



Livelihoods, poverty, and food insecurity in Myanmar

Household survey evidence from May 2021

Six rounds of the Rural-Urban Food Security Survey (RUFSS) conducted in 2020 demonstrated the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on poverty and food insecurity among approximately 2,000 households with pregnant women or young children in urban Yangon and the rural Dry Zone. In this Research Note, we present results from a follow-up round conducted in May 2021.

Key Findings

- 19 percent of urban households based in Yangon in 2020 changed residence in 2021, primarily to other states/regions, while 3 percent of rural households have changed residence. Most migrants are staying with extended family. Almost half of the former Yangon residents say they have moved for six or more months or permanently.
- Income-based poverty was very high at the end of 2020 and declined only marginally in rural areas, from 64 to 60 percent. Poverty remained the same among residents still in Yangon (46 to 47 percent) but increased by 11 percent among recent migrants (52 to 63 percent).
- The share of households that lost employment in the previous month was exceptionally high in May 2021, rising dramatically since late 2020. Among households still in Yangon, the share doubled from 11 percent in late 2020 to 22 percent in May 2021; among those still in the Dry Zone, the share doubled from 7 to 14 percent; and among recent migrants, the share rose from 16 to 41 percent as migrants struggled to find work in their new place of residence.
- There have been major changes in coping strategies since late 2020. Fewer households are using cash savings. The share of Yangon-based households reducing food consumption rose from 6 percent in late 2020 to 23 percent in May 2021, while the share increased from 3 to 15 percent among Dry Zone households and from 7 to 15 percent among recent migrants. Households from all three groups also stated that they consumed fewer kinds of foods in the previous month. Dietary diversity in rural areas has declined.
- COVID-19 assistance from the government—which was typically reaching around 50 percent of all households in the RUFSS sample between July and December 2020—now reaches only one percent of households. Assistance from NGOs and private charities is also minimal. Almost all respondents in our sample receive no external assistance. Virtually no mothers reported receiving maternal and child cash transfers.

Recommended Actions

- It is critical for international donors, local NGOs, and CSOs to scale up assistance to Myanmar's poor. Given the ongoing problems in Myanmar's financial sector, unconditional food assistance may be preferable. However, in the longer term, actors should consider food- or cash-for-work schemes to improve targeting and to generate basic employment.
- Job creation should also be an essential objective in any economic recovery strategy.

Introduction

With the political and economic instability from 1 February 2021 onwards as well as the ensuing widespread protests and civil disobedience actions, Myanmar's economy collapsed just as it was beginning to recover from the economic crisis caused by COVID-19. Political instability was immediately accompanied by unparalleled economic instability, with major disruptions to the financial sector and to trade, transport, and government services and reports of widespread business closures.

Despite clear signs of economic turmoil, the impacts of political instability on household welfare have not been rigorously documented due to a lack of reliable survey data. This Research Note aims to address this knowledge gap by assessing the economic welfare impacts of the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar as well as the ongoing and cumulative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. To do so, we analyzed the Rural-Urban Food Security Survey (RUFSS), a household phone survey of approximately 2,000 mothers in urban and peri-urban Yangon (who were pregnant as of January 2020) and in the rural Dry Zone (who had young children under the age of five). RUFSS was initiated in June 2020 to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on incomes, coping strategies, food security, dietary diversity, and other nutrition-related indicators, e.g., healthcare, breastfeeding practices, etc. Thereafter, RUFSS rounds were conducted monthly with six rounds between June and December 2020. In this Research Note, we report results of a follow-up survey round implemented in May 2021 which incorporates additional questions regarding the impacts of political instability on household welfare.

Although RUFSS is an unbalanced panel that allows us to track welfare changes between late 2020 and May 2021, it is critically important to note that the May 2021 survey round resulted in two major changes in the RUFSS sample. First, around 20 percent of the previous urban sample could not be reached by phone and, therefore, were replaced first by households from the same underlying sample frame, and then by a snowballing approach designed to ensure the same kind of demographic coverage (mothers with young children) and geographical coverage (the same townships in approximately equal proportion). It is important to note that the significant attrition in our sample between the December 2020 and May 2021 rounds, especially in circumstances of major economic and political shocks, could mean that statistical trends in our data are biased in one direction or another if the respondents who dropped out of the sample have different characteristics or faced different circumstances compared to respondents who remained in the sample. If those households were facing more severe shocks, it is possible that the results in this note could underestimate the adversity that households in Myanmar are currently facing.

Second, as we discuss in the following section, almost one in five households that were living in Yangon when surveyed in 2020 have now left Yangon. Also, some rural households in the Dry Zone have left their townships. We therefore report a three-way sample stratification of "Still in Yangon", "Still in Dry Zone, and "Recent Migrants", with the latter largely comprised of households that recently left Yangon (around 80 percent).

The remainder of this note reports results on these migration patterns and then stratifies results on the major impacts of the current political instability. These include income-based poverty trends, unemployment, coping strategies, food insecurity, maternal dietary diversity, and receipts of government, NGO, and private charity assistance. Moreover, since we are interested primarily in changes since late 2020, we typically exclude in our analysis data from respondents who were only added to the sample in May 2021, thereby focusing on a panel of households to examine within-household or within-mother changes over time. We conclude with a list of recommended actions.

Large-scale migration out of Yangon, mostly to other states and regions

In May 2021, we asked all respondents whether they had changed their residence since the last time they were surveyed in November and December 2020. Strikingly, we find very high migration out of the Yangon sub-sample. Table 1 reports statistics only for households who were also surveyed in

the November/December 2020 round. We find that 19 percent of households that were previously in Yangon changed residence (172 of 906 households), while 3 percent of Dry Zone respondents changed residence (30 of 1,011 households).

Table 1. Share of households surveyed in 2020 that have changed residence since December 2020

Share of households that changed residence	In Yangon as of December 2020	In Dry Zone as of December 2020
Moved since December 2020 (%)	19	3
If moved, location of current residence (%)		
Same township	13	9
Urban area in same state/region	11	3 (<i>migrant</i>)
Rural area in same state/region	2 (<i>migrant</i>)	23 (<i>migrant</i>)
Urban area in different state/region	30 (<i>migrant</i>)	34 (<i>migrant</i>)
Rural are in different state/region	44 (<i>migrant</i>)	31 (<i>migrant</i>)
Total households that changed residence (N)	172	30
Total “migrants”, i.e., long-distance (N)	131	28
Observations (N)	906	1,011

Source: RUFSS-May 2021 survey round

In Yangon, just 13 percent of households moved to a new dwelling within their township and 11 percent moved to another urban township in Yangon, whereas 44 and 30 percent moved to a rural area or urban area in a different state/region, respectively. Around one-third of respondents previously living in Yangon stated they had permanently left their previous dwelling, and 18 percent expected to stay in their new dwelling for six months or more.

Among the small rural sub-sample surveyed in November/December 2020 that changed residence, 23 percent moved a rural area in the same state/region, 31 percent to a rural area in a different state/region, and 34 percent to an urban area in a different state/region.

Table 1 also identifies the households we classify as recent “migrants” based on a long-distance change of location. In the Yangon sample, we do not classify households that moved within the same township or within urban Yangon itself as migrants because such households will not necessarily change their occupation or livelihood. For households in the Dry Zone, however, only those that moved within their township are not classified as migrants. In total, we classify 159 households as recent migrants, 82 percent of which were previously residing in and left Yangon and 18 percent of which were previously residing in the Dry Zone and left their 2020 township.

Table 2 reports relocation characteristics among all households that changed residence since late 2020. Here we observe quite different responses based on where respondents previously lived. The respondents from the 2020 Yangon sub-sample are much more likely to cite the desire to improve physical security (48 percent), whereas the 2020 rural sub-sample respondents were more likely to cite taking up new employment (57 percent). However, migrants from Yangon also cited employment (23 percent), saving on rent/housing (35 percent), and financial support from relatives (20 percent), suggesting migrants from Yangon also had strong economic objectives in addition to seeking better physical security. Also striking is that a large share of households who changed residence reported that it was permanent (32 percent of those in Yangon in 2020) or that they expected to stay longer than 6 months in their new place of residence, while many were also undecided. Likewise, 50 percent of the households from Yangon in 2020 stated they were no longer paying rent and could not return to their previous residence. Most households based in Yangon in 2020 moved their entire immediate family. About three-quarters of Yangon-based households moved to stay with extended family, typically the mother’s family. However, this pattern was less common in the rural sub-sample, however.

Table 2. Relocation characteristics of households that changed residence since late 2020

Characteristics of relocation	In Yangon as of late 2020	In Dry Zone as of late 2020
Reasons for moving (%)		
To improve my physical security	48	14
To save on rent or housing costs	35	3
To take up new employment	23	57
To get help from relatives with childcare	28	17
To get financial support from family members	20	3
To get emotional support from family members	8	11
Expected duration of stay in new dwelling (%)		
1 month or less	10	17
1-6 months	23	11
> 6 months	18	20
Permanently	32	26
Don't know	17	26
Status of previous dwelling (%)		
Still paying rent and can return	18	3
No longer paying rent and cannot return	50	14
Still own and can return	21	80
Still own but renting it out	2	0
Plan to sell	15	0
Don't know	8	3
Who moved to new dwelling (%)		
Entire immediate family	84	63
Myself and my children	13	20
Myself and some of my children	2	3
Only myself	1	14
Who else living with (%)		
My extended family	58	31
My husband's extended family	16	17
A new separate dwelling	26	51
Observations (N)	171	35

Source: RUFSS-May 2021 survey round

Respondents cite wide-ranging impacts of political instability

Table 3 reports results of a question asking respondents to list the main three impacts of recent political instability. In the total sample, 51 percent of respondents cited loss of employment or income, 31 percent cited fear of decreasing income, and 32 percent cited problems with their food supply. Likewise, 38 percent cited household members feeling unsafe and 10 percent cited fear of members getting hurt or detained. There are striking differences across sub-samples. Recent migrants reported unemployment and loss of income much more frequently (65 percent), while households still in the Dry Zone were more likely to report problems with food supply (36 percent) compared to those still in Yangon (26 percent). Just 13 percent of respondents stated that the recent political instability has had no major impact on their household.

Table 3. Economic losses and physical insecurity are the most widely cited impacts of political instability

Impacts of political stability	Total sample* (%)	Remaining in Yangon (%)	Remaining in Dry Zone (%)	Recent migrants (%)
No impact at all	13	15	13	12
Unemployment/loss of income	51	54	46	65
Household members feel unsafe	38	39	37	35
Problems with food supply	32	26	36	25
Fear of decreasing household income	31	29	30	23
Long distance travel restrictions	14	13	17	9
Staying indoors more	11	11	11	13
Fear of members getting hurt or detained	10	10	10	12
Observations (N)	2,034	776	979	162

Source: RUFSS-May 2021 survey round

Note:* Includes new respondents. The sub-samples include only respondents who were also interviewed in late 2020.

Responses are based on a question asking respondents to cite the three main impacts of recent political instability, if any.

Poverty and unemployment were very high in May 2021, especially among recent migrants

The income-based poverty measure in RUFSS is based on respondents' estimates of total household income in the past month as well as on a one-time retrospective estimate of income in January 2020 prior to COVID-19's economic impacts. Households are defined as income-poor if their daily per capita income in the past month was less than 890 Myanmar Kyat in June 2020 terms. Nominal incomes reported in RUFSS were adjusted for food price inflation, which was minimal in 2020 but significant from December to May 2021. In this case, due to an absence of recent consumer price index (CPI) data, we use a weighted food price series from the MAPSA Food Vendor survey data—which provided prices for key food commodities in different regions of Myanmar—and household food expenditure data to adjust the 890 Myanmar Kyat poverty line with an expenditure-weighted food price index.

Table 4 shows striking trends in poverty since January 2020. Across the entire survey sample, poverty was 17 percent in January 2020 prior to COVID-19's economic impacts but rose sharply to 46 percent by June 2020 and rose again to 63 percent by September 2020 when Myanmar was hit by exponential growth in COVID-19 cases. Poverty rates remained the same in October (64 percent) but began to improve by November 2020 (55 percent) as the rate of new COVID-19 cases gradually started to decline. Other economic indicators, such as consumer mobility indices, continued to improve in December 2020 and January 2021, suggesting poverty rates were declining. However, as of May 2021 poverty rates remained at 55 percent in this somewhat altered RUFSS sample.

Table 4. Income-based poverty trends from January 2020 to May 2021 at the \$1.90/day poverty line, by percentage of respondents

Income-based poverty	Jan-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	May-21
All households (%)	17	46	37	43	63	64	55	55
Remaining in Yangon (%)	7	35	21	28	60	59	46	47
Remaining in Dry Zone (%)	29	58	50	57	67	69	64	60
Recent migrants (%)	11	43	33	33	54	63	52	63

Source: RUFSS, various survey rounds.

Note: January estimates of monthly income are based on recalled income responses from the first survey round in which each household was surveyed. All other monthly estimates are based on recalled income in the month prior to the survey. Note that these statistics exclude households newly added to the survey in May 2021 to improve comparability to 2020 results.

Statistics for the three sub-samples in Table 4 suggests divergent poverty dynamics among different households. In the Dry Zone, poverty rates fell slightly (64 to 60 percent) between November 2020 and May 2021 in a largely unchanged panel. Among respondents still in Yangon in May 2021, income-based poverty was largely unchanged (46 to 47 percent). However, among

recent migrants, poverty rose from 52 to 63 percent. Overall, this suggests that Yangon's economy—from where most of the migrants originate—has fared worse since the political crisis began in February 2021 than has the economy in the Dry Zone. Another notable feature is that poverty rates among recent migrants in November 2020 (52 percent) were higher than they were for households who continued to stay in Yangon (46 percent), suggesting there were indeed strong economic rationales for migration for many of these migrant households.

Although poverty rates are clearly very high in May 2021 – as they were in late 2020 – it is arguably also surprising that poverty rates have not risen further since late 2020 given the worsening economic, financial, and political situations in Myanmar. There are three possible explanations. First, rural poverty is almost certainly seasonal, and rural Myanmar has not yet entered its traditional lean season. Poverty in rural Myanmar could therefore increase in subsequent rounds unless there is a significant improvement in economic conditions. Second, we note significant attrition in the urban sample. If non-respondents are more likely to have experienced severe shocks and/or migrated out of Yangon, then the statistics in Table 4 could underestimate the true change in poverty. Third, although political instability has created a great deal of instability, COVID-19 restrictions may have relaxed, thereby benefiting some livelihoods. Finally, we emphasize that the household income recall measures used to measure poverty are measured with substantial imprecision.

In addition to measuring poverty, RUFSS also asked respondents qualitative questions about whether their current income was lower than normal and, if so, why (Table 5). Across all survey rounds, we found that about three-quarters of households state their income is lower than normal. However, the reasons for income losses vary across households and samples. Among households still in Yangon in May 2020, 39 percent cited loss of employment, 30 percent cited loss of daily labor opportunities, and 25 percent cited travel restrictions. Most of these indicators were at similar levels in November 2020, although fewer households now reported reduced daily labor opportunities. Among households in the Dry Zone, we also observe loss of employment to be the most frequently cited reason, although rural households also cite a range of lower frequency responses not reported in Table 5 (e.g., poor weather).

Table 5. Reasons cited for changes in income by survey round, among households reporting lower than normal incomes in the past month, by survey round and sub-sample

Reasons for changes in income	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	May-21
Remaining in Yangon (%)							
Loss of employment	54	34	26	46	39	34	39
No work due to travel restrictions	27	13	15	39	30	26	25
Daily labor opportunities reduced	25	30	42	23	31	41	30
Less customers/clients	15	14	17	10	9	12	14
Reduced salary/wage	24	17	13	10	16	23	21
Remaining in Dry Zone (%)							
Loss of employment	53	41	32	32	28	34	35
No work due to travel restrictions	31	14	14	32	32	30	17
Daily labor opportunities reduced	26	28	36	31	36	40	34
Less customers/clients	18	18	19	13	17	15	15
Reduced salary/wage	8	4	5	4	6	9	15
Recent migrants (%)							
Loss of employment	66	47	41	47	39	43	57
No work due to travel restrictions	22	12	8	31	31	34	16
Daily labor opportunities reduced	31	24	27	24	27	34	14
Less customers/clients	9	12	15	10	7	8	7
Reduced salary/wage	18	15	11	12	13	17	19

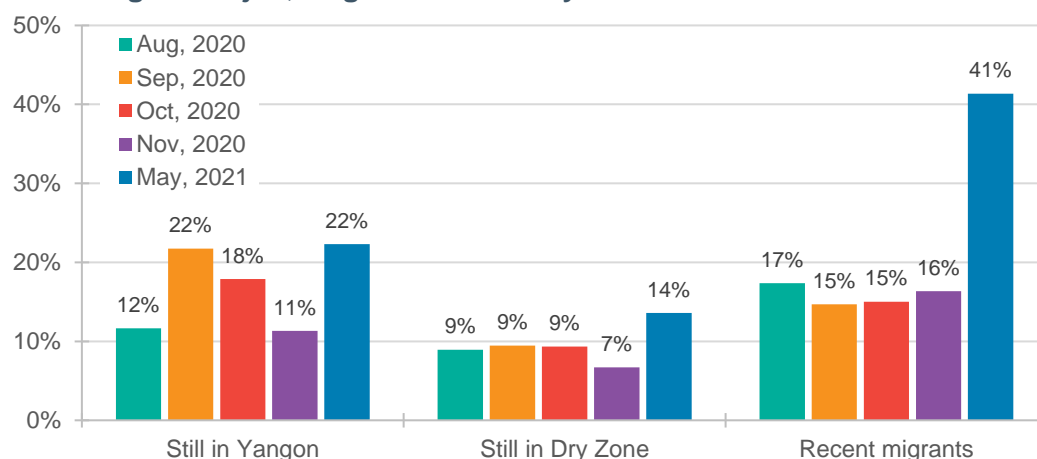
Source: RUFSS, various survey rounds.

Notes: These statistics are derived from the sub-sample of households reporting income lower than normal for this time of year, which typically averages 75 percent of the full sample.

Among recent migrants, we also see loss of employment as the most frequently cited reason for income loss in November 2020 (43 percent compared to 34 percent in the samples still in Yangon or the Dry Zone), and May 2021 (57 percent). However, we observe a marked decline in the share of migrant households citing reduced daily labor opportunities, suggesting that they may be engaged in casual work in their new communities. We also observe fewer migrant households citing travel restrictions.

From August 2020 onwards, we asked respondents whether any household member lost or found new employment in the previous month. Figure 1 records whether a household member lost employment and was not able to find a new permanent job or was only able to find casual work (though this was relatively uncommon). As with poverty, we again observe divergent trends between migrants and the households that remained in Yangon or the Dry Zone as of May 2021. At the peak of the rising COVID-19 cases in September 2020, job losses were very high for the sub-sample that remained in Yangon before falling in October and November and then rising again in May 2021. In the sample that remained in the Dry Zone, less than 10 percent of respondents cited job losses throughout the second half of 2020, though 14 percent did so in May 2021. Among recent migrants, however, job losses were consistently high in the second half of 2020, varying between 15 and 17 percent, before rising sharply to 41 percent in May 2021.

Figure 1. Share of households with members who lost a job in the past month without finding a new job, August 2020 to May 2021



Source: RUFSS, various rounds.

Notes: Note that all statistics exclude households newly added to the survey in May 2021 to improve comparability to 2020 results.

These results suggest the following. First, migrants had trouble finding new work in the short-term. Second, migrants faced greater unemployment prior to the recent political instability, giving them a strong incentive to leave Yangon. Third, even those that stayed in Yangon still experienced very high rates of job loss. Finally, unlike 2020, rural areas are now experiencing rising unemployment.

Worrying changes in coping strategies

Households facing major income shocks resort to a wide range of coping strategies. Previous analyses of RUFSS data found that wealthier households relied on cash savings, poorer households borrowed more, and households of all economic strata cut back on non-food expenditures. In 2020, we also saw very few households selling assets or reducing food consumption.

However, in May 2021 we are seeing signs of a significant shift in coping strategies (Table 6). Reducing non-food consumption remains common among households still in Yangon, though there is a marked increase in households reducing food consumption, rising from just 6 percent in November 2020 to 23 percent in May 2021. The share of households selling of assets also increased from 4 percent in November 2020 to 8 percent in May 2021. Consistent with these increasingly

common strategies, we observe use of cash savings becoming less common (23 percent in May 2021 compared to 27 percent in November 2020 and 38 percent in September 2020), suggesting that cash savings may have been exhausted for many households. Borrowing money is also becoming less common, although there is less evidence of this being a long-term trend.

Table 6. Frequency of use of strategies for coping with income losses, by survey round and sub-sample

Most common coping strategies	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	May-21
Remaining in Yangon (%)							
Reduced non-food consumption	29	40	41	33	33	41	40
Used cash savings	31	24	25	38	29	27	23
Borrowed money	30	26	31	29	31	33	28
Reduced food consumption	18	16	8	9	11	6	23
Sold off assets	8	3	5	5	6	4	8
Help from parents or relatives	2	9	13	17	18	12	17
Remaining in Dry Zone (%)							
Reduced non-food consumption	33	40	41	46	39	38	45
Used cash savings	27	25	30	32	27	29	26
Borrowed money	40	37	36	32	34	40	40
Reduced food consumption	11	10	7	7	8	3	15
Sold off assets	8	4	3	5	5	7	7
Help from parents or relatives	1	4	5	6	8	6	9
Recent migrants (%)							
Reduced non-food consumption	32	50	47	45	42	38	37
Used cash savings	32	16	26	35	25	24	11
Borrowed money	37	31	28	34	31	40	31
Reduced food consumption	11	14	8	6	9	7	15
Sold off assets	3	4	5	5	3	4	9
Help from parents or relatives	5	9	13	15	17	15	29

Source: RUFSS, various rounds.

Notes: Note that all statistics exclude households newly added to the survey in May 2021 to improve comparability to 2020 results.

Among households still in the Dry Zone, we continue to see reductions in non-food consumption (45 percent) and borrowing money (40 percent), though we also observe a marked increase in households reducing food consumption (15 percent in May 2021 compared to 3 percent in November 2020).

Among migrants, we see even more dramatic changes in coping measures. The use of cash savings fell from 24 percent in November 2020 to 11 percent in May 2021. Reducing food consumption increased from 7 to 15 percent, while selling assets increased from 4 to 9 percent and help from parents/relatives increased from 15 to 29 percent, consistent with the fact that most migrants are now living with extended family. Though highly qualitative, these results point to worrying signs that many households have exhausted their ability to use cash savings and are now forced to cut back on food consumption and—in some cases—sell assets.

Food insecurity trends have largely remained stable, although there are signs that diets are becoming less diversified

Table 7 reports trends in several one-month recall indicators from the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) module, including “there were times I ate only a few kinds of foods”, as well as two more extreme measures of deprivation (“there were times I was hungry but did not eat” and “there were time we ran out of food”).

Table 7. Selected food insecurity experience indicators, by survey round and sub-sample

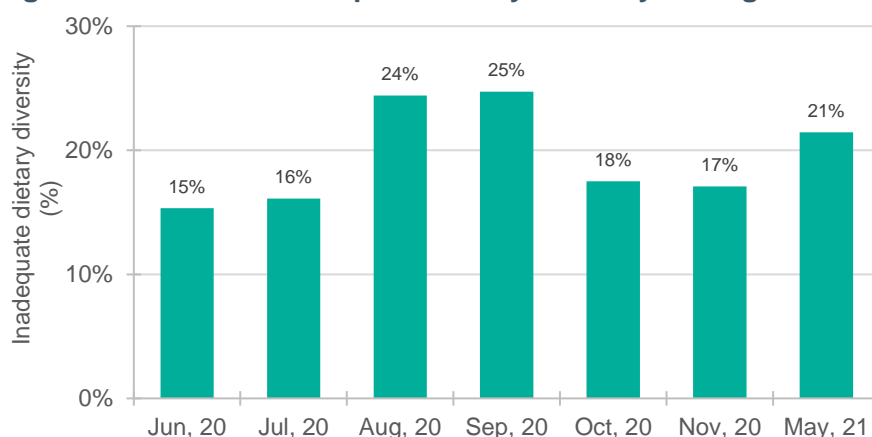
Food insecurity experience indicators	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	May-21
Remaining in Yangon (%)							
Eating only a few kinds of foods	23	11	10	18	20	14	17
Hungry but did not eat	10	3	2	2	5	2	2
Running out of food	12	5	3	6	8	4	5
Remaining in Dry Zone (%)							
Eating only a few kinds of foods	10	8	6	6	10	5	11
Hungry but did not eat	2	1	1	1	1	1	0
Running out of food	4	2	1	1	2	1	1
Recent migrants (%)							
Eating only a few kinds of foods	16	12	8	14	17	8	15
Hungry but did not eat	6	3	2	1	5	1	1
Running out of food	4	3	3	2	9	4	2

Source: RUFSS, various rounds.

Notes: Note that all statistics exclude households newly added to the survey in May 2021 to improve comparability to 2020 results.

In 2020 and 2021, we observe that Yangon-based respondents are more likely to report all three food insecurity experiences, despite the rural sample being poorer in income terms. This may be explained by rural residents, many of whom grow food or have family or social networks that grow food, feeling more secure about their food supplies. However, in May 2021 we saw only a slight increase in households that remained in Yangon reporting to eat only a few kinds of food (14 to 17 percent), whereas in the rural sample and migrant sample, we saw large increases in this indicator (5 to 11 percent and 8 to 15 percent, respectively). We do not observe any significant increase in more severe food insecurity experiences. Overall, these results suggest that dietary diversity may be declining in the face of severe income shocks.

To investigate whether dietary diversity is indeed declining, we also examined trends in maternal dietary diversity in the sub-sample of mothers who stayed in the Dry Zone (Figure 2).¹ We observe that relatively few mothers had inadequately diverse diets in June 2020 (15 percent), although inadequate dietary diversity increased during the monsoon lean season (rising to 24 and 25 percent in August and September, respectively), before declining again in October and November (18 and 17 percent, respectively). However, by May 2021 the prevalence of inadequately diverse diets among mothers had risen to 21 percent despite May not being in a lean season. Results indicate a particularly notable decline in meat consumption. Hence, these results also suggest dietary diversity may be declining and raise concerns of micronutrient deficiencies.

Figure 2. Trends in inadequate dietary diversity among mothers who stayed in the Dry Zone

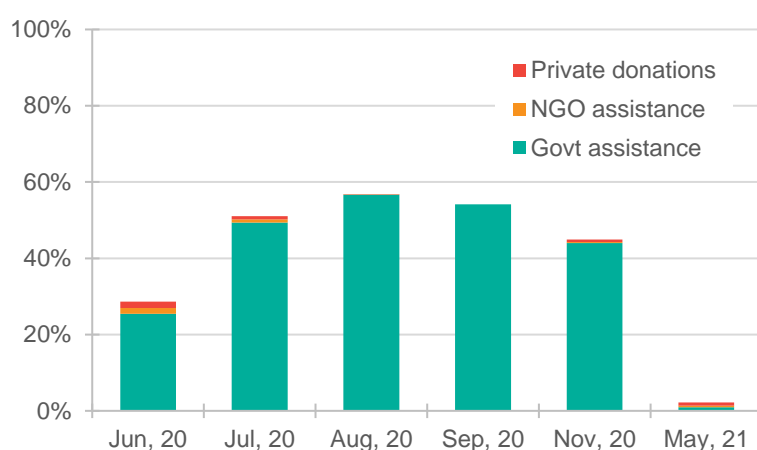
Source: RUFSS, various rounds.

¹ Trends in maternal dietary diversity in the urban sample are more difficult to assess because most of this sample gave birth during the survey and appear to follow postnatal food avoidance taboos that make it difficult to discern meaningful trends related to COVID-19.

Government assistance in the form of cash and food transfers has almost entirely collapsed

During the COVID-19 crisis, we found that around half of RUFSS respondents were receiving assistance from the government (almost all in the form of cash) by July 2020, and roughly half of households continued to receive this assistance throughout subsequent RUFSS rounds in 2020. However, the May 2021 survey reveals that government assistance programs have almost entirely collapsed, with just 0.9 percent of respondents stating that they received any assistance. Assistance from NGOs or private charities was very low throughout 2020 and remains low in 2021. In addition, despite our sample having several mothers eligible for one-off maternal and child cash transfers in 2020, we found virtually no mothers were receiving these payments in May 2021. Thus, economically and nutritionally vulnerable households in these two regions of Myanmar now appear to be receiving almost no assistance from external sources.

Figure 3. Trends in cash or in-kind assistance from the government, NGOs, and private charities



Source: RUFSS, various rounds.

Recommended actions

- Government-based social protection has collapsed in Myanmar since the beginning of the current political crisis on 1 February 2021. Such support to vulnerable individuals urgently needs to be augmented by efforts from the international community and local NGOs and CSOs. It is of paramount importance to use evidence, such as this study, to raise international awareness of the plight of Myanmar's poor in the context of a prolonged series of economic shocks and ongoing political instability.
- It will be critically important for international actors to find effective new ways of reaching Myanmar's poor—including the new poor—given the severe challenges in Myanmar's financial system, the breakdown of many regular government services, and the prohibitions imposed by international donors on cooperation with the military government. In the short term, until financial disruptions lessen, food assistance may be a viable option to cash-based schemes. Targeting of nutritionally vulnerable groups, such as families with young children or pregnant women, should be especially prioritized. In the medium term, scope for food- or cash-for-work schemes may also help improve targeting of these programs to households that are underemployed and in need of assistance.
- Our follow-up RUFSS survey in May 2021 found that 19 percent of households previously living in Yangon have changed residence, with many moving to rural and urban areas in other states/regions. A wide range of RUFSS data show that recent migrants are an especially vulnerable group in an economic sense and in terms of poverty and unemployment were worse off than other households even prior to the recent political instability. Further monitoring of

these groups is needed to understand their welfare dynamics and the impacts of their migration on host communities. Further efforts to quantify the scale of migration are also needed, with a particular focus on urban to rural migration.

- Food insecurity could clearly be heightened by any significant contraction in output from the agricultural sector. It is vitally important to strengthen monitoring of the agricultural sector through higher frequency monitoring surveys and other specialized surveys of key value chain actors.
- Growing unemployment among the Yangon, rural Dry Zone, and recent migrant sub-samples suggests that demand for labor services is very weak, making job creation a critical objective for economic recovery strategies.

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INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

1201 Eye St, NW | Washington, DC 20005 USA
T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606
ifpri@cgiar.org
www.ifpri.org | www.ifpri.info

IFPRI-MYANMAR

No. 99-E6 U Aung Kein Lane
Than Lwin Road, Bahan Township
Yangon, Myanmar
IFPRI-Myanmar@cgiar.org
www.myanmar.ifpri.info



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