

What Happens When Aid Needs to Be ‘Quiet’: Cross-Border Aid in Myanmar

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Abstract

In international development assistance, aid flows are often well-documented- not least because they serve as tools of soft power, diplomacy, or are aimed at domestic voter audiences. What happens when populations are cut off from aid by military regimes or governments, and aid must be brought in quietly to those who need it, often across national borders, and against the express will of ruling powers? Such aid “smuggling” has long histories, including during socialist regimes in Eastern Europe (Capotescu 2024) as well as recent occurrence in the borderlands of Sudan (Carter and Satti, 2025), Ukraine, Syria, and Gaza. Drawing on the case of Myanmar, this paper asks what the practical and conceptual impacts of such “aid smuggling” are, and their significance for a broader aid landscape. It argues that more clandestine forms of aid rely on different groups of actors, favouring those with longer histories and presence in an area, with knowledge of local conditions, and long-standing relationships with all involved. It also asks how the “smuggling” modality changes what can be transported across, and how. Considering the sensitive nature of information involved, this paper will consider the broader consequences rather than empirical detail of such “quiet aid”. The paper also raises the question what possibilities this leaves for non-local potential donors to become involved.