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Internally Displaced Persons' Resilience: An Analysis of Southeast Myanmar Airstrike (Civil War) Survivors' Experiences for Better Solutions of Humanitarian Aid Programs

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the experiences of internally displaced persons who are also airstrike survivors in Hpapun (Mutraw) District, Karen (Kayin) State, Myanmar. It highlights the importance of resilience and localized strategies used by IDPs, as well as the human rights challenges they encounter. The study uses a qualitative research design, including in-depth interviews with 10 IDPs from Hpapun District and 6 representatives from humanitarian aid organizations, with qualitative data analysis as the main analytical approach. The findings show that: (1) in the three domains of resilience—managing risks, adapting to change and securing basic needs—IDPs in Hpapun perceive their greatest weaknesses are in adapting to change and securing basic needs. In

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these areas, they are heavily dependent on outside players, especially religious leaders and humanitarian agencies, to sustain their resilience; (2) Most IDP participants are subjected to multiple human rights abuses, such as inadequate access to food, health care and education as well as sexual violence in displacement settings; and (3) Humanitarian and civil society groups that continue to be major providers of basic services despite the restrictions of military operations can improve IDPs' resilience by providing them with practical survival skills and appropriate information for contingency planning, thereby improving their risk management ability.

Introduction

Displacement is a defining feature of the contemporary global landscape, shaping the lives of millions of people in diverse regions and contexts. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR, 2025) reported that by the end of 2024, more than 120 million people were forced to flee their homes worldwide after armed conflicts, persecution, and environmental pressures. This fact highlights how displacement is a global phenomenon shaped by the multiplication and intersection of structural forces, such as protracted violence, governance failures, and climate-related vulnerabilities. However, while displacement happens at a global scale, the experiences are particularly local, shaped by specific socio-cultural contexts, networks and survival strategies. Therefore, understanding displacement means examining the global drivers of this phenomenon, as well as the local forms of resilience through which affected populations cope with uncertainty and sustain their lives.

Myanmar has experienced decades of mass internal displacement. It is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Southeast Asia and has experienced one of the longest-running ethnic armed conflicts of the modern period (Sakhong, 2014, p. 413). Southeast Myanmar has seen hundreds of thousands of people displaced due to more than six decades of conflict (Center for Prevention Action, 2026). At the same time, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to be among the main victims of armed conflict, experiencing great losses such as displacement, homelessness, and psychological trauma (South & Jolliffe, 2015, p. 4). In such circumstances, displaced populations have often demonstrated remarkable resilience, supported by strong social networks and forms of social and political capital.

Violence has increased since the military coup in 2021, with the military's higher use of

airstrikes on armed factions as well as civilian areas. This escalation reveals a significant shift in the conflict's dynamics, with serious humanitarian consequences. The Burmese military has increased its operations in ethnic areas, such as those controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU) in northern Karen State. The scale and intensity of violence increased rapidly, especially with the increasing use of airstrikes daily, damaging civilian infrastructure like schools, and causing civilian casualties, such as children. The injured have been treated in makeshift jungle clinics with very limited medical resources (Free Burma Rangers, 2021).

Hpapun District, Karen State, is one of the KNU's important administrative areas. Repeated armed clashes between the KNU and the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) have resulted in a high number of IDPs, mainly civilians. One of the first recorded airstrikes targeting civilian areas took place in Day Pu Noh village, Hpapun District, on 27 March 2021, followed by a second strike on 28 March. The attacks destroyed civilian buildings, such as a local school, killing four, wounding eleven, and displacing thousands of civilians (Human Rights Council, 2021, p. 17). In the first 100 days after the coup, the number of displaced people in northern Karen areas swelled from more than 20,000 to over 40,000, many of whom escaped to forested areas to avoid air and ground attacks (Vatican News, 2021). As the conflict intensified, military operations against civilian populations in ethnic areas also increased. Thus, the number of IDPs had grown across Myanmar (Humanitarian Action, 2024). These developments reinforce the urgent need for context-sensitive humanitarian assistance programs to respond to rapidly changing patterns of displacement (Free Burma Rangers, 2021).

Hpapun District is a representative site for exploring the intersections between protracted armed conflict, displacement, and the lived experiences of resilience. This case allows for a theoretical analysis of how resilience is not just an individual attribute. However, it is socially embedded and dynamically produced through community networks, local institutions and everyday coping practices under conditions of extreme precarity. At the same time, the Hpapun context raises urgent human rights issues as civilians, particularly IDPs, are subjected to systematic violations, including forced displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and threats to life and security. Thus, the study of this case contributes to broader debates on the relationship between conflict, protection and agency, but also highlights the significance of more context-sensitive humanitarian and policy responses in conflict-affected settings.

Research Questions

This study explores the concept of resilience through the lived experience of IDPs impacted by airstrikes in Hpapun District, Karen State, Myanmar. The aim is to answer the following research questions:

1. What does resilience mean for IDPs in Hpapun District affected by airstrikes?
2. What forms of human rights violations do IDPs in airstrikes in Hpapun District endure?
3. How can development and humanitarian aid agencies assist the IDPs to enhance and improve their coping/resilience skills?

Research Objectives

The study will pursue three objectives: (1) To explore meanings and experiences of resilience among IDPs who survived airstrikes in Hpapun District, Karen State, Myanmar; (2) To identify types of human rights violations linked to airstrikes affecting IDPs in Hpapun District; and (3) To explore how humanitarian actors can strengthen resilience capacities of IDPs and airstrike survivors in this context.

Literature Review: Resilience of Internally Displaced Persons

Increasingly, the literature on IDPs has turned to the idea of resilience to understand how individuals and communities respond to displacement, violence and protracted uncertainty. Early scholarship on forced displacement was mainly interested in vulnerability, trauma and humanitarian needs. More recent literature, however, has turned the focus to the capacities of displaced populations to cope with, adapt to and transform their circumstances (Cohen & Deng, 1998; Castles, 2003; Ungar, 2011; Betts, 2013; Sigona, 2014). This section reviews important strands of the literature on IDPs and resilience, emphasizing major conceptual approaches and current debates. It also provides an overview of the existing body of knowledge on IDPs in Myanmar, with a particular focus on Hpapun District, and on the concept of resilience.

An inquiry places resilience within humanitarian and development frameworks, where it is often perceived as a policy objective. Displacement is seen in this literature as a condition that generates multidimensional vulnerability, including the loss of livelihoods, assets, and social networks (Cernea, 1997; World Bank, 2017). Some scholars and policy institutions, such as the World Bank and UNHCR, define building resilience as enhancing self-reliance through access to

services, economic opportunities and durable solutions (UNHCR, 2017; World Bank, 2017). In this sense, resilience is often conceived as an outcome – indicated by income recovery, food security, or access to housing. This resilience enables more sustainable programming beyond emergency aid. However, some critics complain that this approach instrumentalizes resilience and neglects the lived realities of displaced populations (Duffield, 2012).

The second literature set considers resilience from a psychological and social work perspective with a focus on coping and individual adaptation. Here, resilience is broadly defined as the ability to sustain or recover well-being in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011). Research in this tradition centers on trauma, stress, and mental health among IDPs, highlighting protective factors such as social support, meaning-making, and personal agency (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). The approach has been particularly influential in emphasizing the relevance of psychosocial interventions in contexts of displacement. However, it has been criticized for its focus on processes at the level of the individual, and insufficiently accounting for larger structural conditions such as violence, poverty and political exclusion (Summerfield, 1999).

In response to these limitations, a growing body of scholarship has developed more socially embedded and relational understandings of resilience. This literature, drawing on anthropology and sociology, emphasizes the everyday practices by which IDPs negotiate displacement. These studies foreground the agency, creativity and adaptive strategies of displaced populations rather than present them as passive victims (De Certeau, 1984; Sigona, 2014). Thus, resilience is understood as a dynamic and context-specific process influenced by social networks, cultural norms and local institutions (Ungar, 2011). For example, displaced communities often depend on informal economies, kinship networks and religious practices to sustain livelihoods and reconstruct meaning. This view of “everyday resilience” aligns with larger trends in the social sciences to value lived experience and local knowledge as critical to understanding human responses to crisis.

At the same time, the social-ecological models of resilience have brought a systems-oriented perspective and have defined resilience as the capacity of interrelated systems – from individuals to communities and institutions – to absorb shocks and reorganize (Holling, 1973; Folke, 2006). The approach is inspired by resilience theory in ecology and highlights the importance of feedback loops, adaptation and transformation across multiple levels. It has been especially useful for analyzing protracted displacement, where IDPs must navigate complex, changing environments over long periods. However, some scholars warn that systems-based approaches can abstract from issues of power and inequality if not grounded in critical theory (Joseph, 2013).

In fact, critical scholarship has played a major role in questioning the very concept of resilience. In critical development and forced migration studies, scholars argue that resilience has been co-opted into neoliberal governance frameworks, in which the responsibility for managing risk is shifted from states and institutions to individuals and communities (Duffield, 2012; Joseph, 2013). Resilience can also obscure structural violence and normalize conditions of precarity, suggesting a need for adaptation among displaced populations rather than for systemic change. This critique calls for a more politically attuned understanding of resilience, which foregrounds issues of justice, rights and power.

Several debates emerge across these strands of literature. First, there is continuing debate about whether resilience should be conceptualized as a capacity, a process, or an outcome (Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2011). Psychological approaches tend to emphasize internal capacities; social and anthropological approaches emphasize negotiation and adaptation processes; and policy frameworks emphasize measurable outcomes. Second, scholars continue to debate the interplay between structure and agency in shaping resilience. While IDPs face structural limitations such as legal marginalization and economic hardship, they also actively navigate and reshape their environments (Castles, 2003; Sigona, 2014). Scholars increasingly propose approaches that combine both dimensions.

Another important debate concerns the scale of analysis, in particular the shift from individual to collective understandings of resilience. Recent research has stressed the importance of social capital, community cohesion and collective action in helping displaced populations to cope and adapt (Ager & Strang, 2008). This shift is especially pertinent in situations where formal institutional backing is absent or scarce. In addition, gender has become a key issue in resilience research, with displaced women bearing unequal burdens while playing a vital role in sustaining households and communities (El-Bushra, 2000). Gendered analyses illustrate that resilience is not homogenous and is produced by intersecting power relations.

Recent scholarship has also started to examine the role of culture and religion in shaping resilience among IDPs. Faith-based practices and belief systems can be important sources of meaning, moral guidance and social support, especially in contexts of profound loss and uncertainty (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011). However, this field remains understudied and offers many opportunities for further research, especially in plural and conflict-affected societies.

Research on IDPs in Hpapun District, Karen State, Myanmar is connected to the long history of armed conflict in the area between the Myanmar military and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), especially the KNU. The patterns of forced displacement, destruction of villages and militarization have led to cycles of protracted displacement in the area, as

documented in previous studies and reports of organizations such as the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) and the Border Consortium (The Border Consortium, 2022; Karen Human Rights Group, 2024). After the military coup in 2021, aerial bombardments have increased, adding new dynamics of violence: airstrikes on civilian areas, including villages, schools and places of worship (Karen Human Rights Group, 2024; Fortify Rights, 2025). Only in Hpapun District, reports describe how airstrikes and shelling have killed civilians, destroyed homes and religious buildings, and displaced villagers, often into forests or informal hiding sites with limited access to food, healthcare, and protection (Karen Human Rights Group, 2026). This literature continues to depict IDPs as highly vulnerable populations who are subjected to gross human rights violations. Resilience is implicitly manifested in their survival strategies rather than explicitly theorized.

More recent accounts emerging from local civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based documentation efforts are foregrounding the lived experiences and adaptive practices of airstrike survivors in Hpapun District. These studies highlight how IDPs navigate insecurity through mobility, local knowledge of terrain and reliance on dense social networks that provide shelter, information and mutual aid (Karen Human Rights Group, 2024). Reports on communities affected by airstrikes in Southeast Myanmar also reveal that villagers have developed self-protection strategies in response to aerial attacks, such as early warning systems, dispersed settlement patterns and collective coping mechanisms (Karen Human Rights Group, 2024). Religious practices, particularly Christianity amongst Karen communities, are important for sustaining hope, collective identity and emotional resilience in the face of ongoing violence and community-based education and health systems continue through local organization despite displacement. However, these adaptive tactics have been limited by ongoing threats of aerial surveillance and attack, and limited humanitarian access (Fortify Rights, 2025). Recent literature advocates for a more nuanced understanding of resilience in Hpapun that recognizes not only the agency of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and airstrike survivors but also the structural and violent conditions that shape, limit and at times threaten their capacities to endure and rebuild their lives.

Research Methodology

This study explores the lived experiences of people living in areas affected by airstrikes in Hpapun District, Karen State, Myanmar. The study aims to explore the deeper meanings of resilience among IDPs and to generate insights to improve future humanitarian interventions. The study is conducted from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, which allows us, as

researchers, to use our subjectivity as an interpretive resource to understand participants' experiences (Wa-Mbaleka, 2016, pp. 89–90). This approach seeks to understand the meanings that key informants attach to their experiences of displacement and survival in contexts of continuing violence.

Data collection methods: We used qualitative methods, primarily in-depth and key informant interviews, to study the experiences of airstrike survivors in Hpapun District, Karen State, Myanmar. In-depth interviews, both via telephone and face-to-face, were used to collect sensitive and experiential data, providing a nuanced exploration of the meanings of resilience among IDPs affected by airstrikes in Southeast Myanmar. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather rich personal narratives and lived experiences, particularly regarding how interviewees understand and make sense of resilience amid ongoing violence and displacement.

Besides, key informant interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including representatives from community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). The interviews also provided further contextual insights into the conditions of IDP communities and existing humanitarian responses, as well as perspectives on potential strategies to improve aid interventions. The purposive sampling method was adopted to recruit 10 IDPs from Hpapun District and 6 humanitarian practitioners engaged in aid implementation in the study. We tried to achieve gender balance, with at least 50 percent of participants being women.

Data Analysis: A qualitative approach is used, in keeping with hermeneutic phenomenology. The interview transcripts were analyzed using iterative coding. This coding began with open coding to identify significant statements and preliminary meanings relating to participants' experiences of displacement and resilience. The axial coding was applied to group the initial codes into broader categories, revealing patterns and relationships across the data. Lastly, selective coding was used to refine core themes that captured the shared and divergent meanings of resilience among participants. This is an analysis with reflexive and interpretive natures, using the researchers' own subjectivity to contextualize informants' narratives while remaining sensitive to the language and meaning they express. Themes were refined through re-reading and cross-comparison between interviews to ensure coherence and depth of interpretation.

Conceptual Framework

The notion of resilience has changed a lot across different fields of study. It used to be about individual traits, but now it is understood in more complex ways that take relationships and context into account. Early definitions, particularly within psychology, characterized resilience as an individual's ability to withstand and bounce back from adversity, typically conceptualized as a set of internal attributes such as coping skills, emotional regulation, and flexibility (Masten, 2001). This view, sometimes referred to as “ordinary magic”, highlights that resilience is not an exceptional quality, but a common human capacity developed through daily processes of growth. This approach has been influential in drawing attention to protective factors at the individual level. However, it is criticized for failing to consider the broader social, cultural and political contexts in which individuals are embedded.

In response, resilience scholarship has increasingly adopted social-ecological and relational perspectives that understand resilience as a dynamic process arising from interactions between people and their environments. This approach highlights access to resources, social relationships, and institutional support as critical determinants of resilient outcomes, rather than locating resilience solely within the individual (Ungar, 2011). In this vein, resilience is increasingly being conceptualized as a social process, situated and negotiated, based on how individuals and communities navigate, access and mobilize resources within culturally meaningful and structurally constrained contexts (Panter-Brick, 2014). From this perspective, resilience is not just a matter of having resources, but of being able to claim, interpret and sustain them through social relations and power-laden environments.

At the same time, critical scholarship has problematized the increasing prominence of resilience in policy and development discourse. Resilience has been progressively embedded in the logic of neoliberal governance, where it is used to shift accountability for risk management from states and institutions to individuals and communities (Duffield, 2012; Joseph, 2013). This framing, however, obscures structural inequalities and normalizes conditions of chronic insecurity, implying that affected populations should adapt, rather than demand systemic change. Such critiques require a more politically conscious reading of resilience that understands power, justice, and history as integral to its production and experience. Contemporary conceptualizations are thus increasingly seeing resilience not only as adaptation but as a relational and potentially transformative process shaped by agency and structure.

In this study, we explore resilience from a relational lens. For us, the Vulnerability to Resilience (V2R) framework offers a more overtly structural and systemic lens for examining the production of resilience under conditions of risk and uncertainty. Resilience emerges from the

interaction among four key dimensions (hazards and stresses, livelihoods, governance and future uncertainty) in the V2R framework developed by Katherine Pasteur (Pasteur, 2011). This framework builds upon social-ecological understanding by foregrounding the interactions of environmental risks, economic conditions, institutional arrangements, and temporal uncertainty. V2R moves away from thinking of resilience as an internal capacity or an end state. Instead, it contextualizes it within structural factors that influence the interplay between exposure to risks, access to livelihoods and the nature of governance systems, shaping people's ability to cope, adapt and recover. The particular significance of incorporating future uncertainty is that it reveals the anticipatory and forward-looking dimensions of resilience, particularly in situations of protracted crisis and instability.

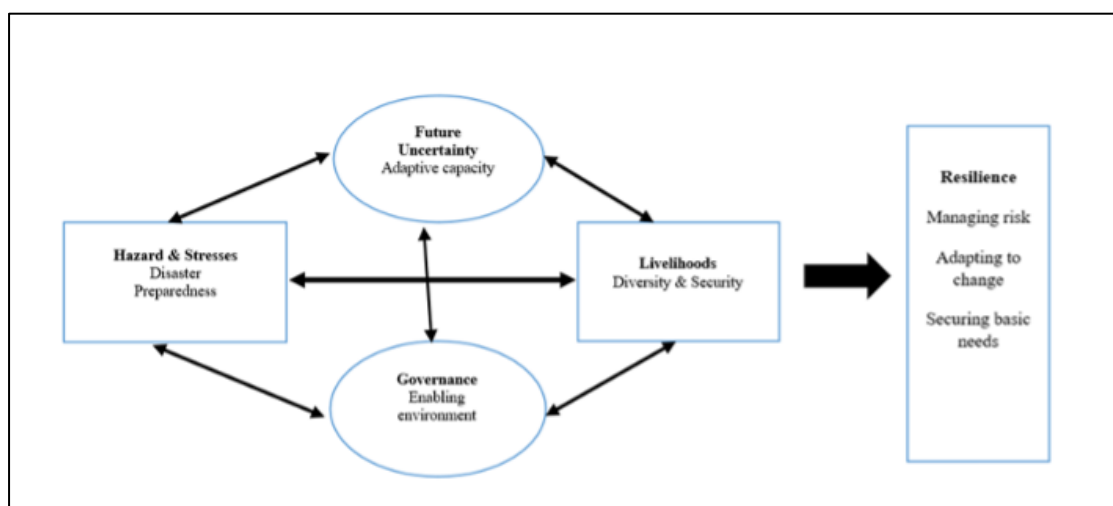


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

Our findings are based on key informant interviews with representatives of NGOs, INGOs and CSOs, as well as in-depth interviews with residents affected by airstrikes. The V2R framework frames the analysis and is open to emerging themes that foreground the lived experiences of airstrike survivors in the Hpapun District.

Research Results and Discussion

From the interviews, we can identify displacement patterns and where IDPs in Hpapun usually go. In Hpapun, there are three broad categories of IDP displacement sites: (1) those who are staying in the forest/jungle; (2) those who are staying with host communities or relatives; and (3) those who are staying in IDP camps. The categories denote different degrees of vulnerability

and access to resources. IDPs who find refuge in host communities or camps usually are in a more stable situation than those who escape into the jungle. The jungle is a place of deprivation for the people there – deprivation of shelter, clean water and food, and constant threats to security, like airstrikes and shelling. Many seek refuge in caves or makeshift hiding places. This situation further illustrates the precarious nature of their situation. Therefore, these "jungle IDPs" have to put in a lot more effort to survive in the highly unstable and dangerous environment.

The IDPs living in camps seem to have relatively better access to basic needs, as camp administrators provide food, clothing and shelter. However, this relative stability is coupled with growing uncertainty about the future. The situation has changed dramatically since the military coup in February 2021. International actors, including the United Nations and INGOs, reached the area and provided humanitarian assistance before the coup. Restrictions on access following the coup have severely limited external aid, and IDPs are increasingly dependent on local support systems, including monks and Buddhist temples.

Life is still difficult for IDPs living with host families. Many are living at the subsistence level due to a lack of stable employment, secure living conditions and enough food. The host families themselves are often economically challenged, usually being daily-wage laborers with few resources. More people in a household put additional pressure on already fragile livelihoods. However, despite these limitations, host families remain crucial in helping displaced persons. However, these arrangements are hard to maintain over the long term because food is scarce and economic pressures are high. As one participant (IDP, female interviewee no. 5) explained, "Rice is good if I have rice and nothing else is as important as rice." This statement underscores the primacy of basic subsistence needs in shaping everyday resilience.

Resilience of Internally Displaced Persons under Airstrikes in Hpapun District

Diversity and Security of Livelihoods: Livelihood disruption is a key dimension of IDPs' resilience in Hpapun District. Most participants were landholders and homeowners before displacement and relied primarily on agriculture and livestock for daily sustenance. Many families are without land, productive assets or stable income-generating opportunities, as these foundations of their livelihoods have been severed by displacement. Camps restrict economic activities severely, and many IDPs lack the knowledge or opportunity to create alternative sources of income. This situation means that households are heavily reliant on humanitarian assistance, particularly for basic food items such as rice, oil and salt. This dependence creates a constant state of anxiety as families are unsure whether there will be enough supplies to meet their daily needs.

In response to these constraints, some IDPs try to reconstruct livelihoods through informal and precarious means. The normal coping mechanisms involve working as daily agricultural laborers, collecting and selling firewood or charcoal, and trading small quantities of rubber or beans. However, these strategies remain highly unstable. Since the February 2021 military coup, restrictions on movement have greatly limited access to markets and mobility, preventing IDPs from selling goods or finding work. This restriction means that many households are under more economic pressure and are more insecure about their livelihoods. "Some IDPs say they want to go back to their villages because there are risks, but there is not much to do in the camps to earn a living because of the lack of stable income. In some instances, host communities assist the displaced or engage in small-scale agricultural activities, such as paddy cultivation, when land is available.

The longer they stay in the jungle, the more precarious their livelihood becomes, with the constant threat of airstrikes and military surveillance. Fear of further attacks deters return to home areas and limits engagement in livelihood activities. The airstrikes have caused serious disruption to access to basic resources – including food, shelter and health care – resulting in repeated displacement and further erosion of coping capacities. The loss of family members is another burden for IDPs, as the loss of labor and social support increases vulnerability. Thus, livelihood insecurity is not experienced in isolation but alongside multiple forms of precarity, producing layered and cumulative vulnerabilities. These conditions point to the important effects of limited access to livelihoods, ongoing insecurity and the broad structural constraints of conflict on IDP resilience.

Adaptive Capacity: The adaptive capacity of IDPs in Hpapun District is affected by both their past experiences of displacement and the changing dynamics of conflict, in particular, the introduction of aerial warfare. For many of the participants, running away from armed conflict is nothing new. However, airstrikes are seen as a more intense and unpredictable form of violence that requires rapid and continuous adaptation. First of all, immediate safety is the priority. Local support systems are very important in this condition. Interviews indicate Buddhist monks and local CSOs have played a key role in providing emergency shelter, including identifying safe locations and erecting temporary tents. However, many of the IDPs are not satisfied with the displacement sites and want to return to their original homes, where they previously farmed for subsistence and had some level of livelihood stability.

Host communities and social networks also facilitate short-term adaptation. Relatives and neighbors bring necessities such as food and mosquito nets. All this is important for the survival of the displaced. Many IDPs relocate to relatively safer areas and stay with relatives or

acquaintances, where they have limited access to necessities. However, living conditions remain fragile, often with temporary accommodation and no stability for the future. In such contexts, IDPs demonstrate absorptive and adaptive capacities through selling remaining assets, engaging in casual labor or continuing agricultural practices through informal arrangements such as renting land from host families. However, these strategies are not enough to sustain long-term survival, as they rely heavily on unstable sources of income and external aid.

Those who remain in the jungle find their capacity to adapt severely limited by harsh conditions and insecurity. Fear of further airstrikes restricts movement and access to food, water and healthcare. "There are not as many dishes on the table as I used to have, and no clean water for me," as one participant described. Moreover, I have no roof over my head. I usually take shelter in a cave, and sometimes I feel breathless. I also worry about weapons when I sleep outside the cave at night" (IDP, male interview no. 8). Such accounts expose the material deprivations and psychological stresses suffered by those in hiding.

Furthermore, humanitarian access remains severely limited. Many IDPs relocated into more isolated and concealed locations, such as mountain slopes and forests, creating challenges for aid organizations to locate and reach them. IDPs are therefore actively using different strategies to deal with displacement, but their adaptive capacity is continuously undermined by limited resources, limited access to assistance and continuing threats of violence. The findings underscore the need for more flexible and context-sensitive humanitarian approaches that balance immediate protection with longer-term adaptive support.

Health problems of IDPs: Health issues are a major factor in the resilience of IDPs in Hpapun District. CSO interviews show that physical and mental health problems worsen during and after displacement due to airstrikes. The sudden loss of homes, food and shelter heightened the risk to IDPs, especially children, women and girls. These conditions are worsened by prolonged displacement in jungle settings, where access to healthy food choices is limited, resulting in high malnutrition levels in children. Poor shelter and sanitation also increase vulnerability to communicable diseases, including diarrhea and other hygiene-related illnesses.

Access to health care is still severely limited. The absence of maternal health services increases the risk for pregnant women, and many injured persons lack timely access to medical care. CSO informants say IDPs frequently resort to traditional remedies when formal healthcare is unavailable. One participant said, "When I was in my village, I used to take traditional medicine when I was ill. When we ran away to the jungle, my elder daughter fell sick. I gave her hot food so that she could sweat. I thought her fever would be reduced. However, she didn't improve" (IDP, female interviewee no. 7). Accounts like these attest to the resilience of displaced

populations and the limits of their access to quality care. Although KNU health workers do provide some health services to IDPs, the services are limited in scope and resources, and in some cases, individuals have to cross border areas to seek treatment. Jungle residents experience the highest barriers to healthcare access of the different displacement settings.

The effects on mental health are no less serious. Many IDPs still live in fear and trauma, particularly to the sound of aircraft, which often sends them running immediately to perceived safe places. One CSO informant said, "When people hear the sound of an airplane, they run to the top of the mountain and hide like an animal." The loss of family members, repeated displacement, and ongoing insecurity lead to chronic psychological distress. Some people experience hopelessness, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation. At the same time, differences in coping capacity are evident. Others suffer from prolonged hardship, while IDPs with access to stable livelihoods or vocational skills seem to cope better with stress. Significantly, many participants reported that religious practices, such as meditation and expressions of gratitude for survival, were important resources for emotional resilience. These findings reveal the dual nature of resilience in this context. While IDPs demonstrate significant adaptive capacities in dealing with health problems, these capacities are constrained by limited access to healthcare, ongoing violence, and structural inequalities.

Disaster Preparedness

Disaster preparedness among IDPs in Hpapun District remains limited, particularly in the face of sudden, unpredictable airstrikes. Although many participants have previous experience of fleeing armed conflict and show some adaptive practices such as digging bomb shelters and storing basic food supplies, these measures are often insufficient to ensure safety during aerial attacks. "In our village, almost every house has dug bomb shelters," explained one of the participants. However, they are not safe when the military conducts airstrikes. At that time, I had to go to rocks and caves, which I thought were safer" (IDP, female interviewee no. 7). This indicates that local knowledge and experience are factors in preparedness practices. However, the nature of air warfare exceeds the protective capacity of conventional coping mechanisms.

A key challenge in preparedness is the lack of timely and reliable information on conflict dynamics and security risks. Many participants said they had not expected the violence to escalate or that airstrikes would be used, especially as their communities were in remote areas. There were no early warning systems or official notifications, so civilians were unprepared for sudden attacks. "There were signs of military presence before the airstrike, but they were not interpreted as an indication of an imminent threat and therefore evacuation was delayed," one

interviewee said. The sudden start of the bombing meant residents had to leave without proper preparation, demonstrating the importance of uncertainty and lack of information in vulnerability. One of our interviewees related her experience in rather vivid terms:

"Two days before the bombing, I saw the plane coming to our area. I had only made a few shelters. The soldiers came in about 2 p.m. and had scouted the area a week before the attack. Then my husband said, 'I think the military will bomb our village. Some people abandoned their houses to find safer places. However, I expected the situation to unfold differently than I had hoped, so I stayed at home. Suddenly, the military started the airstrike, and I had to run out immediately. Fortunately, the bomb did not hit human beings in our village, but those who live outside the village were affected.'" (IDP, Female, interviewee no.7)

In some cases, IDPs attempted to collect emergency supplies, including money, dry food and water. However, these efforts were hampered by resource constraints and the capricious nature of attacks. The lack of advance notice and the targeting of civilian areas further diminish preparedness, as people are often forced to react rather than plan. These findings highlight the need for more effective early warning mechanisms and civilian protection measures in conflict-affected areas. They also suggest that international attention to protective frameworks, such as restrictions on aerial attacks on civilian areas, is important for reducing harm and increasing vulnerable populations' ability to prepare for and respond to crises.

Governance is a key factor in influencing the resilience of IDPs in Hpapun District. Participants across all our interviews repeatedly emphasized good governance and the rule of law as critical to ensuring protection, access to basic services, and a coordinated emergency response. State and non-state actors play important roles in local governance structures. However, the findings point to significant limitations in state capacity, particularly in emergency preparedness and response. There were attempts to engage with INGOs and CSOs, but stakeholders noted weaknesses in budgeting, planning, and institutional capacity. These limitations were compounded in the aftermath of the military coup in February 2021, when respondents pointed to a lack of an effective state-led emergency response. Several INGO informants reported that the military authorities appear to give priority to political and military objectives over the welfare of IDPs.

The coup has also led to a breakdown in trust among communities, government authorities and humanitarian actors. NGO staff told us that restrictions by the State Administration Council (SAC) have curtailed their participation in aid delivery and travel to the field. Before the coup, INGOs and NGOs worked with government authorities through formal agreements, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). Many organizations are unable or unwilling to formalize

engagement with the SAC in the current context and instead resort to low-profile collaboration with local CSOs. Humanitarian operations are often conducted quietly, reflecting both operational necessity and distrust of state governance structures.

Governance challenges are complicated by the presence of multiple authorities in conflict-affected areas. In areas under EAO control, security concerns and checkpoint systems can also restrict humanitarian access. As one participant explained: "They [the aid workers] are forbidden from bringing food items into the village. They have to contact local people and then provide us with food. "There are many military and EAO checkpoints in the designated areas, so aid workers are not allowed to come. "Those who do not appreciate life will have valuable lives in their hands" (IDP, female interviewee no. 2). This is an example of how fragmented governance structures and overlapping authorities hinder the delivery of assistance and increase the vulnerability of displaced populations.

At the same time, IDPs often see EAOs as more responsive to immediate needs. Where possible, they provide food, medicine, temporary shelter and basic health assistance, and in some cases, facilitate the distribution of aid through local networks. One of our IDP interviewees said, "There are some donors, but they do not mention their names." They help the ethnic armed groups, and the ethnic armed groups help us. Rice and oil are the main donations. There are a lot of people in the village, and they distribute a bucket of rice from house to house." This support is critical but limited in scale, barely enough to meet the growing needs of displaced populations.

As the IDP population in Southeast Myanmar continues to grow, these findings emphasize the need for more flexible and context-specific humanitarian approaches. IDPs demonstrate their capacities and survival strategies, but their resilience is constrained by weak governance, a lack of coordination and restricted access to assistance. Risk management in particular remains inadequate. Most IDPs have no contingency planning and no early warning systems when fleeing from airstrikes. Although some adaptive practices (e.g., digging shelters and storing food) are evident, they are inadequate in the context of protracted conflict.

Basic needs such as food, shelter, health care and education remain severely limited for many. From a governance perspective, both the SAC and EAOs face serious challenges in effectively meeting IDPs' needs. The SAC is widely seen as unaccountable and irresponsible in its provision of humanitarian assistance, while EAO support, albeit important, is constrained by limited resources. Therefore, the ability of IDPs to adapt and sustain resilience is not only contingent upon their individual and collective capacities but is inherently conditioned by fractured and insufficient governance structures in conflict-affected settings.

Human Rights Violations in Areas Affected by Airstrikes

Widespread human rights violations occurred in the airstrike-affected areas of Hpapun District, affecting both IDPs and humanitarian actors. Civil society organizations (CSOs) provide evidence of severe restrictions on access to necessities, particularly food. Civilians are unable to travel between locations due to military movement restrictions, hindering their ability to buy food or assist displaced populations. NGOs, INGOs, CSOs and other humanitarian actors are threatened and attacked in an attempt to deliver aid. In several cases, humanitarian and health workers have been blocked or attacked, in contravention of international humanitarian law (IHL), which requires parties to a conflict to allow and facilitate rapid, unimpeded and impartial humanitarian assistance. These constraints further underscore the crucial role of governance in enabling – or hampering – humanitarian access.

Limitations on returning to home villages further exacerbate food insecurity. IDPs said they face violence, including the threat of being shot, when they go to retrieve food or personal belongings from their homes. This threat leaves many without access to vital resources. As stated by Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), individuals have the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing and housing, and states are obliged to ensure freedom from hunger (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [ICESCR] of 1966) (United Nations, n.d.). Nevertheless, here, conflict has decimated livelihoods and assets, leaving IDPs in conditions of extreme deprivation, with food shortages, poor living conditions and diminished human dignity.

In armed conflict, violations also occur in the protection of civilians. The principle of proportionality in IHL prohibits attacks that would cause excessive civilian harm in relation to the anticipated military advantage. Nevertheless, research shows that airstrikes have hit civilian sites, including villages, religious sites and schools. These attacks have disrupted the education system, forcing children to stop their studies or to continue learning in unsafe and poor conditions, such as forested areas. The right to education is provided in Article 13 of the ICESCR, which is vital to the promotion of dignity and respect for human rights (ICESCR, 1966). Myanmar is a State Party to the Covenant, but access to education remains severely compromised in conflict-affected areas.

Health-related rights are eroded as well. The wounded and sick, including pregnant women, must be cared for and protected in accordance with international humanitarian law (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 1949). In practice, however, IDPs encounter significant difficulties in accessing health care due to insecurity, lack of facilities and trained personnel. International human rights law provides for the right to the highest attainable standard

of physical and mental health as set in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966; nonetheless, IDPs often rely on family support, traditional medicine or limited services provided by ethnic armed groups. Thus, physical and mental health are fragile.

Another very worrying dimension of human rights violations is gender-based violence. The research revealed that some IDPs, particularly young women, had suffered abuse in displacement settings, including in camps. Survivors often lack safe means of reporting and fear retaliation, resulting in under-reporting. In some instances, the perpetrators of abuse are individuals in positions of authority within camps, not external actors. These findings point to the pressing need for protective mechanisms, awareness-raising and accountability measures, even in highly constrained environments.

Overall, the findings show that human security is basically undermined in the areas affected by the airstrikes. IDPs experience ongoing insecurity, limited access to food, health care and land, and are often forced to move. International human rights and humanitarian law provide normative protections, including the rights to life, security, food, health and education. However, in practice these rights are largely out of reach due to ongoing conflict and governance failures. As a result, human rights violations are not only widespread but also structurally entrenched, greatly limiting the ability of IDPs to live with dignity and to build resilience in situations of prolonged displacement.

Challenges to Humanitarian Response and Pathways to Strengthen IDPs' Resilience

Humanitarian organizations provide critical support to IDPs in Hpapun District, including access to basic services such as sanitation, healthcare and food. Before the 2021 military coup, NGOs, INGOs and CSOs provided hygiene kits, emergency medicines and food supplies such as rice, oil and other essentials. However, even with these measures, the current help is not enough, especially for stable access to food and other necessities.

The escalation of the conflict has significantly impacted humanitarian operations, severely restricting them. Movement restrictions, insecurity and logistical challenges, including damaged infrastructure and unexploded ordnance, have hampered access to affected populations. "We ran to the jungle when the military was using airstrikes, and it was hard to find food," one participant said. "I was in the jungle for about two months, and I did not go home because of the war; and there were bombs on the road" (IDP, female interviewee no. 7). Humanitarian actors face risks from checkpoints, lack of security guarantees, as well as financial constraints, including banking restrictions and rising commodity prices that delay aid delivery and reduce operational effectiveness.

Political instability further complicates the humanitarian response. However, restrictions imposed by authorities and ongoing conflict between armed actors limit access and coordination. This circumstance means that humanitarian organizations often must work through informal or low-key channels, limiting the scale and visibility of aid. These situations demonstrate the direct impact of governance and insecurity on the ability of humanitarian actors to respond to the needs of IDPs.

The interview findings highlight several strategies to enhance the resilience of internally displaced persons (IDPs) amid ongoing challenges. First, humanitarian interventions should shift from providing short-term relief to implementing longer-term resilience-building strategies, particularly through livelihood development and skills training. Second, it is essential to establish contingency planning and early warning systems, as many IDPs are currently unprepared for sudden displacement due to airstrikes. Lastly, effective collaboration with local actors—such as community leaders, civil society organizations, and ethnic authorities—is vital for building trust, improving access, and ensuring context-sensitive implementation.

Integrated programming across key sectors – livelihoods, education, health and governance – is required to address the multidimensional needs of IDPs. In the short term, humanitarian actors should focus on access to food, health and shelter. In the longer term, interventions should aim to strengthen local systems, including support for community-based education, maternal and child health services and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Ultimately, humanitarian response is closely linked to the broader political context. While delivering aid will require improved mechanisms, achieving sustainable solutions necessitates a stronger focus on peacebuilding and political stability. Additionally, systematic monitoring of human rights violations is essential to ensure accountability and protect vulnerable populations. Until these structural challenges are addressed, efforts to build resilience among internally displaced persons (IDPs) will be limited in their scope and effectiveness.

Conclusion

The results of this study can be read through the lens of the V2R framework, resilience theory and human rights. Firstly, the V2R framework shows how resilience among IDPs in Hpapun District is influenced by the interplay of hazards (airstrikes and ongoing conflict), disrupted livelihoods, weak governance and deep uncertainty about the future. These structural conditions place severe constraints on IDPs' coping and adaptive capacity. Second, in line with social-

ecological and relational approaches to resilience, the results demonstrate that resilience is not solely an individual capacity but is embedded in social networks, local institutions and cultural practices. Displaced people are coping with displacement through community support, religious beliefs and adaptive livelihood strategies, yet these efforts remain constrained by structural inequalities and limited access to resources. Finally, from a human rights perspective, the study demonstrates that systematic violations of fundamental rights, including access to food, health care, education and security, undermine resilience. International legal frameworks have provided normative protections, but these rights are largely inaccessible in practice, indicating that resilience cannot be sustained without addressing the broader issues of accountability, protection, and justice. Collectively, these viewpoints imply that resilience in conflict-affected contexts is a relational and structurally conditioned process, requiring not just individual and community capacities but also enabling governance and respect for human rights.

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