



Aid Without Trust: Civil Society and Donor Dynamics after the 2025 Myanmar Earthquake

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Abstract

The humanitarian response to the 2025 earthquake in Myanmar has been influenced by the public distrust toward state institutions in the wake of a fragile socio-political environment under the military junta, leading to a rapid emergence of grassroots networks and civil society-led organizations. This study examines how donors and fundraisers navigate aid delivery in a governance environment characterized by trust deficiency, with a focus on the interplay between donor decision-making, organizational leadership, and community-driven relief efforts. Our research centers on the following question: How does distrust in official disaster relief organizations influence donor behavior and the structure of aid delivery in post-earthquake Myanmar? This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a cross-sectional analysis of 6 in-depth interviews with leaders of relief fund collection campaigns and quantitative data collected from 78 donors via structured questionnaires. Our findings first underscore transparency as the main driver of confidence in alternative relief channels and the strengthening of social cohesion through more direct, people-to-people aid. Results also reveal a deep-seated skepticism not only toward the military junta but also toward large-scale NGOs, leading many donors to favor smaller, more transparent community-led initiatives.

Keywords: disaster relief, donor behavior, humanitarianism, swift distrust, transparency

1. Introduction

1.1 Political Instability and the 2021 Military Coup

The 2021 military coup resulted in disastrous socioeconomic consequences for the Burmese civil society, which has been largely hurt and impacted by the military junta's policies. In February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power from the democratically elected government through a coup d'état led by Min Aung Hlaing, resulting in disastrous effects on the Burmese civilians. Significantly large rebellions against the junta are repressed to an extent that has led tens of thousands to their deaths, demonstrating the unwillingness of the military to listen to the Burmese population and to act for the greater good (Ware & Skidmore, 2023). The military coup and the military agenda have largely impacted the living standards of Burmese civilians, such as severe censorship, arbitrary arrestations, forced curfew, the

impossibility of pursuing education, and restrictions on mobility to different countries. The consequences also extend to the economic sphere, as poverty and inequalities rise in the event of a large reduction in international trade and several arbitrary economic policies. The collapse in international trade and arbitrary economic policies have caused the national currency to plummet in value, making imports prohibitively expensive and driving nearly half the population below the poverty line.

The military agenda has triggered a significant wave of complex and fragmented humanitarianism on different scales, which aims to compensate for the inability of the "failed state" to care for civil society. As Naing and Wells (2023) identify, Myanmar, by failing to provide positive political goods—such as security, public services, and economic stability—has become a central focus for both national and international humanitarian efforts. On the international stage, organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations have attempted to implement "humanitarian corridors" to provide critical relief aid. However, these efforts have yielded mixed results, often hindered by a political conflict, a lack of access granted by the State Administration Council (SAC), the official name of the military junta, and a profound trust deficit that complicates the delivery of aid to the most vulnerable populations. In parallel with these large-scale international initiatives, the responsibilities and relevance of local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in reorganizing society and fostering social cohesion have largely increased since the putsch. Operating with deep community ties and an on-the-ground understanding of local needs, these organizations have become the de facto first responders and service providers.

1.2 A Crisis Over a Crisis: The 2025 Myanmar Earthquake

The humanitarian chain in Myanmar since 2021 has been subjected to high repression from the ruling junta, leading to significant risks for every one of its actors, from donors to on-the-ground volunteers (Kamal & Fujimatsu, 2024). The SAC has actively restricted and slowed down humanitarian aid through various actions, such as limiting access to certain areas, imposing burdensome bureaucratic restrictions, firing at humanitarian convoys, or conducting continued airstrikes. Due to this repression, volunteers and employees involved in fundraising campaigns on the ground face a high probability of both physical and mental harm (imprisonment, torture, or even assassination). Furthermore, donations to humanitarian channels are restricted, and donors living inside Myanmar are at great risk of arbitrary imprisonment. In this context, trust in humanitarian bodies has been significantly hindered as International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are often slowed down by bureaucratic barriers that restrict access to areas of greatest need, while informal channels suffer from a high risk of military retaliation in the event of an operational failure.

The 2025 earthquake in Myanmar became a major humanitarian crisis due to the aforementioned pre-existing vulnerabilities from the ongoing civil conflict and inadequate infrastructure. The magnitude 7.7 earthquake that struck Myanmar on the 28th of March 2025, in the Sagaing and Magway Regions, created a significant number of casualties and a need for emergency humanitarian relief. The number of casualties caused by the earthquake ranges from 3,600 to 5,350, and the number of injured victims exceeds 11,000 (Shirzaei et al., 2025). It is believed that more than 157,000 buildings were damaged, leaving approximately 200,000 people without homes. The disaster was compounded by the nation's pre-existing vulnerabilities, including ongoing civil conflict, limited infrastructure, and widespread informal constructions (Phattharapornjaroen et al., 2025). The earthquake has emphasized Myanmar's need for humanitarian emergency support, affecting an estimated 17 million people, including a significant number who were already internally displaced. To address the crisis, the ruling SAC declared a temporary ceasefire to facilitate relief and international aid

from the ASEAN nations and the UN into the country. However, trust concerns between international actors and the junta render the delivery of humanitarian assistance extremely complex. The country's weak disaster management frameworks, insufficient resources, and political instability severely hindered effective response and recovery efforts.

1.3 Purpose and Relevance of the Research

The primary purpose of this research is to investigate the complex dynamics of humanitarian aid delivery in a governance environment defined by a profound trust deficit. This research addresses the academic gap by analyzing the impact of the Burmese general distrust in formal humanitarian channels on aid and specifically examines donor-fundraiser trust relationships in the context of the 2025 Myanmar earthquake (see literature review). Thus, this study aims to understand how public skepticism toward official and large-scale institutional relief organizations influences donor behavior and the resulting structure of aid efforts. By examining and comparing the perceptions of actors in the fundraising process, this paper aims to identify discrepancies in both narratives and portray the effects of distrust on the channels, the level of risk, and the humanitarian narrative chosen by donors.

2. Literature Review

The diversity of ethnic and religious groups of victims in delivering disaster relief in Myanmar is a major flashpoint; thus, the legitimacy, inclusivity, and substitutive capacity of NGOs/CSOs in contexts of state failure are conditions that shape the effectiveness of trust in localization. In her research, Décobert (2023) identifies that localization in the humanitarian channel does not necessarily mean a “positive” outcome on the ground (2023). The label of “local” is often used by NGOs without consideration for the underlying inequalities at the local level and the political instability created by supporting a specific local group. This is especially relevant in Myanmar, as the country has long been divided by ethnic conflicts that might be strengthened by lightly addressing localization. Instead, Décobert (2023) argues that in order to gain trust in localization, NGOs should focus on empowering local communities to govern themselves and prioritizing CSOs with genuine legitimacy capable of implementing bottom-up solutions. MacCarthy goes even further in examining Burmese CSOs, stating that the traditional civil society grounded in religious and ethnic communities most often provides more effective and reliable services than formal NGOs (2017). Shared understanding of demographics between local CSOs and Burmese donors positively affects donor trust in humanitarian crises. Throughout the historical political instability of Myanmar, the civil society has evolved as a substitute for an absent, illegitimate state and is therefore highly trusted by peers (Naing & Wells, 2023; De La Perrière, 2015; Dove, 2017).

The tendency of authoritarian regimes to manipulate aid and disaster response to reinforce their own power creates a distrust-based system that hinders not only trust in the regime but also between humanitarian actors themselves. As the military junta in Myanmar serves in multiple cases as an intermediary for humanitarian aid, it is highly relevant to address its impact on donors' trust toward it, but also toward the ability of humanitarian agencies to deal with the uncertainties and the risks created by the junta. Aldoughli (2025) takes the case of the 2023 Earthquakes in Syria to illustrate how regimes can instrumentalize crises by manipulating humanitarian resources to consolidate their authority, distribute aid selectively, and increase the dependency of local as well as international actors on the regime (2025). This contributes to undermining disaster relief and to deepening public skepticism toward official institutions and the actors that have to work with them. The dependency of international bodies (such as the UN, Red Cross, and state-funded groups) on the junta for access to impacted areas makes them vulnerable to its slow bureaucracy, consequently undermining their credibility with

donors and other fundraisers. Furthermore, Desportes and Hilhorst (2020) extend this argument by showing that authoritarian political institutions actively cultivate a culture of distrust, where aid is deliberately manipulated as a governance tool.

Transparency, whether fostered through ethical practices, digital platforms, or verification in a distrust-driven context, is central in shaping donor confidence and asserting the humanitarian legitimacy of fundraisers. Aung et al. (2023) argue that, regarding the political situation in Myanmar, transparency and accountability are ethical drivers that impact the performance of humanitarian aid, as they strengthen the trust relationships with donors because they can observe how resources are used (2023). Moreover, digitalization has been a decisive factor in fundraising; it enables a more effective verification as well as a better monitoring of financial aid flows in real time and to those distanced from the disaster area (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2022). Following the earthquake, Facebook has been especially used as a tool to advocate for projects, assess the impact of humanitarian actions, and provide evidence of these actions. However, the shift toward digital fundraising introduces significant fraud risks that can jeopardize the very legitimacy these platforms aim to build. The literature on digital humanitarianism warns that "crisis informatics" can be exploited by malicious actors who capitalize on the information vacuum during disasters to launch fraudulent crowdfunding campaigns (Mack, 2021; Purcell, 2020). In a high-distrust environment like Myanmar, a single instance of digital fraud—such as the "hijacking" of local NGO identities on social media—can lead to "trust cascades," where donors withdraw support from the entire digital ecosystem, viewing it as a tool for junta-linked scams or private profiteering.

Schiffing et al. (2020) add a complementary perspective by arguing that a swift distrust environment between humanitarian actors can positively impact transparency and, paradoxically, trust, as it compels fundraisers and organizations to verify their actions, ensure accountability, and provide proof to skeptical donors (2020). He highlights that distrust from each actor toward the one they rely on (donor to fundraiser, fundraiser to volunteer, etc) forces each of them to work toward better transparency by providing more informal evidence and establishing constant feedback. Therefore, this concept allows for a decreased formal reporting task, granting more speed to the actions of humanitarian actors. This dynamic is deeply rooted in the theory of "Swift Trust," which posits that in temporary, high-stakes environments, trust is not built through long-term social bonding but through professional roles and immediate action (Meyerson et al., 2006). However, in the Burmese context, this could be replaced by "Swift Distrust"—a foundational skepticism where actors assume malfeasance until proof is provided. While traditional humanitarian governance relies on the assumption of "principled distance," the necessity for constant verification in Myanmar suggests a shift toward a "managed trust" model, where digital evidence acts as a surrogate for interpersonal reliability.

However, another part of the literature argues that accountability and transparency, while designed to build humanitarian legitimacy, can paradoxically slow response, alienate local actors, and lessen donor confidence in their ability to deliver urgent disaster relief. Décobert (2023) demonstrates that the effectiveness of local actors and CSOs can be slowed down by the bureaucratic procedures of INGOs (2023). This contributes to reducing the ability of civil society to respond quickly to the demand for relief while producing an impression of non-action and therefore impacts the trust donors have in these formal aid channels (Keating & Thrandardóttir, 2016). In Myanmar, the military junta opposes a restrictive bureaucracy and a culture of uncertainty to NGOs, leading some of them to prioritize regime "acceptance" in the emergency aid process, which further contributes to diminishing the quality and speed of disaster responses (Desportes & Hilhorst, 2020). The rigidity of international aid frameworks puts excessive pressure for constant proof, which can hinder the local CSOs' action while reducing their flexibility during urgent crises (Naing & Wells, 2023; Tondolo et al., 2023). The

operational shift from “shouting” to “counting” (significant amount of administrative work with the political regime) particularly hinders the speed of humanitarian actors, which can delegitimize them as fundraisers and further harm fundraiser-donor trust (Barter & Sumlut, 2022).

The legitimacy of NGOs and fundraising channels is most durably built through their ability to embed themselves in local contexts and their ability to cultivate trust through identity, shared purpose, and a track record of community engagement. The legitimacy of NGOs and humanitarian channels is multifaceted and socially constructed, extending to aspects such as accountability, representativeness, and the multiple discourses present in the political context in which they operate (Lister, 2003). This is very relevant when looking at trust in the Burmese political context; national donors are more likely to trust Burmese-led fundraising and volunteers sharing their values. Keating and Thrandardóttir (2016) expand on the idea that neither performances nor technical accountability account for the fundraiser-donor trust relationship as much as the sense of common identity and alignment of goals between fundraisers and supporters (2016). As mentioned above, the large ethnic and religious diversity in Myanmar implies that there are multiple specific groups, but also that donors can be divided and easily offset by discrimination in aid delivery (Dove, 2017). Supporting this claim, Waniak-Michalak and Perica (2021) further highlight the importance of the age, reputation, and commonalities between donors and fundraisers in addressing trust in a disaster relief context (2021). By contrast, INGOs seem much more distant from donors when dealing with localised disasters; it is harder to identify with and get to trust global entities that have no sociocultural specialization.

Lastly, the challenges in Myanmar reflect a broader tension in Global Humanitarian Governance. The "standard operating procedures" of the international (Western) humanitarian system, often criticized as a form of "liberal peacebuilding" (Duffield, 2014; Barnett, 2011), frequently collide with the reality of authoritarian or failed states. By viewing the Burmese case through the lens of substitutive governance, it becomes clear that the struggle for trust is not merely a local logistical issue. Rather, it is a fundamental challenge to the universalist humanitarian model, suggesting that in states of failure, legitimacy is derived more from shared political identity and local resistance than from the technical accountability standards mandated by global institutions.

3. Methodology and Sample

This paper employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the dynamics of humanitarian aid delivery in the context of the 2025 Myanmar earthquake. This approach allows us to understand both sides of the trust relationship spectrum between actors of the humanitarian chain. The data collected from each party creates a ground for comparison, which further highlights the dynamics of the trust relationship and the effects of distrust in official channels on the evolution of trust between actors.

A structured survey gathering data from 78 donors who provided financial support for emergency relief, inquiring about their preferences and behavior, constitutes the quantitative element of this study. The survey was administered bilingually (English and Burmese) and included both closed- and open-ended questions. Donor participants were recruited primarily through online channels, including social media platforms (notably Facebook) and private messaging applications commonly used within Myanmar and diaspora communities. The survey link was circulated using a snowball sampling approach, whereby initial participants shared the survey within their personal and organizational networks. Because the survey was openly circulated online, a formal response rate could not be calculated. The sample is therefore

non-random and network-based, reflecting donors who were digitally connected to fundraising campaigns during the earthquake response.

Respondents provided demographic information, indicated their primary donation channel, and rated a series of Likert-scale items designed to measure five key constructs: institutional trust, transparency and verification, risk perceptions, social ties, and perceived outcomes of donations. The analyzed donors' data solely focus on Burmese nationals, as the political context of Myanmar is a key factor in this study, and it is best understood by this population. The survey instrument was adapted from established measures used in prior studies on trust, accountability, and humanitarian giving. Internal consistency for multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all reported scales demonstrating acceptable to strong reliability (α ranging from 0.79 to 0.83).

In parallel, the qualitative component of the research involved 6 in-depth interviews with fundraisers active during and after the earthquake, identified through snowball sampling, to gain a deeper understanding of the trust-related dynamics within relief fund collection. In the data analysis phase, the findings were examined using a cross-perspective approach that enables a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between donor motivations and fundraisers' actions regarding Myanmar's political situation.

As explained in the introduction, the political context is complex, and most of all, it can be dangerous for the members of these organizations. To protect participants, no personal names were recorded, and organizational affiliations were only disclosed where explicit permission was granted. The different leaders interviewed were affiliated with the following organizations, Better Burma (NPO based in the US), Hope Stage (Student-led Fundraising Initiative in Japan), Anonymous (CSO in Myanmar), Team "Ready to Pick" (CSO in Myanmar), Independent campaign leader (CSO in Myanmar), and Advance Myanmar (NPO based in the UK).

The donor sample consisted of 78 individuals, half of whom were based in Myanmar and the other half abroad. Gender is divided between men and women, and most of our responders hold a diploma from higher education. 55% of this sample is between 18 and 29 years old; the other half is composed of equal shares of other age groups. Quantitative findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative tests, including ANOVA, to assess differences in trust and channel preferences across donor groups. Institutional trust was operationalized as respondents' reported trust across organizational channels (SAC, INGOs, and CSOs), with respondents' primary donation channel used as the grouping variable. Standard assumptions of independence and approximate normality were considered, and results are interpreted cautiously, given the non-random, cross-sectional nature of the sample. Qualitative and quantitative findings were then examined through a cross-perspective analytical approach, allowing donor motivations to be interpreted alongside fundraisers' operational strategies within Myanmar's constrained political environment.

Lastly, we have used Mayer et al. (1995) trust theory when describing organizational trust elements in our comparative analysis. We have especially used the three elements that define organizational trustworthiness, which are "ability", "benevolence", and "integrity", in analyzing the dynamics caused by distrust in the donor-fundraiser relationship. These three indicators of trustworthiness are particularly handy when describing which aspects of the trust relationship are impacted by distrust in official institutions and humanitarian channels.

4. Findings

4.1 Distrust Toward Official Institutions; a Driver for Singularization

Among the 78 valid responses of the donor behavior survey, the majority reported donating through local civil society/community organizations (39%) and informal fundraising campaigns (30%). Smaller proportions relied on INGOs (16%), other channels (18%), and SAC (1%). This distribution demonstrates a strong donor preference for community-led and informal mechanisms over both state-controlled and large international organizations. The near absence of SAC and the relatively low reliance on INGOs highlight the centrality of grassroots initiatives in mobilizing post-disaster support in Myanmar's constrained governance context.

This decentralized channel preference is directly underpinned by the corresponding levels of institutional trust among donors. Trust levels varied substantially across organizations. On average, respondents expressed very low trust in the SAC ($M=1.5$, $SD=1.2$), moderate trust in international NGOs ($M=4.4$, $SD=1.8$), and the highest trust in CSOs ($M=4.9$, $SD=1.5$). A one-way ANOVA confirmed significant differences in trust across donation channels, $F(3, 74) = 2.82$, $p = .031$, $\eta^2 = .10$ (Table 1). Given the ordinal nature of Likert-scale data and the non-random sample, results should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 1: One-way ANOVA results for institutional trust across donation channels

Source of variance	df	F	p	η^2
Between groups	3	2.82	0.031	0.10
Within groups	74	—	—	—
Total	77	—	—	—

Source: Authors' survey data (2025)

This quantitative evidence of a trust deficit is precisely what drives the operational model of relief leaders. Interviewed CSO leaders also consistently cite significant distrust toward larger NGOs and governmental channels regarding their ability to provide direct and rapid support to earthquake victims. They also identify that donors share this sentiment, actively seeking ways to circumvent the "bureaucratic burden constituted by large NGOs' funds." This ability to compensate for distrust in official humanitarian channels serves as both the main driver for the existence of smaller campaigns and a powerful asset they leverage to attract donors.

This structural advantage manifests primarily in the ability to deliver aid with superior speed and access. In disaster relief, "speed and access save lives," and smaller organizations can compete with larger institutions on both metrics. As these campaigns typically focus on only one country or specific area, their networks are wider and more deeply rooted in local communities, giving them superior "access" to endangered areas. Moreover, by moving funds and accessing locations through informal means, they bypass the military junta's bureaucratic barriers, enabling them to provide support "faster" than larger bodies. For example, smaller campaigns move cash or goods across the Thai border by avoiding military checkpoints.

4.2 Defining Need, a Bottom-up Approach

The effectiveness of localized campaigns, driven by superior access, is strongly validated by the perception of positive societal outcomes and enhanced legitimacy among donors. Donors strongly agreed that giving made them feel connected to their community ($M=6.0$), that community-led relief strengthened social bonds ($M=5.8$), and that grassroots campaigns had a greater impact than official channels ($M=6.2$). CSO donors reported the strongest positive outcomes, followed by informal donors, while INGO donors reported the lowest. This suggests

that grassroots and community campaigns generated the greatest sense of legitimacy and cohesion in the post-disaster environment.

This strong positive outcome is intrinsically linked to the operational advantage of defining need, a bottom-up approach. Better access translates directly into richer feedback from the impacted population, allowing interviewees to leverage their deep local networks to precisely define needs on the ground. The capacity to provide a more suitable and direct solution to victims is another selling point created by the competition with official humanitarian channels. Given the large ethnic and religious diversity of the Burmese territory, routing funds through the military junta risks not only misuse but also discriminatory allocation. To address both issues, grassroots initiatives organize field trips and conduct bottom-up surveys to identify needs, pinpoint damaged areas, and prioritize aid distribution. Cooperation with local leaders is then managed through gradual, objective-confirmed donations.

4.3 Accountability and Transparency: Overcoming the Barrier

Based on the donor survey results, respondents consistently emphasized the importance of transparency. Agreement was high that campaigns should provide receipts, photos, or videos ($M = 6.5$), that Facebook updates increased confidence ($M = 6.2$), and that lack of transparency reduced willingness to donate ($M = 6.4$). Although transparency expectations were uniformly high, channel-level differences were marginal ($p = 0.086$). This suggests that transparency is a baseline expectation across all donor groups, rather than a differentiating factor in channel choice. Beyond these universal transparency expectations, risk perceptions were also strong, with survey respondents agreeing that state-controlled channels were unsafe ($M = 6.1$) and that community-led or informal channels felt safer than state-controlled ones ($M = 5.5$ – 5.7). However, there is a perception that trust in using these informal channels is paired with significant risks, and more than half of the participants recognized that it felt riskier than donating to larger official channels.

The qualitative data from interviews with fundraising leaders confirms this critical balancing act, highlighting that, as noted in the literature, a significant paradox exists when addressing transparency in humanitarian contexts. All leaders display a thorough awareness of this dilemma: "transparency is both necessary and harmful" to the efficiency of aid in the dangerous Burmese political context. Being quicker means being less transparent, and vice versa. For instance, while some donors prefer to witness a Burmese bank account, fundraisers explain that such accounts are easily frozen by the junta, making their use impractical. Balancing speed, transparency, and safety was thus described as the "hardest" task during the earthquake relief campaign.

To nurture donor relationships, constant and open communication on social media, balanced with great caution in protecting actors on the ground, was crucial. Social media, especially Facebook, was utilized to raise awareness and communicate the situation, despite acknowledged risks of scams. This communication is handled carefully: information is never shared in real-time, and any identifying sign is removed from shared photographs and activities (anonymous posts, blurred faces, removed geotags). As relief shifts to recovery, sharing reconstruction plans and future expenses becomes key to maintaining donor awareness.

On the ground, an "equal distrust toward every actor" was implemented to alleviate the transparency barrier. Whether associated with fundraising or not, actors on the ground are thoroughly vetted and monitored. External actors, such as local leaders, receive gradual donations under the condition of providing proof and confirming their plan. Organizers review each step by triangulating multiple sources (written evidence from locals, narratives from external leaders, etc.). This process allows the organization to circumvent the bureaucratic

hurdles set up by the junta, thereby improving aid delivery speed. This approach echoes Schiffling et al. (2020) concept of “swift distrust,” which suggests that a lack of trust in the humanitarian channel can positively impact organizational efficiency.

4.4 Dealing with Risks in a Context of Danger; Shared Awareness and Personal Trust with Donors

Risks include numerous military checkpoints, materials banned from entering affected areas, and restricted access, with some organizers forbidden from taking photos. Airstrikes, forced conscription, and imposed curfews endanger volunteers and hamper search efforts. Beyond physical danger, organizations face digital surveillance on social media. Shared awareness is thus extremely important in reducing the total risks taken. Fundraisers emphasize the need for donors to be equally knowledgeable about the Burmese political situation to understand the inherent limitations. This focus on communication is essential as the environment encompasses significant risks. Interviewees uniformly identify the military junta as an important threat, characterizing the earthquake as a "crisis on top of another crisis."

Finally, personal trust—defined as donors trusting members directly or via trusted intermediaries—is key to coping with contextual limitations. All interviewees mentioned personal trust as the foundation of their donor relationship. This trust allows organizations to act in a freer fashion, overcoming risks and the accountability agenda by reducing time spent on reporting activities and avoiding unnecessary risks. On the other side of the spectrum, the survey data also highlight that social connections played a powerful role in donor decision-making. Respondents frequently donated because they personally knew the organizer (M = 5.9) or because trusted friends had also donated (M = 5.8). Peer influence via Facebook sharing (M = 5.6) was also important, although general trust in Facebook as a platform was more moderate (M = 4.1).

5. Discussion

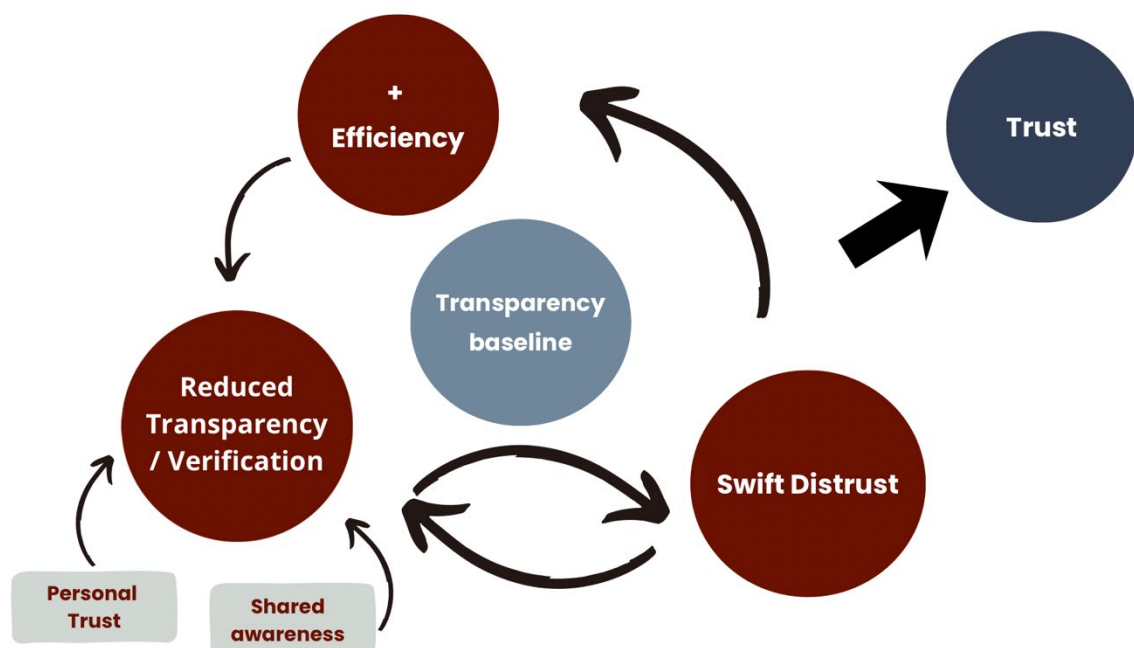


Figure 1. The transparency–speed trade-off and the role of swift distrust in trust formation.
Source: Authors' (2025)

Figure 1 illustrates how CSOs operating in a high-risk humanitarian context navigate the trade-off between transparency and operational efficiency. While increased verification requirements can reduce response speed, the establishment of a minimum transparency baseline, combined with internal mechanisms of swift distrust (e.g., staged disbursement and cross-verification), enables faster aid delivery while sustaining donor trust. Personal trust and shared awareness further compensate for reduced formal transparency.

The findings presented are consistent with independent surveys tracking the low level of trust toward official humanitarian channels (i.e., government, large NGOs) in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup. This degree of distrust is primarily rooted in two factors: the operational hindrance caused by the channels' bureaucratic burden and the significant risk of aid capture and manipulation by the military junta.

This institutional distrust creates a necessary environment where the relationship between donors and small humanitarian organizations is strengthened by the latter's ability to mitigate the weaknesses of official channels. The survey findings clarify that donors do not necessarily distrust large NGOs in general, but rather their operational effectiveness on the ground due to entanglement in the junta's bureaucracy. As local CSOs are aware of and share this distrust, they can specify and compete with larger channels by emphasizing their capabilities in both "speed" and "access." Their existing deeply-rooted networks and capacity to override bureaucratic barriers to aid directly reinforce the "Ability" characteristic—a key antecedent for trustworthiness—in defining the credibility of CSOs (Mayer et al., 1995). The resulting imbalance in perceived aid delivery effectiveness between formal and informal channels presents an opportunity for CSOs to cultivate donor trust. Concurrently, this opportunity also incentivizes CSOs to improve their efficiency and, therefore, further secure the trust of donors.

Accountability in Myanmar's humanitarian context plays an ambiguous role, functioning as both a baseline for trust and a catalyst for distrust regarding operational efficiency. Our research confirms the transparency paradox identified in the literature review and thoroughly studied by Barnett and Weiss (2008). As a matter of fact, donors fundamentally expect transparency and accountability when concerned with the use of their donations; thus, reporting is an essential baseline for the trust relationship between donors and fundraisers. However, excessive verification and reporting can compromise the ability to rapidly provide disaster relief—the very operational factor that drives donor confidence. To remain competitive when concerned with “speed” and “access”, CSOs must reduce their degree of transparency to the minimum tolerable baseline for donors (e.g., evidence of receipts, photos, or videos). Our survey indicates that, despite CSOs having lower formal accountability than INGOs, donors willingly accept the risk of relying on them.

To overcome this transparency barrier and reinforce donor trust in their “Ability, CSOs instigate an environment of "swift distrust"—a mechanism that avoids the need for heavy external accountability. Swift distrust between humanitarian actors has been demonstrated to be, in some cases, beneficial to the efficiency of aid delivery (Schiffing et al., 2020; Adler, 2007). By having actors distrust and doubt the actions of others, CSOs build an informal verification system that forces actors to verify each other's actions without having to report to donors. Techniques such as gradual donations, mandatory confirmation of plans, and real-time actor monitoring grant humanitarian actors greater independence and significantly reduce the bureaucratic burden of formal donor reporting. The implementation of swift distrust reinforces trust in the CSO's capacity to act quickly—the "Ability" component of Mayer et al. (1995) organizational trust theory (1995). Paradoxically, implementing distrust inside the fundraising and action sphere of aid delivery helps to strengthen the relationship with the donation sphere. There is a double paradox here: first, to be more efficient, humanitarian actors need to lessen

efficiency accountability; second, distrust inside the operational sphere creates trust with the donation sphere as long as there is a minimum transparency baseline.

Personal trust and social cohesion are necessary elements that enable donors and CSOs to compensate for reduced formal transparency. By lessening transparency and accountability to the minimum baseline required for operational security, donors mitigate the inherent risk to the trust relationship by shifting focus to other dimensions of trustworthiness. A compensatory factor leveraged here is Benevolence—the perception that the organizer possesses fundamentally good intentions, regardless of strict financial reporting (Mayer et al., 1995). This Benevolence is actively fostered through (inter)personal trust via two distinct mechanisms identified in our survey and interviews: Direct Communication (personalized engagement on social media) and Social Connections (peer influence where intermediaries vouch for the fundraiser). These pathways reinforce the perceived Benevolence factor of the CSOs. By successfully cultivating Benevolence as a substitute for formal Integrity, CSOs establish a durable, high-risk trust relationship uniquely suited to the conflict environment, thus solidifying their competitive advantage over bureaucratic institutional aid.

Concurrently, the Integrity factor of organizational trustworthiness—which Mayer et al. (1995) defines as relating to the organization’s moral character—is profoundly enhanced by shared awareness and shared social identity. The systemic distrust in large, official aid channels actively shapes a culture of shared awareness within the donor-fundraiser relationship. This awareness is fostered if donors come to understand the CSO’s operational limitations imposed by the high-risk political context, and is thus favored by the exchange of knowledge between parties. This shared, contextual knowledge fundamentally eases the reduction of formal verification and transparency, as donors rely on this deeper understanding rather than standard bureaucratic checks. Furthermore, the choice to donate to informal channels creates a sense of proximity, confirming that both parties—donors and fundraisers—share components of the same social identity. Because CSOs share values and specific contextual knowledge with their localized donor base, they can correctly address sensitive worries, particularly the potential for ethnic discrimination in aid delivery.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that in post-earthquake Myanmar, donors favored community-led and informal channels because, under repression and bureaucracy, speed, access, and locally rooted verification became the currencies of trust. CSOs earned credibility by reaching restricted areas quickly, practicing minimum-viable transparency that protected at-risk actors, and building relational benevolence through direct communication and shared identity. Operational “swift distrust”—staged disbursements and cross-verification—reduced bureaucracy while strengthening perceived ability and integrity. In fragile environments, effective aid structures must therefore empower local networks, calibrate transparency to safety, and institutionalize lightweight verification loops.

While this research provides valuable insights, it is limited by its modest and non-random sample of 78 donors, half of whom were young people, and six interviews, which may overrepresent digitally connected networks. It also covers only Burmese nationals who, as depicted in the literature review, have a donation culture of their own. Therefore, these results may not be overgeneralized toward older donor behavior analysis or regions that do not share cultural features with Myanmar. The cross-sectional design also prevents tracking changes in trust over time. Furthermore, security restrictions limited field verification, and our Facebook-based recruitment may bias results toward online campaigns. This study is further subject to potential common-method bias, as donor perceptions and behaviors were self-reported within

a single survey instrument. Social desirability bias may also be present, given the political sensitivity of humanitarian action under military rule. These risks were partially mitigated through anonymous participation, the absence of identifying information, and indirect wording of sensitive items; nevertheless, results should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Theoretically, this research implies that Mayer et al. (1995) organizational trust model's components are not only additive but also substitutable in conflict zones. It further identifies Swift Distrust as a “positive” efficiency driver in gaining donor trust. Regarding humanitarian actors, the findings suggest that their efficiency can be attained when intentionally reducing their transparency baseline while using different factors to foster trust. Internal friction (swift distrust) inside the humanitarian channel is a driver of trust and should be sought by smaller CSOs. Future research should build on these findings by pairing surveys with anonymized transaction records to test the transparency–speed trade-off more precisely, and by following donors and fundraisers longitudinally from crisis to recovery. Comparative studies across similar authoritarian or conflict settings could help validate the “swift distrust” mechanism, while further investigation into equity and inclusion in local aid distribution would ensure that trust-based models also deliver fairness.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the donors and fundraisers who participated in this study for sharing their experiences under difficult and sensitive circumstances. And we appreciate Professor Thomas E. Jones and Joseph Proglor (Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University) for their supervision and guidance during the research process.

Funding

This research was partially funded by the “APU Alumni Association Support Change Makers Fund for Students' Action Support.”

AI Declaration

This manuscript was primarily written by the authors. Artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited and supportive manner for language refinement, clarity, and formatting consistency. No AI tools were used to generate data, conduct analysis, interpret results, or develop the core arguments and conclusions of the study. The authors retain full responsibility for the content of this paper.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Donor Survey Overview

Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and could be withdrawn at any time. No identifying information was collected. Data were used solely for academic research, conference presentation, and publication purposes.

Survey structure

Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree / strongly distrust; 7 = strongly agree / strongly trust). The donor survey consisted of 24 items organized into six sections:

Demographics and background

Items captured gender, age group, current location (Myanmar or abroad), highest education level, donation behavior following the 2025 earthquake, and primary donation channel.

Institutional trust

Items measured trust in state-controlled channels (SAC), international NGOs, and civil society organizations, using a 7-point Likert scale (adapted from Watkins, 2021).

Transparency and verification

Items assessed expectations regarding receipts, visual evidence, and social media updates demonstrating aid delivery (Wymer & Čačija, 2022).

Channel choice and risk perception

Items measured perceived safety and risk associated with donating through state-controlled, international, and informal channels (Aldoughli, 2025).

Social Ties & Platform Influence

Items examined the role of personal connections, peer influence, and trust in social media platforms when deciding to donate.

Outcomes and social cohesion

Items assessed perceived impacts of donations on community connection and post-disaster social cohesion.

Composite construct scores used in the analysis were calculated as the mean of items within each section. The full survey instrument and exact item wording are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Appendix B: Interview Guide Summary

Interviewees provided verbal informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and no names or identifying details were recorded unless explicit permission was granted.

Semi-structured interviews explored six thematic areas:

Origins and motivation

Links to Myanmar and motivations for initiating fundraising campaigns.

Channel selection

Choice of platforms and perceived risks associated with different aid channels.

Transparency practices

Methods used to demonstrate aid delivery and build donor confidence.

Verification and trust

Internal mechanisms for ensuring aid reached intended recipients, including inclusion and non-discrimination considerations.

Governance constraints

Impact of military controls, surveillance, and bureaucratic restrictions on operations.

Reflections and future outlook

Perceptions of what ultimately drove donor trust and expectations for the future role of community-led initiatives.

The complete interview guide is available upon request.