

Policy Brief: Coronavirus Response Policy Needs and Opportunities

To: The Government of Myanmar, civil society organizations, and religious leaders

This document is the result of a collaborative effort by researchers working on Myanmar. Aung Hein and Paul Minoletti led the effort with major contributions by Ali & Duncan Boughton, David Ney, Deniz Okur, Guillem Riambau, Ian Porter, Kyan Htoo, Mai Hla Aye, Mary Callahan, Naing Htoo Aung, and Richard Horsey.

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This policy brief

- Discusses essential medical, policy, economic and social, and political considerations¹
- Aimed for:
 - Government of Myanmar
 - Civil society organizations
 - Religious leaders

(1) All issues explored here are explained in more detail in an accompanying full-length report

Current situation

- As of March 28: 8 confirmed cases of COVID-19
- However *real numbers* probably much higher
- Why do we think so?
 - Low levels of testing
 - High transmissibility of Covid-19
 - Porous borders

Myanmar strengths

Several factors may possibly reduce the spread of Covid-19 in Myanmar

- Hot climate
- Low level of urbanization
- Few international flights

Other factors may possibly reduce the dramatic consequences of the virus

- Relatively young population
- Small prevalence of certain health conditions that increase the risk from Coronavirus (e.g. organ transplants or obesity)

Myanmar weaknesses

However, Myanmar also has several factors that may increase the spread and consequences of Coronavirus

- High prevalence of malnutrition and people that are underweight
- Most elders sharing household with adults and kids
- Overcrowding in urban slums and IDP camps
- High prevalence of certain other health conditions that increase the risk from Coronavirus

Myanmar weaknesses

However, Myanmar also has several factors that may increase the spread and consequences of Coronavirus

- High prevalence of malnutrition and people that are underweight
- Most elders sharing household with adults and kids
- Overcrowding in urban slums and IDP camps
- High prevalence of certain other health conditions that increase the risk from Coronavirus
 - Malnutrition
 - Underweight
 - Hypertension
 - Diabetes
 - AIDS
 - Tuberculosis

Social, Economic, and Political Considerations

All decisions imply trade-offs

- Some measures may have a big impact on reducing the health impact of coronavirus
- But also impose a very heavy burden on society and households' ability to meet their basic economic needs
- For example: full *lockdown*
 - Most effective against spread of Coronavirus
 - BUT:
 - Many households cannot afford to have no income for weeks/months
 - State capacity for economic interventions to compensate them is highly limited
 - State capacity to enforce full *lockdown* is weak

Myanmar challenges

- Under-developed health care system
- Historical lack of cooperation between different government ministries and government levels
- Compared to most countries, low level of trust in most government institutions, and also in most fellow citizens
- However, some are trusted:
 - State Counsellor (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi)
 - the President
 - local communities (such as wards/villages)
 - religious leaders.

Full *lockdown*? \times

- Too costly / difficult
- Extremely high economic and social damage
- \Rightarrow Full *lockdown*? not recommended
- Recommendation: focus on mitigation measures (see next slides)

Mitigation measures

- Work with
 - Trusted community healthcare volunteers for preventive measures
 - Possible super-spreaders (such as water delivery companies and monks) to limit risks
- Install handwashing stations at wet-markets, bus stations, frontline service stations, etc.¹

(1) A more comprehensive list is included in the full-length report, along with considerations of potential health impact; social and economic costs; and ease of implementation

Other measures

- Strengthen institutional capacity through collaboration and resource-pooling [▶ click here for details](#)
- Make use of existing governance structures [▶ click here for details](#)
- Leverage on social capital of the State Counsellor, civil society organizations, and religious leaders [▶ click here for details](#)
- Increase health care infrastructure and equipment [▶ click here for details](#)
- Put in place social and economic cushions [▶ click here for details](#)

Strengthen institutional capacity

- Government of Myanmar: create multi-departmental, multi-stakeholder implementation structure (such as an 'Incident Management System')
- Special attention to local level required
- Coordinate with Civil Society Organizations, Community-Based Organizations, UN/International NGOs, the private sector and Ethnic Armed Organisations
- Suggestion: Use a major policy-making body (such as Central Committee to Prevent, Control, and Treat the 2019 Novel Coronavirus) to support the implementation structure

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Make use of existing governance structures

- MoHS (health services) and GAD (coordinating local government) both have key roles, but so can many other ministries/departments . . .
- To give just one example, the Department of Rural Development's special projects (such as NCDDP, Mya Sein Young etc) have created village level committees in many locations, that can be utilised to share information and mobilise communities.

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Leverage on social capital of various agents

- State Counsellor
 - Communicate all major policy decisions
 - Provide very regular updates to the public (suggestion: daily)
- Township, wards/village tracts, and village levels
 - Civil Society Organizations
 - Religious leaders
 - Leverage on their social capital for effective communication and implementation.

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Increase health care infrastructure

- Goal: Increase the provision of health care infrastructure and equipment
- Specific goal: Increase the supply of personal protective equipment (e.g. masks, gowns, goggles, aprons) to healthcare workers
- How: Government of Myanmar: coordinate with the military, private hospitals, international agencies, and private-sector philanthropy

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Social and economic cushions

- Explore feasible options for providing social and economic cushions to businesses, farms, and households
- Example: Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank (MADB) may consider
 - Postponing loan repayments
 - Increasing loan sizes
 - Rolling out temporary cash transfers to farming households in rural areas

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