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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 government. The rapid emergence of grassroots networks and civil society-led organizations that directed financial funds through informal pathways was accelerated by the rising skepticism in official emergency aid institutions. This study examines how donors and local leaders 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 uses a mixed-methods approach that combines 5 in-depth interviews with leaders of relief fund collection campaigns and quantitative data that was collected from 73 donors via structured questionnaires. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify trust-related dynamics, while survey data were examined using descriptive statistics to map donor preferences and behaviors.

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 government but also toward large-scale NGOs, leading many donors to favor smaller, more transparent community-led initiatives.

Keywords: Humanitarian Aid, Social Cohesion, Donor Dynamics