



▶ ILO Brief

August 2022

Riding out the storm: Organizational resilience of trade unions and civil society organizations following the military takeover in Myanmar

Key points

- ▶ On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power, declared a state of emergency and detained all levels of the democratically elected civilian government. Soon afterwards, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population declared 16 unregistered trade unions and civil society organizations to be operating as “illegal labour organizations” under the Labour Organization Law.
- ▶ The International Labour Conference expressed grave concerns after the “military and police raided trade union offices and homes, harassed and threatened trade unionists and their families, and placed trade union leaders in detention and on a wanted list in retaliation for their participation in strikes and peaceful demonstrations demanding the restoration of democratic order and civilian rule” (ILO 2021b).
- ▶ Organizations that have been declared illegal are now unable to operate without fear of harassment and arrest. Many of these security risks are also shared by CSOs and trade unions not officially named to the blacklist. A key tool used to crackdown on dissent has been to issue arrest warrants for their leadership for “causing fear, spreading false news or agitating” under section 505(A) of the Penal Code.
- ▶ Most organizations have not stopped their activities entirely, however, substantial adaptations have been necessary, particularly for activities that would require direct engagement with the de facto authorities. The mitigation strategies developed in response to the heightened safety and security concerns are viewed as a “return” to their mode of operating under previous military regimes.
- ▶ Expanded and more unrestricted funding is the key form of support required to increase the organizational resilience of trade unions and CSOs. A shift in donor thinking from viewing these organizations primarily as implementers of their respective development agendas to prioritizing their continued organizational existence is needed.
- ▶ Reporting and due diligence requirements should be simplified or reduced, including lowering the expectations for obtaining and retaining documentary evidence, which may place staff and beneficiaries at risk. Donors should also accept a proven organizational track record instead of adhering to strict legal registration requirements.
- ▶ International organizations must dramatically increase the flexibility and responsiveness of their funding to counter this existential threat to civic space and freedom of association in Myanmar. It is time for the international community to practically demonstrate their solidarity with the organizations that are continuing the struggle to uphold workers’ rights in Myanmar.

► 1. Introduction

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power, declared a state of emergency and detained all levels of the democratically elected civilian government. The State Administrative Council (SAC) was installed as the de facto government, under the control of the military commander-in-chief. The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, which represents elected members of Parliament, formed the National Unity Government in exile in April 2021 (ILO 2021a).

Then in June 2021, a major third wave of COVID-19 began to sweep across Myanmar, with its public health system in a state of disorder. After the military takeover, many civil servants (including medical personnel) went on strike, helping to foment the civil disobedience movement against military rule. As COVID-19 infections peaked, hospital beds became nearly impossible to come by, partly because of safety concerns after military personnel took over a number of hospitals. Many people desperately tried to source their own oxygen supplies to administer at home (MSF 2021). The official death count reached nearly 20,000 from COVID-19 through the end of 2021. However, that figure only accounts for people who died at hospitals, and does not include the many who passed away in their own homes (MSF 2021).

As a result of the military takeover and the worsening COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar's labour market has faced severe consequences. An ILO (2022a) rapid impact assessment of employment 18 months after the military takeover estimated job losses at 1.1 million, with women more heavily impacted than men due to major losses of employment in female-dominated industries. Key economic sectors have been battered by job losses and reduced working hours, including agriculture, construction, garment manufacturing, hospitality and tourism.

While the global economy has slowly begun to rebound from the pandemic, Myanmar remains caught in a severe downturn. The World Bank (2022) estimates that a debilitating economic decline of -18 per cent of GDP took place in Myanmar in 2021, and no significant recovery is expected for 2022. The near collapse of the economy is likely to undo much of the progress achieved on economic development since the political reform process started in 2012, leading to increased poverty, food insecurity and crisis migration. In a worst-case scenario, The United Nations Development Programme (2022) has estimated that close to half of Myanmar's population may be living in poverty in 2022.

1.1. Assessment of organizational resilience

In June 2021, the International Labour Conference expressed grave concerns after the "military and police raided trade union offices and homes, harassed and threatened trade unionists and their families, and placed trade union leaders in detention and on a wanted list in retaliation for their participation in strikes and peaceful demonstrations demanding the restoration of democratic order and civilian rule, the continuation of the transition to democracy and an end to the violations of human rights, including labour rights" (ILO 2021b). The Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar, together with 15 other members of the Myanmar Labour Alliance, called for comprehensive economic sanctions and for the international community to isolate the military regime.

Following these events, in March 2022 the ILO Governing Body established a Commission of Inquiry in respect to the non-observance of the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), and the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29). In its decision, the Governing Body deplored the "continued harassment, intimidation and arbitrary arrests and detentions of labour activists, trade unionists and others, including the Rohingya, in the exercise of their human rights" (ILO 2022b).

This challenging new political context has required the ILO to adapt its traditional ways of working with tripartite constituents to engage more explicitly with workers' organizations, employers' organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs). In accordance with the UN Principles of Engagement in Myanmar following the military takeover, the ILO has scaled up assistance for trade unions and CSOs to ensure that a landscape of key non-state actors remain in place.¹

The ILO conducted an assessment of the organizational resilience of trade unions and CSOs in Myanmar to identify how international organizations can most effectively provide support for their continued operation. The study analyzes the impact of the military takeover on the work of trade unions and CSOs, the ongoing risks they face, the mitigation strategies they have developed, and their organizational needs during this time. In addition, the assessment provides a set of recommendations for the international community on how to expand the resilience

¹ Although this report makes references to trade unions and CSOs collectively in some cases due to the similar challenges they are facing, it should be noted that trade unions represent a part of the ILO's tripartite constituency and the ILO therefore engages with them institutionally in a different manner than CSOs.

► ILO brief

Riding out the storm: Organizational resilience of trade unions and civil society organizations following the military takeover in Myanmar

of trade unions and CSOs, guided by the voices of the organizations themselves.

1.2. Assessment approach

From August to October 2021, in-depth interviews were conducted with 21 organizations, including 6 trade unions and 15 CSOs, whose activities support workers in the domestic labour market across all states and regions of Myanmar, as well as for migrants in destination countries. A purposive sample selection of organizations was made based upon those specifically named by the State Administrative Council (SAC) as operating illegally, as well as those organizations who are considered particularly prominent in providing relevant services. Key informant interviews were also conducted with the ILO, the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations Office for Project Services, which are three of the largest international organizations supporting assistance to migrants and other workers in Myanmar. A desk review of relevant secondary materials was also completed and triangulated with the primary research findings.

The study faced some significant limitations, particularly in its ability to complete interviews with the targeted trade unions and CSOs. Many organizations could not be reached due to the severe security challenges they are currently experiencing, forcing many of their staff to go into hiding in other areas of the country or to seek asylum abroad. The resulting sample is a diverse cross-section of the key organizations engaged with supporting migrants and other workers in Myanmar but should not be considered nationally representative. Moreover, it is somewhat skewed towards the views of the leadership of larger trade union federations and CSOs, as it proved particularly difficult in the current context to collect information from the staff of smaller community-based organizations and the membership of factory-based trade unions.

All potentially identifying data has been strictly redacted due to the major ethical and safety concerns involved with sharing this information publicly. More detailed individual profiles were collected during the research, which have been brought together as an overall summary in this report in order to ensure the anonymity of the parties involved. In addition, the report findings were reviewed by trade unions and CSOs to ensure that none of the information shared on their practices would pose a risk of new curbs being introduced.

► 2. Background

2.1. Impact on Myanmar's migrant workers

Even before the military takeover in February, COVID-19 had already had a dramatic effect on Myanmar's 4.25 million international migrants,² with hundreds of thousands forced to return home through border checkpoints and relief flights. These returns, coupled with loss of employment in destination countries, substantially reduced the amount of remittances sent to Myanmar, the majority of which support families living in rural and ethnic areas (UNCDF 2017). COVID-19 also exacerbated entrenched problems with exploitative recruitment and employment practices. Even before the pandemic, the charging of illegal recruitment fees, contract substitution, wage theft, withholding of documents and other abuses against migrants were common (ILO 2017). With severe restrictions on mobility in place during COVID-19, working conditions for migrant workers have become even more precarious and abuses have proliferated (ILO 2020).

With the addition of an unstable political situation, potential migrants are now faced with extremely limited access to information and services to support safe migration, while at the same time, many are seeking employment abroad to restore their livelihoods. Prior to the military takeover, the Government's service infrastructure for migrant workers was still at a nascent stage of development, and most continued to make use of irregular channels to go abroad (ILO 2015). The social and kinship networks that facilitated these movements existed long before any government systems were developed to regulate labour migration and frequently provided a much more efficient means to an end. However, with the borders to major destination countries closed, more migrants have had to rely on the assistance of unfamiliar brokers to go abroad. This has contributed to heightened risks due to increasingly militarized borders and the often extortionate fees being charged to migrants to facilitate entry and job placement – reportedly as much as 28,000 Thai baht (US\$840) to enter Thailand in some cases (Khemaniythathai 2022).

² The number of international migrants from Myanmar is derived from: MOLIP, *Myanmar Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Migration and Urbanization*, 2016.

Myanmar's migrant workers are under especially intense pressure to provide for their families back home during these economically troubled times (Yi and Wongsamuth 2021). As foreign companies have begun to withdraw their investments since the military takeover – reducing the jobs available in the domestic labour market – international remittances have emerged as an even more important source of income. Estimated to contribute as much as US\$10 billion to Myanmar's economy before the military takeover (UNCDF 2017), the figure is now impossible to determine accurately because of increased surveillance and control of transactions through banks and other formal remittance channels by the SAC, driving such transfers underground. The recent enactment of rules by the Central Bank of Myanmar requiring the immediate conversion of foreign exchange income into Myanmar kyat will likely contribute to an even larger shadow economy of remittances sent through informal channels, such as the *hundi* system³, in order to avoid artificially low official exchange rates.

2.2. Persecution of trade unions and civil society organizations

During successive military governments from 1962 to 2011, trade unions and CSOs were declared illegal and suppressed by the authorities under the provisions of various laws, particularly the colonial-era Unlawful Associations Law (Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business 2014). Following the election of a military-backed government in 2011, a wide-ranging political and economic liberalization process was initiated in Myanmar that granted more space for these organizations to be formally established. Trade unions were legalized in Myanmar under the Labour Organization Law and CSOs were permitted to register under the Law Relating to the Registration of Organizations, though in both cases with significant restrictions remaining. Coupled with major increases in donor funding and capacity-building support from the international community, a dramatic expansion of organizations providing assistance to migrants and other workers occurred.

Nevertheless, the relationship between these groups and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population was often contentious, as most of the senior leadership at the Ministry were ex-military officials,⁴ even though it was not officially allocated to them under the Constitution (Wilson 2016). This latent tension quickly resurfaced after the military takeover in February 2021 because of the leading role that trade unions played in mobilizing the pro-democracy protests (Maung 2021). Soon after the seizure of power, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population declared 16 unregistered trade unions and civil society organizations to be operating as “illegal labour organizations” under the Labour Organization Law (*Global New Light of Myanmar* 2020), effectively creating a blacklist and arresting and detaining the staff of organizations that continued to operate. Since that time, the capacity of trade unions and CSOs has been severely curtailed by violent raids on their offices, the arrest and detention of key leaders, monitoring and restriction of finances and limiting access to communication networks (UN News 2021; Liu 2021). This has prevented the organizations involved from consistently engaging with their membership/beneficiaries and implementing core activities, directly impacting the support available for migrants and other workers in Myanmar.⁵

The result has been an almost immediate reversal of the progress achieved on rights-based labour and migration governance since the reform process began in 2012. During this period, CSOs and trade unions played a critical role in filling service gaps, including providing information to migrant workers on safe migration, delivering legal assistance in cases of labour abuse, supporting labour organizing and networking, advocating for expansion of labour rights, delivering skills training, providing support for return migrants during COVID-19 and many other essential forms of assistance. They have been particularly important in providing services to migrant workers in border states and regions and among ethnic populations, where access and trust in government services has long been limited. The persecution of these grassroots organizations represents an existential threat to further progress on protecting the rights of workers in Myanmar (Harkins 2021).

³ *Hundi* is an informal service for sending remittances (and sometimes goods) operated by unlicensed financial brokers. Based almost entirely on bonds of trust between the parties involved, these types of money transfer systems are very popular in countries such as Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and China because they are relatively cheap, fast and do not require the sender to provide identification.

⁴ Notably, the system of permanent secretaries that was re-established in 2015 by the Thein Sein Government meant that mostly former military personnel were appointed to the most senior civil servant positions across all ministries prior to the formation of the National League for Democracy Government.

⁵ Although several major trade unions were not declared illegal – including the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar and the Myanmar Industries Craft and Services Union Federation – arrest warrants were issued for their executive members.

►► The working environment is slowly slipping into a state where workers feel they just have to accept whatever abuses they may face in order to be able to work. With the previous Government, we could push back on these issues but now that has been lost. It's very reminiscent of the type of exploitation workers used to experience during the Than Shwe era.

► CSO Director

In a nationwide survey of 68 CSOs conducted in May 2021 by two anonymous organizations, nearly 70 per cent reported being adversely affected (including 21 per cent that had closed entirely) (Liu 2021). The research points to immense pressure on CSO operations from increasingly restrictive laws; scaled-up surveillance, violence and harassment by the de facto authorities; and the limited availability of banking services. It also highlights the slow and inadequate response of the international community in addressing the needs of these organizations. Under the current circumstances in Myanmar, many of the procedures typically associated with obtaining donor funding are now extremely challenging without risking the safety and security of staff. The findings demonstrate the need for donors to become more flexible in their grant management procedures for CSOs and trade unions, keeping in mind that the very foundations of civic space in Myanmar are currently at stake.

► 3. Key findings

3.1. Impact on activities

Nearly all organizations interviewed reported that they have not stopped their activities entirely, despite the major challenges involved. However, substantial adaptations have been necessary, particularly where they would require direct engagement with the de facto authorities. Gathering workers together for collective action has also largely ceased due to the high risk of arrest and detention involved. In addition, many cash-intensive activities have been curtailed due to the limited availability of bank transfers and cash withdrawals.

Specific interventions that have proven the most challenging to continue (and practically impossible in some cases) include organizing workers into trade unions and associations, providing support for trafficking survivors in the criminal justice system, delivering legal assistance for worker grievances and distribution of cash transfers to unemployed workers and return migrants. It was also noted that some organizations have prioritized resistance to the military takeover and democratic activism, which has diverted their focus from implementing activities related to labour rights and migration issues.

►► Post-coup, there really is no more unionizing of workers in Myanmar because there is no way to legally register as a trade union. Any organizing activity would be considered illegal by the authorities.

► Trade union leader

All of the organizations interviewed stated that they have ceased their activities involving direct cooperation with the de facto authorities. Specifically, this includes working with regime officials to obtain documents for workers, participating in consultations or advocacy on development

of policy and legal frameworks, completing trade union and CSO registration processes, legal representation at township conciliation bodies and collaboration with the anti-trafficking police on identification and service delivery for trafficking survivors. Where possible and appropriate, some organizations have continued to work with village-level administrators who are not appointed by the SAC.

However, many activities to support migrant workers have been able to continue. This includes operating migrant centres, disseminating safe migration information to potential migrants through outreach, provision of some forms of vocational skills training, delivery of housing services to workers, provision of crisis support and shelter services and support for informal dispute resolution through direction negotiation with employers. Although migrants and other workers are still able to lodge complaints related to labour rights violations with the de facto authorities, CSOs and trade unions are no longer able to directly assist in the conciliation process. Instead, they are now providing legal support to workers from behind the scenes. The conflict between providing assistance and maintaining non-engagement has not been entirely resolved for a number of activities, such as how to encourage “safe migration” in a context where the regular migration channels are controlled by the SAC.

Geographic deployment of SAC security forces is a major determinant of the ability of CSOs and trade unions to operate more freely. Organizations based in urban centres face greater risks and have had more of their activities curtailed because of the heavier police and military presence, especially for those in Yangon where the largest portion are concentrated. Conversely, some of the organizations in more rural areas in the country’s periphery and those operating in areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations have more space to continue their activities, though they still face pressure from the military. Likewise, cross-border support has been able to continue in destination countries for organizations with offices located there.

►► We haven’t had to shut down entirely. We are still able to provide support to migrants in border areas. But we did have to close our office in Yangon because it had just become too dangerous for our staff to even go to work due to raids.

► CSO Director in Mae Sot

Increasingly, unpredictable and prolonged periods where electricity is unavailable has also dramatically affected implementation of activities. Many smaller organizations do not have the infrastructure in place to maintain power during daily brownouts. This has made it difficult to continue to use laptops and mobile phones, access the internet, provide facility-based services and complete other basic activities. It can be expected that these concerns may increase in the future as the development of the national power grid in Myanmar is impacted by divestment from the international community.

3.2. Security risks and mitigation strategies

Staff of those organizations declared illegal by the SAC are unable to operate without fear of harassment and arrest, including raids on their homes and offices, seizure of equipment, revoking of passports, threatening phone calls, interrogations and surveillance. They also report receiving frequent warnings from local officials not to participate in political activism against the military takeover. Despite these threats, many organizations are still able to implement some non-political interventions to assist migrants and other workers on a reduced scale, and have not been forced to shut down entirely as demanded in the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population announcement.

The uneven enforcement of the announcement suggests that its function is chiefly as a tool for intimidation of organizations known to be political opponents of the military takeover. It has clearly had a powerful effect in that regard, as the threat of possible enforcement has led to substantially decreased operations. Because of the seemingly arbitrary nature of the actions taken, trade union and CSO leaders are struggling to determine which activities are likely to provoke the authorities in order

to maintain the safety and security of their staff. This is stressful, time consuming and expensive, significantly reducing their ability to deliver support to their target beneficiaries.

►► The SAC seems to be cleaning out CSOs and labour unions through their blacklist, especially those who worked with the previous government. It is very clearly targeted towards those organizations they view as their political enemies.

► CSO Director in Yangon

Many of these security risks are shared by organizations not specifically declared illegal under the Labour Organization Law. In addition to the thousands of actual arrests, a key tool for intimidation has been to issue arrest warrants for the leadership of CSOs and trade unions for “causing fear, spreading false news or agitating” under section 505(A) of the Penal Code, which is punishable by three years in jail. In practice, this has had the same effect as the blacklist in limiting operations. For leaders and staff who have not yet been targeted by arrest warrants personally, most have friends and associates who have been arrested and detained. They therefore have good reason to believe the same situation could happen to them, and many have had to go into hiding. In some cases, arresting family members has also become a common tactic for intimidation where the subject of a warrant cannot be located.

►► First, the police came to ransack our offices at 1 a.m. Then, they raided the homes of our union leaders and destroyed their belongings the next day. Fortunately, no one was arrested, but now we have to hide out in areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations so that we won't be detained.

► Trade union leader in Kayin State

Several respondents stated that some factory owners and employers have taken advantage of the emerging gaps in rule of law to intimidate CSOs, trade unions and workers with the tacit and sometimes direct support of the SAC. The strong patronage networks have made it increasingly difficult to directly intervene in cases of labour rights violations, as there is a sense of impunity among private sector actors who enjoy the backing of the de facto authorities. Several organizations also reported that factory owners are directly leveraging the assistance of the police to support union busting within their workplaces through the harassment and arrest of trade union leaders.

Important mitigation strategies have been developed by trade unions and CSOs to address the heightened safety and security concerns since the military takeover. Many of these strategies were described as a “return” to their mode of operating under previous military regimes. This includes establishing formal and informal networks among organizations to support each other's work, share resources and allow them to operate with greater anonymity.

COVID-19 had already equipped many organizations with remote working capabilities, which has allowed them to be less visible in providing assistance to migrants and other workers. A wide variety of activities have been able to continue online where access to the internet is still consistently available. However, this has proven more difficult in rural areas where internet access is more limited. It has also increased the costs involved due to the need to circumvent internet restrictions and

► ILO brief

Riding out the storm: Organizational resilience of trade unions and civil society organizations following the military takeover in Myanmar

avoid surveillance. Moreover, activities involving building solidarity, networks and empowerment among workers are less impactful when conducted through the medium of virtual meetings – without the relationship-building opportunities of meeting face to face.

3.3. Organizational resilience needs

Most organizations reported that expanded and more unrestricted funding is the main form of support they require to increase their organizational resilience. It is clear that the overall amount of donor funding available to trade unions and CSOs has diminished since the military takeover took place because of risk aversion and restrictive grant requirements, exacerbated by the obstacles to completing bank transfers. Many organizations are struggling to fill the gaps this has left in their budgets and have had to go dormant or close their doors permanently.

In addition to continuing their funding, international organizations need to consider providing substantially more flexibility to their trade union and CSO partners, such as through increasing the amount of indirect costs they allow or providing them with core funding. A shift in donor thinking from viewing these organizations primarily as implementers of their respective development agendas to prioritizing their continued organizational existence is needed.

As might be expected, the older, larger and more well-established organizations have been relatively more resilient and better able to seek the additional support they require from donors. Conversely, the newer, smaller and less widely known organizations have less capacity to mobilize resources to bridge their funding gaps. This suggests the need for small grant funds and active donor outreach to continue in Myanmar, targeting organizations that may not have the ability to apply for the scale of funding required by large international organizations.

Specific to trade unions, several organizations reported that membership dues have declined precipitously because of the closure of many factories in industrial zones during COVID-19 and the military takeover, as well as because of discriminatory dismissal of trade unionists. Although many unions had been able to operate previously through a mixture of donor funding and member contributions, they are now experiencing significant shortfalls that have made it difficult to continue to provide services and represent the interests of workers. Relative to the situation of the CSOs interviewed, trade unions appear to be facing a more severe threat to their organizational continuity.

►► Union leaders have been increasingly losing their jobs just because they are union leaders. We see this as an intentional effort to weaken the power of unions since the coup so that workers are no longer able to assert their labour rights.

► Trade union leader in Yangon

Given the high amount of pressure that many CSOs and trade unions are under during this period, some organizations indicated that it is important to support the personal and emotional welfare of staff so that they do not burn out and are able to continue their work, including for those who have experienced interrogation and imprisonment. It was noted that effective collective action to support migrant workers is built on the work of individuals who cannot function effectively under a cloud of despair. This requires that donors accept more flexibility on work planning and outputs, so that the physical and psychological health of staff can be prioritized.

It was also requested that funders reduce or simplify their technical and financial reporting and due diligence requirements. For example, lowering the expectations for obtaining and retaining documentary evidence, such as receipts for expenditures below a certain threshold. In addition, to ensure the safety of staff and beneficiaries, the obligations to collect detailed participant information and meeting attendance records could be substantially abridged. Donor organizations should also be willing to accept a proven track record of effective support for worker and migrant communities, instead of adhering to strict legal registration requirements.

In addition to funding, several organizations pointed out their need for technical support and guidance on adaptive management to successfully navigate this difficult period. CSO and trade union leaders requested advice and assistance to help them to develop alternative ways of working and to restructure their business models for the post-takeover period. In particular, support to convene forums to share meaningful learning between

local organizations is needed, as many have already developed very effective strategies for continuing their activities. There was also interest expressed in learning from the international experiences of trade unions and CSOs in other countries who have experienced similar forms of suppression.

Almost all of the organizations interviewed indicated that their resilience is strengthened by the knowledge that international organizations continue to actively and visibly support them and are keeping the channels of communication open so they can voice their needs. In addition to the funding provided, this was viewed to be a source of valuable guidance, support for capacity-building, expanded networks and international solidarity. Increasing the opportunities to advocate internationally for the interests of Myanmar's workers was also raised as a need.

►► Our overall approach to supporting trade unions and CSOs has been to try to be as flexible as possible in responding to their requests at this time. There is definitely a lot more that needs to be done, particularly on easing access to money transfers, improving communication and risk sharing.

► International organization official

► 4. Conclusion

The military takeover has taken a severe toll on trade unions and CSOs providing services to migrants and other workers in Myanmar. The targeted persecution of these groups, including arbitrary arrests, detentions, acts of violence, raids on their homes and offices, seizure of equipment, threatening phone calls, interrogations and surveillance have substantially impacted their ability to operate. The dire situation has been compounded by a compromised health system that has been unable to effectively respond to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and by a crippled banking system, both which are the direct result of the military takeover on 1 February 2021.

Despite the fierce commitment demonstrated by trade unions and CSOs to resist SAC suppression and continue their work, it is clear that their organizational resilience is being brutally tested and not all are likely to survive. The expansion of these organizations during the last decade in Myanmar has been a key foundation for much of the progress achieved on increasing labour rights protection in Myanmar. The current state of affairs represents a genuine threat to the continuity of these rights, as well as to the possibilities for future advances on fundamental principles and rights at work in the country.

International organizations must dramatically increase the flexibility and responsiveness of their support to counter this existential threat to civic space and worker organizing in Myanmar. Rigid and conflict-insensitive policies that do not adequately respond to the needs of their partners on the ground will almost certainly lead to a

devastating loss of grassroots organizations. It is time for the international community to practically demonstrate their solidarity with the organizations that are continuing the struggle to uphold workers' rights in Myanmar.

4.1. Recommendations

Based on the needs and concerns identified by trade unions and CSOs during this study, the following recommendations are provided for the international community:

Funding

- 1. Prioritize the organizational resilience and sustainability of trade unions and CSOs through increasing the flexibility of funding**, including provision of unrestricted funding that is not directly tied to programming, such as a larger share for indirect costs or simply core funding.
- 2. Increase funding for the safety and security of trade union and CSO staff**, such as covering the heightened costs of getting to work and communicating safely, establishing contingency funds that are available for those requiring emergency relocation to prevent arrest and detention, and improving digital security for online activities.

- 3. Expand funding for equipment that will allow trade unions and CSOs to continue to operate in an environment of regular power outages**, potentially including the purchase of generators, inverters and solar power equipment.
- 4. Actively conduct outreach to smaller trade unions and CSOs and expand small grant funding** to ensure continued support for those organizations that are at the greatest risk of closure due to lack of sufficient funds.

Grant management

- 5. Reduce technical and financial reporting and other requirements that may place staff and their beneficiaries at risk**, such as collecting detailed beneficiary information, meeting attendance records, physical receipts and other documentation.
- 6. Remove all requirements related to organizational registration** within compliance and auditing procedures.
- 7. Allow trade unions and CSOs to make use of hundi agents and other informal cash transfer services** as necessary to send and receive funding.
- 8. Emphasize the physical and emotional welfare of staff** through provision of psychosocial support services, as well as by allowing for more flexibility in work planning and delivery of contractual outputs.

Capacity-building

- 9. Build capacity on remote working modalities** so that trade unions and CSOs can continue to engage with their beneficiaries and membership without risking the safety and security of the parties involved.
- 10. Provide training and technical support that will assist trade unions and CSOs to remain financially viable as organizations**, including on proposal writing, organizational restructuring and expansion into new areas of thematic expertise.

Networking

- 11. Support regular opportunities for trade unions and CSOs to network and exchange information** on successful adaptations of their organizational models and activities in the post-takeover period.
- 12. Organize an ongoing series of dialogues between trade unions/CSOs and international organizations** that will allow them to directly advocate for their organizational needs.
- 13. Facilitate risk sharing with trade unions and CSOs** by maintaining clear and visible partnerships with international organizations.

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