

THE SHIFT IN GLOBAL DISASTER AID: IMPLICATIONS OF REDUCED U.S. SUPPORT AND PREPAREDNESS POST-MYANMAR EARTHQUAKE

NGUYEN NGOC TUONG VI^{1,2†} , MINH QUAN LE^{2,3†} , ABDELRAHMAN GAD^{2,4} ,
 MUAWIA YOUSIF FADLELMOLA MOHAMED^{2,5†} , LINH TRAN^{2,6†} , TIN ZAR WIN⁷ , PHILLIP TRAN⁸ ,
 NGUYEN TIEN HUY^{7,9,10*} 

¹Department of Science, Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam. ²Online Research Club (<http://www.onlineresearchclub.org>), Nagasaki, Japan. ³Florida State University College of Medicine, Tallahassee, Florida, USA. ⁴Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA. ⁵Southend University Hospital, United Kingdom. ⁶Danang University of Medical Technology and Pharmacy, Da Nang, Vietnam. ⁷School of Tropical Medicine and Global Health, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki, Japan. ⁸Department of Invasive Cardiology, Nam Can Tho University, Can Tho, Vietnam. ⁹Institute of Research and Development, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, Vietnam. ¹⁰School of Medicine and Pharmacy, Duy Tan University, Da Nang, Vietnam. Email: nguyentienhuy4@duytan.edu.vn

Received: 22 October 2025, Revised and Accepted: 17 November 2025

ABSTRACT

The 7.7 magnitude earthquake in Myanmar significantly exposed vulnerability in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) disaster management, a failure attributed to the reduced aid from the United States. These LMICs are adapting to this circumstance through strengthening regional partnerships, aid source diversification, and local preparedness investment. This commentary examines the effect of the decline in U.S. humanitarian leadership. It explores how LMICs such as Myanmar respond and discusses forward-looking strategies to enhance global disaster resilience. These findings offer timely insight into how LMICs can recalibrate humanitarian strategies amid an increasingly fragmented aid landscape.

Keywords: LMICs, earthquake

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INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters demand rapid and organized humanitarian responses. The United States, mainly via the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [1], has led initiatives to aid global crisis management. USAID has provided support in healthcare, humanitarian aid, and democratic reforms.

On March 28th, 2025, the earthquake in Myanmar resulted in at least 700 deaths, over 5,000 injuries, 4,800 reported missing [2], and approximately 50,000 destroyed houses [3]. The crisis was further exacerbated by political instability that undermined resilience efforts [4]. Yet, there was a significant reduction in U.S. humanitarian funding, leaving a negative effect on Myanmar and the global disaster response [5]. The U.S. withdrawal reduced financial assistance and affected human resources, cutting USAID's operational capacity [6]. This U.S. humanitarian weakening created a response vacuum, placing increased pressure on domestic governance and regional actors to manage large-scale crises.

This paper examines the impact of declining U.S. support on disaster management in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), using Myanmar as a case study, and discusses strategies for more sustainable approaches to humanitarian preparedness.

IMPACT OF U.S. AID REDUCTION ON LMICs

LMICs often rely heavily on international aid to compensate for limited domestic resources in disaster preparedness and response [6]. Indeed, major financial support for development programs such as health, education, infrastructure, and economic growth has come from U.S. aid [7]. Significant gaps resulting from declining funding have LMICs reallocating limited resources from long-term development priorities to emergency response [8].

Myanmar exhibits these structural vulnerabilities. Funding cuts, including lower U.S. assistance for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) – key participants in local outreach and Early Warning System execution – have seriously compromised Myanmar's risk detection capabilities [8-12]. Reduced warning times and community preparation follow from this, therefore impairing a system vital for reaching remote areas – particularly in times of disasters and conflict. This transition has also made it more challenging for CSOs to educate local personnel, therefore lowering institutional recollection and long-term preparedness systems [8-12].

Apart from that, the continuous violence keeps destroying important infrastructure; meanwhile, reconstruction projects remain underfunded [10]. Simultaneously, efforts to build Myanmar's essential facilities, dependent on capital investment from Official Development Assistance (ODA) previously supported by U.S. funding, faced financial strain due to the deficit of investment [8-10]. The sluggish recovery resulting from little foreign support means many people are surviving without food, housing, or medical treatment [8]. These difficulties are not exclusive of Myanmar. Other LMICs dealing with comparable aid reductions also face similar challenges, which emphasizes the need of building more sustainable and self-reliant disaster preparedness systems.

STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTATION: LMICs RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

In response to declining U.S. aid, Myanmar and other LMICs are formulating strategies to increase their resilience.

Regional collaborations and cooperation

Strengthening regional alliances has been one important tactic, as they provide scalable substitutes for conventional bilateral aid [13].

Following the earthquake, neighboring nations including Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia deployed field hospitals, medical teams, and logistics support [14,15]. As emergency relief, India, China, and Russia collectively contributed over a hundred million US dollars [12]. This influx of emergency funding reveals an increasing reliance on regional powers – especially non-Western donors – to fill the operational void [12].

Anwar Ibrahim, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, brokered interim cease-fires and promptly promised fifty rescue teams [16]. Rapid emergency aid delivery to strategic hubs such as Subang, Malaysia, and Chainat, Thailand was enabled by ASEAN's regional disaster-management frameworks [17]. These responses reflect ASEAN's potential as a regional coordinating body, though institutional principles like non-interference still limit its effectiveness.

Aid sources diversification

Other LMICs demonstrate a second approach: diversifying their donor base to reduce dependency on former primary donors. Nepal extended regional cooperation with China and India in response to the 2015 earthquake [18]. Haiti deepened its cooperation with China to support national reconstruction [19]. To reduce reliance on Western funding, Zimbabwe turned to the African Union (AU) [20]. These initiatives reflect a shift from donor dependency toward multi-alignment and risk-sharing among diverse partners. Although commendable, this reactive adaptation risks replacing one form of dependency with another, if not institutionalized within a long-term preparedness framework.

These adaptive indicators show that LMICs have shifted from passive recipients to active actors in shaping regional humanitarian responses. To avoid repeated vulnerability and ensure sustainability, these temporary adjustments must evolve into integrated, long-term plans – a challenge that will be discussed in the next section.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PREPAREDNESS

Recent initiatives by LMICs reveal that, even in the absence of stable international support, agility in disaster response is feasible. But as the frequency and intensity of crises escalate, short-term solutions won't be enough. Building resilience that lasts requires deeper structural commitments. Particularly three areas require attention: local capacity-building, varied funding, and regional cooperation.

Improving regional collaboration

During crises, informal collaboration among LMICs has shown great benefit. These initiatives, to translate into sustained preparation, however, must be established through reliable, well-practiced regional systems. Such models include the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response [21,22], the South Pacific Community, and systems within the AU [23,24]. Each shows how regional entities might go from reactive aid to proactive planning.

Of course, collaboration does not happen in a vacuum. Political sensitivities – especially surrounding sovereignty and consensus – can slow down action when time is most critical. Building these systems entails confronting that conflict squarely.

Diversifying funding resource

Relying on a single major donor leaves countries highly vulnerable to political and fiscal shifts beyond their control. LMICs should actively seek multilateral development financing, tap into private capital markets, and leverage risk-transfer tools to ensure timely liquidity during disasters [25].

For instance, pre-arranged payouts have allowed nations in the Caribbean to avoid lengthy financing delays [26]. Likewise, funded by the World Bank, Mexico's Catastrophe Bond (Cat Mex) shows how sovereign risk transfer can complement conventional aid [27,28]. Although they are not ideal, these approaches show a significant strategic and financial step forward in preparedness.

Investing in local capacity and decentralized preparedness

No disaster response system – whether national or regional – can operate effectively without strong local foundations. In practice, it's the people on the ground who make or break a response. Bangladesh's Cyclone Preparedness Programme, for instance, mobilizes thousands of trained volunteers and has become a widely referenced example of how community-based systems can save lives when disaster strikes [29,30]. India has similarly made investments in both national and state-level response forces (National Disaster Response Force, State Disaster Response Force), thereby boosting their capacity for fast deployment in crises. Under Republic Act 10121, risk governance has been deliberately decentralized in the Philippines through Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Councils [31,32]. Strengthening these local structures is a strategic requirement rather than merely a technical one. When preparedness is embedded at the community level, frontline response becomes faster, more culturally calibrated, and ultimately more sustainable.

LMICs will require more than just temporary ingenuity if they are to navigate a world of increasingly fragmented aid. What is needed is a change toward systems that are regional by design, financially based, and locally carried out. Humanitarian response thus moves from emergency to strategy.

CONCLUSION

The latest earthquake in Myanmar highlights how precarious disaster readiness may be in low- and middle-income nations when foreign funding is cut. It showed how fast emergency systems might be overwhelmed without continuous outside help, not only tested them. Simultaneously, the spectrum of responses observed in different areas points to an optimistic change. Many LMICs are aggressively seeking new alliances, developing local expertise, and creating solutions that match their particular needs instead of depending just on conventional donors.

What we have seen goes beyond mere improvisation – it marks the start of a longer-term change in the approach to humanitarian intervention. Not just helpful during crises, but also for long-lasting resilience are regional cooperation, more flexible funding sources, and empowered local players. Disaster governance has to migrate from centralized, donor-driven models toward systems anchored in local leadership and shared accountability if it is to become more equitable and successful.

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