



## ACCELERATING THREATS FROM CLIMATE CHANGE: DISASTERS AND DISPLACEMENT IN MYANMAR

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*Front cover:* A disaster-affected village in Mimbya Township, Rakhine State.

*This page:* Massive floods in 2015 washed away this woman's home and most of her village in Kale Township, Sagaing Region. She and her family have now been relocated to another site by local authorities where they are struggling to rebuild their lives.



## Introduction

In the summer of 2015, Myanmar experienced massive floods and associated landslides that affected nine million people. Since then, the country has seen dramatic political change, while confronting a litany of ongoing humanitarian crises. As the government strives to juggle humanitarian needs with longer-term development issues, it must confront its extreme vulnerability to disasters and climate change. At present, flood-affected communities in some of the poorest and most conflict-ridden areas of the country have yet to recover, including those which were hastily relocated. In the near-term, the government and its development partners must help those displaced by the 2015 floods and landslides to restore their livelihoods and enhance their resilience to future disasters. Over the longer-term, the government will also need to work with its partners to build its technical capacity to better mitigate the adverse impacts of disasters and climate change on displacement and migration. Failure to do so will only continue to undermine development and exacerbate Myanmar's other challenges.

## Recommendations

- Donor governments and development and humanitarian agencies with expertise in disaster risk management must work collaboratively to support the Myanmar government in developing and implementing proven strategies that mitigate disaster displacement risk among the most vulnerable communities. This includes increasing financial and technical support, especially at the local level, to effectively address the risks and underlying socio-economic drivers of displacement and migration in the context of disasters and climate change.
- The Myanmar government, with the support of the multi-lateral development banks, donor governments, the United Nations (UN), and the private sector, must prioritize investments in recovery and livelihood restoration in those areas worst affected by the 2015 floods and landslides including increased support for the implementation of the Myanmar government's National Recovery Framework.
- The Myanmar government and its partners, with the support of technical experts and international initiatives such as the Platform on Disaster Displacement, should develop policies, procedures, and guidelines for planned relocation. Such guidelines must be implemented at the local level through training and capacity building to ensure that relocation is fully consensual and participatory, respects the human rights of affected individuals, and is accompanied by the multi-year funding necessary to provide relocated households with land, safe and secure housing, and access to livelihoods and services.
- Members of the UN humanitarian country team in Myanmar providing support for relocation of disaster-displaced communities must develop joint internal guidelines for operationalizing their role. This should include working with the Myanmar government and development agencies to try to ensure that planned relocation is accompanied by comprehensive, long-term support and monitoring so that it is sustainable and does not increase vulnerability or protection risks.

## Background and Context

Over the past year, Myanmar has seen dramatic political change and new opportunities for development. In November 2015, after decades of rule by the military, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in national elections paving the way for the first truly civilian president in more than 50 years. In addition, donor countries and multi-lateral development banks have pledged to support the new government to address the country's chronic underdevelopment. The U.S. government's decision in September 2016 to lift nearly all of the remaining sanctions against Myanmar has also opened the door to trade benefits and further increases in investment.

But the fledgling government has also inherited numerous challenges. Since coming to power in March, the NLD has had to form and re-form a government and fill thousands of administrative and political positions at numerous levels. At the same time, the military's continued economic influence and control of a quarter of parliamentary seats pursuant to the Myanmar's constitution has constrained the NLD's ability to bring about more radical changes. Meanwhile, the peace process between the government and several armed ethnic groups has stalled amid new violent clashes and continued blocking of humanitarian aid in parts of Kachin and northern Shan States. The Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State in western Myanmar continues to face persecution and a recent security crackdown that has led to dozens of deaths and numerous reported abuses as well as the blocking of humanitarian aid to tens of thousands. The past two years have also seen a slowing of economic growth due in part to flood-related impacts on agriculture and a deceleration of investments during the election transition, while high rates of poverty<sup>1</sup> and under-development continue to hamper progress.<sup>2</sup>

Underlying this is Myanmar's extreme vulnerability to natural hazards and climate change. Each year the country consistently ranks at the top of the leading risk indices.

Over the past decade, the government has made steady progress on improving its disaster management. In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the country

Myanmar ranks second on the 2017 Global Climate Risk Index, which analyzes the extent to which countries have suffered weather-related losses over the past 20 years.<sup>3</sup> Myanmar also ranks 12 out of 191 countries on the 2017 Index for Risk Management, which assesses the risk of humanitarian crises based on an analysis of hazards and exposure, underlying vulnerability, and lack of coping capacity.<sup>4</sup> In terms of readiness to improve resilience and adapt to climate change and other global challenges, Myanmar ranks 163 out of 181 countries on the University of Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index.<sup>5</sup>

in 2008 and exposed the military government's lack of preparedness, Myanmar adopted a national framework called the Myanmar Action Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction (MAPDRR), which aims to make the country "safer and more resilient against natural hazards, thus protecting lives, livelihoods, and development gains." In June 2013, the government adopted the Disaster Management Law and rules for its implementation were promulgated in April 2015. At present, the government is revising the MAPDRR in order to come into line with regional and global disaster risk reduction (DRR) frameworks.<sup>6</sup> The 2014 Disaster Management Reference Handbook is also under revision.<sup>7</sup>

As the country looks towards a new era of growth, it must ensure that both development and humanitarian plans integrate the country's extreme vulnerability to natural hazards and climate change. The ongoing revisions to the MAPDRR and the Disaster Management Handbook and the adoption of other DRR and climate change adaptation strategies and plans present an opportunity to integrate proven strategies to avert, minimize, and address climate-related displacement risk.

# Impacts of Disasters and Climate Change on Displacement and Migration in Myanmar

Annual monsoon-related flooding and tropical cyclones emanating from the Bay of Bengal are a frequent cause of displacement in Myanmar. Most impacted are poor, rural households reliant on fishing and rice production in coastal and delta areas, but densely populated urban areas like Yangon also are at risk. During heavy rains, mountainous areas experience landslides. The country is also susceptible to earthquakes, wildfires, and drought. In general, displacement from these events is presumed to be relatively short-term with families returning to restore or rebuild their homes once the hazard subsides. However, at present, there is no data on how long people are displaced by these events. Nor is there available information on how many flee the country altogether in the wake of frequent natural disasters.<sup>8</sup>

In July and August 2015, intense rains fueled by a tropical cyclone caused massive floods and landslides across 12 of Myanmar's 14 states and regions, leading the government to declare a state of emergency. By all accounts, the 2015 floods/landslides disaster was the worst since Cyclone Nargis devastated the country in 2008, killing more than 138,000 people.<sup>9</sup> The 2015 floods and landslides killed 172 people, displaced close to 1.7 million, and affected 9.5 million people overall. Hardest hit was the shelter/housing sector, with more than 20,000 homes totally destroyed and a half million homes damaged.<sup>10</sup> Damage to the agricultural sector – in particular, the country's staple commodity, rice – was also massive, with over two million acres of farmland destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to destroying homes and paddy fields, floodwaters and landslides rendered uninhabitable certain areas that were washed away or submerged in mud. In the months following the disaster, local authorities reported that 3,000 households in Chin State and approximately 1,600 in the Sagaing region would need to be relocated to safer areas during the recovery phase.<sup>12</sup> While the full scale of the impact from the disaster will not be known for

years, direct economic losses are estimated at \$1.49 billion in U.S. dollars.<sup>13</sup> Worst affected were some of the poorest and most conflict-ridden parts of the country, including Rakhine and Chin States.

In the past year alone since the 2015 floods, the country has experienced several additional weather extremes and climate shocks that have left vulnerable communities unable to meet basic needs and in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. In April and May 2016, Mandalay, Bago, and Ayeyarwady regions were hit with record-breaking temperatures and widespread water shortages due in part to El Niño conditions.<sup>14</sup> In July 2016, the country was again hit by usually strong floods that inundated many of the same areas hit by the 2015 floods and landslides and which displaced 500,000 people.<sup>15</sup> In August, central Myanmar was struck by a 6.8 magnitude earthquake.<sup>16</sup>

In the decades to come, numerous contributing factors are likely to result in increased disaster-related displacement, including: more frequent and severe floods, cyclones, droughts, and other weather events linked to global climate change; population growth and increasing numbers of people living in high-risk areas; and deforestation/environmental degradation, which, without careful protection measures, are likely to accompany development and industrialization.

Failure to effectively respond to disasters and other adverse climate change effects is also likely to contribute to both internal and international migration. Experience from past disasters indicates that the inability of affected communities in Myanmar to recover their livelihoods in the wake of disasters contributes to migration. For example, social impact monitoring conducted by the World Bank following Cyclone Nargis revealed that the inability of affected villages to recover from the disaster led to high levels of outmigration over time. In some instances, nearly half of village youth ultimately migrated to urban areas as the only means of coping with the disaster.<sup>17</sup> Many of them now live in slum-like conditions in Hlaing Thar Yar, a fast-growing, industrial neighborhood on the outskirts of Yangon.

While migration to urban areas often provides new opportunities to impoverished farmers from rural areas, it also



RI interviews with informal settlers, who migrated to Yangon following Cyclone Nargis and are now living in Hlaing Thar Yar, confirmed that while life in urban areas creates new social and employment opportunities, it also carries inherent risks.

presents protection risks to poorer and more vulnerable migrants, including child labor, crime, and sexual and labor exploitation.<sup>18</sup> In a recent address, Vice President U Henry Van Thio, chairman of National Natural Disaster Committee, expressed concern that weaknesses in resettling and rehousing people after disasters could be linked to human trafficking, internal migration, and illegal migrant workers.<sup>19</sup>

## Lessons Learned from Responses to Recent Climate-Related Displacement and Migration in Myanmar

In September 2015, about a month after the floods and landslides disaster, a team from Refugees International (RI) visited affected areas of Sagaing Region, Chin State, and Rakhine State to meet with displaced families as well as local and international humanitarian agencies that

assisted with the response. A year later, in September 2016, RI returned to Myanmar to visit many of the same areas affected by the 2015 floods to assess how communities were recovering, including numerous villages in Sagaing Region and Chin State that had been relocated.

As discussed in RI's November 2015 field report, "Myanmar Floods: Missed Opportunities but Still Time to Act," the initial response to the disaster was robust (although this had more to do with the outpouring of assistance by local charitable organizations and the Myanmar public and to self-help measures employed by affected communities themselves, than to a timely response by the government or international community). Nonetheless, there has been notable progress in many areas. Humanitarian agencies with whom RI spoke pointed in particular to improvements to information management and coordination by the National Disaster Management Center and to disaster coordination via the Emergency Operations Centre. In addition, whereas during the response to Cyclone Nargis the government was reluctant to share



information on the magnitude of the devastation and, suspicious of outsiders (especially the United Nations), it was slow to provide access which would have allowed international humanitarian agencies to assist. The government was far more open to working with the international community during the response to the 2015 floods and landslides. Within days of the disaster declaration, the government accepted the international community's offer of assistance and established expedited procedures for humanitarian access to affected communities.<sup>20</sup> The private sector which provided both cash and food aid also played an important role.

Less evident, however, were improvements in disaster preparedness measures that would have more effectively avoided or mitigated displacement and other impacts of the disaster on livelihoods, especially on the most vulnerable populations. For example, as discussed in its November 2015 report, RI saw little to no evidence in Rakhine State, Chin State, or Sagaing Region of effective early warning systems that would have allowed people to better protect their homes, animals, and assets from the devastation caused by the floods and landslides. RI interviews with affected communities and humanitarian agencies involved in the response also indicated that insufficient support to help displaced families rebuild their homes and for early recovery in the direct aftermath of the disaster (e.g., the provision of seeds, animals, or other income-generating assets) left poorer households with few remaining sources of income and increased levels of indebtedness.

Moreover, while there were reports that evacuation shelters constructed in the aftermath of Nargis had proved effective in Ayeyarwady Region, evacuations in Rakhine State and Sagaing Region appeared unplanned and totally spontaneous, with most people fleeing to nearby schools or monasteries amid rapidly rising flood waters. The apparent lack of evacuation plans for internally displaced Rakhine and Rohingya communities living in displacement camps in Rakhine State was deeply concerning, since these displaced populations generally live in inadequate shelter in flood-prone and highly exposed areas. The particularly poor conditions of camps holding some 120,000 displaced Rohingya and the restrictions on freedom of movement aimed at the general Rohingya

population present unique challenges in the case of an emergency, leaving them at serious risk of harm in a disaster. Even those Rohingya and other Muslim minorities who might have been permitted by the authorities to evacuate to a monastery may have been hesitant to do so for fear of discrimination.

Government donors such as the United States and Japan, as well as development and humanitarian agencies with expertise in disaster risk management – including members of the Myanmar Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group (DRR WG)<sup>21</sup> and development actors involved in early recovery, e.g., the UN Development Program (UNDP) – must work collaboratively to support the Myanmar government to develop and implement proven strategies to mitigate the risk of displacement among those with the highest levels of socio-economic vulnerability who live in hazard prone areas. Key to this will be increasing financial and technical support, especially at the local level, to improve understanding of displacement risk. Measures for better addressing displacement risk include:

- Identifying communities most exposed to hazards through improved hazard mapping.
- Ensuring that appropriate protection measures are in place (e.g., improved forecasting of hazards, early warning to allow people to safeguard homes and assets, and evacuation planning to ensure people's safety).
- Targeting both early and long-term recovery assistance to the most vulnerable communities and households (e.g., the poor, the landless, marginalized communities) to ensure they are provided with durable shelter and sustainable livelihoods in the aftermath of disasters.
- Monitoring displacement and migration over the long-term to identify the root causes of post-disaster, protracted displacement and migration.

## Recovery Efforts Stalled

Also disappointing is limited evidence that the government or its humanitarian or development partners have accomplished much since the 2015 floods and landslides to address the mid- and longer-term recovery needs of millions of rural poor affected by the disaster. Interviews with agencies involved in assisting the government to develop response and recovery plans indicated that the government transition over the past year – combined with a seemingly never-ending emergence of new crises including ongoing violence and inter-ethnic conflict – had diverted time and attention, and that recovery programs had stalled. Interviews with many of the worst-affected communities in Rakhine State, Chin State, and Sagaing Region indicated that, with the few remaining disaster assistance programs about to end, many of the more vulnerable households do not know how they will survive.

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**“One of the lessons we learned is not to create dependencies. But what I hear from communities is, ‘Now you are giving us everything. But what happens when [the assistance] stops?’ They are afraid for the future.”**

— NGO staff member interviewed by RI

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At present, there are a few projects aimed at helping disaster-affected communities to recover. For example, USAID has provided \$5 million to its partners to help promote greater economic opportunity for conflict-affected communities in Rakhine State, some of which were also affected by flooding, over a 30 month period until July 2018.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the World Bank has issued a \$200 million credit focused on reconstruction of the transportation sector as part of its Myanmar Flood and Landslide Emergency Recovery Project that will include support for livelihoods and job creation through the use of labor-intensive works.<sup>23</sup> While a National Recovery Framework and Plan for the 2015 Floods and Landslides Disaster was completed in September 2016, at the time of

RI’s visit, it had not yet been approved by the government. The framework adopts a multi-sectoral approach aimed at supporting the self-recovery of flood- and landslide-affected communities and strengthening community and institutional resilience.

As the country looks towards new opportunities to build resilience, the recovery needs of those affected by the 2015 disaster must be prioritized. The Myanmar government, with the support of the multi-lateral development banks, government donors, and the United Nations, must prioritize investments in recovery and livelihood restoration in those areas worst affected by the 2015 floods and landslides, including increased support for the implementation of the government’s National Recovery Framework.

Toward this end, the contribution of Myanmar’s private sector will be critical. At present, the Union of Myanmar Federations Chamber of Commerce and Industries (UMFCCI) and other businesses are collaborating with the government, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and UNDP to establish a private sector network for disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response, and recovery.<sup>24</sup> As the network organizes and develops terms of reference, it should include activities and financial support to help implement the government’s recovery plans and build resilience of the most vulnerable communities to future disasters.

*“[W]e must look beyond the immediate needs and towards durable and transformative change: communities, the Government, and its development partners must move towards more effective risk management. Income-generating capacity must not only be increased, but livelihood streams also need to be diversified in order for affected families – in one of the countries most vulnerable to disasters – to adapt and absorb the innumerable shocks and stressors they will encounter.”*

– Myanmar National Recovery Framework and Plan  
Floods and Landslides 2015





This pregnant mother of two, whose home in Mimbya Township, Rakhine State was severely damaged by the 2015 floods, was able to repair her home with the help of family and neighbors. However, she and her husband, who are day laborers, are struggling to find work and their income is half of what it used to be (from \$4 to \$2 per day). They no longer are able to afford sending their 6-year-old daughter, pictured here, to school.

## Insufficient Support for Sustainable Planned Relocation

When RI visited flood-affected areas of Rakhine State, Chin State, and Sagaing Division not long after the floods in September 2015, the team met with numerous individuals whose homes and former villages had been destroyed and who were then living in displacement camps or tents by the side of the road awaiting relocation by the government to safer areas. At the time, limited information was available regarding the relocations, including where people would be relocated to or when. Concerned regarding the lack of transparent and inclusive relocation plans, RI urged the government and humanitarian agencies to ensure that families facing prolonged displacement were adequately protected and assisted while awaiting relocation. RI's November 2015 report also called on national and international agencies to advocate for protection safeguards for relocated communities to ensure that they were fully informed, provided with suitable housing and access to public services, and afforded access to livelihoods in their new locations. Given the inherent risks in relocating

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**“On the relocation side,  
we dropped the ball.”**

*— UN agency representative interviewed by RI*

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communities in post-disaster settings, the report urged the government and protection actors to “ensure that safeguards were in place for those targeted for relocation.”<sup>25</sup>

When RI returned to visit these same areas in Chin State and Sagaing Region one year later, nearly all of the communities had been relocated. The government, local authorities, and their partners deserve credit for the speed with which they accomplished these relocations thereby minimizing prolonged displacement. The tradeoff, however, was that few, if any, of guidelines for planned relocation had been adhered to. Rather, relocations of communities had been undertaken in a somewhat ad hoc fashion with the support of a variety of actors, including local authorities, national charities, the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS), local NGOs, the United Nations, and other inter-

national agencies with a wide range of results. Common concerns of relocated households included the following:

***Insufficient information regarding the relocation process or assistance, limited opportunities for participation:***

While awaiting relocation, few people had been informed regarding when or to where they would be relocated or what types of assistance they would receive. Now that they have been relocated, many communities remain dependent on humanitarian aid but have not been informed of whether or when the aid will end.

***Lack of available sites for relocation:*** Lack of available, government-owned land for relocation meant that in some instances the communities themselves were forced to pool funds to purchase privately owned land. For example, RI visited families from a village in Kale Township in Sagaing Region whose homes were destroyed by the floods and who had spent six months in tents awaiting relocation. However, when the government was unable to find a suitable relocation site, the families ended up pooling funds to purchase 47 acres of land from a private landowner.

***Limited support for rebuilding homes:*** Because government shelter support was limited to those whose homes had been totally destroyed, many relocated families whose homes were only partially damaged received little to no assistance in rebuilding new homes at the relocation site.<sup>26</sup> For example, RI met with one family whose home had been buried in mud up to the roof, but since the house was technically still there, the family did not receive any shelter assistance and had to use its own resources to exhume the home from the mud. Ultimately, they had to use their own funds to transport what was left of the beams, siding, flooring, and the roof to the relocation site.

***Limited support for physical relocation:*** As noted above, one of the biggest challenges for displaced families whose homes had been partially destroyed was how to physically move the remnants of their former homes – e.g., wooden beams and poles, roofing – to the relocation sites. Many families could not afford to rent a truck and lacked the manpower to move these heavy construction materials on their own.

***Smaller, less durable homes:*** With a few exceptions, relocated families' new homes were smaller and less well constructed than their former homes. RI saw numerous sizes and styles of housing, ranging from large wooden constructions to semi-temporary structures at the relocation sites.

***Challenges accessing services and education:*** While nearly all of the households with whom RI spoke said they had received new and improved latrines at the relocation sites, some reported encountering challenges in accessing water. In two of the relocated villages RI visited, attempts to drill for water at the new sites, which were further away and uphill from their original homes by the river, were unsuccessful. Several relocated families also complained that the school was now located further away. An NGO working with a relocated community in Chin State expressed concern that school drop-out rates were likely to increase in the coming months in some of the relocated communities.

***Limited livelihood opportunities at relocation sites:*** The biggest concern among the dozens of relocated families with whom RI spoke was the lack of available livelihoods at the relocation sites. In general, most of the relocated communities depended on agriculture or informal day labor for their income prior to the floods. The destruction of paddy fields and the drop off in labor demand left most households with no means of making a living other than illegally cutting trees or foraging for bamboo. There was evidence that it was not only the destruction caused by the disaster that had deprived them of a livelihood, but also relocating them to a new site where livelihoods were harder to access or did not exist, as was the case in Chin State.

***Short-term nature of assistance to relocated communities:*** Many relocated families expressed concern that humanitarian assistance, including the food aid and cash assistance they had been receiving from the UN, the MRCS, and other local and international humanitarian organizations, had ended or was coming to an end. Most of these families had used whatever cash assistance they had received to move and/or rebuild their homes. Because most had no sustainable source of income at the relocation sites and had been unable to recover their livelihoods, they



had no idea how they would get by when these programs came to an end.

## Safeguards for Planned Relocation Get Short Shift

The many challenges and need for safeguards for planned relocation were documented at numerous junctures following the disaster. A report carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in late February 2016, called the Disaster Tracking Matrix (DTM), cites numerous issues around the relocations, including the absence of clear guidelines from the national government on eligibility criteria and concerns that criteria would be based on secure land tenure, raising fears that those renters, informal settlers, and displaced families with weak security of tenure would be left out.<sup>27</sup>

An assessment by the Myanmar Shelter Cluster Coordinator<sup>28</sup> of relocated communities in Chin State also pointed to numerous concerns including: unknown flood and landslide risk of relocation sites built on steep terrain; limited consultation with displaced individuals

on permanent housing options; relocation sites that were incompatible with displaced communities' previous sources of livelihoods, thus raising issues of sustainability; failure to address the caseload of rented houses that were either partially or completely damaged, thereby leaving them at risk of "falling through the cracks"; lack of compensation for those who did not own their houses and failure to account for the significant increase in the cost of rental housing; and questions regarding the suitability of building materials used for permanent housing given the local climate. With respect to the livelihoods and sustainability at relocation sites, the shelter cluster coordinator "deferred relevant questions to the expertise of early recovery/development agencies (i.e. UNDP)."<sup>29</sup>

The Myanmar government's National Framework for Recovery for the 2015 Floods and Landslides, released in September 2016, contains detailed safeguards to protect communities subject to relocation including, among other things, the requirement that people who are unavoidably displaced be compensated and assisted "so their economic and social future is generally as favorable as it would have been in the absence of relocation."<sup>30</sup> The recovery framework stresses that implementers must ensure that:



This family's home in Rakhine State, and the 40-foot plot on which it stood, were swept away when the river bank collapsed during the 2015 floods taking 21 other homes with it. They rebuilt their home inland but it was inundated again during above-normal flooding in 2016, when 20 more feet of their land fell into the river. The village administrator is now working with township authorities to try to relocate the entire village of 97 households. "I'm pretty sure in five years this whole village will be submerged by the river," he said.





When RI visited this area of Sagaing Region last September, these families were living in tents along a roadside, their homes having been washed away by flash floods. Now, one year later, they have been relocated away from the river to government-owned land and are living in new homes built with support from international donors. They feel safer in their new homes, but the new site is situated along a steep mountainside far from the main road, creating numerous challenges. For poor rural households like these that rely on whatever odd jobs are available, proximity to a town or main road has a direct impact on their earnings.

The destruction to paddy fields, livestock, and other sources of income caused by the floods has deeply impacted employment opportunities, resulting in greater competition for work. When people come to the village seeking day laborers, the people living further down the mountainside near to the main road get work. In addition, because their new plots are smaller, they cannot grow as many vegetables in their garden as before, an important source of food and income. It has affected their children as well who now have to walk an hour each way to get to their school.



communities are fully informed and consulted; able to exercise their right to participate in decision making processes including development of compensation packages, selection of a site, development of site services; dedicated grievance and appeals mechanisms, and independent, regular monitoring systems are in place; and new settlements are provided with requisite infrastructure and livelihood investments.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, however, it appears that few, if any, of these guidelines were adhered to or met. For example, in Chin State, RI spoke to a national NGO that had been providing assistance to four villages in Tedim Township that had been wiped out by landslides and required relocation. However, finding suitable, nearby land for relocation proved challenging. While the Chin government was able to find nearby, available land for two of the villages, the third had to be located 16 miles away and the fourth 60 miles from its original site in Tedim Township. The government paid for transport of the families to the new site but did not allow families to bring their personal belongings. In addition, given the constraints on available land, the government was reportedly unable to provide any land for farming for two of the villages.

According to the representative of an NGO assisting with the relocation, “The main problem is how to make [the relocated people] self-reliant when they are moving tens of miles away from their original homes to a site [near the border with Sagaing], where there is no work. They don’t even speak Burmese.” Relocated families have been provided with some goats, but otherwise, “there is no way to make a living... A relocation program like this really needs to be supported for two to three years until they can recover their livelihoods,” he added.

With government and donor support for flood-affected communities having already ended or coming to an end later this year, and with no signs of long-term recovery programs that would help displaced communities to restore their livelihoods, there is a very real risk that the relocation itself will end up further impoverishing these displaced families. Without sufficient monitoring and sustained, multi-year support to ensure relocated communities are able to access jobs, schools, water, and other services, relocation threatens to undermine, not enhance, disaster resilience.

## Recommendations for More Effectively Addressing Climate-Related Displacement

With the numbers of people displaced by disasters trending upwards across the globe,<sup>31</sup> the international community has increased its focus on the need to better prepare for and respond to the impacts of more extreme weather and climate change on displacement. The most comprehensive initiative to date on disasters, climate change, and human mobility is the Nansen Initiative on Disaster-Induced, Cross-Border Displacement. Launched in 2012, the Nansen Initiative was a state-led, bottom up consultative process among governments aimed at building international consensus on how to address the gap in the international legal framework for protection people forced to flee their countries due to disasters and climate change (who do not qualify as “refugees” under the 1951 Refugees Convention). Over a three year period, the Nansen Initiative Secretariat led a series of regional consultations with governments to develop common goals and principles. The effort culminated in October 2015 with more than 100 governments adopting the “Nansen Initiative Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border, Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change” (Nansen Protection Agenda).<sup>33</sup>

Recognizing the propensity of internal displacement from disasters to lead to cross-border displacement and migration, the Nansen Protection Agenda goes beyond cross-border displacement and calls on national governments to better manage disaster displacement risk within their countries by reducing vulnerability and building resilience. The Agenda recommends: (1) integrating displacement and migration from disasters into disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation strategies and other relevant development processes; (2) improving the use of planned relocation as preventative or responsive measure to disaster risk and displacement; and (3) ensuring that relevant laws and policies address the needs of internally displaced persons in disaster situations.<sup>34</sup>

In order to implement the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda, the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) was launched in 2016. Over the next several years, the PDD will be coordinating efforts to address disaster and

climate change-related displacement and migration, including through planned relocation having gained the support of numerous governments and brought together an advisory committee comprised of United Nations agencies, NGOs, and academic and research institutions to support its work. As such, it provides an important platform and source of technical support for countries like Myanmar, which are likely to experience more frequent disasters, changing climactic conditions, and associated impacts on displacement and migration in the decades to come.

According to the PDD's Strategic Framework (2016-2018), the Platform will work with both IOM and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to operationalize measures to address climate displacement risk through voluntary migration and planned relocation.

When displacement or other forms of human mobility are unavoidable in the context of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change, policy options may include facilitating voluntary migration and planned relocation to move people away from hazardous areas to safer areas before a disaster or displacement occurs, taking into account the regional/sub-regional diversity or uniqueness. Both IOM (facilitating voluntary migration) and UNHCR (planned relocation) have often assumed organizational leadership for work in these areas both at policy and operational level. The Platform will work and coordinate closely with both agencies to enable further action in support of such processes.<sup>35</sup>

The Myanmar government, with the support of technical experts and international initiatives like the PDD, must adopt policies for planned relocation and implement them at the local level through training and capacity building to ensure that planned relocation is fully consensual, respects the human rights of relocated individuals, and is accompanied by multi-year funding and support to ensure that relocated households are provided with safe and secure housing, land, and access to livelihoods and services. The ongoing revision of MAPDRR and Disaster Management Handbook provide opportunities for the Myanmar government to adopt specific measures targeted

not only at mitigating disaster displacement risk but also policies and procedures for planned relocation and to clarify roles and responsibilities regarding planned relocation.

However, given the inherent risks in planned relocation and experience from Myanmar and other countries like the Philippines,<sup>36</sup> it also will be necessary for humanitarian agencies and donors who support them to determine when and under what conditions they will assist with planned relocations. In Myanmar, IOM, the MRCS, and local and international agencies and non-governmental organizations with sectoral expertise in shelter, camp coordination and camp management, and water and sanitation (i.e., UNICEF) provided support to local authorities engaged in planned relocation. According to RI interviews, while UNHCR has responsibility for protection of internally displaced persons in complex emergencies in Myanmar, it did not assist with planned relocation in Chin State or Sagaing Region (either in its capacity as co-lead of the shelter cluster with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, IFRC, or as protection cluster lead) as it had no presence in these areas and prior to the disaster, had reached an informal arrangement with IFRC that IFRC would lead on the shelter response to disaster-related displacement.

Establishing lines of responsibility within the clusters in situations of disasters is key to ensuring that at the time, and no matter where, the crisis hits, the response is well coordinated both among humanitarian agencies and with the government. This is true for planned relocation as well. Given the likelihood that the Myanmar government will continue to employ planned relocation in post-disaster settings as a strategy to avoid future displacement, members of the UN humanitarian country team (HCT) providing support for planned relocation of disaster-displaced communities, as well as the donors who support them, must develop internal guidelines for operationalizing their role in supporting local authorities with planned relocation. Agencies such as IOM, MRCS, IFRC, UNHCR (to the extent that it has assumed an operational role with respect to planned relocation under the PDD), and UNDP (given its role in supporting early recovery) will have a particularly important role in developing HCT guidelines applicable to post-disaster, planned relocation.



Where the government determines planned relocation is warranted, they should adhere to safeguards to avoid increasing vulnerability or protection risks and work with the government and development actors to ensure that planned relocation is accompanied by comprehensive, long-term support to ensure it is sustainable.

## Conclusion

As the newly elected government gets on its feet and looks toward increased foreign investment and development, it must prioritize strategies to address the growing threat that disasters, more extreme weather, and climate change present to its future. In the near-term, the government and its development partners must help those displaced by the 2015 floods and landslides, especially those who were relocated and remain reliant on humanitarian

aid, to restore their livelihoods and enhance their resilience to future disasters. Without sufficient monitoring and sustained, multi-year support to ensure relocated communities are able to access jobs, schools, water, and other services, relocation threatens to undermine, not enhance, disaster resilience. Over the mid- and longer-term, the government will also need to build its technical capacity to better prevent and address displacement and other impacts from climate change. Failure to do so will only continue to undermine longer-term development and exacerbate the other challenges faced by the country.

*Alice Thomas, Refugees International's Climate Displacement Program Manager, traveled with consultant and former RI Fellow Davina Wadley to the country's capital, Yangon, as well as to disaster-affected areas of Rakhine State, Chin State, and Sagaing Region in September and October 2016.*

## Endnotes

1. According to a 2010 UNDP household survey conducted with the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, nearly 26 percent of the population in Myanmar lives below the poverty line. The survey indicates that the highest poverty incidence is recorded in Chin State with 73 percent followed by Rakhine State with 44 percent. Sida, UNICEF, UNDP, "Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar 2009-2010: Poverty Profile," June 2011, [www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/FAIMMRPovertyProfile\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/FAIMMRPovertyProfile_Eng.pdf).
2. Myanmar ranks 143 out of 180 countries on the 2015 Human Development Index. UNDP, Human Development Report 2015, 49. [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015\\_human\\_development\\_report.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf).
3. Germanwatch, Global Climate Risk Index 2017, <https://germanwatch.org/en/download/16411.pdf>.
4. INFORM Index for Risk Management Global Results Report 2017, [www.inform-index.org/Portals/0/InfoRM/INFORM%20Global%20Results%20Report%202017%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](http://www.inform-index.org/Portals/0/InfoRM/INFORM%20Global%20Results%20Report%202017%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf).
5. Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index, [index.gain.org](http://index.gain.org).
6. These include the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (ADDMER) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) which was adopted by UN member states in March 2015. See Myanmar Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Settlement, DRRWG, "Proceedings Lessons Learnt Workshop MAPDRR Implementation," April 8, 2016, [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report\\_MAPDRR\\_Lesson\\_Learn\\_Workshop\\_Apr2016.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_MAPDRR_Lesson_Learn_Workshop_Apr2016.pdf).
7. Ibid.
8. While both the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) collect information on displacement from disasters, they do not have information on how long people are displaced. There is also limited information on whether people who are internally displaced end up crossing an international border. Nansen Initiative Global Consultation Conference Report, Oct. 24-25, 2015, 24, <https://www.nanseninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/GLOBAL-CONSULTATION-REPORT.pdf>; IDMC Global Estimates 2015 People Displaced by Disasters, 47, <http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/Publicaciones/2015/10092.pdf?view=1>.
9. 15th ASEAN Regional Forum, Intersessional Meeting on Disaster Response, presentation by the Myanmar Relief and Resettlement Department on Lessons Learned from the 2015 Floods Response Operation, Feb. 25-26, 2016.
10. Government of Myanmar, "Post-Disaster Needs Assessment of Floods and Landslides," July-Sept. 2015, 86, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/646661467990966084/pdf/103631-WP-P157276-PUBLIC-PFLNA-Report-2016.pdf>.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Myanmar National Recovery Framework and Plan 2015 Floods and Landslides, 9.
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  18. See, e.g., "A Town Beyond the Law: Hlaing Tharyar," *Myanmar Times*, Feb. 4, 2016. <http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/yangon/18817-a-town-beyond-the-law-hlaing-tharyar.html>; International Labour Organization (ILO), "Rapid Assessment of Child Labour in Hlaing Thar Yar Industrial Zone, Yangon, Myanmar," October 2015. [http://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS\\_IPEC\\_PUB\\_27439/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_IPEC_PUB_27439/lang-en/index.htm).
  19. Global New Light of Myanmar, Sept. 27, 2016, 3.
  20. Thomas, Alice, "Myanmar Floods: Missed Opportunities But Still Time to Act," *Refugees International*, Nov. 12, 2015, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2015/11/12/myanmar-floods-missed-opportunities-but-still-time-to-act>.
  21. The Disaster Risk Reduction Working Group (DRR WG) was formed in 2008 to support the Government and communities to promote disaster resilience in Myanmar and is comprised of 53 agencies including the UN, international NGOs, local NGOs and professional organisations working for DRR. For more information on DRR WG's structure and strategic plan, see <http://www.themimu.info/sector/disaster-risk-reduction>.
  22. USAID Rakhine Early Recovery Activity Fact Sheet, Feb. 2016.
  23. For more information on the project, see <http://projects.worldbank.org/P158194?lang=en>.
  24. Myanmar Business Today, Vol. 4, Issue 17, "UMFCCI Workshops Aim to Bolster Natural Disaster Relief Efforts," May 9, 2016, <http://www.mmbiztoday.com/articles/umfcci-workshops-aim-bolster-natural-disaster-relief-efforts>.
  25. Supra n.22.
  26. To account for this assistance gap, the Myanmar Red Cross Society gave cash support to those whose homes were partially destroyed. However, as there were no restrictions on how the cash was used, many of the beneficiaries ended up using the money for other purposes. Some used it to purchase land especially where the government was able to find a suitable relocation site. Others used the cash assistance to repay debts they had taken on since the floods leaving them no extra cash to rebuild their homes, recover their assets, or restore their livelihoods. In short, the cash assistance had served only as a step up in the much deeper hole they now found themselves in.
  27. IOM, "DTM Round 3 Report, Cyclone Komen, Chin and Sagaing State," Feb. 25, 2016.
  28. The "shelter cluster" is a humanitarian coordination mechanism established at the global and country level to support people affected by natural disasters and internally displaced people affected by conflict with the means to live in safe, dignified and appropriate shelter. The shelter cluster enables better coordination among all shelter actors, including local and national governments, with a goal of ensuring that people who need shelter assistance get help faster and receive the right kind of support. See Global Shelter Cluster website at [www.sheltercluster.org](http://www.sheltercluster.org) and Myanmar Shelter Cluster website at <https://www.sheltercluster.org/asiapacific/myanmar>.
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  31. Ibid.
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