

Humanitarian Assistance Beyond the State: Cross-Border Aid in Karenni State

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Abstract

This paper examines cross-border humanitarian assistance along the Thai–Karenni border following Myanmar’s 2021 military coup. Drawing on qualitative interviews with civil society organizations (CSOs), Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), interim governance bodies, and humanitarian actors, as well as field visits to refugee and IDP sites, it analyzes how aid is negotiated, delivered, and governed in a highly politicized border environment.

Applying a border governance lens, the study shows that cross-border assistance is essential for reaching conflict-affected populations yet politically sensitive. Local CSOs and community networks serve as primary implementers, operating through informal channels shaped by Thai regulations and ongoing conflict in Myanmar. EROs facilitate access and security, while interim governance bodies provide coordination. Financial transfers rely largely on informal mechanisms, exposing actors to legal and operational risks.

The findings highlight the border’s ambivalent role. While it enables protection and humanitarian access, it simultaneously produces uneven distribution, regulatory uncertainty, and differential vulnerabilities, particularly for women and those in remote areas. The paper argues that cross-border aid is sustained through adaptive local governance practices and informal infrastructures, while structural constraints and funding volatility continue to shape its limits. This case study illustrates how border regimes actively condition both humanitarian access and the lived experience of crisis.