

case  
study

# Myanmar Red Cross Society

## Humanitarian Diplomacy in Action



Kyaw San Win, disaster management hub coordinator for the Myanmar Red Cross in Kalay Township, explains the flood response operations to Dr. Sai Mauk Kham, Vice President of Myanmar. Credit: Emil Helotie/Finnish Red Cross

### A country in transition

The 2010 election in Myanmar, the first general election in 20 years, marked a significant point within the country's ongoing political transition. In the same month, and to great international recognition, Nobel peace laureate and opposition political leader Aung San Suu Kyi was freed after nearly fifteen years under house arrest. Shortly afterwards, in March 2011, a semi-civilian government was officially appointed after 49 years of military rule.

Since this time, the world has closely watched as a range of reforms have been introduced by the new Myanmar parliament. These reforms include the release of political prisoners, the establishment of the National Commission on Human Rights, and the introduction of a managed floating exchange rate. The past two years have also brought the partial lifting of sanctions by foreign governments, and the re-engagement of the World Bank with the country.

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*“Humanitarian diplomacy is persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles”*

**Humanitarian Diplomacy Policy, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)**

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While the full impact of these transitions is yet to be seen, they have resulted in a shifting governmental structure. This is particularly evident at a local level, with the restructure of the government's countrywide network from 17 states and divisions, into 14 newly established state and regional government offices.

These changes in offices and personnel have required the Myanmar Red Cross Society to reassert its working relationship with key government stakeholders, while also offering an opportunity to address some of the challenges and issues faced with local government departments and officials.

As a result, when local governments at the state and regional level began their administrative functions in March 2011, the Myanmar Red Cross Society developed an engagement strategy. The goals of the strategy were to increase understanding of the Red Cross mandate amongst local government decision makers, and to also advocate on key issues affecting the communities where the Red Cross is presently active.

### Reaching out to relevant decision makers

Of the 14 newly formed states and regions, the Myanmar Red Cross Society initially identified seven as strategically important. The decision was based on Red Cross Red Crescent programme work in the geographical areas. Advocacy meetings with government departments were firstly sought in Bago, Magway, Tanintharyi and Mandalay Regions and Rakhine, Kayin and Mon States. As the initial target was quickly met, a decision was made to further expand the advocacy initiative, and by the end of 2014, advocacy meetings had been held in all 14 states and regions.

Prior to the meetings with local government officials, a series of consultative workshops were held with local Myanmar Red Cross Society leaders and emergency committees. The purpose of the workshops was to ensure that the experience of Red Cross staff and volunteers informed the advocacy objectives of the meetings. The Myanmar Red Cross Society took into consideration the challenges faced by local branches, volunteers and communities, and then determined how governmental support could be of assistance.

*“Humanitarian Diplomacy is an essential part of our work, and by directly advocating to the local authorities we were able to ensure a greater understanding of the role of the Myanmar Red Cross and also increase support for our humanitarian activities. The door is now open for us to continue to build on this good working relationship.”*

**Professor Dr. Tha Hla Shwe,**  
President of the Myanmar Red Cross Society



The Myanmar Red Cross has received support to secure land for local offices in several locations across the country as a result of their efforts in humanitarian diplomacy. Photo credit: Felix Laframboise





The Myanmar Red Cross' efforts in humanitarian diplomacy allows the Red Cross to continue conducting life-saving activities in communities such as early warning for disasters. Photo credit: Felix Laframboise

### Identifying internal objectives

One internal objective highlighted across all states and regions was the potential for local government departments to help mobilize resources for Myanmar Red Cross Society branch development, specifically for emergency administrative costs and annual volunteer insurance. Securing land for Red Cross offices was also identified as a priority, as was the sustainability of the support by the government to the Myanmar Red Cross Society. While the government has played an ongoing, and vital, role in supporting the administrative costs of the Myanmar Red Cross Society, a leading concern for the National Society was whether the support would continue, and in what capacity it would be made available.

Further to funding and development opportunities, additional advocacy objectives focused on helping local Red Cross branches resolve persistent issues such as:

- Confusion around how the National Society can be both an auxiliary to government and at the same time, remain independent and neutral; and
- Consistent concerns about emblem misuse.

### Identifying external objectives

The Myanmar Red Cross Society's external advocacy objectives included addressing the challenges the Red Cross face in reaching the most vulnerable in some communities affected by conflict in various parts of the country. Access has proved difficult for the National Society at times in the past, due to a) a lack of understanding of the impartial nature of the assistance provided and b) perceptions that the National Society was closely linked to the government.

In particular, the continued role of Red Cross volunteers in the country's military parade was also felt to challenge public understanding of the National Societies neutrality. The parade began in 1997, and Red Cross volunteers have played a key role in the proceedings for the last 17 years, leading to a strong public association between Red Cross volunteers and military soldiers.

## The impact of humanitarian diplomacy

Since the Myanmar Red Cross Society humanitarian diplomacy strategy was launched and advocacy meetings began in 2012, a number of successful outcomes have been achieved.

### Results: supporting local communities local communities

Dissemination sessions were carried out with government officials and local communities in order to address community concerns about the Red Cross' neutrality, and to highlight the need to protect humanitarian space. The success of these sessions was two-fold:

- Greater understanding of how the Myanmar Red Cross Society supports the government in times of emergency;
- Acceptance by local government officials that only Myanmar Red Cross Society volunteers should carry out Red Cross Red Crescent aid distributions in future (and that requests for Red Cross volunteer support should be strictly limited to humanitarian tasks and not, as had happened in the past, for security assignments).

In March 2014, Myanmar Red Cross Society was finally able to distribute relief kits to conflict affected families in Kachin, an area where support had previously been rejected. The relief kits, donated by the Red Cross Society of China, were distributed within a government controlled area, thanks to the close coordination and advocacy work of the Myanmar Red Cross Society with government officials, the Kachin Independence Organisation and the Kachin Independence Army.

To further stress the neutral and impartial role of the Myanmar Red Cross Society, the President, Professor Dr. Tha Hla Shwe visited the area in September 2014 and held meetings with Kachin Independence Organisation focal points to personally explain the auxiliary role of the Myanmar Red Cross Society, the commitment to impartial and humanitarian assistance and the Fundamental Principles. Additional requests for assistance have since been received, with Myanmar Red Cross Society able to provide student kits and other vital items to families that were previously inaccessible.



In meetings with local authorities, the Myanmar Red Cross emphasizes their contribution to communities - such as training for teachers on preparedness for disasters.  
Photo credit: Felix Laframboise



## Results: increased understanding

In December 2014 the Red Cross invited Yangon Region Parliamentarians to an advocacy workshop. The goal of the workshop was to reinforce the working relationship of the Red Cross with all sectors of the Myanmar government. The content of the workshop included:

- Discussion on how the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement works with governments worldwide;
- The Red Cross Red Crescent Fundamental Principles;
- The auxiliary role of the Myanmar Red Cross Society; and
- The unique assistance and insight the Myanmar Red Cross Society can provide in terms of disaster management, first aid, health and International Humanitarian Law.

The sessions were positively received, and resulted in a recommendation by the government to expand the advocacy workshops to other branches of government and parliaments.

The Myanmar Red Cross Society similarly used the advocacy meetings as an opportunity to understand the priorities of government departments and how these could be integrated with Red Cross support to communities.

For instance, the promotion of good health practices within communities, and supporting disaster preparedness initiatives were consistently raised by the government as priorities. Helping build safer, more resilient communities is at the heart of all Myanmar Red Cross Society's activities. Red Cross volunteers have reached hundreds of thousands of people through community-based interventions in disaster preparedness and risk reduction and health. This reach and experience was considered particularly valuable by the government.

As one of the few organizations able to continually provide impartial humanitarian assistance in recent years, the Myanmar Red Cross Society also has unique knowledge of the needs of vulnerable people.

This has proven invaluable when advocating at the state and region level; the information and evidence from Red Cross Society activities has influenced officials' decision making.

The unique role of the Myanmar Red Cross Society, and in particular its auxiliary role, were also discussed at length in the advocacy meetings. Ensuring the general public understand the independent and neutral role of the National Society has been of critical importance in Myanmar. One topic of discussion at the advocacy meetings was the participation of Red Cross volunteers in the Military Parade, which it was felt could lead to public

confusion about the relationship between the authorities and the National Society.

As a result of these discussions, a decision was taken to ensure that Red Cross volunteers no longer participate in the Military Parade.

## Results: supporting the Myanmar Red Cross Society

The results of the advocacy meetings also benefit the Myanmar Red Cross Society. Plots of land have been donated in five locations for the Red Cross to build local offices. Financial assistance has also been provided by local government budgets to support volunteers' annual insurance payments and to provide uniforms.

## Results: strengthening independence

The Myanmar Red Cross Society Act introduced in 1959, outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Red Cross by law, as an auxiliary to the public authorities. Over the years, a series of amendments have been made to the Act which have strengthened the position of government officials in the organizational structure of the National Society. Discussions on the auxiliary role the past two years were conducted in parallel with a submission in 2007 by the Red Cross for further amendments. Through these changes, the Myanmar Red Cross Society has aimed to strengthen its independence, and lessen the involvement of government officials in the administration of the National Society.



*The Myanmar Red Cross has gained access to areas that were previously inaccessible as a result of their discussions with local authorities, allowing them to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need. Credit: Andreas Weissenberg / IFRC*

The amendment proposed in 2012 was adopted on August 26 2015 by the Union Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) Subsequently, 11 sections of the existing law will change, including those related to the structure, fund management, activities, flag and logo. "It is an ongoing effort to balance our auxiliary role with our Principle of Independence. We are very pleased with these results that will help us to reinforce our role in Myanmar and adapt to the changing context of humanitarian needs in the country today," said Professor Tha Hla Shwe, President of the Myanmar Red Cross Society.

## A complex context

Despite the success of recent humanitarian diplomacy initiatives, substantial challenges remain in Myanmar. The country is geographically and culturally diverse, with 135 groups speaking over 100 languages and dialects, and humanitarian emergencies continue to rage on many fronts. Earthquakes, cyclones and floods are also common in this disaster-prone country, causing loss of life and massive destruction.

In addition to outbreaks of violence causing massive displacement in Rakhine, fighting also continues to cause pain and suffering for thousands of vulnerable people in the troubled state of Kachin. Red Cross volunteers have proved invaluable in responding to these crises, yet respect for the Fundamental Principles and a clear understanding of the auxiliary role of the Myanmar Red Cross remain vital.

## Looking ahead

The Myanmar Red Cross Society has witnessed significant achievements as a result of their work in humanitarian diplomacy. As the election results of 2015 look set to bring further changes and transformations to the Myanmar political system, the Myanmar Red Cross Society remains committed to ensuring that dialogue with decision makers and opinion leaders remain a focus in the ongoing work to serve vulnerable communities throughout Myanmar.



The Myanmar Red Cross provides vital information to communities for their health and safety. With community-based volunteers across the country, the Red Cross uniquely understands the needs of communities and adapts messaging to fit their context. They also use the information for advocacy with public authorities. Credit: Mandy George

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