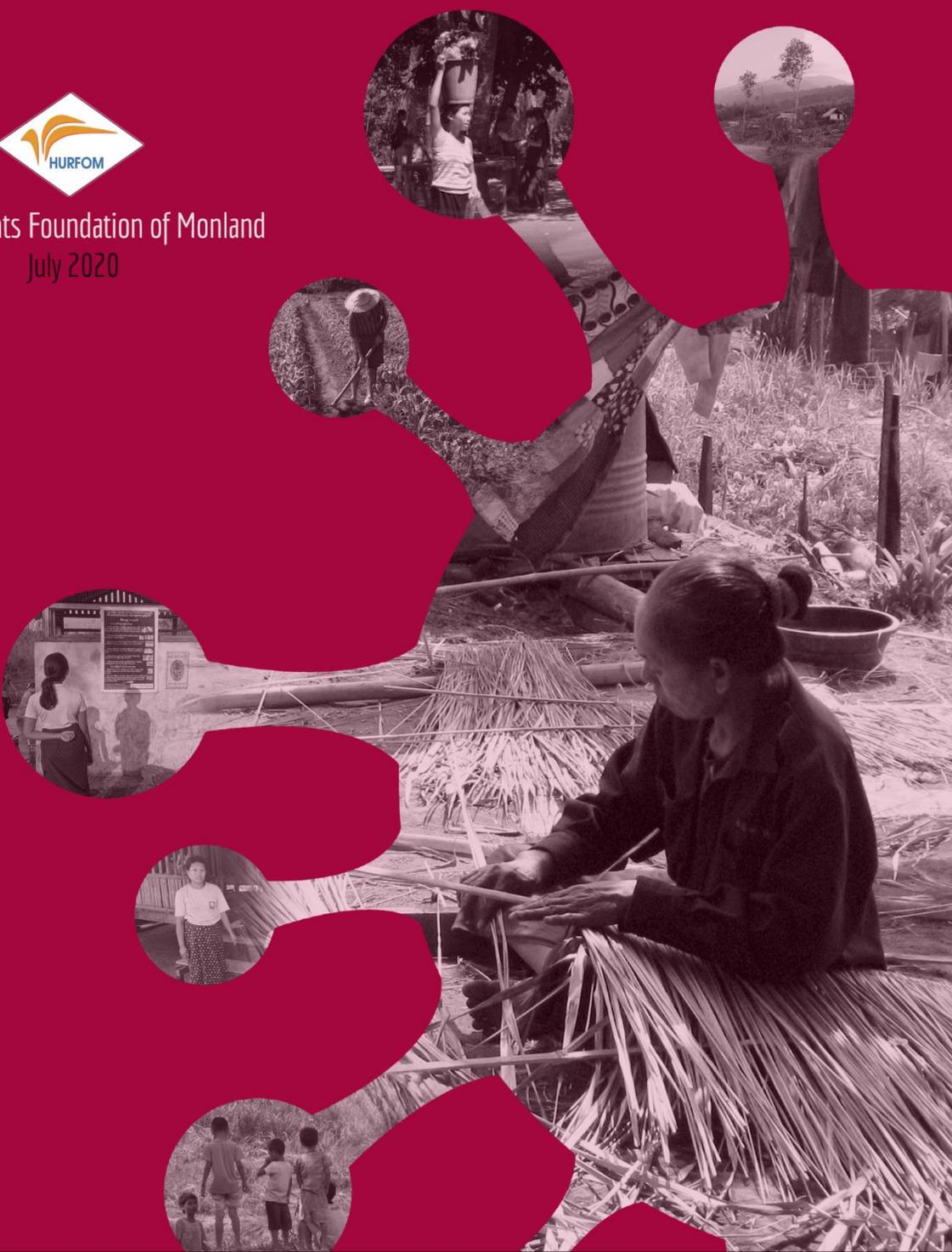




Human Rights Foundation of Monland
July 2020



LEFT BEHIND AND DESTITUTE:

How IDP Communities in Southern Burma/Myanmar
are Struggling to Survive during COVID-19

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STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE DURING COVID-19



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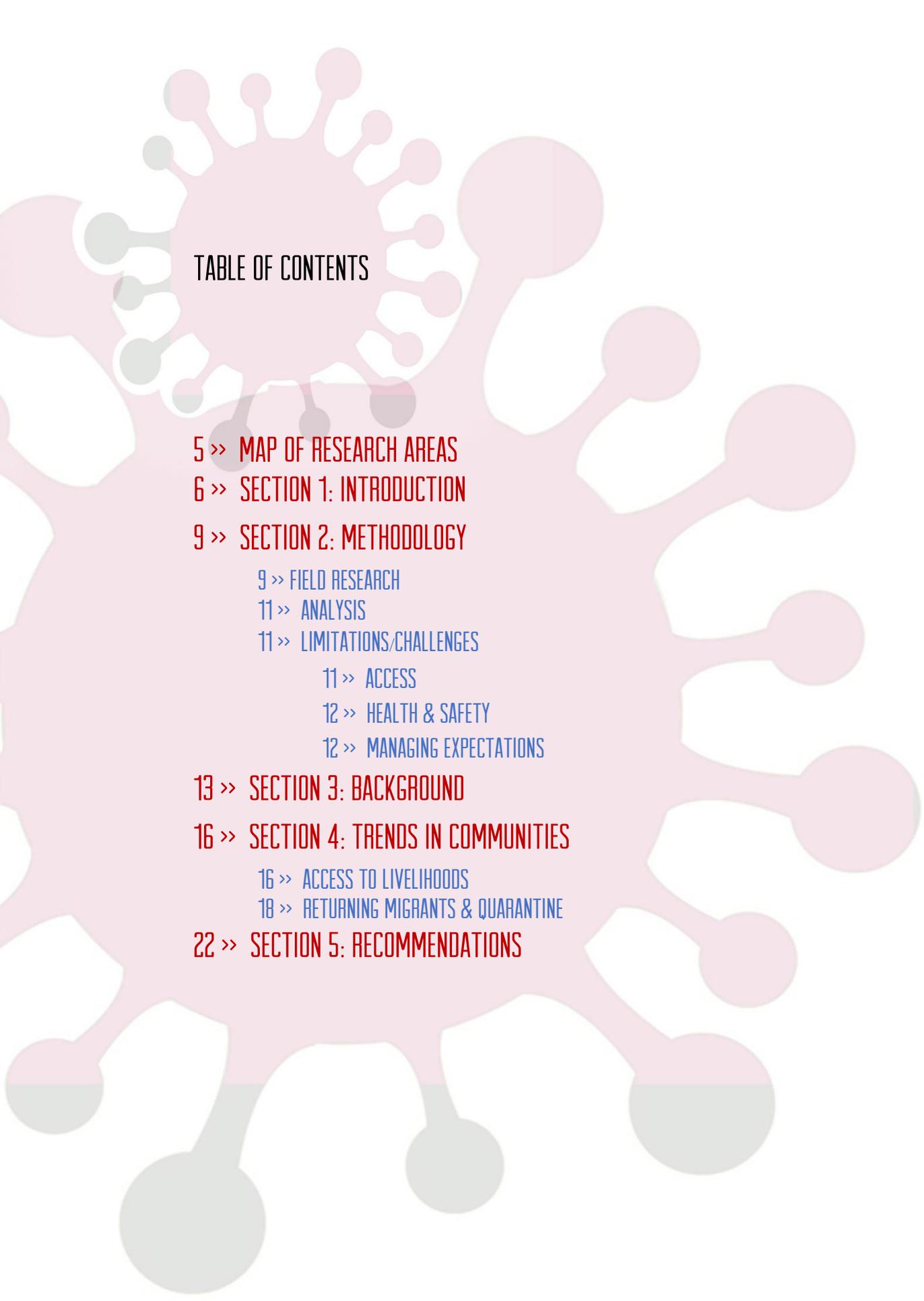


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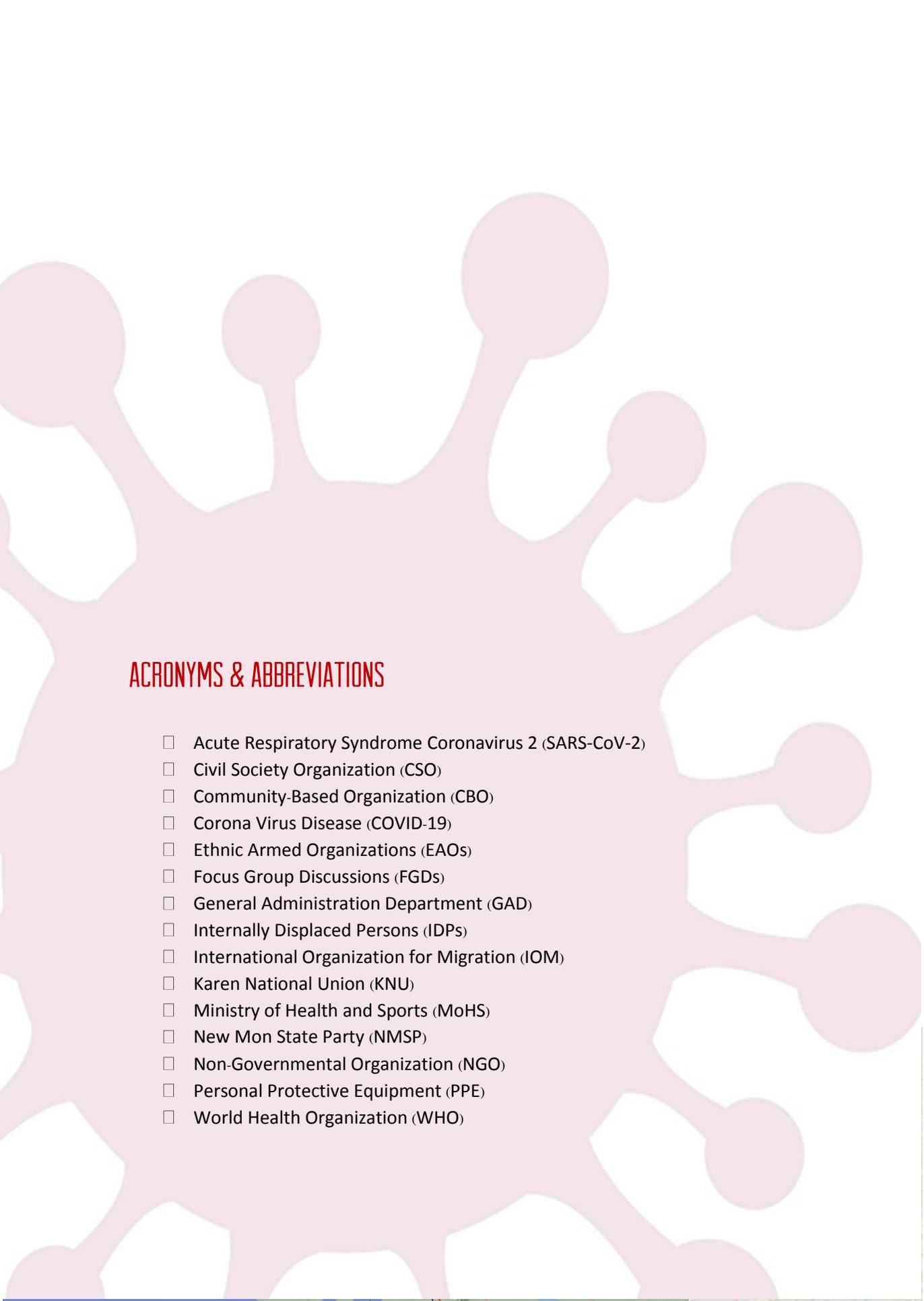
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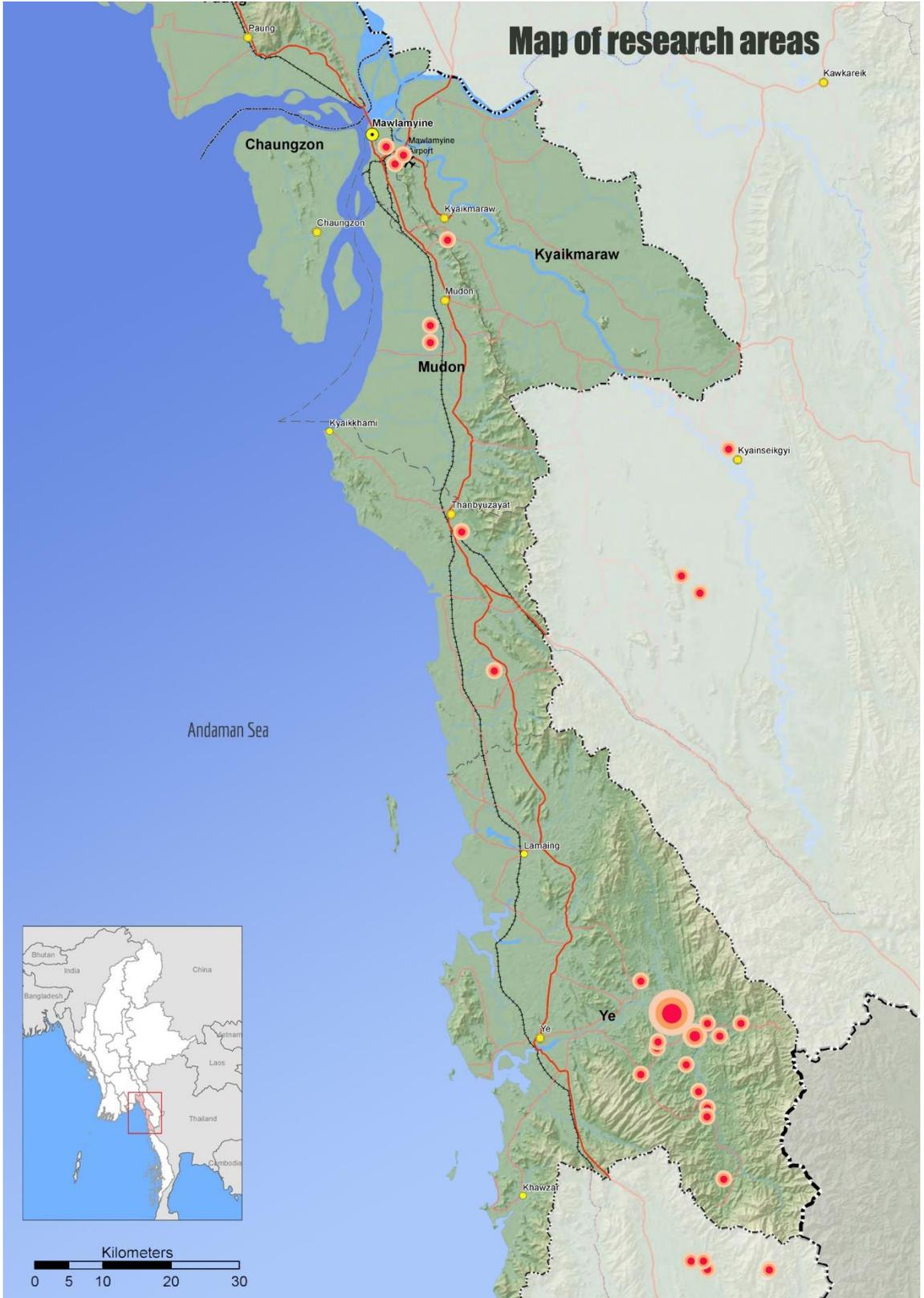
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ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

- Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)
- Civil Society Organization (CSO)
- Community-Based Organization (CBO)
- Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19)
- Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs)
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
- General Administration Department (GAD)
- Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)
- International Organization for Migration (IOM)
- Karen National Union (KNU)
- Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS)
- New Mon State Party (NMSP)
- Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- World Health Organization (WHO)





SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The corona virus disease (COVID-19), caused by the acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), first emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019.¹ The virus would spread rapidly across the globe, and on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak a pandemic.

On 23 March 2020, Burma/Myanmar confirmed its first known case of an individual infected with COVID-19, joining an inauspicious but growing global club of states now battling a health crisis. From that day forward, both Burma/Myanmar's union- and state-level strategies and the ability of the authorities to cope with the growing

¹ "Naming the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and the Virus that Causes It," World Health Organization, accessed 30 June 2020.

health emergency would be scrutinized, not only by its own citizens but by Burma/Myanmar watchers and analysts alike. As of 3 July 2020, Burma/Myanmar has officially recorded 304 confirmed cases; 6 deaths; and 223 recoveries, according to data from the Central Epidemiology Unit, Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS), Myanmar.²

Like much of the rest of the world, the global work stoppage and movement restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the virus has had severe economic consequences and both looming global- and state-level economic crises that will last for months, if not years until a full recovery is seen.

In recognition of Burma/Myanmar's economic turndown, on 28 April 2020, the central government and its National-Level Central Committee for Prevention, Control and Treatment of COVID-19 launched its COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan, aimed at alleviating the economic fallout caused by the pandemic. Among its seven goals, 10 strategies, 36 action plans, and 76 actions, includes mitigation strategies aimed at the household level, including cash transfers to the most vulnerable and in need, including internally displaced persons (IDPs). Aung San Suu Kyi praised the plan, claiming it left 'no one behind'.³

However, our data shows that many of the most vulnerable are being left behind. Interviews and data collected in IDP villages in Mon and Karen states and remote areas in New Mon State Party (NMSP) administrated areas reveal that the economic consequences of COVID-19 are having a



² [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Surveillance Dashboard \(Myanmar\)](#), eHealth Unit, Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health and Sports, Myanmar, accessed 3 July 2020.

³ ["Myanmar Launches Sweeping COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan,"](#) *The Irrawaddy*, 29 April

significant and detrimental effect on the everyday lives of villagers, leaving many close to destitution, without access to livelihoods or emergency relief aid. This is exacerbated by the stringent restrictions on freedom of movement by township authorities and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) intended to curb the spread of the virus, in addition to the mandatory quarantine for the thousands of returning migrant workers which puts added stress on these communities who must also support them.

While economic relief packages are available, there are no guarantees that this aid or requested personal protective equipment (PPE) will reach these remote IDP communities. Many of these communities have repeatedly appealed to CSOs and NGOs for emergency relief funding, as they are dangerously close to food shortages and deprivation. Many of these communities, have, indeed, been 'left behind' by government-administered economic relief packages, while also being denied access to livelihoods and freedom of movement, and thus are being left near destitution.



SECTION 2: METHODOLOGY

Since 1995, HURFOM has been documenting the voices of Mon populations in Burma/Myanmar using a methodology developed over 25 years of experience. In doing so, it has documented systematic and widespread human rights violations against ethnic communities committed by the Burma Army and EAOs in Mon and Karen states and Tenasserim Division in southeast Burma/Myanmar.

FIELD RESEARCH

For this report, field research was conducted between April and May 2020. HURFOM employed a total of five Field Researchers throughout the project to gather information, conducting interviews in Kyaikmayaw, Mudon, Ye, Mawlamyine, and Thanbyuzayat townships, Mon State; Yebyu Township, Tenasserim Region; and Kyainnseikgyi Township, Karen State; and IDP villages in NMSP administrative areas.

Overall, Fields Researchers conducted 36 *interviews* inside and outside NMSP-controlled areas, meeting and interviewing IDPs, local community members, a Mon Unity Party representative, village leaders, activists and social workers, members from aid groups, as well as service providers and volunteers at quarantine centers. They also held *two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)* with 14 and 15 people, respectively, bringing together IDPs committees, service providers from NMSP COVID-19 Control and Response Committees, and religious leaders.

Preliminary research for this report began in May with three Field Researchers visiting three remote IDP communities in NMSP administrative areas in Ye Township, Mon State, along with a group providing COVID-19 relief



to IDPs and returning migrant workers via emergency relief funds. Along the way, they conducted 17 interviews and 2 FGDs with 29 people in Upper Yit Chaung, Lower Yit Chaung, Kaine Taw, Dhamma Parla, Wae Zin, and Ga Ni IDP villages. They also met with village leaders and returned migrant workers from these areas. In addition to conducting interviews, they collected photos and shot video footage, which culminated in HURFOM's 1 June 2020 release of a short documentary entitled "[Reflections on Grassroots Livelihoods During COVID-19](#)" showcasing the challenges and needs in those communities as a consequence of COVID-19. These Field Researchers also met with communities located outside NMSP-controlled areas as well and found the situation to be similar.

The remaining 19 interviews were conducted throughout late April and May 2020 in the abovementioned townships. In the second week of May, another six communities were revisited in the company of an aid group in NMSP, KNU, and Ye Township authorities mixed-control areas. Health education and tool kits distribution trips were also conducted to three communities located in northern Yebyu Township (also in mix-controlled areas: NMSP, KNU). Field Researchers also met with political parties, community leaders, NMSP COVID Control and Response Team leaders, and other individuals in Kyainnseikgyi, Mudon, Mawlamyine, and Kyaikmayaw townships.



Extensive desk research was also conducted to develop a timeline of COVID-19's impact on Burma/Myanmar and its states—but, also, more importantly the targeted research areas of Mon State, northern Tenasserim Region, and NMSP-administered areas of Karen State, including remote IDP villages.

ANALYSIS

This report analyzed field information gathered from Mon State and Mon areas of southeast Burma/Myanmar from April and May 2020. The HURFOM Field Researcher Team conducted 36 interviews with community members, service providers, and village leaders, among others, on their perspectives and concerns with their communities' response and needs in relation to COVID-19 relief. As data from the field was received, HURFOM staff translated documents into English from either Mon or Burmese. The information was then coded into various sub-themes and location.

LIMITATIONS/CHALLENGES

During the field research phase of this report, HURFOM Field Researchers faced many challenges in obtaining thorough information regarding the challenges posed to vulnerable communities by COVID-19.

ACCESS

Due to the very nature of the pandemic itself, access to communities was a challenge faced by researchers. Lockdown decrees by both the Mon State government and EAOs created travel restrictions, and the team often needed to request permission in advance to conduct site visits. Furthermore, capturing photos or video was banned in most NMSP-controlled areas, again necessitating permission first (although in some cases, they were allowed, publication rights were not granted). In other areas, such as northern Yebyu, Field Researchers were given landmine warnings, making accessing certain communities hazardous, jeopardizing their safety. Access to information, particularly accurate



data, from the government's MoHS and even local COVID-19 Control and Response Committees, was also a challenge.

HEALTH & SAFETY

By traveling throughout southern Burma/Myanmar during a pandemic, HURFOM Field Researchers risked their health and safety talking to IDP communities, returned migrant workers, and volunteers in quarantine centers. HURFOM prepared risk assessments with contingency plans for all team members, and ensured they were informed of proper health procedures and had access to PPE, hand sanitizer gel, and that all health precautions were taken. HURFOM operates with a 'do no harm' policy during all research and projects, taking the health and safety of its Field Researchers seriously, and this extended not only to its Field Researchers, but to all interviewees, informants, and stakeholders.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

One challenge that Field Researchers encountered often was the belief that HURFOM was a wealthy CSO which could provide assistance and meet the needs of communities visited who were clearly in need of aid. HURFOM Field Researchers had to carefully and consistently explain that HURFOM is not a service provider each

time they (re)visited a community in order to manage expectations and avoid misunderstandings and uncomfortable and/or angry confrontations later on. In addition, several quarantine centers run by the NMSP and local communities asked HURFOM for assistance, but HURFOM was again unable to provide assistance. During the second visit to a particular village, some individuals did not want to share information, and some of the Field Researchers felt that the local people wanted something in return after they shared information the first time around, and perhaps a symptom of the dire situation, and the hopelessness and frustration felt.





SECTION 3: BACKGROUND

Since COVID-19 first emerged on the global scene in early 2020, interrupting the daily lives of billions around the world, the socio-economic effects of the extreme measures employed by states in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus are now becoming increasingly dire for many of the world's most vulnerable populations, including subsistence farmers, daily wage laborers, the disabled, and the elderly. In Burma/Myanmar, rigorous restrictions on freedom of movement, means many cannot access their farm plots, collect a wage as a daily laborer, collect traditional forest products, and thus are unable to afford food or scavenge for traditional forest foodstuffs.

Compounding this issue are the unintended social and economic consequences that lock down measures governments, such as Thailand, have imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 and which are placing enormous pressure on communities in Mon and Karen states. Already stretched thin as they grapple with their own government's orders restricting citizens' movements and thus their inability to work

and generate an income, these communities—often remote—are now faced with an increasing number of returning migrant workers, no longer able to support themselves working abroad. Mon State has seen a large influx of returnees with more than 15,500 having returned and under some form of the mandatory 14-day quarantine for those returning from a foreign country within the first week of April 2020.⁴

Remote IDP communities, particularly in Ye Township, Mon State, struggle to support the large numbers of returning migrant workers. Wae Zine, Wae Pouné, and Dhamma Parla villages—NMSP-controlled areas—with 40–60 returning community members each and growing, were unable to provide basic food and health/protective gear. This was made all the more dire, as CSOs and other service providers were restricted access due to the travel ban and as operations temporarily shut down for several weeks for Myanmar's new year's holiday.

In recognition of this influx of returning migrant workers from Thailand, at the end of May, the NMSP closed their border checkpoints at Three Pagoda Pass and Japanese Well, barring migrant workers from using these as routes of return. Moreover, on 10 June, the National Central Committee for Prevention, Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease 2019 announced that migrant workers who returned to Burma/Myanmar via unsanctioned routes (for example, NSMP checkpoints and other non-official ports) will face punishment under the law, including those who assist returnees.⁵ However, not all migrants make it back to Burma/Myanmar, there have been eight suicides of



⁴ “Myanmar’s Mon State Consolidates Quarantine Centers for Returning Migrants”, *The Irrawaddy*, 06 April 2020.

⁵ “*Illegal Returnees and Those Who Assist Them Will Be Punished*”, HURFOM, 15 June 2020.

undocumented Burmese workers in Malaysia, including a 22-year-old from Mon State, after losing their jobs amid the economic crisis and ongoing xenophobic crack down on refugees and undocumented migrants.⁶

Starting from 5 April 2020, all of the south-eastern part of Ye and Yebyu townships, was put under rigorous lockdown measures by the NMSP and the Ye Township General Administration Department (GAD) authorities over concerns of the growing spread of COVID-19. Villagers now have little chance to access daily livelihoods. In NMSP and KNU mixed-control areas (Yebyu), villagers are unable to leave their villages to work or even collect traditional subsistence items from the surrounding forest. Now, with the rainy season starting, the situation in these communities have become worse day by day. As most of villagers are subsistence farmers or daily wage laborers, many of them have expressed that they are in trouble, particularly running out of rice, without a chance to earn an income—the current state of most households—and facing a food shortage and crisis.



⁶ [“Myanmar Seeks to Fly Illegal Migrants Home from Malaysia as More Suicides Reported Amid COVID-19,”](#) *The Irrawaddy*, 23 June 2020.



SECTION 4: TRENDS IN COMMUNITIES

This section provides an analysis of the data gathered, focusing on villagers' two primary concerns: access to livelihoods and the returning migrants and quarantine. This section relies heavily on the voices of the IDPs in their own words, aiming to provide as much as possible a platform for their voices to be heard.

ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS

Access to livelihoods, or lack thereof, was consistently brought up in interviews, particularly for IDPs in NMSP-administered areas. Since the beginning of April, both the KNU and NMSP have restricted freedom of movement, banned individuals from leaving the confines of the village borders as well as foraging for traditional forest items in their mixed-control areas. In April, the Burma government provided relief aid in the form of rice and other basic food items to families in Mon State, but these were not distributed to residents living in NMSP-controlled territories or other remote areas.⁷

⁷ [“Thousands of Families Apply for Govt Aid from NSMP Controlled Area,”](#) Network Media Group, 28 June 2020.

Many interviewees talked of sliding into destitution as the situation dragged on, exacerbated by the start of the rainy season, for example, Nai San Oo (44, Boleh Doon Phite IDP Site, originally from southern Ye Township, Mon State) described it this way:

“Most of us have been moving into a situation of destitution. Yes, the situation is one of *moving from poverty into destitution*, and this virus [COVID-19] has made us increasingly isolated by the lockdown. New regulations and rules make it very hard to access our jobs, we cannot afford to feed our families. Now, that some restrictions are lifted, it is already too late, and the rainy season has begun. We did not have a chance to work to collect and store foods during the dry season.



On behalf of my villagers, I would like to request the [state-level] government and the New Mon State Party to arrange sustainable jobs for us during the interim and to make sure to recognize health, education, and social rights.”

According to Mi San San Aye, Kyaik Soi Mon IDP Site, eastern Ye Township, Mon State:

“It is hard for me to say ‘NO’ when my children come and ask for more food. I know that we cannot feed them enough. This is the hardest time for me during these lockdown periods. My husband left me with 3 children about 2 years ago, and I tried to survive on my own, collecting tall grasses and working in the rubber plantation.



Like other residents here in Kyaik Soi Mon village, I haven't been able to earn [a living] and find food since the second week of April. My neighbors assisted me with approximately 10 kg of rice, and the village committee supported me with another 10 kg. I would like to

express my thanks to them. People have big hearts and care for my family.

You know, this lockdown reminds me of my young time, stuck in the forest afraid of being killed by the Burmese soldiers and their landmines. Now, I feel like this again. Now, we're afraid of going out and getting the virus. The worst thing is, most of us are living here with no job now.”

RETURNING MIGRANTS & QUARANTINE

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) statistics, 99,058 migrants have returned to Burma/Myanmar through border check points between 22 March and 10 June, a telling figure of the global economic slowdown brought about by the pandemic.⁸ Mon State has seen a large influx of returnees, particularly from Thailand, with more than 15,500 having returned by the first week of April 2020—a number that has no doubt grown throughout May and June (no up to date data could be found).⁹

While initially subject to a mandatory 14-day quarantine in a facility upon return, on 17 April, the MoHS announced changes to the regulations, mandating 21 days in

⁸ International Organization for Migration, IOM Myanmar COVID-19 Response Situation Report 8, 12 June 2020.

⁹ “Myanmar’s Mon State Consolidates Quarantine Centers for Returning Migrants,” *The Irrawaddy*, 06 April 2020.

facility quarantine and 7 days home quarantine (28 days total) for those returning from abroad.¹⁰ Breaching quarantine law can have serious repercussions; for example, a 32-old-man from Ye Township was jailed for 3 months for repeatedly leaving a facility early.¹¹



In the data we collected, approximately 63% of interviewees spoke of returning migrants, and most often in relation to quarantine. One challenge informants spoke of repeatedly was the discrimination felt by returning migrants and the quarantine orders to keep the community safe.

According to Mi Than Htay, Administrator, Taranar village, Kyaikmayaw Township.

“The biggest challenge is that returnees have already done a medical check at Myawaddy and [now] they have to stay in quarantine for 14 days again at the village. So, they didn’t want to stay at the quarantine [facility]. The village administrator and the authorities had to explain a lot about it to them.



But they argued that they weren’t infected by the disease. They sneaked out at night. They didn’t know clearly about [what to do and what not to do]. The returnees

¹⁰ “Announcement for 21 Days Facility Quarantine and 7 Days Home Quarantine,” *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 17 April 2020.

¹¹ “Returnee jailed for three months for breaching C-19 quarantine law,” HURFOM, 23 April 2020

who already stayed at the quarantine for 14 days also came back to the quarantine [facility] and helped us manage.”

Nai Shwe Win, an activist in Mae Ga Row village, Kyaikmayaw Township, echoed Mi Than Htay, noting the same difficulties with the 22 returnees staying at the quarantine center.

“We have too many challenges. [The returnees didn’t understand] why they have to stay at the quarantine facility even though they didn’t have symptoms and weren’t infected by the disease. Some returnees said they were discriminated against because of the disease. We had to explain about it to them for 30 minutes.”

Another challenge that came up time and again was support and funding for returned migrants, or rather the lack thereof, despite the mandatory nature of the community-based quarantine facility. This frustration was often directed toward the government, while acknowledging the support of local CSOs, groups, and communities.

“We accommodated the returnees at the government school, but the government supported us with nothing. They didn’t even support us with thermometers and masks. We also didn’t have volunteers help with the quarantine. What we got from the government was just instructions. We didn’t receive anything else. Food for the returnees was sent by their family members.

The government gave nothing but the instructions. There was no practical support. Nearly all villages in Kyaikmayaw Township have difficulty taking care of the returnees and their health. An organization donated a thermometer and another Mon organization supported us with hand sanitizer, masks, and brochures. I saw that my village followed the government’s instructions well, even though there was no support from them [government]. I want to request the government to support people with equipment and material in order allow them to be able to follow the government’s instruction.”

Nai Shwe Win, Mae Ga Row village, Kyaikmayaw Township

“The most need in the centers is masks. Both volunteers and returnees should wear masks. The government can't provide enough masks and it can be bought easily in the market. So, everyone can't wear a mask.

There are [quarantine] centers that didn't get government support. The government supported 20 masks per center. Most of the centers didn't get that support. Some centers had more than 70 persons, but the government can provide only 20 masks per center. That's not even enough for the volunteers who worked for the centers. It can't cover one day's use. One center gets a thermometer and, similarly, some centers didn't. The government support is too little.

There are also needs for accommodation and drinking water. The volunteers who have helped the quarantine weren't well educated about health. We don't have enough health workers so there are lots of needs. Some centers have to worry about food. Frankly, there are thousands of needs, but I don't want to make a complaint about everything.”



SECTION 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Burma Government and EAOs:

- Cease all restrictions on IDPs' movements in war-affected communities;
- Allow all humanitarian aid (with special considerations) free passage without the need for prior permissions and to assist these groups with the necessary COVID-19 response assistance in all IDPs areas;
- Immediately end all pressure and threats by EAOs' Covid-19 Control and Response Committees' efforts to prevent people from exercising their right to freedom of movement;
- The Burma Government must re-design their national budget plans for humanitarian purposes particularly designating more towards rural ethnic areas, IDPs, and war-affected areas;
- End the monitoring, prosecution, and harassment of ethnic service providers, EAOs' health workers, human rights defenders, and journalists;
- Immediately end blocks on ethnic media websites which regularly cover IDPs, refugees, and vulnerable communities in EAO-controlled and rural ethnic areas;
- Repeal repressive legislation and enact laws that enshrine press freedom and freedom of expression;
- The government must recognize and equally provide for ethnic health organizations, including funding and material resources in support of COVID-19 health services in EAOs' administrative areas;
- Ensure healthcare provision, humanitarian and health education are all-inclusive in all ethnic minority areas.

To International Donors, INGOs, and Government Agencies

- Pressure the Burma Government and Army to comply with its international obligations to act in accordance with international human rights laws and principles;
- International actors supporting COVID-19 relief efforts need to ensure their assistance reaches the country's most marginalized communities affected by the civil war, the victims of the past human rights abuses;
- For the recent COVID-19 response, the provision of direct cross-border and equitable funding to ethnic health organizations and ethnic community-based service providers are providing essential services to displaced communities and other conflict-affected areas.

