based methods, to minimize errors and make the process faster and more efficient; and
- pay continuous attention to changing circumstances to ensure that previous assessments and selection criteria always reflect current needs and vulnerabilities throughout the duration of the project. Tension was caused between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries because the former had been selected based on an analysis conducted before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby not accounting for negative socioeconomic impacts of containment measures.

To select the most suitable type of intervention and maximize their impact in conflict-affected contexts, namely:

- cash-for-work interventions targeting whole communities have the potential to contribute to improved inter-community relations, promote community development, and provide livelihoods and opportunities for positive social engagements while building or rehabilitating infrastructure useful to the community;
- interventions should consider labour market fluctuations, seasonality and cultural or religious festivities, such as Ramadan; and
- targeted unconditional cash transfers need careful communication, transparency, community validation and effective mechanisms to address exclusion complaints in a satisfactory manner.

Testimonies



“The seeds, fertilizers, cash and power tillers are very helpful for the community.”

Kyauk Phyu Taung village, Buthidaung township

“We received paddy seeds, crops and cash assistance from FAO. Thanks to this support, we can easily plough and harvest our farms, which we extended with the help of FAO. We also made profit, thanks to the vegetable seeds that we have cultivated and sold in the market. The fertilizer provided by FAO is the best we have ever seen. The plants and vegetables grew easily and faster. FAO also gave one tractor for the whole village.”

Naung Chaung village, Maungdaw township

“We are glad that FAO constructed the water channel in our village. It is convenient for us to plant in the summer.”

Kyauk Phyu village, Kyauktaw township

“FAO provided face masks, paddy seeds, crops and vegetable seeds, a tractor and cash assistance. By using the tractor, we can save the cost of ploughing using manpower and we can better cover the cost for food and medicine.”

Kyee Kan Pyin village, Maungdaw township



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Partners

Resource partner

- European Union Directorate-General for International Partnerships

Technical partners

- Rakhine State administration
- Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation
- Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement
- Respect Accountability Fairness Transparency Myanmar
- People for People
- Action for Green Earth
- Phyu Sin Saydanar Action Group

Acknowledgements

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of the United Nations**

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REQUIRED CITATION

FAO. 2023. *Improving food security and nutrition with cash assistance, cash for work and inputs distribution in Myanmar*. Rome. [https://doi.org??](https://doi.org?)

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