MYANMAR

STRATEGY SUPPORT PROGRAM RESEARCH NOTE 71 DECEMBER 2021

Livelihoods, poverty, and food insecurity in Myanmar

Survey evidence from June 2020 to September 2021

Nine rounds of the Rural-Urban Food Security Survey (RUFSS) have been conducted between June 2020 and September 2021 to assess the impacts of Myanmar's economic, political, and health crises on various dimensions of household welfare. RUFSS interviews about 2000 mothers of young children per round from urban Yangon, the rural Dry Zone, and recent migrants from these areas.

Key Findings

- Myanmar has experienced four distinct economic shocks since early 2020. The most recent of these shocks–the spread of the Delta variant–was devastating, with 63 percent of respondents stating that at least one household member had experienced COVID-like symptoms and almost all cases occurring in the May-September 2021 third wave.
- 16 percent of interviewed households moved townships between their first interview and September 2021. Around two-thirds of these were from the Yangon sample.
- Physical insecurity has emerged as a key impact of political instability, with 53 percent of respondents in September 2021 stating they feel unsafe compared to 37 percent in May 2021.
- In September 2021, 48 percent of respondents cited food supply problems (compared to 32 percent in May 2021) and 41 percent cited loss of jobs or income (31 percent in May 2021). Travel restrictions are also more commonly reported.
- Job loss has been extremely high in 2021: 28 percent of migrants, 19 percent of urban Yangon households, and 18 percent of rural Dry Zone households reported job loss.
- Income-based poverty declined among Yangon households over June-September 2021 (to 44 percent) but remained high among migrants (52 percent) and rural households (58 percent).
- Mothers in urban and migrant samples were more likely to have inadequately diverse diets than rural mothers. In Yangon, 44 percent of mothers of young children had poor diets. We also observe very high rates of inadequately diverse child diets in all samples, but particularly a steep rise in inadequate diets between 2020 and 2021 in the rural Dry Zone sample.
- To cope with the crisis, households have not only cut back on expenditures but also sold assets (24 percent), taken collateral loans (14 percent), and borrowed money (71 percent) that they say will be difficult to repay.

Recommended actions

- International donors and local NGOs/CSOs must scale up assistance to Myanmar's poor through conditional, unconditional, and nutrition-sensitive social protection schemes for vulnerable communities. Further monitoring of the situation in Myanmar will also be essential.

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE
FEED THE FUTURE The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative
LIFT Livelihoods and Food Security Fund
managed by UNOPS

Background

Myanmar's political and economic instability from February 1, 2021 onwards has resulted in business closures and major disruptions to the finance sector. The ensuing widespread protests and civil disobedience actions have also added to the disruptions in trade, transport, and government services. Impacted heavily by these factors, Myanmar's economy collapsed just as it was beginning to recover from the 2020 economic crisis caused by COVID-19. Furthermore, in May 2021 this turmoil was compounded by rising COVID-19 cases linked to the rapid emergence of the Delta variant throughout the summer months. As a result of low testing rates, the true scale of this third wave is not precisely known, though the Delta variant is widely thought to be highly prevalent due not only to low vaccination rates and weak social distancing measures but also to the high degree of contagiousness of the variant.

In this note, we provide an update on results from the Rural-Urban Food Security Survey (RUFSS), a household phone survey of approximately 2000 mothers–who were pregnant or had young children under the age of five as of January 2020–per round from households originally located in urban or peri-urban Yangon and the rural Dry Zone. RUFSS is an unbalanced panel survey including six rounds of surveys from June-December 2020 and three rounds in 2021 (May, July, and September). RUFSS was initially designed 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.). However, the survey now incorporates additional questions regarding the impacts of political instability on household welfare. In September 2021, we also asked respondents how many of their household members had experienced COVID-19-like symptoms and when these symptoms occurred.

Although RUFSS is a panel that allows us to track welfare changes within households over time, it is critically important to note three features of this unbalanced panel. First, not all mothers respond in each survey round, especially in the urban sample where many gave birth in 2020. Second, when we attempted to recontact households in May 2021, we found that around 20 percent of the previous urban sample could not be reached by phone and were therefore 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). Although several 2020 respondents returned in the July and September rounds, attrition was still an issue in the urban sample. Third, in May 2021 we found high rates of migration. However, in the most recent round we use a new and more rigorous classification of migrants based on township changes between a household's first interview and September 2021.

Due to the third feature of our sample, we now report a three-way sample stratification into "Still in Yangon (same township)", "Still in Dry Zone (same township)", and "Recent Migrants". Of the 2,015 households interviewed in September, 910 remained in their original rural Dry Zone township, 774 remained in their original Yangon township, and 331 were classified as migrants who had moved townships since their first interview (households moving within their township were not classified as migrants). Among recent migrants, 36 percent were those who had moved townships within Yangon region, 32 percent were those who had left Yangon, and another 32 percent were those who had left their rural Dry Zone township. The largest destination for migrants leaving Yangon was Ayeyarwady.

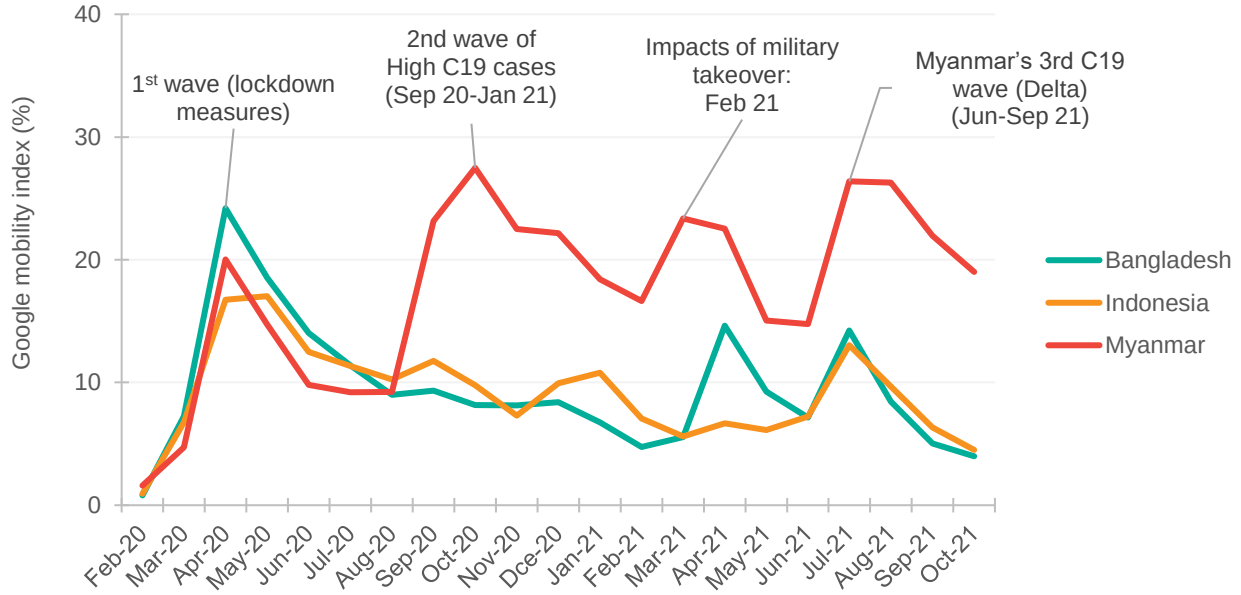
The remainder of this Research Note reviews trends in the Google mobility index in Myanmar to show the degree of economic disruption due to economic, political, and health shocks, followed by a stratification of results on the major impacts of these shocks: income-based poverty trends, unemployment, coping strategies, food insecurity, maternal dietary diversity, and receipts of

government, NGO, and private charity assistance. We also examine self-reported COVID-19-like symptoms to better understand the scale of the health crisis in Myanmar.

Consumer mobility fell sharply again during the most recent COVID-19 wave

Figure 1 reports trends in the Google mobility index, which measures how much phone users are staying at home compared to a pre-COVID-19 baseline for Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Indonesia (i.e., comparator countries with similar economic structures and levels of development). There are four distinct shocks over 2021 along with aborted economic recoveries: (1) the first wave of COVID-19, associated with lockdown measures imposed in April 2020; (2) the second wave of COVID-19 associated with the rapid spread of COVID-19 cases from September 2020 to January 2021; (3) the military takeover from February 2021 and the ensuing disruptions; and (4) the third COVID-19 wave that occurred between June and September 2021. The extent to which Myanmar consumers stayed at home increased by 20 percent in the first of these lockdowns (less than Bangladesh but more than Indonesia). However, subsequent mobility shocks were far more severe. Figure 1 demonstrates the extent that Myanmar's economy has been impacted relative to other Asian economies. In the recent Delta wave that affected all three countries, Myanmar's mobility index was at 26 percent for two consecutive months, compared to 13-14 percent in a single month (July) in Bangladesh and Indonesia. As of late October 2021, consumers stayed at home 19 percent more than pre-COVID-19 times in Myanmar, compared to 4-5 percent more in the other two countries.

Figure 1. Trends in the Google mobility index in 2020 and 2021 in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Indonesia



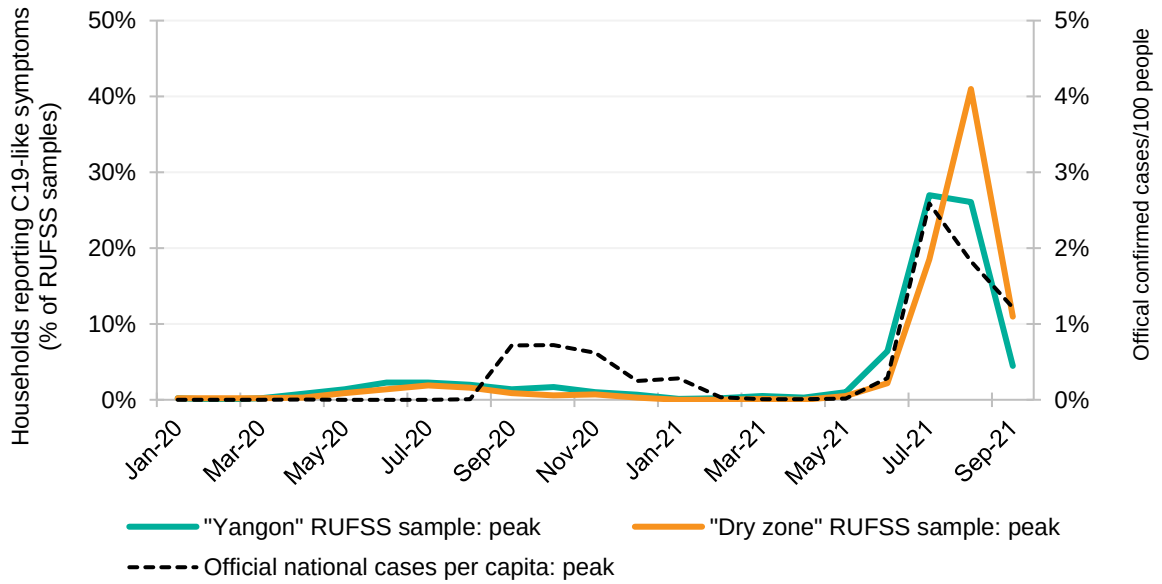
Note: The Google mobility index measures how much phone users are staying at home compared to a pre-COVID-19 baseline.
Source: Authors' estimates from Google mobility data.

Respondents report very high prevalence of COVID-like symptoms in mid-2021

In the September 2021 survey round, we asked respondents how many members of their household had COVID-19-like symptoms and the timing of these symptoms by month in 2020 and 2021. In Figure 2, we report the share of households with COVID-19-like symptoms by month (on the left axis) and compare it to official confirmed cases per 100 people (on the right axis). We observe a high prevalence of households reporting COVID-19-like symptoms in the third wave that took place in mid-2021, with almost 63 percent of households reporting COVID-19-like symptoms at any time

in 2020 and 2021. Almost all of these households reported symptoms in mid-2021. In the Yangon sub-sample, cases peaked in July 2021 at 27 percent and in August 2021 at 26 percent, while in the Dry Zone sample it peaked in August 2021 at 41 percent. This pattern follows confirmed cases trends in two ways: first, confirmed cases at the national level also peaked in July 2021, as Figure 2 demonstrates; and second, confirmed cases also rose first in Yangon and only subsequently increased in the rural Dry Zone. Thus, despite the use of a COVID-19 proxy, the trends in results are highly plausible. Moreover, the survey results likely give a much better indicator of the true prevalence of the disease than confirmed cases–which peaked at just 2.5 per 100 people in July 2021–because of extremely low testing rates. Such high rates of infection also explain why infection rates declined quickly from September despite very low vaccination rates nationwide.

Figure 2. Trends in RUFSS households reporting COVID-19-like symptoms by month in 2020 and 2021 vs. official national cases per capita, by percentage of respondents



Note: Responses are based on a question asking respondents about the number of household members who had COVID-19-like symptoms (i.e., high fever, cough, breathlessness, body pains, loss of smell), and which months in 2020 and 2021 that household members had such symptoms.
Source: RUFSS-September 2021 survey round.

Respondents cite wide-ranging impacts of political instability

Table 1 reports results from a question asking respondents to list the three main impacts of recent political instability. Respondents are more frequently reporting adverse economic impacts, though the largest increases between May and September 2021 pertain to greater feelings of physical insecurity. On the economic front, 41 percent of respondents cite loss of employment or income compared to 31 percent in May, and 48 percent cite problems with their food supply (compared to 32 percent in May 2021). In terms of insecurity, we observe a very large increase in respondents stating that their household feels unsafe (57 percent in September compared to 37 percent in May), and 18 percent cite fear of household members getting hurt or detained in September compared to just 10 percent in May. There are few differences across sub-samples.

Table 1. Economic losses and physical insecurity are the most widely cited impacts of political instability

	Total sample (%)	Recent migrants (%)	Remaining in Yangon (%)	Remaining in Dry Zone (%)
No impact at all	8	9	8	8
Household members feel unsafe	53	53	48	57
Problems with food supply	48	45	47	50
Unemployment/loss of income	41	44	42	39
Long distance travel restrictions	32	28	29	35
Fear of decreasing household income	24	22	26	23
Fear of household members getting hurt or detained	18	15	18	18
Staying indoors more	13	10	16	11
Observations (N)	*2015*	*331*	*774*	*910*

Note: Responses are based on a question asking respondents to cite the three main impacts of recent political instability, if any.
Source: RUFSS-September 2021 survey round.

Poverty and unemployment were very high in September 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, which approximates the $1.90/day poverty line used by the World Bank to measure extreme poverty. Note that our measure of income-based poverty deviates from standard methods of poverty calculation and is therefore not directly comparable to previous nationally representative estimates in Myanmar or to other developing countries. The standard calculation method uses an extensive set of questions to calculate expenditure-based poverty, which was not feasible when conducting phone survey interviews. Also note that nominal incomes reported in RUFSS were adjusted for food price inflation to produce real income estimates. To do so, we used a weighted food price series from the MAPSA Food Vendor survey data–which provided prices for key food commodities in different regions of Myanmar–with weights for each food group corresponding to household food expenditure patterns from nationally representative survey data from 2017. Therefore, poverty estimates are adjusted for food price inflation, which was minimal in 2020 but significant from December 2020 to September 2021.

Table 2 shows striking trends in poverty since January 2020. In the full sample, poverty was 18 percent in January 2020 prior to COVID-19's economic impacts, but rose sharply to 50 percent by June 2020 and rose again to 65 percent by September 2020 when Myanmar was hit by very rapid growth in COVID-19 cases. Poverty rates remained the same in October 2020 (67 percent), but began to improve by November 2020 (59 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 (Figure 1), suggesting poverty rates were declining prior to the military takeover. However, in 2021 poverty rates have largely flatlined, remaining above 50 percent in the May, July, and September 2021 survey rounds.

Table 2. 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	Jul 21	Sep 21
Total sample (%)	18	50	40	46	65	67	59	57	53	52
Remaining in Yangon (%)	8	38	24	30	60	62	49	52	44	44
Remaining in Dry Zone	28	57	50	57	71	70	64	60	59	58
Recent migrants (%)	12	46	32	42	58	65	60	61	53	52

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

Statistics for other sub-samples in Table 2 suggest divergent poverty dynamics among different households. In the Dry Zone, poverty rates fell from 64 percent to 58 percent between November 2020 and September 2021 in a largely unchanged panel. Among respondents still in Yangon in September 2021, income-based poverty was largely unchanged from November 2020 to September 2021 (49 percent to 44 percent). Among recent migrants, poverty declined from 60 percent to 52 percent. However, we did not see improvement in any sample between July 2021 and September 2021. Another notable feature is that the poverty rate among recent migrants in November 2020 (60 percent)–two-thirds of whom were from Yangon–was higher than the poverty rate for households who continued to stay in Yangon (49 percent), suggesting there were indeed strong economic rationales for migration for many of these migrant households. It appears that households who stayed in Yangon were recovering from the second COVID-19 wave (prior to the military takeover) whereas migrants who were doing poorly likely left Yangon for economic as well as security reasons.

These poverty trends are disconcerting in that most respondents are income-poor and below the relatively low poverty line of 890 kyat/day. However, it is also surprising that poverty rates have not risen further since November 2020 given the dire economic, financial, and political situation in Myanmar. There are four possible explanations. First, rural poverty is almost certainly seasonal and 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. However, there are limitations to the data as the household income recall measures used to measure poverty are imprecise. Lastly, poverty headcounts do not measure depth of poverty, and it is possible that those below the poverty line have fallen deeper into poverty.

In addition to measuring poverty, RUFSS asked respondents qualitative questions about whether their current income was lower than normal, and if so, why (Table 3). 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 that remained in Yangon in September 2021, 33 percent cited loss of employment, 43 percent cited loss of daily labor opportunities, 32 percent cited travel restrictions, and 28 percent cited reduced salaries/wages. Among households in the Dry Zone, we observed loss of employment and reduced daily labor opportunities to be the most frequently cited reasons, although rural households also cited several other explanations with lower frequency responses which are not reported in Table 3 (e.g., poor weather). It is also notable that rural Dry Zone respondents were 10 percentage points more likely to report reductions in daily labor opportunities in September 2021 (41 percent) compared to September 2020 (31 percent). This likely indicates that farmers are hiring fewer farm workers due

higher input costs and reduced credit availability. Among recent migrants, we see explanations similar to those of respondents who remained in Yangon, although loss of employment and daily labor opportunities are more commonly cited.

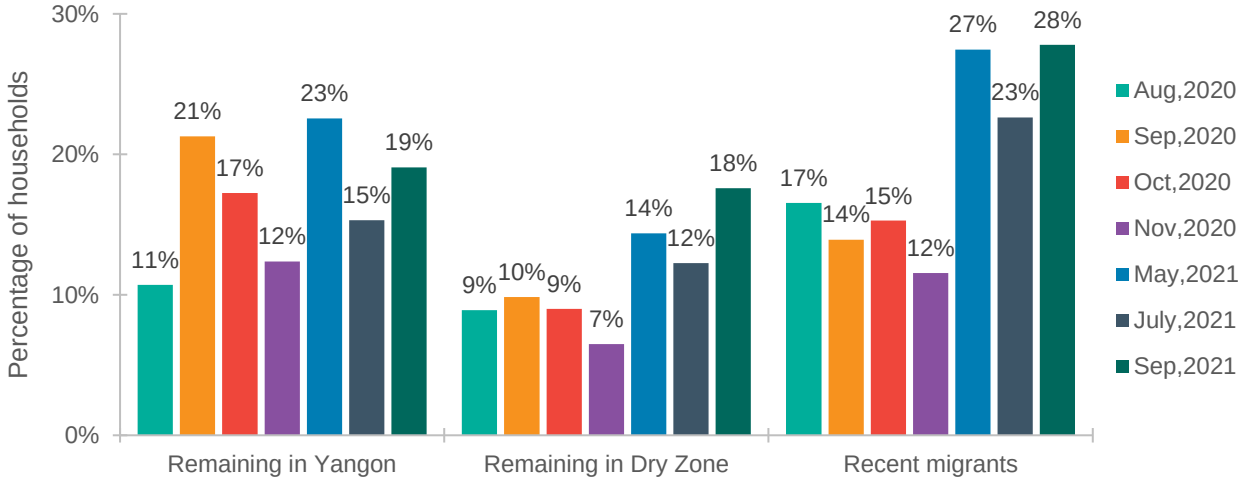
Table 3. Reasons for changes in income by survey round, among households reporting lower than normal incomes in the past month

Reasons for changes in income	Jun 20	Jul 20	Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	May 21	Jul 21	Sep 21
Remaining in Yangon (%)									
Loss of employment	55	35	27	47	38	32	40	35	33
No work due to travel restrictions	29	13	15	37	29	25	22	17	32
Daily labor opportunities reduced	26	30	43	25	29	41	31	49	43
Less customers/clients	15	15	15	11	9	13	12	13	19
Reduced salary/wage	22	15	13	10	17	24	25	29	28
Remaining in Dry Zone (%)									
Loss of employment	53	41	33	32	28	35	36	38	41
No work due to travel restrictions	32	14	14	31	30	30	17	21	22
Daily labor opportunities reduced	26	29	36	31	37	40	33	46	41
Less customers/clients	17	17	18	13	16	14	14	17	15
Reduced salary/wage	8	5	5	3	6	9	15	21	23
Recent migrants (%)									
Loss of employment	60	42	33	42	37	41	47	41	43
No work due to travel restrictions	20	8	11	38	34	31	26	20	33
Daily labor opportunities reduced	22	26	33	23	32	38	25	44	48
Less customers/clients	13	14	15	10	12	12	11	19	17
Reduced salary/wage	17	13	9	10	12	14	17	23	26

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.
Source: RUFSS–various survey rounds.

From August 2020 onwards, we asked whether any household member lost or found new employment in the previous month. Figure 3 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 who remained in Yangon or the Dry Zone as of September 2021. Towards the end of the second COVID-19 wave in September 2020, job losses were very high for the sub-sample that remained in Yangon (23 percent) before falling substantially by November 2020 (12 percent), again signaling some recovery. However, in 2021 we observe very high job losses in May (23 percent), July (15 percent), and September (19 percent). In the rural sample, job losses were 10 percent or less in each round in 2020, but much higher in 2021–14 percent in May, 12 percent in July, and 18 percent in September–signaling a worrying increase in unemployment in rural areas in 2021 which is distinct to the 2020 situation. In the migrant sample, we observe relatively high job losses in 2020–though again, signs of recovery by November 2020 (12 percent)–but in 2021 job losses are extremely high in this sample, no doubt partly due to a combination of unemployment in their original locations and the difficulties of finding employment in new locations.

Figure 3. Share of households with members who lost a job in the past month without finding a new job, August 2020 to September 2021



Notes: These statistics exclude households newly added to the survey in September 2021 to improve comparability to 2020 results.
Source: RUFSS–various survey rounds.

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 while poorer households borrowed more, and households of all economic strata cut back on non-food expenditures. In 2020, we saw relatively few households selling assets or reducing food consumption.

However, in September 2021 we are seeing a significant shift in coping strategies (Table 4). Reducing non-food consumption remains common and increased by 10 points among households still in Yangon (to 56 percent in September 2021) and 6 points in the Dry Zone (to 53 percent). Using cash savings remains common but borrowing is far more common among all samples, especially in the Dry Zone (46 percent in September 2021 compared to 36 percent and 38 percent in the Yangon and migrant samples, respectively). Migrants are also much more likely to have reported receiving help from relatives (21 percent), unsurprising given that many will have moved to live with relatives.

Table 4. Frequency of strategies for coping with income losses, by survey round

Most common coping strategies	Jun 20	Jul 20	Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	May 21	Jul 21	Sep 21	% change*
Remaining in Yangon (%)										
Reduced non-food consumption	30	42	41	34	34	42	44	46	56	22
Used cash savings	32	25	27	40	31	26	26	18	23	-17
Borrowed money	30	26	29	28	29	32	26	34	36	8
Reduced food consumption	19	14	8	8	11	7	21	15	12	4
Sold off assets	8	4	6	4	6	3	7	7	5	1
Help from parents or relatives	2	9	11	18	17	12	19	14	13	-5
Remaining in Dry Zone (%)										
Reduced non-food consumption	34	41	40	46	40	38	44	47	53	7
Used cash savings	27	25	30	32	27	28	26	21	27	-5
Borrowed money	40	37	36	32	34	41	40	45	46	14
Reduced food consumption	10	9	7	6	8	3	16	12	7	1
Sold off assets	8	4	4	5	5	7	7	9	7	2
Help from parents or relatives	1	4	6	6	8	6	9	7	7	1
Recent migrants (%)										
Reduced non-food consumption	27	42	46	41	38	38	44	48	48	7
Used cash savings	28	19	24	36	29	29	16	20	27	-9
Borrowed money	38	33	33	33	31	37	34	35	38	5
Reduced food consumption	14	15	7	9	12	6	16	15	9	0
Sold off assets	5	4	3	5	3	4	8	8	7	2
Help from parents or relatives	5	7	10	12	15	13	19	20	21	9

Notes: *Change between September 2020 and September 2021.
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. All statistics exclude households that were newly added to the survey in September 2021 to improve comparability to 2020 results.
Source: RUFSS-various rounds.

Finally, we pooled all rounds of data to assess the share of households that used a coping mechanism at least once at any point across all survey rounds, provided they reported reduced income at any point in time, and then stratified results by asset levels. Asset levels refer to simple counts of the number of assets owned: 0-1 assets (asset-poor), 2-3 assets (asset-low) and 4-6 assets (asset-rich). Unsurprisingly, we find that most households report lowering non-food consumption (85 percent), borrowing (71 percent), and using cash savings (66 percent), and 42 percent lowered food consumption at least once, 24 percent sold assets at least once, and 14 percent took a collateral loan. However, there is one very large difference across asset levels: the asset-poor are 27 percentage points more likely to borrow money than the asset-rich and 20 percentage points more likely to buy goods on credit.

Overall, the results in Tables 4 and 5 point to worrying signs since households that deplete productive assets could find themselves in poverty traps through high rates of indebtedness and/or lacking the assets to recover incomes if conditions improve. Moreover, lowering both consumption of food and non-food goods and services could also reduce human capital, particularly in terms of increasing the risk of malnutrition in young children, but also in terms of the health of income earners.

Table 5. The share of households reporting using a coping mechanism at least once at any point in time across all survey rounds, stratified by asset levels

	Total Sample (%)	Asset-poor (%)	Asset-low (%)	Asset-rich (%)	Difference: rich-poor (%)
Lower non-food consumption	85	86	85	84	-2
Borrowing money	71	80	73	54	-27
Using cash savings	66	63	64	75	+12
Lower food consumption	42	43	42	41	-3
Help from family	35	32	37	36	+5
Goods on credit	28	36	29	16	-20
Sold assets	24	25	23	22	-2
Collateral loan	14	12	14	17	+5
Did nothing	14	13	12	18	+5
Reduced savings	5	4	5	6	+2

Note: Asset levels refer to simple counts of the number of assets owned: 0-1 assets (asset-poor), 2-3 assets (asset-low) and 4-6 assets (asset-rich).
Source: RUFSS-various rounds.

Food insecurity trends have largely remained stable throughout 2020, except among migrants for whom food insecurity has been rising

Table 6 reports trends in several one-month recall indicators from the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) module, including “there were times when I ate only a few kinds of foods”, as well as two more extreme measures of deprivation (“there were times when we ran out of food” and “there were times when I was hungry but did not eat”). In general, we only observe high frequency reporting of eating only a few kinds of foods, while the severe food insecurity indicators are less frequently reported. However, there were several difficult months for some sub-samples, notably May 2021 in the Yangon sample (10 percent reported running out of food) as well as May and October 2020 for the migrant sample (mostly from Yangon, and clearly suffering from worse employment conditions).

Table 6. Trends in selected food insecurity experience indicators

	Jun 20	Jul 20	Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	May 21	Jul 21	Sep 21
Remaining in Yangon (%)									
Eating only a few kinds of food	21	9	8	18	19	14	18	18	18
Running out of food	10	4	2	5	6	3	3	6	5
Hungry but did not eat	7	2	2	2	4	2	2	3	5
Remaining in Dry Zone (%)									
Eating only a few kinds of food	10	9	5	5	10	4	11	12	13
Running out of food	3	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	2
Hungry but did not eat	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	2	3
Recent migrants (%)									
Eating only a few kinds of food	18	10	9	13	19	10	14	17	20
Running out of food	8	3	3	4	10	3	5	4	2
Hungry but did not eat	10	2	1	2	3	2	1	2	2

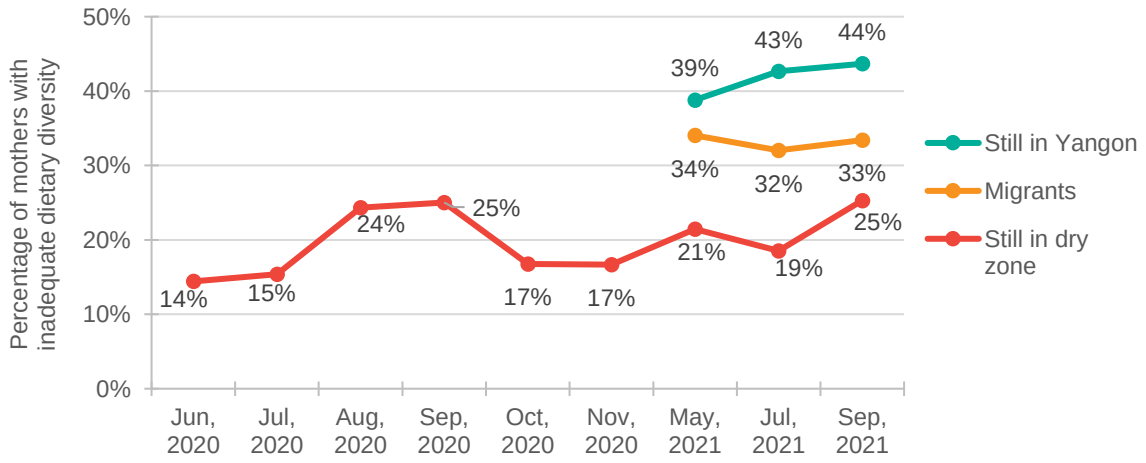
Notes: All statistics exclude households newly added to the survey in September 2021 to improve comparability to 2020 results.
Source: RUFSS-various rounds.

In 2020, we observed that Yangon-based respondents were more likely to report all three kinds of 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 social/family networks that grow food, feeling more secure about their food supplies (which is consistent with results from MAPSA agricultural production phone survey, also conducted in the Dry Zone).[1] However, in 2021 we saw only a slight increase in households that remained in Yangon reporting to eat only a few kinds of food (14 percent to 18 percent), whereas in the rural sample and the migrant sample, we saw large increases in this indicator (4 percent in November 2020 but 11-13 percent in the three 2021 rounds). We do not observe any significant increase in more severe food insecurity experiences in rural areas, however. The migrant sample also reported an increase in eating only a few kinds of foods in 2020, from 10 percent in November 2020 to 14 percent in May, 17 percent in July, and 20 percent in September 2021. Consistent with high unemployment in this sample, it appears that migrants are doing poorly in 2021.

Inadequate dietary diversity is much high among rural mothers and young children

To investigate whether maternal dietary diversity is declining, we examined trends in this indicator for the sub-sample of mothers who stayed in the Dry Zone for both 2020 and 2021 (Figure 4). We look only at trends for the Yangon and migrant samples in the three rounds in 2021 because of complications related to many women adjusting eating patterns after giving birth, according to local cultural customs.[2]

Figure 4. Trends in inadequate dietary diversity among mothers who stayed in the Dry Zone



Source: RUFSS-various rounds.

In the rural sample, we observe what may be highly seasonal effects with food insecurity which was highest in the August and September months in both 2020 (25 percent) and 2021 (26 percent in September). However, we also note that inadequate dietary diversity was somewhat higher in May and July 2021 (21 percent and 19 percent) compared June and July 2020 (16 percent), suggesting some signs of deteriorating dietary conditions in the rural Dry Zone.

In the other two samples, mothers have much less diversified diets than in the rural Dry Zone, and the situation seems to be getting worse in the Yangon sub-sample, where inadequately diverse diets rose from 39 percent in May 2021 to 44 percent in September 2021. Around one-third of the

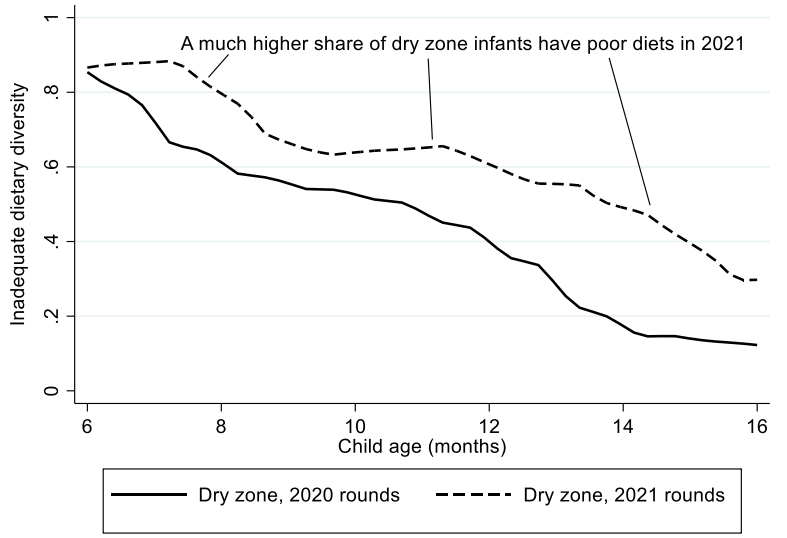
[1] IFPRI-Myanmar Research Note 70. Community perceptions of the economic impacts of Myanmar's health and political crises: Insights from the National COVID-19 Community Survey–September 2021. https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.134850.

[2] 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.

migrant sample of mothers–a mix of households previously based in Yangon and rural Dry Zone townships–reports inadequately diverse diets in 2021. Given that this indicator is a robust predictor of multiple micronutrient deficiencies, these trends are worrying from a nutritional perspective.

We also report trends in inadequate dietary diversity among infants 6-16 months of age now that the Yangon sample of children are old enough to have passed the six-month threshold for consuming solid foods. It is well known that most stunting emerges in the 6–20-month period when children in low-income settings are too often fed monotonous diets and lack a diverse range of nutritious foods. In all three samples we also observe that younger infants start out with very poor dietary diversity as they are initially fed very few foods. Figures 5 and 6 plot the prevalence of inadequate dietary diversity by child age using local polynomial regression smoothing. For the rural Dry Zone sample, we have data for both 2020 and 2021 (Figure 5). Worryingly, we observe a steep increase in the prevalence of infants with inadequate diets in 2021 which holds across the full age range of infants 6-16 months of age. The increase in inadequate diets is larger among older kids, typically 20-30 points in magnitude, suggesting a major deterioration in child feeding practices in this sample.

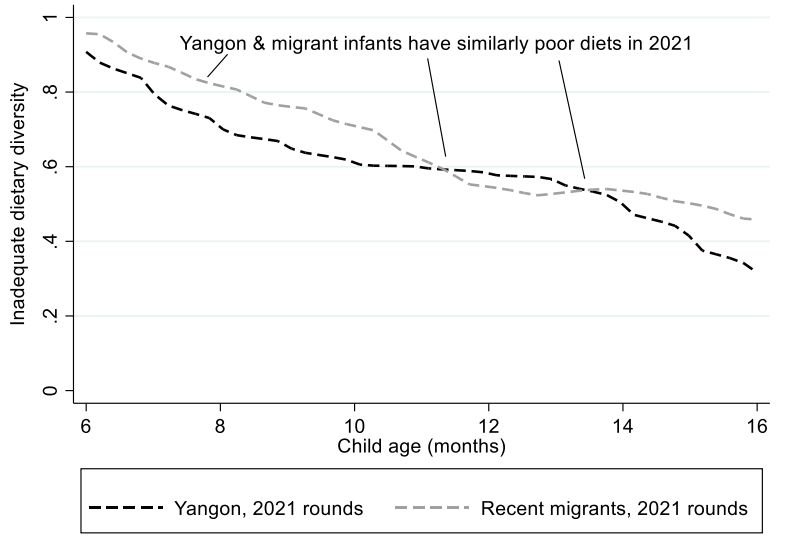
Figure 5. Comparisons of inadequate dietary diversity among children 6-16 months of age in the rural Dry Zone sample in 2020 and 2021



Note: The y-axis measures inadequate dietary diversity as the share of children who consume less than 4 out of 7 food groups.
Source: RUFSS–various rounds.

For the Yangon and recent migrant samples, we do not have a 2020 comparison, though in 2021 we observe patterns in these two samples which are very similar to the rural Dry Zone results in 2021, even by 12 months of age. For example, around 60 percent of children in both samples had inadequately diverse diets in 2021. The results in Figures 5 and 6 suggest an increased risk of micronutrient deficiencies in these children, as well as greater risks of stunting.

Figure 6. Comparisons of inadequate dietary diversity between infants 6-16 months of age still in Yangon and those from households that recently migrated

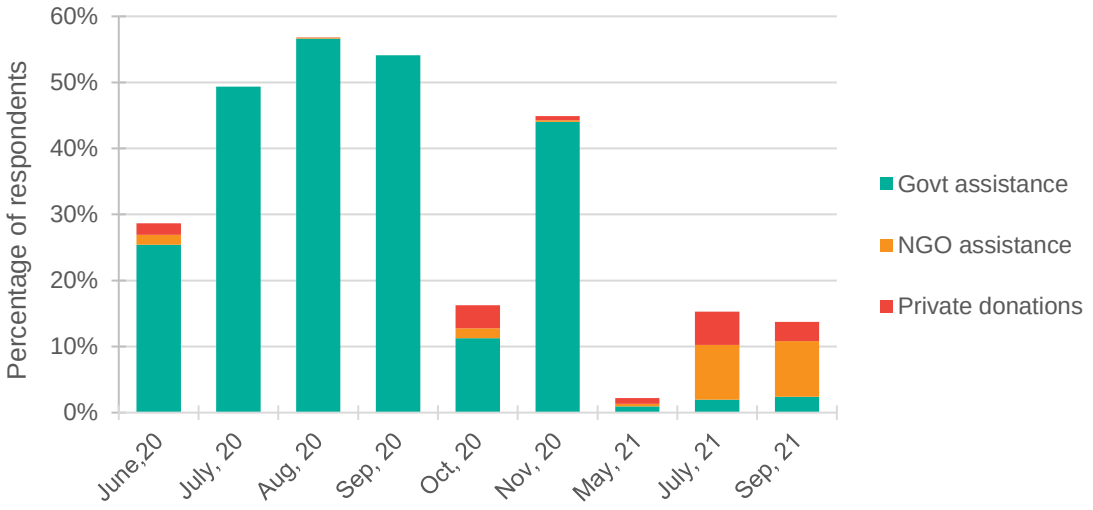


Note: The y-axis measures inadequate dietary diversity as the share of children who consume less than 4 out of 7 food groups.
Source: RUFSS–various rounds.

Government assistance in the form of cash and food transfers has almost entirely collapsed, but private donations and NGO assistance slightly increased

Figure 7 reports trends in cash or in-kind assistance from various sources for the full sample. During the COVID-19 crisis, we found that about half of RUFSS respondents received assistance from the government by July 2020 (almost all in the form of cash), and roughly half of households continued to receive this assistance through subsequent RUFSS rounds in 2020. However, the May 2021 survey revealed that government assistance programs almost entirely collapsed (<1 percent of respondents received assistance). Assistance from NGOs or private charities was unable to step in as a substitute in May 2021, though NGO and private charity assistance has increased slightly since then. In July and September 2021, we see around 8 percent of households reporting assistance from NGOs, and 5 and 3 percent reporting assistance from private donations in July and September, respectively. Additionally, despite our sample having several mothers eligible for one-off maternal and child cash transfers in 2020, we found that very few mothers received these payments in May 2021. Overall, the share of households receiving assistance is very low relative to measures of poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, or inadequate dietary diversity.

Figure 7. Trends in cash or in-kind assistance from the government, NGOs, and private charities



Source: RUFSS–various rounds.

Recommended actions

- A series of severe economic, political, and health shocks have hit Myanmar hard. COVID-19 was one critical shock that resulted in repeated reductions in consumer mobility as well as a high infection rate (62 percent of the sample), especially in mid-2021. To avoid or mitigate future waves of COVID-19, increasing vaccination rates as well as other recommended public health measures such as mask wearing and social distancing will be critical.
- Our follow-up surveys in 2021 have found that a large proportion of households have changed townships and that these recent migrants are economically vulnerable. In late 2020, recent migrants were typically worse off than other households in terms of poverty and unemployment. It is likely that poverty and unemployment, along with growing political instability in 2021, prompted migration, though migration itself has also posed significant economic challenges. Further monitoring of these groups is needed to understand their welfare dynamics and the impacts of migration on host communities.
- Inadequate dietary diversity is a primary form of food insecurity, with implications for malnutrition. The dietary diversity situation of mothers and young children in Yangon–and among migrants–is deeply concerning and warrants immediate actions to prevent malnutrition such as maternal and child cash transfers, behavioral change interventions, and supplements and/or food fortification
- Food insecurity could climb if there is any significant contraction in output from the agricultural sector. Thus, it is vitally important to strengthen agricultural monitoring through high frequency monitoring surveys and other specialized surveys of key value chain actors.
- 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 to cooperate with the military government. Targeting of nutritionally vulnerable groups, such as families with young children or pregnant women, should be prioritized. In the medium term, food- or cash-for-work schemes may also help improve targeting of these programs to households that are underemployed and in need of assistance.

- While we observe a slight increase in households benefiting from NGO/private charity assistance in July and September 2021, the share of households receiving assistance is very low relative to the prevalence of reported socioeconomic hardship. Since February 1, 2021, government-based social protection has collapsed in Myanmar and support from international and local organizations is urgently needed. 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 wake of such a prolonged series of economic shocks and ongoing political instability.

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