Early Recovery Network

Early Recovery Multi-Sector Assessment of Mrauk-U District

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Executive Summary

In June and October 2012, inter-communal violence across Rakhine State resulted in 8,614\(^1\) homes being destroyed, leaving thousands displaced and later resulting in restrictions on movement being imposed. Following the violence, the situation for displaced populations in Mrauk-U District was, on the whole, different from other conflict-affected areas of Rakhine. In these townships of Kyauktaw, Minbya and Mrauk-U, IDPs have been sheltered in temporary longhouses either in or near their villages. Launched in March 2015, the Rakhine State Government’s Resettlement Plan provides a pathway for many of these IDPs to return. Indeed many have now returned voluntarily to their villages, and some have been relocated to new sites over the course of the past year. This process is nearing completion across Mrauk-U District, which raises an important question as to how international assistance is delivered here in the future.

This assessment aims to inform that recalculation by comparing and contrasting the socio-economic context and overall welfare of villages with IDPs and those without. Villages that have been directly affected by conflict have been receiving the majority of assistance while assistance to villages without IDPs has been more limited. In order to ensure that needs are not being overlooked, evaluating and comparing their contexts is vital.

This assessment is reliant on qualitative inputs that depict illustrative findings across a multitude of sectors. What is presented here is a broad snapshot of how these villages are fairing, the coping strategies they use, and the priorities they see for improving their lives going forward. While a key recommendation offered is the need for further research to deepen and add granular data to the analysis here, the following conclusions were drawn.

The core finding of this assessment is that all villages here are poor and have suffered from the broader economic stagnation of central Rakhine State over the past five years. While differences in the socio-economic contexts and welfare of villages exist, they are dependent more on the village’s ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, its geography than on whether or not it hosts IDPs.

The economic decline of this district is first demonstrated by the significant negative shifts in livelihood opportunities. The number of households reporting that they have no income or are engaged in migrant work/dependent on remittances has increased significantly. Reduced opportunities in fisheries and livestock rearing further underline the economic stagnation. The changes in livelihood opportunities for former IDP villages and non IDP Muslim villages have been similar and most likely point to the adverse effects stemming from the restrictions on movement imposed on the Muslim population. Livelihood challenges for Rakhine non-IDP villages are different, though also point to negative shifts in the economy, with those reliant on migration and remittances being much more commonplace.

Both ethnicities respond with pessimistic views of the future, foreseeing that the boys and girls in their villages would likely engage either in casual labor or migrant work. A significant minority of villages stated that the girls in the village will likely remain in the home engaging in housework – and this trend was higher in Muslim than in Rakhine villages.

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\(^1\) Final report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State (July 2013) p. 20
The widespread poverty here is further underlined by all respondents identifying a lack of cash as the primary challenge to accessing social services and markets. Specifically, Muslim villages, both with and without IDPs, identify a lack of cash for transport as their primary challenge, rather than the restrictions on movement – a likely reflection of restrictions on movement here not being absolute, but can often be overcome with informal payments. The main expenditure for all communities is food, followed by healthcare and education. At the same time, reducing the intake of food is the most common coping strategy for Muslim villages, while Rakhine villagers turn to taking loans as their primary coping mechanism.

Access to emergency healthcare and birthing services is worst for Muslim non-IDP villages, followed by Muslim IDP villages – and is worryingly low for both of these groups. Access to these services is notably higher for Rakhine non-IDP villages but is still only around 50%. Most prevalent healthcare access challenge is a lack of cash for transport for Muslim villagers and a lack of cash for treatment for Rakhine communities. WASH facilities are more accessible for IDP villages, than for Muslim and Rakhine non-IDP villages, likely a reflection of international assistance. The differences in the availability of latrines across these realities also reflect the involvement of international organizations.

Rakhine villages have better education facilities in their villages as Muslim communities can no longer access many of the schools in the district. Muslim non IDPs seemingly have the poorest access to education facilities. Women largely feel safe in their own villages, though the location where they feel most unsafe is their access route to markets. Gender-based violence and child protection issues were reported in informant interviews but were not reflected in the survey component of this study – and is, therefore, an important focus area for further research.

The majority of social relationships between villages of different ethnicities here are improving, though respondents in Rakhine communities and former IDP villages were less likely to state improvements. In Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U the vast majority of respondents stated that relationships are improving; in Minbya that proportion was approximately 50%. Both types of Muslim communities, those with and without IDPs, state that they would like the government to prioritize the restoration of freedom of movement to improve their lives. An overwhelming proportion of Rakhine villages stated that they would like the government to prioritize job creation, and this community shows no interest in improving social relations with other communities.

Overall the findings point to two central conclusions. First, that the economic stagnation in this district is adversely affecting all communities and improved income generating activities are sorely needed. Second, the welfare of former IDP villages and non-IDP villages are comparable across a number of sectors and thus the current focus on humanitarian assistance may be overlooking the needs of certain groups, particularly of non IDP Muslim villages.

Considering these conclusions, a set of recommendations has been developed pointing to a broadening of the international assistance agenda in Mrauk-U District. Any shift in assistance should be preceded by further thematic and specific geographical research, and the monitoring of protection challenges should be continued. Moreover, the political and inter-communal dynamics that are at play need to be more carefully assessed and understood here, while the needs of the most vulnerable should be given particular attention if a broadened international assistance agenda is to be implemented.
Introduction

More than three years after inter-communal conflict broke out in Rakhine State, an estimated 120,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain, with severe restrictions on movement and limited access to services. These IDPs have either been sheltered in camps or in longhouses built within villages directly affected by conflict. Since 2012, the majority of service support in Rakhine State from government and international agencies has taken the form of humanitarian assistance directed to these displaced populations across the state.

In March 2015, the Rakhine State Government (RSG) launched an initiative to return 8,468 households (1,768 of which have been completed while 6,700 are ongoing) to their plots of origin within their villages or voluntarily relocate them to new sites in single-family houses. Approximately 2,440 across Mrauk-U District are covered in this initiative, and the returned IDPs have been offered a shelter package provided by the RSG and/or other actors. Many have accepted, and the operation is close to completion in Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk U, and Rathedaung Townships. Although there have been some relocations here, namely in Mrauk-U (1) and Kyauktaw (2), the vast majority of IDPs have voluntarily returned across these townships. The return of former IDPs here is a thus a relatively recent event that requires further analysis to ensure that international assistance is calibrated precisely to the reality of their needs.

This assessment is designed to measure and compare differences in the socio-economic context and overall welfare of villages that are and are not hosting former IDPs in Mrauk-U District, in order to determine the needs of these target populations, and, therefore, inform the design of future international assistance.

Rakhine state as a whole faces significant development challenges, as has been demonstrated by a series of assessments and reports since the 2012 violence. As restrictions on movement for many Muslim communities and other mitigating measures remain in place, both Rakhine and Muslim livelihoods have stagnated. Recent assessments indicate high levels of poverty, malnutrition, underdevelopment and lack of access to basic amenities among many non-displaced populations and as UNHCR reported, “the violence in June and October 2012 not only destroyed market stalls, but also reduced people’s spending power by an estimated 50 %, effectively wiping out many livelihoods.”

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2 UNHCR, ‘Protection Concerns and Risks Analysis’ (November 2015)
3 According to the Rakhine State Government list received on 11 September 2015
4 UNHCR, ‘Protection Sector Update No.6 on Ending Displacement in Rakhine State’, (08 January 2016)
5 Figure provided by Rakhine State Government to shelter cluster. UNHCR, ‘Protection Sector Update No.6 on Ending Displacement in Rakhine State’, (08 January 2016)
6 Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency
7 UNHCR, ‘Protection Sector Update No.6 on Ending Displacement in Rakhine State’, (08 January 2016)
8 Informant interview with UN-agency, Sittwe (07/02/16). One informant interview stated that there is anecdotal evidence of a forced relocation in a village in Minbya township though this has not been verified.
9 Comprises of Kyauktaw, Minbya and Mrauk-U Townships.
10 Secondary literature list found in ‘Methodology’ section below.
12 Numerous studies include research from ACTED-Myanmar and the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony – fully elaborated below.
13 UNHCR, ‘Protection Concerns and Risks Analysis’ (November 2015) p. 17
A Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) assessment conducted among non-displaced villages (both Muslim and Rakhine) in Sittwe Township in November 2013 showed that 87% of households lack latrines, nearly all water sources are open, hand-dug wells, and that 77% of villages have experienced loss of income due to the conflict. The 2014 nationwide census showed that Rakhine State has the lowest proportion of households with improved sanitation facilities in the whole country: 31.8% versus a national average of 74.3%. Communities throughout the state experience seasonal water shortages and have reported declining agricultural yields over the past several years due to inadequate or low quality agricultural inputs. In light of the conflict and frequent natural disasters, Rakhine’s vulnerability to economic, socio-political or natural shocks, is particularly concerning.

Compounding the severity of these existing issues, on 30-31 July 2015, Cyclone Komen made landfall in Rakhine State. The strong winds and tidal surges produced by the cyclone exacerbated existing heavy flooding in lowland areas, leading to widespread damage across the state from Maungdaw Township in the north to Ann Township in the south. The flooding and strong winds caused substantial initial damage, destroying paddy fields, shelters and displacing thousands from their homes across the affected area. Moreover, households have also lost other productive assets critical to income diversification, such as livestock, winter crop gardens or fishing equipment. Many households are already in debt and anticipate taking on more to cope with the loss of their income and assets.

Given this context, the end of IDP’s displacement in Mrauk-U District necessitates not only an assessment of their needs, but of the needs of communities in the area as a whole. Only if the needs of both former-IDP villages and communities where there were no IDPs (Rakhine and Muslim) are understood, can a holistic and inclusive approach to international assistance be adopted. With this in mind, the Early Recovery Network, led by UNDP, has conducted an initial Early Recovery Multi-Sector Assessment of the socio-economic condition of these contexts. Kyauktaw, Minbya and Mrauk-U have been selected as the target townships for this study due to the returns and relocation process being at relatively similar and advanced stages across these realities, and their relatively homogenous socio-economic contexts.

With this in mind, this study aims to fill several existing analytical gaps regarding the international community’s understanding of Mrauk-U District including but not limited to:

- The general welfare of returned and relocated villages, their host communities, and surrounding villages.
- The livelihood profiles of returned/relocated villages and other Muslim and Rakhine villages not directly affected by conflict.
- Most common coping mechanisms used by target populations.
- Access to services including water, health, and education.

**Objectives**

**Overall Objective**
To analyze the socio-economic context and welfare of villages with returned or relocated former IDPs compared to non-IDP villages in Kyauktaw, Minbya and Mrauk-U.

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14 Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) assessment, November 2013.
17 Informant interview with UN-agency, Sittwe (07/02/16)
Specific Objectives

1. To gain a holistic understanding of the socio-economic context (livelihoods, access to services, markets, social relations, etc.) across the target realities.
2. To gain a holistic understanding of the current welfare (WASH, access to food, coping strategies, etc.) across the target realities.

Research focus

The research covered a number of sectors in order to develop a snap shot of the target communities social and economic context. This was reflected in the research design of the survey, discussed below, which saw inputs from a range of UN agencies. The results presented here include, but are not limited to: livelihoods, access to food and markets, WASH facilities, access challenges to health and education, expenditures and sources of credit, coping strategies, and social interactions between villages of different ethnicities. Communities’ perceptions on suggested government priorities were also addressed.

Figure 1: Mrauk-U District (Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U Townships)
Methodology

Overview
The Early Recovery Multi-Sector Assessment (ERMSA) comprises of three core inputs that have been developed for this report and the accompanying township-specific assessments. A desk review and a set of key informant interviews were both conducted by a consultant in close co-ordination with the UNDP Early Recovery team. The third input was a UN inter-agency village-level survey that included research design by UNDP and the Early Recovery Network, facilitation of the Open Data Kit (ODK) enumeration method by IOM, and data analysis by WFP. The field teams collecting the data consisted of UNDP, IOM, WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, OCHA and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) staff. This approach allowed triangulation of survey results with key informant interviews and existing literature on the three target townships, and the differing realities of the target realities identified above. Key findings were highlighted and sense-checked with a selection of relevant interlocutors in Sittwe, including government officials.

The research was conducted using a phased approach throughout February 2016. The consultant ensured conflict sensitive principles were adhered to throughout the key interview process. Given the recent history of turbulent inter-communal relations, a ‘do no harm’ approach was adopted in order to minimize the effect of potential conflict drivers. Specifically, this has meant being inclusive of concerns from both Muslim and Rakhine target populations, as well as of the Chin, Maramargyi, and Hindu communities present in central Rakhine State. Moreover, the conflict that took place in 2012 was not mentioned explicitly in the questionnaire; instead enumerators enquired about the situation ‘five years ago’ as a point of reference.

The experiences and perceptions of women and girls in conflict-affected areas can differ significantly from that of men and boys. With this in mind, the field survey undertook one focus group discussion with a group of women and one group of men. This process sought to give female voices ample room to be heard. The different realities of men and women are, therefore, expressed in the data presented below.

Assessment tools

Review of secondary literature
Existing literature and data on the socio-economic context of the target townships was reviewed by the consultant. This process helped establish a contextual baseline of research and identified gaps in existing information.

Alongside various reports and analytical briefs, five key banks of data were reviewed to provide a baseline understanding of the township contexts:

1. **REACH Initiative, UNDP and IOM (& Swanyee Development Foundation) ‘Cyclone Komen Early Recovery Assessment’, (August 2015).**
   - This assessment took a “snapshot” of one village-tract per township in Kyauktaw, Ponnaguyn, Mrauk-U, and Minbya townships to identify needs for cyclone-affected communities.

   - This assessment adopted independent interview and FGD data collection methodologies targeting different variables: one focused on the supply of education
(schools) and the other on demand (school users) in Maungdaw, Rathedaung, Buthidaung, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Sittwe, Pauktaw, Minbya, and Myebon townships.

3. ACTED, ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)’, (October 2015)
   - This assessment was carried out as part of the livelihoods program implementation activities, funded by UNDP, in 13 villages. The study was designed to examine issues of livelihoods, household finances, access to services, and social interaction.

4. Rakhine Needs Assessment carried out by the Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) (September 2015)
   - This assessment draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected over 2014-15, and focused on gauging perceptions and needs of both the Muslim and Rakhine communities in across Rakhine State.

Key informant interviews
While there is a relative dearth of granular socio-economic data on the target townships, contextual knowledge held by UN, INGO, and NGO staff in Sittwe is abundant. This knowledge has been developed through empirical observation over time and through engagement with communities in the three target townships. As a result, informant interviews formed an important qualitative aspect of this research, providing additional nuance, filling gaps, and identifying questions for future research.

Key informants were selected by UNDP in Sittwe, with each engaged based on their agency’s operations in the target townships. It is important to note that a flexible approach was taken in the delivery of the questionnaire so that the informant agency’s thematic and geographical knowledge was given priority over broader commentary on the situation of the target townships. A full list of the key informants interviewed is given in Annex.

Data From Early Recovery Village-level Survey
The final input for this assessment is a joint inter-agency survey, led by UNDP, of 50 villages. This village-level survey was conducted through focus groups discussions (FGDs) in three townships in Mrauk-U District. The survey questionnaire was designed by UNDP and IOM, and reviewed by the ERN. Data collection was facilitated in the field by a number of ERN members.

The survey was designed to capture indicative realities of three distinct communities’ current welfare and socio-economic context:
   - Villages with former IDPs that have returned or have been relocated.
   - Muslim villages without IDPs.
   - Rakhine villages without IDPs.

As mentioned above, the welfare and socio-economic status of the Chin and Hindu villages that were not directly affected by the conflict, and a Maramargyi community that was, were also the subject of this study.

The survey instrument was designed and village sample selection procedures were conducted internally by UNDP. A total of 50 villages were visited: 24 in Kyauktaw (7 former IDP villages, 15 non-IDPs villages, 2 IDPs villages), 14 in Minbya (8 former IDP villages, 6 non-IDPs villages), and 12 in Mrauk-U (4 former IDP villages, 8 non-IDPs villages).\(^{18}\) 40% of the total sample across all three townships was therefore composed of former IDP villages, and

\(^{18}\) There are two villages in Kyauktaw (Nidin and Ah Pa Wa) where IDPs remain in temporary shelters. For the sake of this assessment, these were grouped with the former IDP villages as villages that have been directly affected by conflict.
60% of non-IDPs villages. FGDs were selected as the structure for data collection, with one male focus group and one female focus group per village. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Annex.

**Scope and process**
A total of 100 FGDs were held across 50 villages and each group consisted of 15-25 participants. The participants were identified by village administrators and village elders in consultation with the research team leaders. Each focus group completed a single survey instrument, which was digitally recorded using an Open Data Kit to IOM servers in Yangon to produce a data set of 100 entries. Village selection was conducted by ERN members and, for non-IDP villages, an effort was made to find villages less likely to be recipients of international assistance. This was done in order to be more illustrative of the average villages that are not hosting former IDPs across Mrauk-U District. IDP villages were selected on the basis that they are receiving assistance to provide illustrative findings for this community type.

Seven research teams conducted the ERN survey. The survey was conducted in the first week of February 2016 and was approved by the Chief Minister, Security Minister, and Emergency Co-ordination Committee. Relevant Township Administrators had also been notified to provide support to the co-ordination of the research teams.

**Data analysis**
IOM undertook initial data consolidation and cleaning. Following this, a data analyst from WFP disaggregated the data for ethnicity and conflict-affectedness in order to produce a data set in a format so that the target realities could be analysed. The consultant developed a series of graphical overlays demonstrating the key findings of the survey for further analysis presented here.

**Assessment Limitations**
The limitations of this study are as follows:

1. **Timeframe for assessment completion**
The assessment was undertaken in a very limited timeframe and this resulted in challenges for the research design and implementation:
   a) Data analysis using conflict affectedness and ethnic lenses was only conducted on two-thirds of the survey questions due to time and human resource constraints. Raw data tables exist for responses to the remaining questions, though the timeframe was too short to conduct fuller analysis.
   b) The survey was not piloted. A trial or pilot period could have allowed refinement of questions to ensure a more granular data collection.

2. **Multi-sector approach**
The multiple focal sectors for this study has allowed a broad picture of village welfare to be developed for the community types described above. However, this picture is necessarily shallow in each thematic area. A deeper focus of specific sectors, particularly livelihoods, would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of specific community needs.

3. **Village-level unit of analysis**
While the selection of target villages was made by UN agencies to construct a representative sample, a household level survey would produce a richer data set with which to conduct deeper analysis.
4. Lack of existing quantitative data
A lack of quantitative data relative to other operating environments in Myanmar meant that a comprehensive baseline of the three townships was not established.

Mrauk-U District with ERN survey target villages
Red=former IDP villages
Green=non-IDP villages
Findings: Mrauk-U District

Early Recovery Network survey sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Rakhine</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Chin</th>
<th>Maramargyi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former IDP villages</td>
<td>15 villages</td>
<td>2 villages</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-IDP villages</td>
<td>7 villages</td>
<td>20 villages</td>
<td>1 village</td>
<td>1 village</td>
<td>1 village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDP villages</td>
<td>2 villages</td>
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</tbody>
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Top-line:
The widespread underdevelopment of all villages across Mrauk-U district is the core finding of this assessment. When examined in more detail, however, differences at the village-level across the townships emerge. These differences exist more along the lines of ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, on geography, than on whether or not the village is hosting former IDPs. Further research is required to elaborate on this finding though the data presented below, as well as in the township analyses offered as annex, point to this conclusion.

Key Findings:
- **All realities are poor** and significant service access challenges are present. The socio-economic context and welfare of villages depends more on ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, on geography rather than whether or not IDPs are present.
- Respondents have experienced significant negative shifts in livelihoods opportunities over the last five years. There were significant increases in those registering with no income, migrant workers, and remittances and losses of opportunities in fisheries & livestock rearing.
- Livelihoods shifts are largely similar for Muslim non IDP and former IDP villages. Rakhine non-IDP villages have also experienced a significant negative shift but in different sectors that point to many leaving the district.
- Expected future opportunities for boys and girls are perceived as limited to casual labor or migrant work, while a significant minority of girls is expected to remain in the home doing housework.
- **A lack of cash for food is cited as the primary challenge** for accessing markets for Rakhine villages, while lack of cash for transport is primary challenge for Muslim population.
- Access to WASH facilities is generally higher for former IDP villages and lowest for non-IDP Muslim villages, reflected in greater access to latrines for former IDP villages.
- **All realities have similar expenditure priorities. The main expenditure is food** for all respondents, followed by healthcare then education. Lower education expenditures in former IDP villages may reveal increased reliance on external actors.
- **Reducing food intake** is most common coping strategy for Muslim villages, especially non-IDP villages. **Taking loans** is the primary coping strategy for Rakhine villages.
- Access to emergency healthcare provision worst for Muslim non IDPs, then former IDPs, and highest for Rakhine. Most prevalent access challenges are lack of cash for transport for Muslim and a lack of cash for treatment and transport for Rakhine.
- Rakhine villages have more advanced education facilities than Muslim villages. Muslim non-IDP villages have poorest facilities.
- Women largely feel safe in their own villages, though least safe accessing markets.
- There are greater safety concerns when accessing services in former IDP villages.
- Social interactions between villages have **improved for most in the last six months** – though less so for Rakhine villages. In Minbya township there has been less improvement between villages of different ethnicities.
Former IDP villages and Muslim non-IDP villages state that the restoration of freedom of movement should be a government priority, while Rakhine villages identify job creation as the highest priority. Improving education is a higher priority in Muslim villages and some Muslim villages demonstrate interest in improving inter-ethnic community relations, while no Rakhine villages demonstrated interest in this (see figure below).

**Socio-economic context**
A number of socio-economic indicators demonstrate the entrenched poverty of the three townships in Mrauk-U township relative to other areas of Rakhine—let alone the rest of the country. Following the 2012 communal violence, many areas have seen inter-village interactions decline, resulting in a downturn of commercial activity and a stagnation in the district’s economy that is affecting all communities here.\(^\text{19}\) Restrictions on movement have been imposed on the Muslim population, a key driver of the current underdevelopment and economic strife.\(^\text{20}\) In a recent study by the Center for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH), in Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U townships more than 90% of Muslims viewed their living conditions as either bad or very bad.\(^\text{21}\)

The underdevelopment of Mrauk-U District, though, is by no means limited to Muslim villages. The majority of villages in the district are Rakhine and there are smaller communities of Hindu, Chin, Myo, Maramargyi and other ethnic groups that are also generally poor. Villages in Mrauk-U District are all ethnically homogenous though there is some interaction between different ethnicities, usually within larger market villages, construction sites, and in paddy fields where laborers from different ethnic groups work. The majority of the population is rural and this is reflected in the area’s primary livelihood, agriculture and the accompanying daily labor.

Since 2013, and especially in 2014-2015, restrictions on movement have eased incrementally across Mrauk-U District, particularly in Kyauktaw township, though measures remain in place for most Muslim villages. When Cyclone Komen made landfall in July 2015,

\(^{19}\) Informant interview with UN-agency, Sittwe (06/02/16). To be expanded on below.

\(^{20}\) Informant interview with UN-agency and INGO staff, Sittwe (05-6/02/16).

\(^{21}\) Center for Diversity and National Harmony, ‘Rakhine State Needs Assessment’, (September, 2015) p. 33
evidence presented by the REACH Initiative demonstrates that restrictions were temporarily lifted to allow for emergency flood relief efforts. This observation is corroborated by UNHCR’s Protection Sector who recorded “momentary significant improvements in freedom of movement observed among Muslims in Minbya, Mrauk U and Kyauktaw townships.”

The International Organization of Migration (IOM) estimates that during the floods, 80% of flood-affected people temporarily moved from their place of origin. The three townships in Mrauk-U District were amongst the worst affected in Rakhine State, and exacerbated existing structural problems of poverty, underdevelopment and a lack of community resilience to withstand shocks.

Over the course of last year, in almost all of the villages affected by the conflict, IDPs have either been returned to their former plots of origin or been relocated by the RSG. As the data drawn from the ERN survey indicates, across many thematic areas, the socio-economic state of these former IDP villages is comparable to many villages without IDPs that were not directly affected by the conflict in 2012.

Livelihoods

Agriculture is the primary livelihood for villagers in Mrauk-U District, and most employment is centered on paddy cultivation. Casual laborers, hired to provide short-term assistance, generally but not exclusively on farms, form the bulk of employed labor. This reliance on agricultural work is a reflection of the lack of longer-term, more regular job opportunities. It is telling that the third most common source of income across the assessed area is remittances received from migrated family members. While the ERN data shows some income generated through other opportunities, such as vegetable and fruit cultivation, livestock rearing, fishing, and firewood selling, these sectors are small relative to the cultivation of paddy.

Current livelihoods in Mrauk-U District target villages

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25 The exceptions are Eh Pauk Wa and Nidin where IDP camps remain. Issues over relocation were raised in Raw Ma Ni as well, though a settlement has been reached between the Maramargyi population in question and the Rakhine State Government. Almost all other returns have been voluntary, as per UNHCR’s periodic Protection Sector Updates.

26 Common crops for cultivation in this area include peas, beans, chilli, cabbage, betel nut, and oil seed.
Mrauk-U District’s poor economic performance is better understood when current livelihoods are compared with the most common livelihoods five years ago. The ERN survey results demonstrate that significant shifts in livelihoods have occurred over this period. The most significant, and indicative of high poverty level, is that around 1,200 more households now state that they have no income, while an increased number of households now report dependence on remittances from migrated family members. At the same time, the number of fishing households has shrunk dramatically, reflecting a downturn in the fishing industry across Rakhine State more broadly. Livestock rearing and other productive agricultural activities also employ fewer households than five years ago.

When disaggregated for ethnicity and conflict-affectedness the similarities in the experiences of the former IDP villages and the Muslim non-IDP villages emerge. For former IDP villages, the significant increase in households registering as without an income is the largest shift in livelihoods, while a similarly sized group stated that they were previously working in the fisheries sector. Reduction in employment rates for livestock rearing, firewood collection, migrant work, vegetable cultivation, small business and farming are also notable and are likely to be the result of restrictions on movement.
For Muslim villages that were not directly affected by conflict, the major livelihoods shifts correlate strongly with those with former IDPs. The economic decline for these Muslim communities is particularly clear, as a large increase in those registering as without an income is also present here. At the same time, a mix of livelihood opportunities report proportional reductions, including livestock rearing, fisheries, farming and vegetable cultivation. The category labeled ‘other’ comprises mostly of opportunities in bamboo mat making, sewing and fish net making. The one major difference between these two communities is the significant drop in casual labor experienced in non IDPs Muslim villages as compared to the former IDP villages. This is likely a reflection of the level of international assistance in offering cash-for-work programs which often result in daily casual work for beneficiaries. Largely unexposed to these programs at present, the non IDPs Muslim villages have likely experienced this significant drop, which is also indicative that the role that international assistance can play in providing temporary opportunities for laborers.
For Rakhine non-IDP villages, the livelihoods changes also point toward economic stagnation though with gains and losses of opportunities in different sectors. Significant increases in those relying on migrant work and remittances reflect the number of women encountered during focus group discussions that stated that they were now ‘widowed’, with their partners having left for work to other parts of the country. The increases in opportunities in small business and livestock rearing are a likely result, to some extent, of the losses experienced by the Muslim community who were previously frequently engaged in these professions. The losses in farming, fisheries, casual labor and firewood collection reflect the contraction experienced in these sectors.

The decrease in the number of households registering as without an income is a likely reflection of increasing pull factors away this area when compared to five years ago. To elaborate, when prices of daily goods were lower here five years ago and opportunities elsewhere in the country were scarcer, more villagers may have been able to survive on subsistence farming. With increasing prices and more attractive livelihoods opportunities available elsewhere, many previously stating that they were without income may instead have turned to migration.

Key informant interviews indicated that seasonal labor shortages across Mrauk-U District townships has inflated the cost of employing casual workers at peak times. For instance, one informant reported that positions paid 2-3,000mmk for a day’s work in 2011 are now paid around 5,000mmk/day, and maximum wages for skilled work is usually 6,000mmk. Informant interviews also pointed to marked gender difference in wages as men would likely get 30-50% more than women for a day’s labor. This shift has been largely driven by the outward migration of working men, and an increase in infrastructure upgrades across the township – an initiative led by the RSG to stimulate growth through better connectivity between villages. It was reported that labor shortages tend to be during harvest periods, while job opportunities are scarce the rest of the year.

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27 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/02/16)
28 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/02/16)
29 Informant interview with UN staff, Sittwe (07/03/16)
30 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/02/16)
Mrauk-U District villages currently do not receive much support in terms of livelihoods assistance. Informant interviews in Sittwe affirmed this, as only a handful of UN and INGOs are engaged in livelihoods support activities. There are no government vocational training schools at present though a technical college in Kyauktaw is due to start taking students later in 2016. When respondent groups were asked what type of livelihoods support is available, groups stated that micro-grant programs (12%), cash-for-work initiatives (13%) and infrastructure rehabilitation schemes (5%) are active across the three townships.

Considering the recent socio-economic trajectory of Mrauk-U District villages, the ERN survey returned results that paint a bleak picture of villagers’ perceptions of the future. When asked what type of employment boys will be engaged in, 37% said casual labor and 26% responded with migrant work. 22% went on to describe work in small businesses, the fisheries sector, or for the government. Almost 40% of respondent groups described girls would be engaged in household work (registered in the survey as “other”), often after having married – and a minority described that women would be engaged in the garments sector, as teachers or working for the government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casual labor</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Fisherman</td>
<td>Migrant worker</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
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Some respondent groups made it clear that women would not be able to take employment outside the home – and this perception was more frequent in female respondent groups, particularly in Muslim villages. 28% responded that girls would go into casual labor while 19% stated that girls would become migrant workers.

The high proportion of respondent groups stating that they expect their children to become migrant workers highlights a lack of belief in the socio-economic trajectory of their villages. It is noteworthy that a particularly high proportion (39.5%) of Rakhine respondent groups stated that they expect their boys to become migrant workers, compared to Muslim respondent groups (12.2%). This sentiment is also significant when examined through the lens of conflict as 25.4% of villages without IDPs stated that girls would likely be migrant workers, though only 9.8% of villages with IDPs responded similarly.

**Food and access to markets**
Access to food and markets in Mrauk-U District is especially low compared to other parts of Rakhine State. The three townships are poorly connected and, critically, as the only major
bridge across the Kaladan river exists in Kyauktaw town, transport between the three townships. Transport links from Paletwa in Chin State down to Sittwe, is particularly difficult and time-consuming as well. Access challenges also exist on a village-to-village scale, with communities often lacking easy or regular access to town markets and commercial food sources. Access has been severely restricted for Muslim communities here, resulting in a localized depreciation of commercial activity that has stymied livelihood opportunities for both ethnic groups. As a study by CDNH concluded, ‘access to adequate food and markets appeared especially low in Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw.’

As the ERN survey reported that market access was reported to be higher in villages not directly affected by conflict and this finding was corroborated by informant interviews in Sittwe, that suggested restrictions on movement are particularly severe around villages hosting former IDPs. Moreover, former IDP villages were less likely to perceive their access to food as safe.

Evidence for the stagnant economy is perhaps best represented in the vitality of local markets. In Mrauk-U District, none of the respondent groups recorded an increase in the quantity of products available, while most stated that the quantity has either stayed the same, or has decreased compared to five years ago. Product selection seems to worst for Muslim villages, particularly those with former IDPs, as the chart here illustrates. Most Rakhine non-IDP villages responded saying that the quantity of products is the same as five years ago.

Another useful measure of how villages access markets is through reported challenges. According to the ERN survey, the primary challenges for villagers in Mrauk-U District is a lack of cash to go (40%) or not having enough money to buy food (38%). Only 13% of respondent groups pointed to safety as their primary concern. It’s notable that 18% of respondent groups’ secondary concern was distance to the market. When examined through the lens of conflict-affectedness, the principal finding remains the same – that former IDP villages and non-IDP villages both rank money as their principal challenge. Muslim non-IDP villages name a lack of cash for transport as their principal challenge – a likely reflection of the associated informal costs in order to move around localities. Muslim villagers are often treated

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32 Informant interview with UN staff in Sittwe (06/02/16)
differently at check-points, usually according to the amount of cash that villagers have to travel from village to village. In this way, it is often the case that the wealthier Muslim population moves around more freely\textsuperscript{33} -- a finding that was corroborated by informant interviews in Sittwe.\textsuperscript{34}

There are also clear similarities in communities’ perceptions of secondary and tertiary market access challenges. 19.5% of former IDP villages and 16.9% of non-IDP villages stated that distance and time are secondary challenges, and 24.4% and 20.3% respectively also stated this issue as a tertiary challenge. Female and male respondent groups across Mrauk-U District identified very similar challenges as one another, however women were more likely to raise safety issues while men emphasize issues of distance and time to get to markets.

Overall, the lack of cash for transport and food is also a reflection of the negative livelihoods trends described above, and, taken alongside the limited livelihoods assistance, a signal that improved income-generating opportunities are much needed across communities here.

![Challenges in access to markets in Zone 1](chart.png)

Existing challenges to accessing food were made more acute by Cyclone Komen in mid-2015. The most important negative consequences reported by communities in Mrauk-U District was the destruction of their crops or their paddy fields (35%) and mud intrusion onto their plots (30%).\textsuperscript{35} IOM reported that in the aftermath of the flooding, of the challenges facing communities rebuilding local infrastructure, 42% reported that the primary issue was a lack of financial resources, while 36% identified a lack of building materials.\textsuperscript{36} 210,000 acres was damaged across Mrauk-U District, though only 1,400 acres remain uncultivated.\textsuperscript{37} The flooding has exacerbated an already fragile food access scenario, negatively affecting both former IDP villages and non-IDP villages.

\textsuperscript{33} UNDP, ‘Rakhine State Scenario Planning’ (October 2014) by Adam Burke (PhD) p. 55
\textsuperscript{34} Informant interview with UN-agency, Sittwe (06/02/16).
\textsuperscript{35} International Organization for Migration, ‘Displacement Tracking Preliminary Report: Cyclone Komen, Kyauktaw, Minbya & Mrauk-U’, (15 August 2015) p. 4
\textsuperscript{36} International Organization for Migration, ‘Displacement Tracking Preliminary Report: Cyclone Komen, Kyauktaw, Minbya & Mrauk-U’, (15 August 2015) p. 6
\textsuperscript{37} Informant interview with government staff, Sittwe (02/03/16)
Overall, access to food is a fundamental issue for the vast majority of villages here. At present, food provision delivered by international actors is concentrated towards those directly affected by conflict. It was noted during informant interviews that this assistance is creating perceptions that the international community is only providing for the Muslim population. As one interviewee mentioned, and the CDNH study corroborates, food rations disbursed to former IDPs are often sold on to generate cash, fuelling the perception that there is an oversupply of food to these villages.  

[Access to WASH facilities in Mrauk-U]

**Water, sanitation & hygiene**

The ERN survey found that across all three townships, 65% of respondent groups had access to WASH facilities, and the data points to WASH facilities within specific communities having largely been provided by external assistance, including from UN-agencies, INGOs, or the state government. In a recent assessment conducted by the REACH Initiative, 40% of respondent groups across all conflict realities identified that WASH infrastructure is a specific problem. When examined through an ethnic lens, it is clear that the group with least access to WASH facilities is Muslim villages not directly affected by conflict. Access to WASH facilities in these villages was reported to be just 21.4%. The difference in responses between men and women was negligible, just 1%.

[Latrine use in Mrauk-U District]

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38 Center for Diversity and National Harmony, ‘Rakhine State Needs Assessment’, (September, 2015) p. 71
Another indicator of WASH practices is the type of latrine used by the majority of households. 59% of respondent groups across Mrauk-U District said that a latrine with an open pit is the primary sanitation facility in their village, while 7% stated that a septic tank is used, and 2% said that they use latrines with concrete slabs. 32% of respondent groups stated the option “other”, going on to explain that open defecation is practiced by those respondent groups.

The chart above illustrates the likely effect that international assistance is having as the highest proportion of those using a latrine with a septic tank or a concrete slab is the former IDP villages. It is notable that 40.7% of non-IDP villages, both Muslim and Rakhine, stated that open defecation is practiced in comparison to 19.5% of former IDP villages. The group most readily practicing open defecation is Rakhine non-IDP villages – a finding that was corroborated by government staff.40

Respondent groups were then asked to name their primary source of drinking water. 67% of respondents stated a nearby pond or canal was their primary source.41 Differences in response according to gender were negligible. When examined through both lenses of conflict-affectedness and ethnicity, however, it emerged that the Muslim non-IDPs villages have the most varied access to water, with a small but notable minority reporting no access and others reporting good access year-round. It is also clear that a substantial number of Rakhine non-IDP villages lack access to drinking water year round. When informant interviews were asked to explain this finding, most pointed to Muslim communities more readily turning to drinking river water once their drinking ponds had run dry usually in April/May. ERN enumerators reaffirmed that Rakhine communities, especially those that were further downstream on the Lay Myo or Kaladan rivers, are less likely to turn to drinking water – and thus likely stated that they only have access in the wet season. Overall, informant interviewees affirmed that the WASH scenario outside camps or former IDP villages is comparatively worse due to a lack of external assistance to these non-IDP villages.42

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40 Informant interview with government staff, Sittwe (02/03/16)
41 A ‘fresh water river’ option was not offered in the questionnaire. Research team leaders reported that in many of the focus groups, the option of a pond or canal was selected instead.
42 Informant interview with UN-agency, Sittwe (06/02/16)
Main expenditures
Across Mrauk-U District, 95% of respondent groups interviewed in the ERN survey stated that their main expenditure is food, corroborating findings from the REACH Initiative, ACTED PRAs and IOM’s post-flood needs assessment. When groups were asked to rank their second most significant expenditure, it was healthcare (49%) and the third was education (46%), followed by a selection of other expenditures as depicted in the chart below.

When comparing former IDP villages and non-IDP villages, it emerges that while 100% of non-IDP villages reported food as their main expenditure, only 87.8% of former IDP villages gave food as their primary answer – informant interviews speculated this to be a likely result of the food assistance to some of these former IDP villages. Data analysis using ethnicity indicates that secondary expenditure trends are very similar across both Muslim and Rakhine non-IDP villages. The relative consistency of expenditure priorities across the three realities points to similar lifestyle patterns, and underlines the existence of similar needs across these realities.
Debt & sources of credit

Existing research points to communities being locked in a cycle of poverty, as the major coping mechanism for many households is to take on additional debt, as studies by the REACH Initiative evidence. Access to formal channels of credit is low with few formal, bank-based financial services available. According to informant interviews many, therefore, turn to informal sources – and this is reflected in the data presented below. The Agricultural Bank, under the Cooperative Department, offers loans though these have a minimum threshold of 50-100 acres, meaning that farmers must form a collective to access them. Moreover, these loans seem to be being released too late in the planting cycle for most farmers – a key recommendation that emerged from CDNH’s Rakhine Needs Assessment was indeed to bring forward the loan cycle to align with the needs of farmers.

Muslim communities are not permitted to access these loans from government and are thus are reliant to a greater extent on informal mechanisms such as the hundi network present here. Microfinance services are rare and villagers rely largely on their own networks to borrow money. As a result, informal lenders are the most common sources with 35% of respondent groups identifying them as their principal source of credit. Family and friends are also common, while government banks were identified as a lender by just over 15% of respondent groups – likely to be comprised almost exclusively of Rakhine villagers.

Many households across Mrauk-U District are in debt, with the REACH Initiative reporting that the average level of household indebtedness is approximately 300,000mmk. The ERN survey, corroborating REACH’s findings, identified that borrowing money is an important coping mechanism for villagers though data remains to be analyzed on the average levels of indebtedness for the different community realities.

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44 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (05/03/16)
45 Center for Diversity and National Harmony, ‘Rakhine State Needs Assessment’, (September, 2015)
46 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/03/16)
Coping strategies

The ERN findings on coping strategies indicate a high reliance on debt. Across Mrauk-U District, the primary coping strategies are either reduction in food intake (33%), additional cash loans (26%) or buying food on credit (16%). This data aligns with research conducted by the REACH Initiative which reported taking loans (25% in Kyauktaw, 57% in Minbya), buying food on credit (46% in Mrauk-U and Minbya), and reducing spending on basic goods (25% Mrauk-U and 40% in Kyauktaw). Approximately 10% of respondents in the ERN survey also responded that they would sell livestock. Other less common mechanisms include removing children from school, selling land, spending savings or migrating for work.

The relative consistency across the three realities of this study points not only to similar expenditure patterns, but also to coping mechanisms. When viewed through the lenses of conflict and ethnicity, 36.6% of former IDP villages stated that their primary coping mechanism was to reduce food, which was slightly higher than non-IDP villages’ 30.5%. Rakhine villages are less likely to reduce food intake than Muslim villages, particularly those Muslim villages that have not been directly affected by conflict. The fact that half of these villages stated that they turn first to reducing their intake of food is particularly indicative of the underdevelopment across this area – and should be carefully considered for future programming. Rakhine non-IDP villages, in contrast, are more likely instead to buy food on credit, or to sell what livestock they may have.

Access to healthcare

Access to healthcare across Mrauk-U District is poor for all communities as underinvestment has not only led to poor facilities, but of significant access challenges. The CDNH assessment found that ‘access to healthcare services appeared especially poor in Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Myebon, and Pauktaw.’

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Access issues have been compounded since the 2012 conflict, especially for Muslim villages. Movement restrictions mean that primary care in secondary hospitals is often only accessible if a fee is paid—though often even then access was challenging. Primary health providers are the government and the Myanmar Health Assistance Association (MHAA) which provides nutrition services and primary healthcare to children (mainly IDP communities but also to others), while INGOs and NGOs, such as ICRC, IRC, and MSF, are also present.

The data that emerges from the ERN survey on healthcare access was unrepresentatively high due to question phrasing. A better indicator is the data that on respondent statements regarding the presence of on-site care for emergency births.50 Here, access is significantly lower in Muslim communities than Rakhine communities, and especially low in those Muslim villages without IDPs. When an informant interviewee engaged in healthcare provision here was asked why this is the case, the informant pointed not only to lower physical access levels in non IDP villages, but lower awareness of services available as well. This assessment concentrates on access levels and challenges though this issue of service awareness is addressed later in the report.

For broader healthcare access, the major challenges to access are, once again, financial, with 46% of villagers not having money to pay for transport or for treatment (29%). Freedom of movement was only given as the primary challenge by 6% of respondent groups. A lack of cash is also the reason that most respondent groups also gave as their secondary challenge, while the distance and time was a significant (36%) tertiary issue.

When disaggregated by ethnicity and conflict-affectedness, it emerges clearly that a lack of cash is the major issue for all three realities. However, the more frequent identification of a lack of cash for transport over treatment by Muslim communities is a likely symptom of the necessary payments present for these groups that have to pay to unofficially move from village to village. Moreover, it would explain the low response rate of those stating that restrictions on freedom of movement is the principal challenge for communities here. Significantly, for the Rakhine population present in non-IDP villages, their lack of cash both to pay for treatment and for transport was identified as their principal challenges. The challenges of these communities in accessing healthcare services are also very consistent across gender.

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50 This data point was identified by a UN-agency staffer to be the equivalent of assessing access levels to the Township hospital.
Access to education

Inadequate access to education was identified by multiple informants as the most negative outcome of the movement restrictions faced by Muslim communities\(^{51}\) – both in terms of children accessing schools and of the quality of services for this group. As it was stated that approximately 90% of teachers in this district are Rakhine, Muslim villages have had to turn to a number of coping strategies in order to continue education for their girls and boys. Informal institutions such as community schools, tutoring systems, temporary learning spaces, and parallel systems such as madrassas, are filling a critical service gaps for these villages though often with unqualified teachers.\(^{52}\) As informant interviews in Sittwe stated, access to education is perhaps the area in which the greatest differences between the Muslim and Rakhine, and former IDPs and non-IDP villages exist.

The most useful indicator of education access from the ERN survey was the education facilities available on site for villagers across all three realities. The majority of villages only have primary school facilities, and this is fairly consistent across Muslim villages both with and without former IDPs. The second most common schooling facility in these villages are temporary learning spaces (TLS) or madrassas – the latter of which often offer services alongside rather than in competition with other primary school services.\(^{53}\) In Rakhine villages, over 30% stated that middle schools are present and it is only in these villages that there is access to high schools. ERN enumerators reported that some wealthier Muslim villagers are able to send their children to high schools, though they only comprise of a small fraction of this community.\(^{54}\)

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\(^{51}\) Informant interview with UN-staff in Sittwe, (06/02/16)
\(^{52}\) Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/02/16)
\(^{54}\) Informant interview with INGO-staff, Sittwe (07/02/16)
Another useful indicator is to examine attendance challenges, and the ERN survey asked for reasons why boys and girls do not attend school. For girls, the primary challenge was a lack of money with 81% of respondent groups stating as such, while 8% stated that girls had to help with work. The primary challenge across the three townships for boys was also a lack of money (79%), while 12% of respondent groups stated that boys had to help with work. 26% of respondents stated that a lack of documentation was the third most important issue. An assessment by the REACH Initiative also recorded that in Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U, the distance and time necessary to travel to school continues to be a major challenge.56

Access challenges for education align with access challenges for markets and for healthcare. The lack of cash to pay for services is thus a central issue that affects all communities across a number of sectors, and this is reflective of the broader underdevelopment of the district.

55 The lack of madrasses recorded in the former IDP villages is likely an enumeration error as it was confirmed with a number of informants that madrasses exist and are accessible in these villages.

**Protection of women & children**

The entrenched patriarchy in Rakhine State is evident in Mrauk-U District across all ethnic groups and is manifested most visibly in women staying near the home and limited to certain duties, such as the collection of water and firewood. Informant interviews identified that women can fear men of other ethnic groups though just as often, fear security forces in their localities. Moreover, a lack of legal recourse means that the level of sexual and gender-based violence is often thought to be vastly under-reported. Muslim women in particular, whom are often not recognized by the state as citizens and therefore have no legal protection, are at greater risk of violence from perpetrators.

The ERN survey results demonstrate that perceptions on the safety of women and girls are higher in Rakhine than in Muslim villages, with Muslim non-IDP villages voicing their concerns most expressly. When asked if women and girls feel safe in their village, the majority (77%) expressed that they did so, though they also identify accessing the market, which is often off-site, as the process during which they feel most unsafe. The 22% of respondent groups saying market access was unsafe explained they feared a neighbouring different ethnic group or local security forces that would either have to be passed or be present in the market itself. The ERN survey found that this feeling of insecurity only exists between Rakhine and Muslim communities as the Hindu, Chin, and Maramargyi respondents all responded that they felt safe.

Only the female focus group discussions were asked about common child protection incidents in their villages. The vast majority did not report any incidents, though some Muslim non-IDP villages did point to emotional and physical abuse. The sensitivity of these issues, though, would likely mean that these issues were not explored in full in these focus groups discussions and are, therefore, an area for further research. Finally, the ERN survey found that women were less likely (70%) than men (80%) to state that social interactions between villages had improved over the last six months. As an informant interviewee posited, this will have likely resulted from men engaging in daily work which may involve travelling to and from neighbouring villages, while more women remain in the home where interactions with neighbouring communities would be minimal.

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57 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/02/16)
58 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/02/16)
Inter-ethnic social interaction

The legacy of the 2012 violence for most villages remains one of distrust, though informant interviews also pointed to some willingness, especially in Muslim villages, to resume the inter-village social relations present before 2012. This sentiment is further corroborated by evidence presented in CDNH’s Rakhine Needs Assessment. The level of engagement between villages of different ethnicities has increased gradually since early 2014, and 75% of respondent groups in the village survey stated that social interactions with neighbouring villages had improved in the last six months.

The survey further proved that Rakhine villages and former IDP villages were somewhat less likely to observe improvements in social interactions with other villages in the last six months – a likely legacy of the conflict in 2012. All Hindu, Chin and Maramargyi villages responded by stating that they had perceived improvements in social interactions with other villages. Notably, improvements in social relationships between villages in Minbya were significantly lower at 50%, compared to 83.3% for Kyauktaw and 87.5% for Mrauk-U. Muslim respondent groups that stated that neighbourly relations had not improved cited restrictions on movement and fractured relationships with Rakhine communities as key reasons – though relations with Chin villages was notably better. Rakhine communities pointed to a lack of trust in Muslim villagers after the violence in 2012, while some cited wider concerns such as citizenship issues.

The aftermath of Cyclone Komen offered a particular opportunity for increased social interactions, though this failed to initiate a more permanent relaxation of movement restrictions. Evidence was found of communities supporting one another and re-constructing destroyed homes, rebuilding sluice banks, and helping to clear debris. Informant interviews posited that these events as a possible explanation for these perceived improvements in relations though further research is needed to more fully understand why these improvements have occurred.

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59 Informant interview with INGO staff, Sittwe (06/02/16)
60 Center for Diversity and National Harmony, ‘Rakhine State Needs Assessment’, (September, 2015)
61 Informant interview INGO lead, Sittwe (09/02/16). For instance, flood affected communities of Shin Kyan (Rakhine) were observed to be supporting victims of the flooding in Kin Thay (Muslim) to find shelter during the floods in Kyauktaw township.
Challenges & Opportunities

The challenges and opportunities described below have been formulated for the attention of international assistance actors that operate, or are considering operating, across the three townships in Mrauk-U District.

Widespread needs: The central challenge emerging from this assessment is the significant degradation in livelihoods opportunities in key sectors of employment, coupled with the finding that many have turned to migrant work or are now dependent on remittances. This points to an overall deterioration in the economic situation of the district over the past several years – a reality further evidenced by a lack of cash being identified as a primary challenge to accessing services for all groups.

There is, therefore, a need and an opportunity to broaden the concentration of international support to different groups that are currently being overlooked under the present framework of humanitarian assistance. The needs of the Muslim non-IDP villages are of particular concern given their lower levels of development and overall welfare that are being compounded by restrictions on movement. A significant challenge exists in ensuring that the needs of this group are addressed while not entrenching the perception of unequal assistance across the district.

Transitional measures: Considering the effect that international assistance has had in supporting former IDP villages, ensuring that a recovery transition is responsibly conducted is a major challenge. The prevalence of reducing the intake of food as a coping strategy is a finding that demands attention when recalculating humanitarian assistance. Program adjustments should be carefully conceptualized and executed so as not to produce shocks to households – and indeed beneficiaries should be informed. Moreover, further challenges exist in addressing perceptions on the manner and equity of assistance, as well as the way in which the phasing out of assistance is conducted in order to avoid worsening potential conflict drivers.

Particular attention should also be paid to vulnerable groups such as women, children, and those with disabilities to ensure that their needs, under a broadened recovery agenda, are not overlooked. It is also worth considering the potential latent effects of the conflict and the flooding after Cyclone Komen in terms of trauma to communities, both when designing further research tools, and when considering programming that addresses potentially sensitive issues.

Political transition and uncertainty: As a new government comes into power in March 2016, expectations are high in some circles of policy changes stemming from a reorientation of government priorities. A greater emphasis on social service provision, for instance, may provide new opportunities for programming here. However, when examined more closely, the politics of Rakhine State looks uncertain and may present a significant challenge. An appointment of an NLD Chief Minister would likely intensify ethnic Rakhine grievances of marginalization while anti-UN and INGO sentiment, which is also based around perceptions of unequal treatment, has not dissipated.

The implication for international actors to consider is that negative and potentially disruptive reactions to their work may re-emerge, especially on issues of the returns process and of the potential for joint activities between Muslim and Rakhine communities. Despite perceived improvements in ethnic relations in Mrauk-U District, these issues remain
sensitive and the current trajectory of state politics does not suggest that Rakhine grievances will ease in the near future. For instance, informant interviews identified that Rakhine villages in Mrauk-U District continue to be pressured by nationalist Rakhine entities in Sittwe to resist re-establishing connections with Muslim communities.62

Inter-communal relations: The perceived improvements in inter-ethnic relations in the district as found in the survey, triangulated with empirical observations of INGO and UN staff, offer an opportunity to facilitate relationships through joint activities. At the same time, it will be important for actors to remain aware that village-level dynamics differ considerably dependent on geography, ethnicity and conflict history. The limited depth of the survey and this assessment necessitates further research on this topic.

Moreover, an opportunity exists to learn from why relations between ethnic groups have improved, and to take forward and integrate these principles into the design of programming. Lastly, existing negative perceptions of other ethnic groups and of township authorities and security forces require further research and analysis in order to find entry-points to engage these bodies as other key actors in conflict prevention.

Awareness and quality of services: While this assessment concentrated on access challenges to services, many informant interviews identified awareness and quality issues of services as important focus areas of assistance if a transition towards a broadened development agenda is adopted. This issue is particularly pertinent to non-IDP villages that are generally located in more remote areas that have received less international assistance and are, therefore, often less aware of services available.

Moreover, this assessment did not examine service quality and a longer-term opportunity exists to research ways in which government services can be extended and improved. An exploration of sector-specific service issues – as the REACH Initiative’s Education Needs Assessment has done – would provide a better understanding of longer-term service improvements that a transition towards development would require.

Lack of baseline data: There remains a major need for further research to establish the depth of underdevelopment in this district remains. For actors to first understand the full panoply of challenges that communities face down to a granular household level, further baseline assessments in thematic areas outlined in the following section should take place.

62 Informant interviews with LNGOs and INGOs in Sittwe (09/03/16)
Recommendations

Inclusive transition towards development: The key findings from this assessment suggest that international assistance to villages in Mrauk-U District requires a more holistic approach that transitions towards broadened development programming. Continued humanitarian-only engagement to former IDPs will likely result in unmet needs in other communities and an entrenchment of the perception of unequal assistance. While this transition is recommended, it is important that this is conducted in a conflict-sensitive manner with ‘Do No Harm’ principles in mind and, crucially, not to overlook the level of dependency on assistance that may have developed for former IDP villages.

Widespread development needs will necessary entail a prioritization process for proposed programming across the townships – and a robust co-ordination mechanism to implement initiatives. Further studies into specific thematic and geographical areas should be conducted as part of any targeted program design so that this prioritization and coordination process is well informed, particularly of the needs of the most vulnerable.

Protection monitoring: Despite the IDP return process in Mrauk-U District being at an advanced stage, protection issues remain extremely relevant. Issues such as child protection and gender-based violence were not explored in full in this assessment and require particular attention going forward. These, as well as better understanding the needs of other vulnerable groups such as disabled persons, should be prioritized as part of a pre-program design assessment phase for any new assistance.

Livelihoods support: The deterioration in livelihoods opportunities for all groups is a major finding and programming should look to address this not least to stimulate the economy and raise income levels, but also as an opportunity to gradually re-build community relations through economic interaction. Development of extension services to improve agricultural practices is recommended, while facilitating formal access to credit for the Muslim population and more attractive terms for Rakhine communities to borrow from formal sources should be explored.

There are currently no vocational training schools across the district. Some basic skills and livelihoods training programs are offered by international actors, namely the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) in Minbya township, Relief International and ACTED in Mrauk-U, and Oxfam in Kyauktaw. These trainings should be assessed for their feasibility to be scaled up and their potential to be conducted as joint activities. International assistance actors should be aware of government vocational schools that are due to open this year and look to co-ordinate efforts accordingly to avoid gaps and overlaps.

As a transitional measure, small-scale infrastructure upgrade programs through cash-for-work programs to enhance village-level connectivity is also recommended. This type of programming may be designed to generate positive externalities as a disaster-risk reduction measure to increase community resilience to natural disasters as well. Importantly, engagement with local governance bodies on these programs, as elaborated below, is recommended to ensure that planning bodies, and the programs that are implemented, are sustainable. Programs that offer opportunities for members of both Muslim and Rakhine communities to jointly plan and implement infrastructure rehabilitation of mutual benefit could be examined further and tested for its sustainability and suitability in other parts of the district.
Local governance engagement & advocacy: Service provision and access is poor and is reflective of decades of underinvestment. Engaging township, village-tract and village authorities in planning and implementation of development projects is recommended to ensure greater sustainability and co-ordination with government priorities. Direct engagement with local governance committees is recommended to develop the capacity of these bodies while building relationships through a more holistic and inclusive approach towards development work that is described above.

As these relationships are nurtured at the local level, it will be vital to maintain advocacy efforts to continue highlighting the negative effects that the restrictions on movement are having across the district. With this in mind, sustained protection-oriented advocacy at the local, State and Union level is needed in tandem with the inclusive approach.

Rebuilding community relations: Considering that Rakhine respondents expressed no interest in improving community relations with other ethnic groups, but overwhelmingly state a need for job creation, “peace-building” programs, especially if named as such, are unlikely to gain traction with this community. In contrast, leveraging the need for economic development expressed by both communities through livelihoods support and infrastructure programs that incrementally bring communities together – as detailed above -- have a higher chance of rebuilding sustainable relationships. Moreover, ways in which to engage township authorities, including local security forces, in issues of dispute resolution and conflict prevention should occur concurrently with efforts to engage communities themselves.

International actors should pay particular attention to specific sites of economic interaction that have been re-established organically since the conflict in 2012 and learn lessons for their own efforts to facilitate improvements in these relations. Moreover, of vital importance will be program anonymity if joint activities are to be safe and sustainable. Closely monitoring the political temperature of Rakhine politics, particularly rhetoric from hard-line elements from both the Muslim or Rakhine side, should be given attention particularly if programs look to work with both communities.

Further research: Critical focus areas for further research include the current levels of and recent changes in; levels of income and indebtedness, access to land and fishing territories, the role of women in the economy, and reliance on remittances and migratory work. In addition, research into attitudes and perceptions of different ethnic groups, especially in relation to economic interactions is also recommended. Qualitative changes in the lives of women and girls after displacement ends should also be given attention, particularly to areas such as the potential for gender-based violence and issues around child protection.

Moreover, if a broadening of international support is to be considered, this will most likely involve operating in new contexts for many actors. Understanding these contexts through thorough village level conflict analyses and household surveys would be recommended in order to add more granular detail to the illustrative findings identified in this assessment.