

# CHALLENGES FACED BY THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION (FAO) IN MAINTAINING FOOD SECURITY IN MYANMAR

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## Abstract

The military coup that occurred in Myanmar in February 2021 triggered crises in various sectors, including food security. This study examines the challenges faced by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in maintaining food security amid ongoing conflict, the collapse of public services, and rising malnutrition rates. The research employs a qualitative method with a case study approach, using secondary data from reports by the FAO, World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and other international organizations. The findings indicate that FAO faces several major obstacles such as limited access to conflict zones, logistical disruptions due to damaged infrastructure, and inadequate funding. Furthermore, coordination with various actors, such as the Myanmar government, international donors, and local NGOs plays a crucial role in implementing food security programs. Nevertheless, restrictions imposed by the military junta remain a significant barrier to aid distribution and the recovery of the agricultural sector. This study highlights the urge for synergy among humanitarian agencies and global diplomatic pressure to open humanitarian access in Myanmar and strengthen food security for the affected communities.

**Keywords:** Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Myanmar, Food Security, Conflict, Humanitarian Aid.

## INTRODUCTION

The political crisis in Myanmar has escalated significantly since early 2021. This was marked by a drastic change in the national government structure. On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw) carried out a coup against the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) (Nur Aini, 2021). The coup was justified by allegations of fraud during the November 2020 general election. Tatmadaw declared a one-year state of emergency and placed all state authority under military control. The arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and several civilian officials sparked widespread mass protests across various regions in Myanmar.

Based on *International Crisis Group* (ICG)'s report that these groups have increasingly intensified their attacks on military outposts and military administrative centers in various regions, particularly in Kayin, Shan, Kachin, Magwe, and Sagaing States (Food Security Information Network, 2025). These areas are home to concentrated ethnic populations and also serve as key food production centers for Myanmar (Tun, 2022). For example, Sagaing is the third largest rice producing region in Myanmar. Also, Magwe ranks fifth among the country's top rice producing areas. The ongoing conflict is disrupting food supply in Myanmar, as junta forces have not only burned down homes but also destroyed farming equipment. Many farmers who have fallen victim to the junta have been forced to sell their agricultural assets to buy firearms, which they use for self-defense (Food Security Information Network, 2025).

Data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) shows that the crisis in Myanmar has put up to 70% of the total population at risk (FAO, 2022). The security and political situation in Myanmar has created significant challenges for international organizations, such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in delivering aid, particularly food assistance, to conflict-affected areas. The State Administration Council (SAC) saw that the governing body established in Myanmar following the military coup on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 has imposed movement restrictions, including access blockades and tight surveillance on humanitarian staff and distribution operations in several areas, particularly in conflict zones such as Sagaing, Rakhine, Chin, and Shan. In 2024 there are more than 60 towns across Myanmar were placed under martial law, accompanied by strict restrictions on the movement of international organizations (OCHA, 2024). The enforcement of organizational laws has tightened operational permits for NGOs and international organizations and shrinking their operating space. Measures such as the closure of logistical routes and strict monitoring of aid distribution have resulted in delays and even in some cases they fail to delivering food assistance. In addition there are over 15.2 million people have been identified as facing acute levels of food insecurity. However, due to limited access and insufficient funding, only a fraction of them could be reached. The WFP and FAO were able to assist around 3.2 million people. It is falling short of their target of 5.3 million aid recipients (OCHA, 2023). Based on these circumstances, it is clear that international organizations are facing complex challenges in delivering food aid in Myanmar.

In addition to the limitations on humanitarian aid, Myanmar has also experienced a significant rise in nutritional vulnerability and malnutrition from 2021 to 2024. This increase is driven by the ongoing food crisis, prolonged conflict, and the collapse of basic public services. According to the Food Security Information Network (FSIN) on its 2024th *Global Report on Food Crises*, a total of 400,000 children aged 6 to 59 months in Myanmar experienced acute malnutrition throughout the year. This made around 70,000 children were classified as severely malnourished, while approximately 360,000 were moderately malnourished. Additionally, around 30,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women have been categorized as high-risk for undernutrition due to limited food intake and increased nutritional needs during pregnancy and lactation (Food Security Information Network, 2024). Moreover, limited funding remains a major obstacle in addressing malnutrition, with the nutrition sector in Myanmar receiving only about 23% of the total funding required to meet its needs. As a result, the coverage of nutritional assistance is extremely limited, with priority given only to children already suffering from acute malnutrition and displaced populations in active conflict zones. Despite the urgent, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), several areas in Myanmar have already reached Phase 4 which classified as an emergency and typically marked by a sharp rise in severe malnutrition cases (Food Security Information Network, 2023).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative method, supported by a literature review and analysis of official documents from international organizations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The study adopts a case study approach on focusing on the challenges faced by the FAO in maintaining food security in Myanmar amidst ongoing armed conflict and political instability from 2021 to 2024. It is also explores the role, strategies, and limitations of the FAO in responding to the worsening humanitarian situation caused by the 2021 military coup and the subsequent disruptions to the agricultural system. The study also examines the impact of the conflict on food production, distribution, and malnutrition levels across Myanmar.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Food security in Myanmar**

The state of food security in Myanmar from 2021 to 2024 has shown a worsening and fluctuating trend. It happened driven by multiple factors such as military conflict, natural disasters, including floods and climate disruptions, economic crisis, and limited access to public services.

According to the Global Report on Food Crises 2022 by the Food Security Information Network (FSIN), 2021 marked the beginning of a political and security crisis following the military coup. The World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported that there are 20% of households in Myanmar had poor food consumption or were unable to access adequate nutritious food daily. In addition, more than 55% of the population adopted emergency coping strategies to survive the ongoing food crisis, reflecting the severity of acute food insecurity in the country. Furthermore, farmers in particularly rice producers faced challenges in accessing fertilizers at regular prices due to a significant surge in fertilizer costs, which rose to 3.6 times higher than 2019 prices. Cultivable land also declined drastically. In 2022, the situation worsened, with 27% of the total population facing acute food insecurity and requiring humanitarian assistance. The escalating frequency of armed conflict severely restricted mobility and disrupted food distribution, while also worsening access to healthcare services and clean water (Food Security Information Network, 2023). In 2023, the food crisis was further exacerbated by the natural disaster Cyclone Mocha, which struck western and northern Myanmar in May, causing widespread infrastructure damage. Consequently, this event impacted 3.4 million individuals, and destroyed 326,000 hectares of agricultural land. This severely disrupting food production, especially rice (Food Security Information Network, 2024). At the beginning of January 2024, rice prices surged by 65% compared to the previous year, while prices of essential goods rose by 69% compared to January 2023. As the result there are 10.7 million people or same as 19% of the population experiencing severe food insecurity. The conflict intensity increased in 2024, particularly in the states of Chin, Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin which leaving over 14.4 million people, or 25% of the population, in crisis-level food insecurity. The lack of access to clean water and sanitation, especially in displacement camps, further aggravated the nutrition crisis. According to reports by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), poor hygiene conditions in these camps led to the spread of diseases. This cuased an outbreaks of acute diarrhea and cholera by mid 2024 in Rakhine, Yangon, Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, and Mon regions.

### **FAO's Program in Myanmar**

According to the FAO Country Programming Framework for Myanmar, the FAO designed several programs aligned with three main priority areas. The first priority area focuses on improving access to nutritious food and strengthening food security systems. The second area emphasizes the sustainable management of natural resources. The third priority area aims to enhance the resilience of local communities, as well as agricultural and forestry systems, against both natural and human-induced disasters (FAO, 2019). In addition, FAO, in collaboration with WFP, implements the Food Security Cluster to support food security and sustainable agriculture in accessible regions. To address food shortages and declining agricultural production in affected areas, FAO has distributed assistance packages including 42 kg of rice seeds, 100 g of vegetable seeds, and 100 kg of fertilizer per household. Moreover, households received cash support of USD 100 either directly or through a cash-for-work scheme that also supports the rehabilitation of irrigation systems and aquaculture (FAO, 2022).

FAO also provides technical assistance through training programs in agricultural management, food processing, financial literacy, and small business skills. This programme focus on vulnerable groups such as female-headed households, indigenous communities, and farmers in the northwest and southeast regions of Myanmar or areas that are particularly difficult for government authorities and development agencies to access. These programs are implemented flexibly and adapted to local conditions, allowing FAO to maintain operations even in areas with restricted access due to conflict or political instability (OCHA, 2023). Overall, FAO's approach is not limited to short term aid, but also aims to build long term resilience by promoting adaptive and sustainable agriculture, thereby reducing dependence on emergency assistance.

### **Challenges facing FAO**

The implementation of FAO programs in Myanmar faces a range of interconnected challenges, including widespread armed conflict, political instability, natural disasters, logistical obstacles, and limited funding. These challenges not only hinder the distribution of technical and food assistance but also disrupt the long-term goals outlined in the 2017–2022 Country Programming Framework.

### **Challenges Of Internal Conflict**

The intensifying internal conflict since the 2021 military coup has significantly restricted access to many rural areas and conflict zones. By the end of 2024, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Myanmar had reached 3.2 million. This rising sharply from 2.6 million in 2023 and 1.47 million in 2022. Most of these individuals reside in hard to reach areas such as Rakhine, Kachin, Chin, and Kayah, making it extremely difficult for FAO to deliver agricultural support, seeds, or training to vulnerable groups in need. The ongoing internal conflict also reflects a further deterioration in Myanmar's security situation. Humanitarian actors have frequently faced dangerous conditions, including arrest, harassment, and other forms of mistreatment. Additional challenges arise from the military junta's use of heavy weapons in civilian areas, widespread village burnings, landmine deployment, and other acts of violence.

### **Challenges Of Natural Disasters**

In addition to conflict, natural disasters have further impeded the implementation of FAO programs. Cyclone Mocha, which struck in May 2023 had caused damage to approximately 326,000 hectares of agricultural land and affected around 3.4 million people across coastal areas in western and northern Myanmar. In 2024, recurring floods and landslides again devastated farmlands and infrastructure in Sagaing, Magway, and Rakhine states, resulting in widespread crop losses and the disruption of FAO's climate resilience projects. Other significant barriers to FAO's program implementation include logistical and economic constraints. Transportation access has been hindered by insecurity and damaged infrastructure, while the prices of essential goods have surged dramatically. For instance, rice prices increased by as much as 108% in Rakhine between 2023 and 2024, and the cost of a basic food basket rose by 69% from January 2023 to January 2024. These price spikes have not only weakened household purchasing power but have also complicated the distribution of food aid and agricultural inputs.

### **Funding Challenges**

FAO also faces significant funding challenges. According to the FAO Country Programming Framework for Myanmar, of the total USD 770 million in development funding received by Myanmar between 2017 and 2022, there are only USD 51.6 million (6.7%) was directly managed by FAO. This reliance on external donor funding limits the organization's flexibility

in responding to rapidly evolving emergencies. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the nutrition sector in Myanmar received only around 24% of its total humanitarian funding needs in 2024, making it one of the most underfunded sectors globally.

Despite these constraints, FAO continues to pursue its mandate through collaboration with a variety of stakeholders. The organization coordinates with the Ministry of Agriculture, Environment, and Health, as well as with international bodies such as WFP, UNDP, and local NGOs. FAO also plays an active role in the Food Security Cluster and the development of an evidence-based national food monitoring system. However, direct coordination with military authorities remains limited due to concerns over humanitarian neutrality and operational safety. Overall, these multiple barriers highlight that FAO's technical success is highly dependent on external factors beyond its control. While its program structure is robust and data-driven, implementation remains severely constrained by ongoing conflict and the breakdown of public service systems.

## CONCLUSION

Food security conditions in Myanmar have continued to deteriorate since the military coup in 2021. Armed conflict, natural disasters, economic crisis, and the collapse of public services have resulted in over a quarter of the population facing acute food insecurity, with high levels of malnutrition, particularly among children and pregnant women. In response, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has implemented programs focused on improving access to nutritious food, promoting sustainable natural resource management, and strengthening community resilience. FAO has also provided seed distributions, fertilizers, technical training, and cash assistance to support local agricultural production and the livelihoods of vulnerable communities. However, the organization faces significant challenges in executing its programs. These include restricted access to conflict zones due to security threats and military-imposed limitations, logistical obstacles resulting from damaged infrastructure and rising food prices, as well as funding constraints that limit the reach and impact of FAO's interventions.

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