

Advance Myanmar

Project report:

Helping local communities during the Covid Crisis in 2020

May - December 2020

Introduction: Turning Urgent Need into Urgent Action

In the spring of 2020, Advance Myanmar was contacted by grassroots organisations active in Myanmar and on the Myanmar borders who support refugees, IDPs and other vulnerable people in remote areas. These groups were alarmed over the prospect of Covid-19 in the context of already dwindling aid support and generally a very difficult living situation for these populations. As Covid-19 is not only a health emergency, but also an economic emergency, many organisations were worried about both the health impact and the impact on households' ability to financially support themselves.

Advance Myanmar is very grateful for the funding provided to support these groups. In total, we managed to support six community organisations with a total grant of \$154,800.



These organisations reach remote populations that do not always have access to larger aid delivery programmes. Neither do these organisations always have the capacity to apply for funding from larger donors, since the programmes these grassroots organisations run are perhaps more small-scale than bigger donors prefer, or they do not have the resources to dedicate the staff time to fill in burdensome forms, applications and reports for support. That is why Advance Myanmar wants to work with these groups: because they are genuine grassroots organisations working directly with affected people, and because they are often overlooked by big aid organisations.

“We are grateful to our donors for providing financial support quickly and in a flexible manner, so that we could step in quickly, respond in a practical way, and address the real needs of the most vulnerable in our community in this most difficult time.”

Karen organisation

It is clear from the project partners’ reports that the funding was sorely needed for them to be able to support communities at risk from the Covid-19 pandemic. Although geographically spread out over Myanmar, some of the groups faced the same challenges, not just from Covid-19 but also from the subsequent border closures with Thailand and China, further disadvantaging already marginalised groups. Different organisations had different areas of focus for their support but it included Covid-19 prevention training, food support for IDPs and other vulnerable communities, the provision of soap and facemasks, handwashing stations and quarantine centres. It was up to the implementing organisations themselves to decide how to focus their support, as they are the experts on their own situation and the local needs. The project also meant other, long-term advantages that had perhaps had not been foreseen. One of the reports from the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh states:

“The opportunities of the camps were immense as it meant there was a new experience, learning and volunteering opportunities for individuals. We were able to give over 26 volunteers a chance to learn about the virus and teach others. This opportunity meant that they had something to do during the lockdown and could use this experience to gain jobs with NGOs in the future.”

Rohingya community organisation

Below is a short summary of the support our partners provided, divided into geographical region. They all expressed gratitude to the donors, and Advance Myanmar would also like to extend our thanks for the quick financial response which enabled us to provide urgent assistance to these groups. In some cases, the reports from the organisations are part of a larger report to multiple donors.

The Project

Kachin State

Amount: \$10,000

Focus: Food for local villagers in remote areas

Reach: 1,134 people in two areas

Food support was provided to people in two areas affected by food shortages due to Covid-19. In the Danai region in Western Kachin State, people were suffering from desperate food shortages due to coronavirus lockdown. These villages are very remote and have been regularly under attack by the Myanmar military. The villagers are not allowed to travel from their homes to other places.

Villagers in the Nahkyem area in Northern Shan State, including people from the Kachin and Ta’ang ethnic groups, were also supported. During the Covid-19 crisis, the Burma army has increased its fighting with the Northern Alliance of ethnic armies, and they have stationed themselves in Nahkyem, plundering local villages and killing their livestock. Both areas are hard to reach and centres of conflict.

The provisions included rice, cooking oil, onions, beans, garlic and salt. In total food for 168 households in the Danai region for a month, and a week's provisions for 100 households in Nahkyem, was provided and a total of 1134 people reached.

Amount: \$10,000

Focus: Covid-19 prevention, Covid-19 education, PPE and food

Reach: 15,343 people

This grant supported local communities in Kachin State close to the border with China. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many local people who regularly travel to China for work and for trading opportunities were blocked from crossing the border. As a result, the population in local IDP camps increased and poverty levels rose. In total, people in 4 IDP camps, 17 villages and 5 schools were supported. The implementing partner provided hand soap and hand washing stations for schools and masks were provided for the students and IDPs. They also supplied daily meals at a camp quarantine centre for 75 people who did not have any relatives to help with food and support. That way it was possible for these people to quarantine and not risk bringing Covid-19 into their communities.

Youth participants in Covid-19 prevention training, organised by the Covid-19 Prevention Committee, were also supported. This training was held by medical staff from the local hospital in Mai Ja Yang, and the 11 male and 12 female participants are now serving as volunteers for Covid-19 prevention work in their villages.

"We would like to say grateful words to the ADVANCE MYANMAR for your kind support on this situation and it was really effective on time support for the needy communities."

Shan State

Amount: \$18,000

Focus: Food, medicine and baby milk for IDPs

People reached: 6,000 IDPs in 6 camps

In Shan State, on the border with Thailand, IDPs were also affected by border closures. Many people on the Shan side of the border earn their living in Thailand and the border closure meant that they could not support their families, nor could they access emergency health care in Thailand, something that is otherwise granted on a case-by-case basis. In August, restrictions tightened even further during the second wave of Covid in Burma and more Burmese troops were stationed around one of the IDP camps, causing fear among the IDPs there.

Support was focussed on food deliveries to these IDPs, as well as emergency medicine and milk for children. In total, they supported over 6,000 IDPs spread over 6 camps along the border. Camp committee members and IDPs/refugees carried the supplies to camp store houses and distributed the food to every family in the camp.

Karen State

"If we have a good government, they should be the ones fixing the problems. But now as we all know this is not possible, as we do not have a very supportive government. Our community suffered from poverty and lack of access to basic services including livelihoods support and so the COVID-19 pandemic has made everything more difficult. During the home visits, we found out that we are the first organization who came and supported the needs for most vulnerable people, which made me appreciate our work even more."

Karen community leader

IDPs in Ei Htu Hta

Amount: \$33,800

Focus: Rice, medicine, cash support

Reach: All 2,229 IDPs for the duration of programme (co-funded by other donors)

During the second Thai lockdown from August to November 2020, Thai authorities refused to allow any informal trading across the border, and increased patrols and wire fencing in some areas close to Ei Htu Hta, making it even harder for the IDPs to access any food. The IDPs in Ei Htu Hta asked for only one thing: rice. It was decided a long-term solution for support was best and 5 kilos of rice per person per month was provided all through the programme period. 170 of the most vulnerable individuals were also supported with a one-off cash donation of 1000 Thai Baht, and 50,000 Baht was provided for health agencies to buy medicines.

On top of this, an investment of 299 sacks of rice was made for a rice bank in the camp, where the IDPs could buy rice at a low set price, and also had the possibility of paying for the rice later, if they had no access to money at the time. The rice bank also helped keep food prices down, as the Thai businessmen who normally sell food to the IDPs couldn't hike the prices as they usually do, but had to adapt to the price level of the rice bank if they wanted to sell anything. For the people that still haven't been able to pay for the rice, the community can decide if these loans should be waived, or whether the community should hold out for payments. Because of the Thai lockdown, it has been even harder for people to travel to find work.

"They have found ways to help us where others could not. They target the most vulnerable people in our community such as widows, the elderly over 70, people with disabilities, and orphans. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our food supplies chain was cut off. They advocated for us and found some support for us. We received five kilograms of rice each month for each person for the past six months. This is really helpful for us all and it had a really positive impact on our lives. It saved our lives really, because during this time, we were not allowed to leave, we could not go to look for work. Due to this support, we did not go hungry, we did not starve. We were so glad to get a helping hand in this very difficult and scary time."

IDP in Ei Htu Hta on the help provided by the local Karen organisation

Covid-19 support in Karen communities

Amount: \$30,000

Focus: Food, Covid-19 education and prevention, community support, PPE and hygiene packs

Reach: 7 districts in Kaw Thoo Lie (Karen State), in total 25,951 individuals (co-funded by one other donor)

As for many other communities, people in Karen state were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns which made people's access to livelihoods more difficult. To alleviate this, food and hygiene packs were distributed to vulnerable families and individuals in the seven districts in Kaw Thoo Lie, as well as 11,000 facemasks for vulnerable people.

When staff visited homes to distribute the hygiene and food packages, they provided Covid-19 prevention awareness and advice, as well as to small gatherings in the communities. Through this way of working, advice and support was provided to thousands of people.

Our partner organisation reported that people in the refugee camps and in Karen State are so worried about their livelihoods, as they cannot not work to earn an income to feed their family and they have received reports of more people suffering depression and even an increase in suicides. People being forced together in confined spaces over a long period of time and during difficult circumstances also increased the risk of alcohol abuse and domestic violence, and made the home environment more dangerous for women and children.

Karenni State

Amount: \$25,000

Focus: Covid-19 preparedness, Covid-19 education, PPE, medicine, hygiene

Reach: 246 villages

Our partner in Karenni state runs 15 clinics spread over six townships in Karenni State, where there are no government healthcare facilities, or these are inaccessible. Most of their clinics are in hard to reach areas. With the support from Advance Myanmar, they could prepare their clinics for receiving covid patients.

“With Advance Myanmar funds, all the clinics have been set up with a fever corner, isolation room, emergency response equipment and assigned staff. Isolation rooms have been prepared with oxygen set, emergency box and emergency equipment.”

Karenni partner organisation

Our partner also delivered health education and Covid related health care to a total of 246 villages in Karenni state, as well as 7,000 cloth facemasks. They provided cloth masks, hand washing basins, face shields, thermometers, hand gel, surgical masks and soap for 39 secondary schools in Hpa Saung and Hpruso townships. Their aim was for general prevention among school children and teachers. Most of the secondary schools did not receive any support from the Myanmar government. They focused on preventive measures as an outbreak would be very difficult for them to deal with, due to the remoteness of many villages and the bad conditions of the roads. They write in their report:

“The main difficulty and barrier in transportation is the geographical situation and the weather. It is taking too much time and effort for us to deliver supplies and medicines. (...) To reach the farthest clinic, we have to travel for a week by car, motorbike and foot. Lack of phone and internet connection is also a big issue to keep normal contact between our staff.”

Karenni partner organisation

Rohingya in Bangladesh

Everybody feared what an outbreak of Covid-19 in the camps in Cox's Bazaar would mean for the one million Rohingya refugees living there in squalid conditions. The camps are crowded, the sanitation and hygiene lacking, access to fresh drinking water and the ability to maintain personal hygiene are extremely limited, as is the possibility to self-isolate. The medical facilities are not nearly enough, even in non-Covid times. There weren't nearly enough isolation wards, and there was a general lack of PPE.

Amount: \$20,000

Focus: Covid-19 education, Covid-19 prevention, PPE, food for refugees

Reach: 4 camps

This project focussed support on the prevention of infection and spreading of the disease through a team of 20 volunteers. They conducted training sessions in four camps, both for men and women and with male and female trainers. Through these training sessions, they provided information about how the virus spreads, how to prevent infection and the warning signs to look out for. The team also distributed soap, face masks and hand sanitisers to targeted households with extra vulnerable people, including widows, elderly people and pregnant women. On top of this, food and cash support was also provided for targeted households.

Amount: \$10,000

Focus: Covid-19 education, Covid-19 prevention, PPE, food for refugees

Reach: Educated over 4,000 refugees and gave aid to 3,000 in multiple camps

“Overall, this project was successful and has proven how the impact of international donors can drastically improve the lives of the refugees. The help provided via this campaign was invaluable both to the volunteers and those who received it.”

Rohingya community organisation

The work was divided into two parts. During the first part, between July and November, six groups of volunteers worked in six camps in Cox’s Bazar. They provided hand sanitiser, face masks, rubber gloves and soap, as well as provided Covid-19 prevention training, both by going door to door and in small gatherings. They also spoke in mosques to reach out more widely with their health message.

In the second part of the work, from September-November, volunteers provided the same type of aid and training in different camps, some of which were the smaller and newer camps where more help was needed. They took a refugee-led approach to their implementation of the project, letting volunteers on the ground decide what was the best way of both distributing aid and reaching out with the message. In their report they write:

“The strength of the campaign was the vast connection our on-ground project manager had. (...) The campaign also saw a big improvement in the understanding of the virus, as well as having access to aid. Another major strength was being able to involve the local mosques in the camps. We saw Molanas (mosque leaders) involved in the campaign and this had a big effect as many people listened to religious leaders.”

Rohingya community organisation

Summary: Local Support for Local Needs

In total, this emergency Covid-19 support programme reached at least 100,000 people in Kachin, Shan, Karen and Karenni states, as well as in refugee camps in Bangladesh. These people received education on what Covid-19 is, how it spreads and how to protect themselves, as well as hygiene and PPE equipment including soap, facemasks, gloves and hand sanitisers.

Because the pandemic meant increasing poverty for many vulnerable groups, many were also provided with food and/or cash support. Schools were equipped with washing facilities, people were provided with food so that they could quarantine, and babies were provided with milk. Medical centres could prepare for an outbreak and work presentably. Remote villages that otherwise wouldn’t have received information were reached. It is fair to assume that a vast majority of the people supported would not have been if it wasn’t for this specific project.

Advance Myanmar is impressed with what all the organisations managed to achieve during very difficult circumstances, and we have had our belief reinforced that local grassroots organisations know better than anyone else what the needs are and how to implement the project locally in the best way. There have been clear consultations between the implementing organisations and the affected communities as to what the most urgent needs were, and as such this has been a bottom-up project. We have seen in the Rohingya refugee camps how refugee volunteers have earned valuable skills through the project to help them gain employment with other NGOs in the camps.

All partners provided both financial and narrative reports to Advance Myanmar, as well as photos of their work. We thank our donors for the support and express gratitude to our partners for their dedicated, impressive and hard work.

Advance Myanmar

Advance Myanmar has six part-time staff that have worked with the implementation of the project. This includes, but is not limited to, project management, financial transfers, accountancy and audit, fundraising, contact with partners in Myanmar and communication with supporters.

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