

**Myanmar's Politically Engaged Youth –
Poking holes in the junta's blanket of
darkness**

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	2
Context	4
Methodology	5
Research Findings	6
i) Demographics	6
ii) Education	8
iii) Employment and skills	9
iv) Living circumstances	11
V) Well being, community impact, and support	12
Conclusions	15
Recommendations for future programming	18

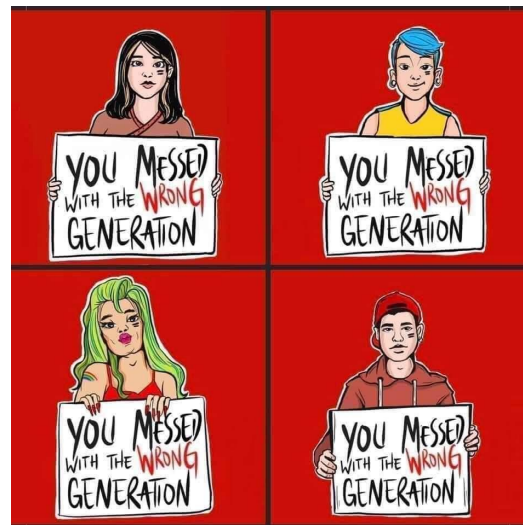
Executive Summary

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar shook the whole nation and changed the trajectory of the lives and livelihoods of everyone in Myanmar. Our research focuses on the impact the coup has had on the millions of youth across Myanmar. Youth played a leading role in resisting the military's attempt at dictatorship, and many have been displaced across the country and overseas as a result, a process that is likely to continue. Based on 106 interviews with politically involved youth engaged in various parts of the resistance, this paper and the research it entails asks the question, "What are the challenges for politically active youth in accessing information, skills, and learning while they are engaged in the movement for federal democracy?"

Introduction

Myanmar has struggled with dictatorship since 1958, when General Ne Win's caretaker government took over the country's governance. The transition from full military rule in 2011 and the re-election of the civilian-led National League for Democracy in 2020 marked a decade of civilian rule. The Myanmar youth of today are the first generation since Burma's parliamentary period (1948-1958) to have grown up under quasi-civilian rule.

The 2021 coup served a bitter pill to a hopeful generation. Within a day, healthcare workers across the country launched the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in opposition to the coup. This cascaded into widespread labour strikes across all major sectors. Protest groups took to the streets, people banged on pots and pans (a tradition to remove evil), and the whole nation rose up in resistance against dictatorship. During this time, young people between the ages of 18-35 took the lead in resisting the coup. The digitally connected youth of Myanmar coordinated rallies and marches across the country, with signs and banners drawing on memes and pop culture references. Keyboard warriors utilised hashtags¹ to bring attention to the struggle in Myanmar. Myanmar youth joined the Milk Tea Alliance, an international online democracy and human rights movement advocating for democracy and against authoritarianism in countries such as Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. There was a marked difference between the rebellions and protests of the past and what we saw after the 2021 coup – to Myanmar youth, they were no longer



Digital artworks by artist Ku Kue went viral during the protests and on social media (Courtesy of Ku Kue)

¹ #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar, #CivilDisobedience, #RespectOurVotes, among others

protesting an unjust government or coup; they were leading a revolution. A popular rallying cry at protests and across social media declared, “You messed with the wrong generation.”²

The celebratory tone of the protests and resistance was cut short as the military cracked down violently on peaceful protests and strikes within days. Young people stood on the frontlines of the protests and were the most vulnerable to the violence inflicted by the military. Myanmar mourned the murder of the first protester on February 19, after a 20 year-old woman, Mya Thwe Thwe Khine, was shot in the head by security forces at a protest in Naypyitaw. Since the initial wave of protests, police and soldiers have actively targeted youth, specifically young men, in order to crack down on resistance.³ Young people across Myanmar have had to flee from their homes in order to try to avoid arrest and torture.

The youth interviewed for our survey were all displaced in one way or another. Some remained in Yangon, moving between different safe houses⁴ around the city. Many relocated to different areas inside Myanmar, while others escaped to neighbouring countries like Thailand and India. This paper presents the findings from these 100-odd conversations with displaced Myanmar youth. It presents the challenges and opportunities faced by these youths, and their plans for the future.

The paper proceeds in four sections. The first section presents the context upon which the research is being conducted, with regard to the history of youth leadership in protest movements in Myanmar, and the ramifications of the persecution of youth by the military over the last two decades. The next section presents the paper’s methodology, including the collection methods of the survey, and limitations of the methodology. It is followed by the research findings, which outline the practical challenges and opportunities faced by Myanmar youth. Then, we present specific case studies from extended interviews with respondents, disaggregated by categorised groups – media, Civil Disobedience Movement representatives, armed group representatives, and civil society actors. A concluding section is followed by recommendations for future programming.

Context

The Myanmar police and military’s attempt to target what they termed the “Taliban Gen Z” was widely made fun of by protesters and the international community in the early days of the coup.⁵ However, it also hinted at the forthcoming indiscriminate targeting of youth in the regime’s attempts to crack down on resistance. There is a long history of Myanmar youth participating in protests and demonstrations against dictatorship, and it is no secret that the Tatmadaw sees

² (“‘You Messed with the Wrong Generation,’ Myanmar’s Youth Tell Coup Makers” 2021)

³ (The Associated Press 2021)

⁴ As police raided homes, it became increasingly dangerous for pro-democracy actors, journalists, and civil servants to stay at their registered addresses. People moved between houses in order to evade arrest. There are still many activists and journalists in Myanmar still surviving under these circumstances today.

⁵ (Frontier 2021)

youth activism as a specific threat, and one that needs to be quashed and/ or destroyed. 708 of the 1725 deaths recorded and confirmed by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) to date have been under 30, and 136 under the age of 18.⁶ With this in mind, the open targeting of “Gen Z” by the military regime takes on a much more pernicious tone.

Youth have been at the vanguard of political movements in the country since the mid-1930s at the start of the anti-colonialist struggle. Aung San (father of Aung San Suu Kyi and founder of the Tatmadaw) precipitated student strikes at Rangoon University and later led the student union.⁷ Later student movements, particularly following the coup d’etats of 1962 and 1988, drew their revolutionary lineage from the actions of Aung San prior to independence.

The 1962 Rangoon University protests saw the deaths of over a hundred and arrest of more than 6000 students. The military then blew up the historic Rangoon University Students’ Union building. In the aftermath, the regime closed all universities across the country for months and introduced broad institutional reforms that brought Burma’s universities under government control and hampered the free education of Burmese youth for decades to come.

Youth activism in Myanmar was hampered for over 2 decades, until the 8888 Uprising, when university students led over 1 million people to take to the streets and protest against the regime. A military coup in September 1988 brought the State Law and Order Restoration Council into power. The new regime cracked down violently on the protesters. Because the uprising began as a student movement, many of the individuals who were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the police and the military were high school and university students. In response, the SLORC closed down all universities in Myanmar for 2 years.⁸ Protests between 1996 and 1998 led to the closure of universities in Myanmar for another 3 years.

The opportunity costs that come with military dictatorship for Myanmar youth are high, and the impacts of which will be felt for decades to come. Compared to the past decades, the minimum barrier of entry today, particularly skills required, to participate in industry globally are much higher than for previous generations. Education and opportunities in Myanmar already weren’t giving young people the chance they needed to compete domestically, let alone globally. After the coup, young people are facing displacement, arrest, and loss of opportunities and resources. Over the last year, many politically active Myanmar youth had to flee arrest and persecution by fleeing to other parts of the country and across the border to neighbouring countries.

Those now in liberated areas frequently find themselves in the middle of warzones and escaping aerial bombardments and clashes with junta troops, a totally new experience for many youth especially those from urban areas.⁹ Those who managed to flee undocumented across

⁶ (“Myanmar Spring Revolution (Mmspring.tech)” 2014)

⁷ He was anti-British and staunchly anti-imperialist and by 1940 had led a series of nationwide strikes against the colonial government, before pursuing armed struggle with the Japanese Government.

⁸ (Skidmore and Wilson 2008)

⁹ Liberated areas refer to regions controlled by Ethnic armed Organisations (EAOs) or Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) such as the KNU, KIA, AA, among others

the border to Thailand or India struggle for their subsistence, language barriers, and threats of arrest and deportation due to their undocumented status. The ones left behind in the cities across Myanmar are faced with frequent cuts to communications, threat of arrest and torture, and fear of “dalans” or informants reporting on their whereabouts to police.¹⁰ Despite these challenges, politically active youth continue to resist the attempted coup in a myriad of ways. This paper will look at how the lives of young people have been turned upside down, and what they are doing to make themselves feel useful and cope in the meantime.

Methodology

This research was undertaken to develop a better understanding of politically active youth in Myanmar and the cohort of recent arrivals to the Myanmar border and neighbouring countries, with a particular focus on understanding their backgrounds, needs, and future plans and/or hopes in their own words. This will enable support for the needs of politically engaged youth from Myanmar, and to inform and encourage donors, international organisations, civil society organisations and other implementers to continue to support politically-engaged youth in a tailored and nuanced manner.

The survey was divided into five sections, based on the themes or focus of the questions contained therein. The first section served to collect basic information about the participants, such as their age, gender, group affiliations, and their location prior to and after the coup. The second section served to gauge the educational needs of participants and to see the level of access that they currently have to educational resources such as schools, online courses, and information in general. Participants were asked about their academic history and their interests in potentially pursuing further areas of study. The third section gauged the career and financial needs of participants and to see their opinions on the availability of work opportunities. Participants were asked questions about their employment history, acquired career skills, or if they are looking for work. Participants were then asked about their living circumstances, and affordability of their current accommodation. Finally, participants were asked about their wellbeing and the community impact of their work. The participants were encouraged to answer in long form about what keeps them busy and motivated, as well as whether they see any opportunities to contribute to their community.

The target respondents were to be politically involved in Myanmar’s resistance to the coup, and broadly represent the following cohorts or groups - civil society representatives, media representatives, representatives of non-state armed actors and representatives of the civil disobedience movement. It was well noted that respondents may define themselves as falling within two categories, or not squarely within one, but provided they felt they were politically engaged and involved in the resistance they were eligible to be interviewed. The second defining characteristic was that the interviewees needed to consider themselves youths, by United Kingdom definition youths are defined as between the ages of 13 and 29.

¹⁰ (“Myanmar: International Community Must Do More to Protect Brave Protesters” 2022)

In order to have as representative a sample as feasible, the research team aimed to conduct at least 100 interviews with a cross-section of the groups outlined above included as evenly as was feasible in the sample. The survey, format and research questions were consistent throughout the research in order to be able to compare responses and disaggregate data. A mix of quantitative and qualitative questions were utilised in order to elicit the required information in order to inform our understanding of the demographics and needs of the target audience - politically engaged youths in Myanmar.

Eight Myanmar youths with backgrounds in research, election monitoring, and journalism were recruited to conduct the interviews. The data was collected through structured interviews based on the standardised questionnaire. The interviews were conducted over digitally encrypted applications with 106 politically active youths with an average age of 25. Respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 35, with an even split of male and female respondents, and one nonbinary person. Interviews were not audio recorded for safety reasons and lasted around 20 minutes each. 99 of the 106 interviews were conducted in Burmese, then translated into English, while the remainder were conducted in English. Respondents were selected utilising a snowballing sampling method¹¹ and within the parameters outlined above, with connections being made via the interviewees' own trusted networks. This was done to preserve the safety of the respondents and to gain some level of trust with the interviewers. The research team determined that receiving an interview request through a trusted friend was more likely to yield honest results, especially in groups that were engaging in particularly politically sensitive work.

The sampling of the respondents skewed moderately towards including more members of civil society and media, with fewer members of armed groups and members of the Civil Disobedience Movement having responded to the survey. 7 respondents elected not to tell us their group affiliation, likely for safety concerns. It is difficult to verify whether members of peaceful resistance who responded to the survey are also supporting or involved in armed resistance. It is possible that members of CDM and armed groups also elected not to reveal their affiliation, choosing to present themselves as members of civil society or media, or declining to respond to the question, since their risk levels are considerably higher than the latter groups.

Given the speed at which the context and situational realities of the respondents is changing, the research findings are likely to date relatively quickly. Of course, the findings also only tell us about the specific sample that was interviewed, which is hopefully representative. The sample size of cohorts or groups are relatively small, particularly for members of non-state armed groups and representatives of the civil disobedience movement and are therefore more likely to be skewed. It would be ideal to repeat the research in order to test its findings and to determine whether the findings can be generalised, and/ or to undertake additional research with selected cohorts or groups.

¹¹ Snowball sampling is where researchers and research participants recruit other participants for a test or study. It is used where potential participants are hard to find, such as in the current context when such youth are not registered anywhere, and where trust is low and security risks are high and therefore personal introductions are key.

Research Findings

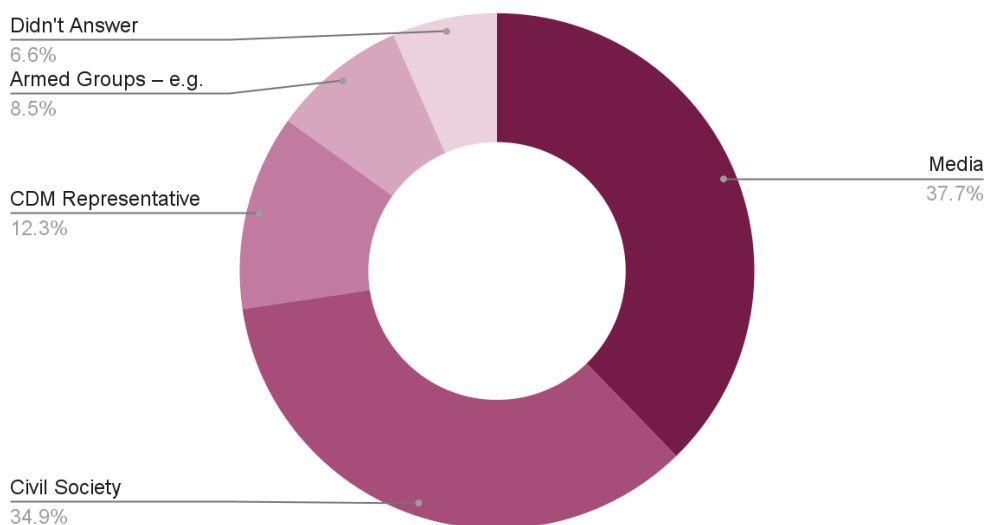
The research findings are divided into thematic sections, and mirror the layout and structure of the research survey.

i) Demographics

This section sought to understand basic information about the participants, such as their age, gender, group affiliations, and their location prior to and after the coup. There was an equal distribution of male and female participants in the survey (at 51 each). 1 person stated their gender as 'Non-binary' and 3 people chose 'Prefer not to say'. The youngest participant was 17 years old and the oldest was 35, with the average age being 25 years old across 104 respondents. The male to female ratio was evenly split through all groups, except for armed groups, where there were more responses from males (7:3).

Media and civil society together comprised the majority of respondents at 37.7% and 34.9% respectively. Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) representatives made up 12.3% and 8.5% said they were affiliated with an armed group (e.g. People's Defence Forces (PDFs)¹², Local Defence Forces (LDFs), Defectors (Police/Military), Ethnic Revolutionary Organisation (ERO) representatives¹³. 6.6% did not state which group they were affiliated with (**Fig 1.1**).

Fig. 1.1 Group Affiliation



The map below looks at respondents' place of residence before and after the coup. Prior to the coup, the highest concentration of respondents (71) were in Yangon Region, with others spread

¹² The People's Defence Force (abbreviated: PDF) are groups under the armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG), a body of democratically-elected legislators and officials that is widely accepted by the civilian populace to be the legitimate government of Myanmar.

¹³ Ethnic Revolutionary Organisations (ERO) are also known as Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO)

across Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and Magway Regions, and Chin, Shan, Mon, and Kachin States (**Fig 1.2a**).

Fig 1.2a Location before coup

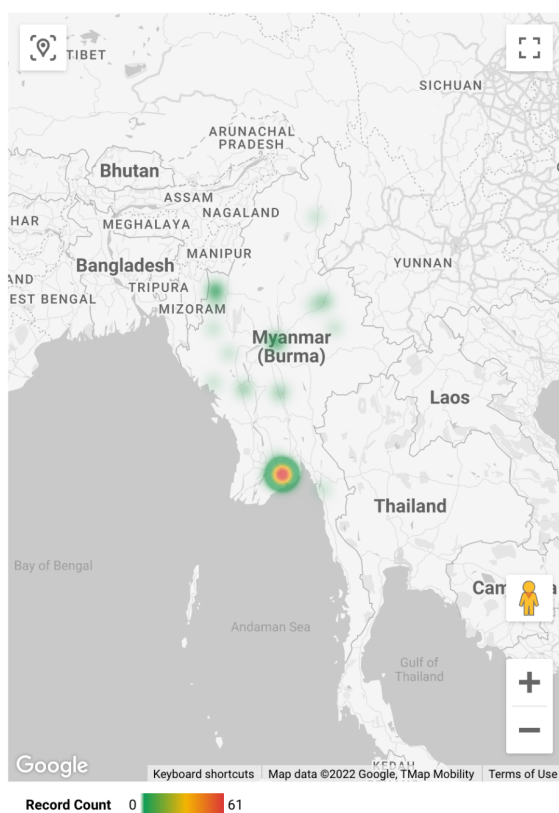
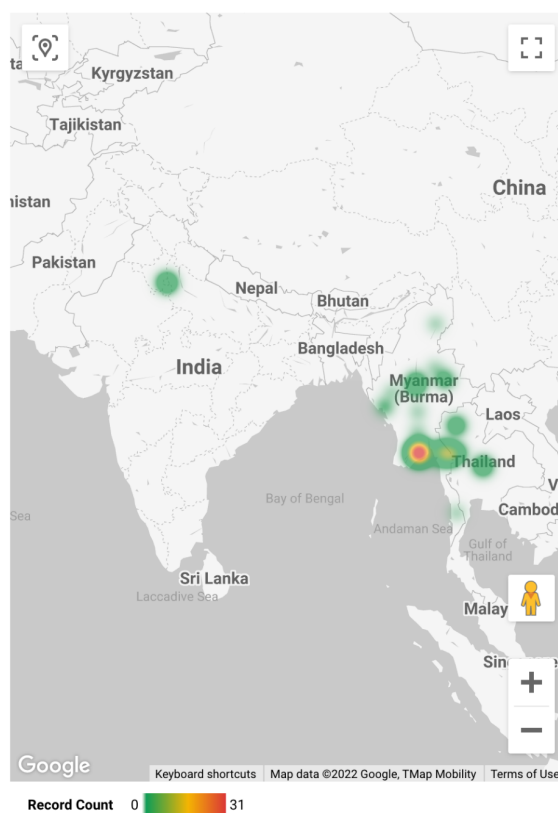


Fig 1.2b Location after coup

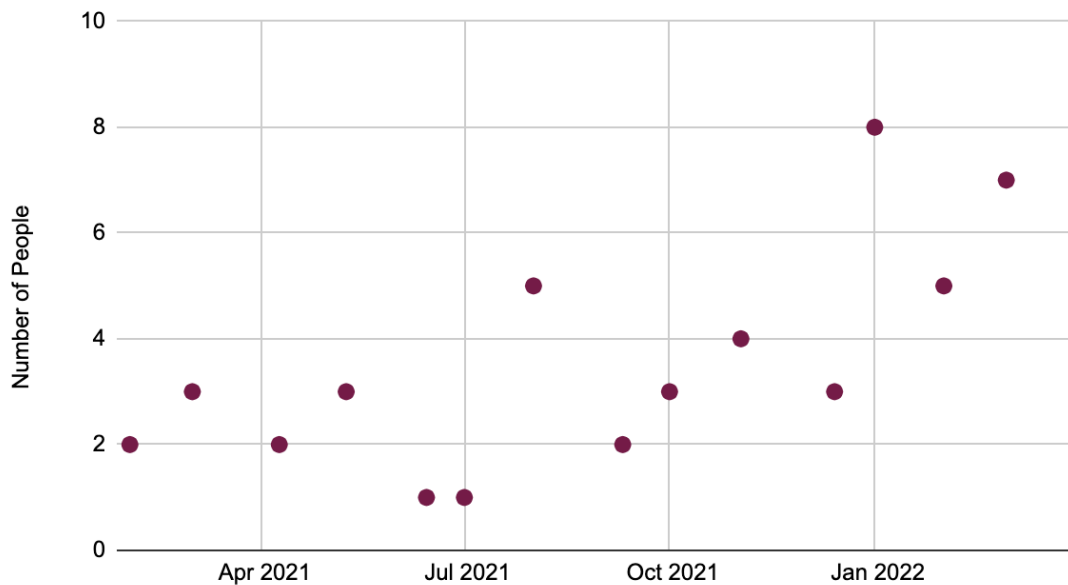


A year after the coup (**Fig 1.2b**), only 31 respondents remained in Yangon, and many of those had moved to different townships within the city. There is an increase in concentration in central Myanmar and near the borders. Many moved to Shan, Rakhine, and Kayah States, with Kayah receiving the largest influx of people. Kayah State (also called Karenni State) is considered by many to be a liberated area, where the military have little to no control, and civilians are protected by the joint forces of the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) and the Karenni Army in the capital Loikaw and elsewhere. Many fleeing conflict across Myanmar, especially from Yangon, end up in Kayah/Karenni and Kayin (also known as Karen) States, where they can cross over into Thailand if necessary.

Of those outside of the country, 24 reported that they were in Thailand, mainly in Maesot and in Tak Province. Many of those affiliated with armed groups reported that they were in Thailand. A number of PDF members and defected soldiers have had to flee across the border into Thailand as violence and clashes increased on the border at the end of last year. Chiang Mai proved to be the second most popular destination, as there is a strong network of Myanmar activists and

scholars in exile.¹⁴ On the other side of the country, respondents originally from Chin State who were affiliated with CDM groups and civil society have moved to Mizoram across the border in India, and some moved on to New Delhi. Other destinations outside the country include Dubai, UAE and Sydney, Australia.

Fig 1.3 Timetable of recently relocated youth



This timetable (**Fig 1.3**) shows that the number of people moving has increased over time since February last year, with the peak being at the start of the new year. The end of 2021 was marked with intense and brutal crackdowns by the military across Myanmar, especially in liberated areas. The Tatmadaw conducted aerial bombardments in conflict areas over December in 2021 and used heavy artillery, which forced thousands to flee across the border into Thailand.¹⁵

ii) Education

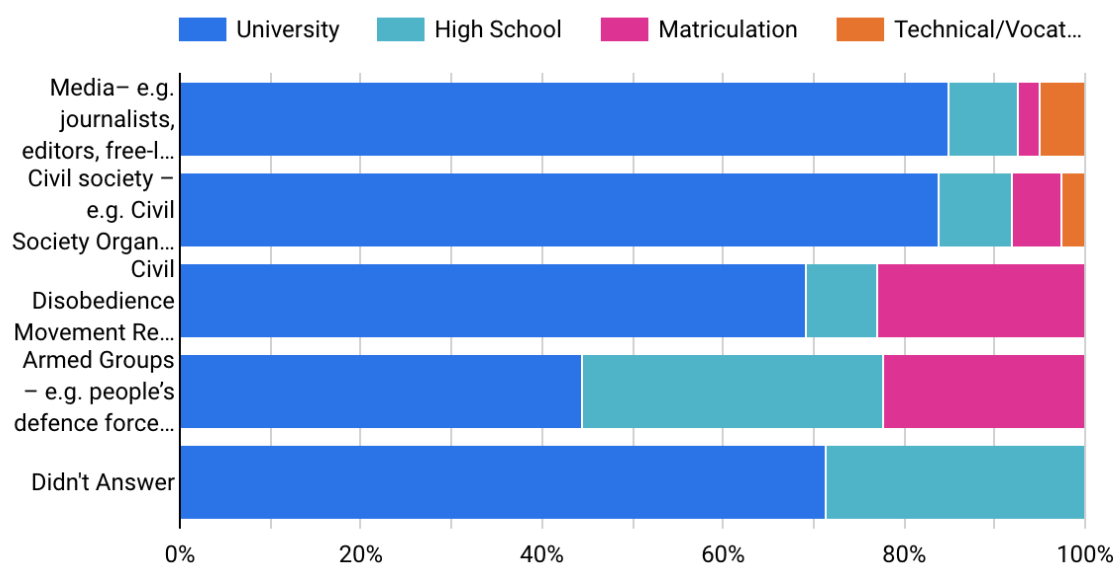
This section served to gauge the educational status of respondents, and their current level of access to educational resources such as schools, online courses, and information in general. Participants are asked about their academic history and their interests in potentially pursuing further areas of study.

¹⁴ There is a difference in the risks held by those in Maesot and the greater Tak Province and those in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Most Myanmar youth in Maesot and Tak are undocumented and thus cannot move easily around the country and are at risk of arrest, fines, and deportation. Many in Chiang Mai and Bangkok came by flight with valid passports and visas, though their legal status is still challenging to maintain.

¹⁵ (Al Jazeera 2021)

A large majority of participants, at 83 entries (78.3% of those who provided answers), had university education as their highest education level, followed by high school at 12 entries (11.3%), matriculation at 8 (7.5%), and Technical/Vocational school at 3 entries (2.8%). As would be expected, those who were younger in age were typically more likely to answer high school as their highest education level. Those affiliated with media and civil society typically had a higher level of education than those in CDM or armed groups. 85% of those affiliated with media reported to have graduated university, and 84% from civil society reported the same. 69% of CDM representatives were also university graduates. In comparison, only 44% of respondents in armed groups had attended university. (Fig 2.1)

Fig 2.1 Highest Education Level of Each Group



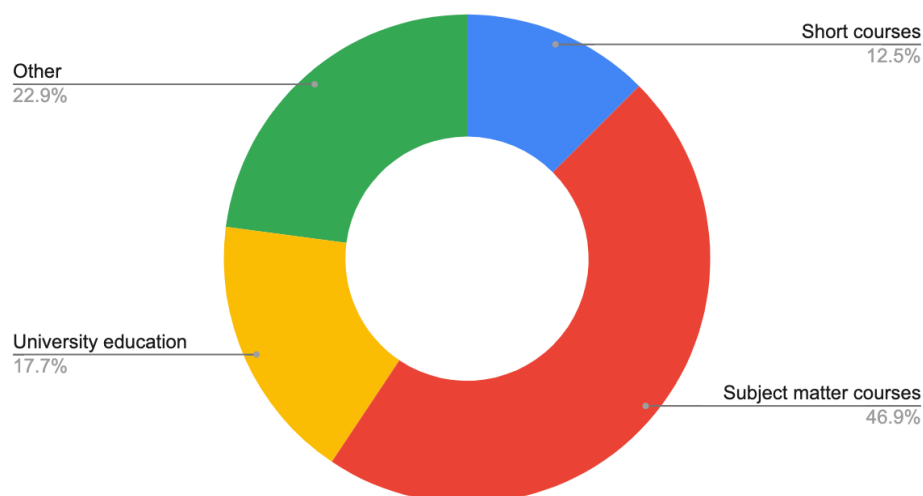
Out of 105 responses, only 7 stated that they had studied in countries outside of Myanmar before. They were all from media and civil society, and all were above the age of 20 save for one who did not submit their age.

The graph below, **Fig 2.2**, shows the number of different university majors taken by participants. Of the university graduates, English, History, and Myanmar (Burmese language) were the most popular majors studied by this group, with 9 respondents in each subject

Fig 2.2 University Majors		▼	
English	9	International Relations	2
History	9	Psychology	2
Myanmar	9	Accounting	1
Philosophy	4	Biochemistry	1
Chemistry	3	Directing	1
Law	3	Journalism	1
Geography	3	Marine Science	1
Computer Science	2	Zoology	1

The majority of participants were interested in studying subject matter courses lasting from a few months to a year compared to short courses or university education, with the most popular topics for potential study being journalism, political science, language skills, and organising skills such as effective communication, planning, and time management. These topics come up again in other capacities throughout the interview with the participants. 17 respondents were interested in attending a university degree program (**Fig 2.3**).

Fig 2.3 Additional training / education



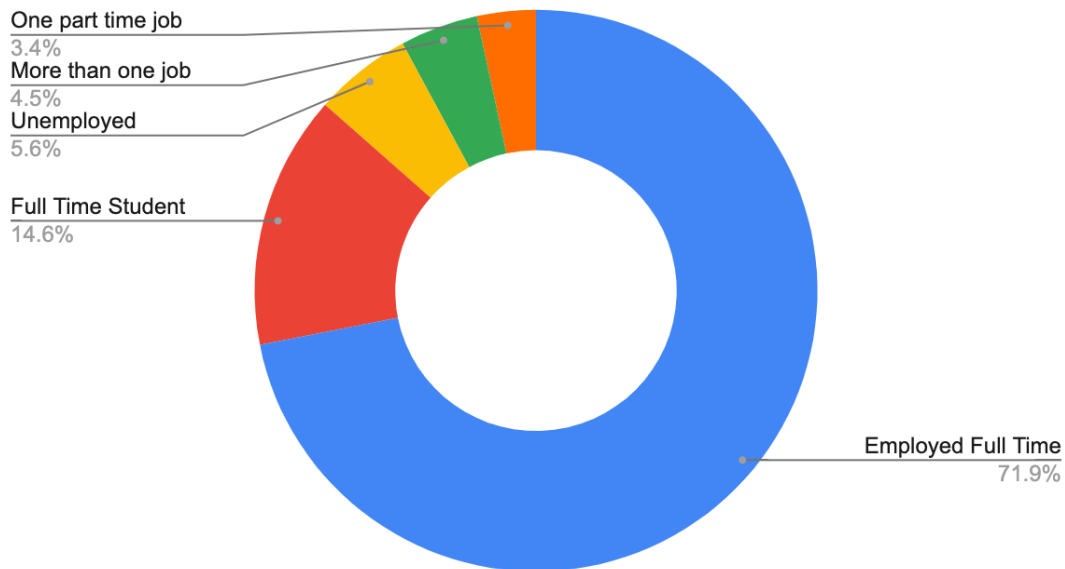
61 participants (58.1%) stated that they had not been able to access these topics through online universities or other programs, while 44 (41.9%) said they had been able to. Those who could access online courses used platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Facebook, Youtube, Duolingo, Coursera, and GoToMeeting or they attended in person. Zoom is mentioned the most out of these platforms. Some reported self-studying online, with courses on Youtube and Coursera, while others attended short week to month long courses on specific subject matter.

iii) Employment and skills

This section gauged the career and financial needs of participants and to see their opinions on the availability of work opportunities. Participants are asked questions about their employment history, acquired career skills, or if they are looking for work. The survey also asked questions about future plans for career and skill development, to better understand their needs.

Approximately 87% of respondents were fully occupied with employment and study prior to the coup - 72% of respondents were employed full time and 14.6% reported studying full time. 8% reported having one or more part time jobs. Only 5.6% of respondents reported being unemployed.

Fig 3.1 Graph of employment status before the coup

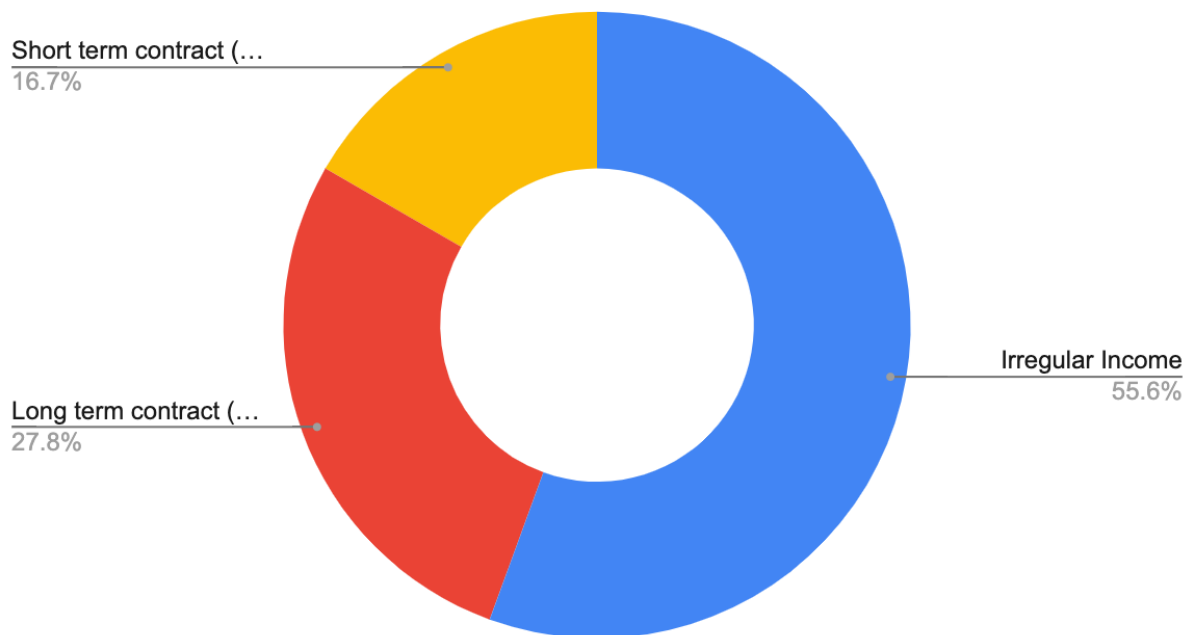


The respondents had a variety of jobs before the coup, many were from the media and civil society sectors, while CDM representatives were largely civil servants ranging from police officers to midwives to school teachers. The jobs reported by respondents are included in **Fig. 3.2** below.

Fig 3.2 Jobs mentioned ▲

3D Animator	Driver	Merchant	Senior Manager
Assistant Fire Chief	Fact Checker	Midwife	Site Engineer
Assistant Producer	ForB Trainer	News Anchor	TV Reporter
Broadcast Engineer	Freelance English Teacher	News Editor	VFX Artist
Cameraman	Freelance Teacher	News Staff	Video Editor
Car Repair Course Instructor	Grants Officer	Police Officer	Video Journalist
Cashier	Graphic Designer	Presenter	Waiter
Civil Servant	Human Resources	Primary Assistant Teacher	Web Moderator
Content Writer	Interpreter	Primary School Teacher	Youth Pastor
Coordinator	Journalist	Private Employee	
Customer Service Operator	Language Instructor	Producer	
Deputy Police Chief	Librarian	Product Manager	
Digital Marketing Executive	Lower Level Staff	Product Officer	
Digital Marketing Staff	Marketing executive	Project Officer	
Digital Uploader	Media Worker	Reporter	

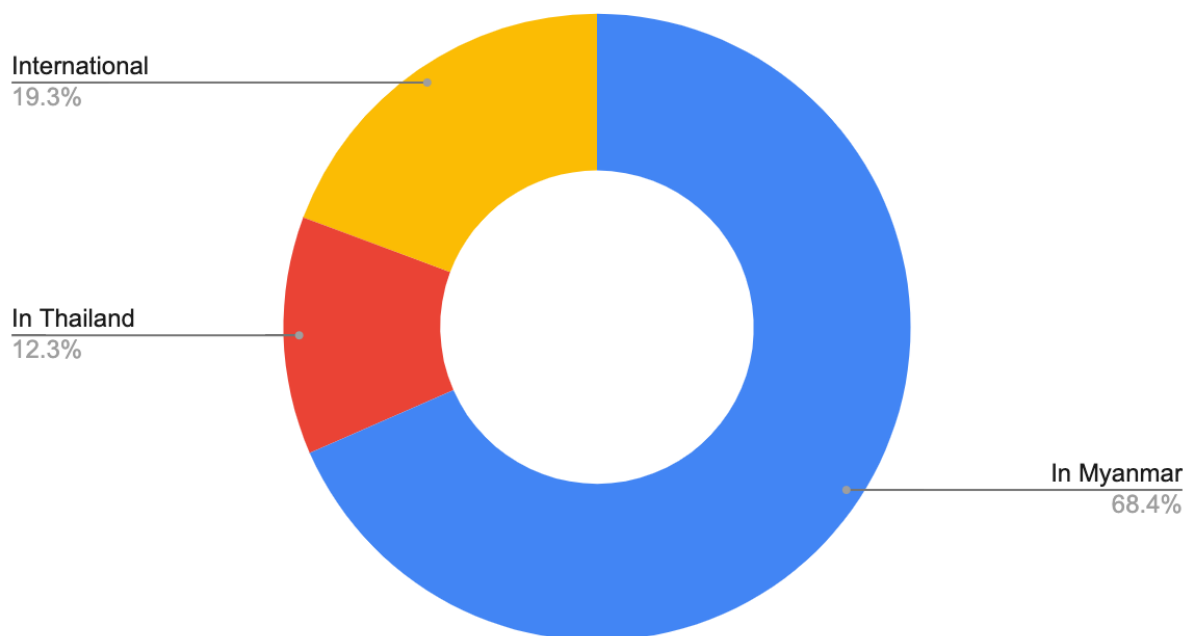
Fig 3.3 Current income



Even though most respondents were fully employed before the coup, when asked if they had a current income source, only 27.8% said they were currently employed under a long-term contract of 1 year or more. 16.7% were on short-term contracts of under 1 year, and 55.6% only had irregular income (**Fig 3.3**). 39% were employed by an employer inside Myanmar in some capacity, and 11.7% were employed by an internationally based organisation, often INGOs. 7% were employed by an employer in Thailand, such as Thailand-based CSOs, or Thai businesses

(Fig 3.4). The results illustrate the decrease in stability experienced by the respondents since the coup.

Fig 3.4 Location of employment



78% of respondents said they were able to use the same skills from their previous jobs (pre-coup) in the current context (not just related to paid employment opportunities), with the most popular skills being news related (writing articles, journalism, presenting), teaching, and multimedia production (video editing, photography, etc.). Those respondents from the medical field listed midwifery and administering vaccines as critical skills from their work that was still useful. Many in the media industry were still able to use their specific job skills to report on the news in Myanmar, although only some remained employed after the coup. Those with specific job skills such as welding, repairing car / mechanic, and engineering found their specific skills useful as well.

Respondents were asked which skills came in handy after the coup and the responses were aggregated into different thematic categories. We found that political and organising skills to be the most useful to the respondents; explaining political concepts, organising within one's community, and public speaking were some skills that were mentioned frequently. Other job-related skills such as news gathering, fact checking, welding, and engineering were also popular responses. Other responses included legal knowledge, medical knowledge, military and survival skills, digital security, teaching, fundraising, and language skills.

There was one question in particular that respondents struggled to answer during the interviews, which also yielded some of the most interesting results. Question 6 of Section 3 asked, *"In your opinion, what are the skills/ information/ knowledge that you most need now?"*

The skills/ information/ knowledge can be both practical or theoretical, e.g. facilitated planning sessions or lessons learnt from other countries' examples. Please think of this question on multiple time scales (a. immediately, b. in the next year or two, c. for the longer term)."

Many respondents struggled to think of an answer that was relevant in the longer time scales, with many unable to picture a future different from that that they're currently living. It is possible that, having had to attend only to pressing and immediate needs in the year since the coup, respondents struggled with picturing a life in the longer time scale. For many Myanmar youth, their hopes and dreams and future planning were dashed after the coup attempt in 2021.

Specific career skills (such as camera work, coding, and phone repair) were listed as the kinds of skills and knowledge most needed in all three time frames. Respondents seem to be looking for ways to improve their career prospects in both the immediate, mid-term, and long-term. For all three time frames, computer skills, digital literacy, and digital security were high on the list of priorities for respondents. Leadership and advocacy skills were next on all three time scales, showing that respondents saw the need to improve their abilities as leaders and advocates in their own communities. The desire for military and physical defensive skills, while high in the immediate time frame, dropped considerably in the mid- to long-term, while the importance of political and vision-building skills, which were not so important in the immediate to middle time frame, gained more importance in the long-term. One skill that multiple respondents mentioned as important in the immediate time frame, but not at all in the longer term, was mindfulness, suggesting a current need for self-soothing and trauma-reducing psychosocial support practices.

Respondents were asked if they were looking for work, and if so, what kind of work they are looking for. Here are examples of some responses:

"If I am able to go to Thailand, I will be able to work properly as a journalist. Right now, in the country it's hard to conduct interviews; there are a lot of power cuts, and mobile data is expensive. Furthermore, the military has been cracking down on and killing journalists and those from the political field so it's a very unsafe environment for me to work in. I have to worry every time a source gets arrested. My sister is in Thailand so I'm able to write good news pieces with her help, safely, and also learn from her. To get to Thailand, there are many challenges such as needing enough funds for a visa, air tickets, and to settle in when I first get there."

"Even though I have a job, expenses in Thailand are so much that I only can send my family [in Myanmar] back a little after using the money up [that I need] for myself. That's why I am trying to find part time jobs, whether it be in news media or anything within my skill set."

"I'm looking for some jobs on the side like teaching or translation, that do not require a high [level of] commitment."

“No, my mind is just in the revolution.”

“Any work I get I will do. As long as it provides enough for my family”

“Since there are many power cuts these days, online businesses are not practical. For me personally, it's hard to go abroad to get a job”

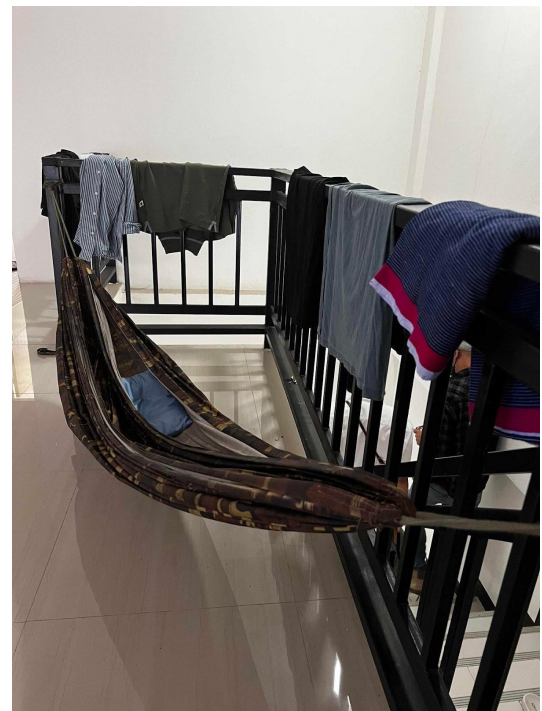
While many are actively looking for work, it seems that the situation inside the country makes it difficult for some to work in their chosen professions. Others are hindered by frequent power cuts, which have increased in intensity and frequency since the coup, and political instability.¹⁶ For those on the Thai side of the border, language becomes a barrier for those who are looking for employment, as well as their legal status. Undocumented migrants obviously face additional challenges to find employment.

iv) Living circumstances

We wanted to understand the circumstances under which respondents were living. The affordability of housing varies widely based on where you are. Yangon rental prices are remarkably higher than Sagaing or Mandalay, and those who are displaced outside the country have other concerns such as paying for cross-border travel, visas or bribes, and other expenses that can stack up considerably – many have realised for the first time that being a refugee can be very expensive.

Half of the respondents reported living in an apartment, while the other half lived in houses. Only 8 respondents reported living alone, while others had some form of house sharing arrangement. Nearly half of the respondents are living with family, a quarter are living with friends, and the remainder are living with colleagues or roommates they did not know before the coup. 20% of respondents were living with 5 or more people in a room. 26.5% of respondents lived 4 in a room, and only 16.7% of respondents had a room to themselves.

61% of respondents expected to be able to stay in their living spaces for over 3 months; 30% had 1-3 months of stability and 9% had stable housing for only



An example of the housing conditions for many Myanmar youth living in the Thai border town of Maesot. 13 young men and women are living undocumented in a cramped townhouse, subsisting on nothing but rice and instant noodles. This hammock was brought into Thailand by a youth who escaped the bombardment of the town of Laykaykaw on December 24th by junta troops.

¹⁶ Some townships in Yangon experience daily power cuts, where electricity is available for only 8 hours per day. Rural places have even more reduced hours of electricity.

a few weeks. 57.8% of respondents were currently paying rent but only 32.1% considered their rent affordable. Those not paying rent are typically being supported by other friends or housemates who are employed and who cover the rent for them. We spoke to a house of 5 young media professionals who were all living in a studio apartment; two were employed and were supporting their three friends who did not have work. This arrangement is becoming quite common, as well-paying employment is hard to come by.

V) Well being, community impact, and support

Finally, we had a section to inquire about the wellbeing of the respondents, how they are coping with the difficulties they are facing, and what they are doing to stay motivated. Respondents were asked what they do to keep themselves motivated and busy during this time, and what kind of activities make them feel most useful. These questions were open ended to elicit more natural answers from the respondents.

The top activities that were reported to be motivating for the respondents were, in order, reading, studying/learning, talking with friends and family, and playing games or watching TV. Also high on the list were working or volunteering, and exercise or sports. Some listed music as an important motivator, while others were drawn to religious sermons, meditation, and other religious activities. Six respondents mentioned politics or activism as occupying their time and motivating them.

"By finding ways I can practise self care, whether it be for my body, achievements, connections with people, and just general enjoyment. I am able to keep myself calm and motivated."

"[I am motivated by] religion. I help out with two [pro-democracy Facebook] pages I'm helping run and also find news to report on. I hold interviews with people, if I'm able to film them personally, I do it. Sometimes I study English. I relax by drawing, reading, and listening to music. I also have to take responsibility for household errands so I'm often busy. Plus, I am planning to put out a book abroad so I really have to spend my time wisely."

"I don't have that much free time due to my job and I frequently tend to get depressed because of my work but my mother is always there to get me out of it and support me."

"I do feel depressed and sad from time to time, I can't help it. Since I am a journalist, all I see is unpleasant news and I also have to write about it all time, especially during this period. And more, I have to worry about my family's safety and security. To cheer myself up I listen to songs, read books, and talk to my loved ones. And I also take breaks to cool down."

When asked which activities made them feel most useful, respondents answered, in order, work, learning, engaging in politics and caring for others as their top responses. While politics was not a highly rated motivating factor, engaging in politics still ranked highly as helping them to feel useful during this period. Also high on the list were exercise and sports, connecting with people, and fundraising or donating.¹⁷

“Right now, I feel pretty useless, but I think taking volunteer teaching jobs would make me feel useful. Before the coup I wanted to go to Chin state because there was an open volunteer teaching position. I think I would also feel more useful if I could channel my energy into something artistic like arts and crafts or music and do some fundraising. Reading about events in the country, its literature, and more also makes me feel somewhat useful, because I feel more informed, and I feel more connected to my culture despite the attempted brainwashing by the military.”

“Everything I do that helps boost morale for the people still partaking in the revolution makes me feel useful.”

“I can be of service to the people when I get physically fit and strong from working out.”

The responses to these two questions highlighted the importance of connection, learning, and recreation in people’s motivations and ability to contribute to society.

Respondents were then asked about whether they saw other opportunities to help their communities, and the challenges they face. We saw responses that highlighted the myriad of challenges faced by Myanmar youth. The power outages and internet cuts across Myanmar were often mentioned as a leading obstacle to further opportunities. Physical danger and fear of informants were also cited as obstacles, as were challenges with organising and networking with different groups. Trust issues were also cited as a major challenge for those who wanted to participate in their communities. Informants (known as “dalan” in Burmese) led to the arrest of many pro-democracy actors, and politically active youth were wary of engaging with strangers for fear that they are junta spies.

“The power outage situation is getting really bad these days, so doing things online is very hard. There are a lot of opportunities, and I especially want to do something regarding counselling, but the aforementioned power outages and also a lack of funding and equipment makes things difficult.”

¹⁷ Many answered that Click to Donate is an important initiative that makes them feel useful. A click-to-donate site is a website where users can click a button to generate a donation for a charity without spending any of their own money. The money for the donation comes from advertisers whose banners are displayed each time a user clicks the button. There are many such Click to Donate initiatives that are popping up around the Spring Revolution, where people are encouraged to read blogs or view videos that are funnelled through the Click to Donate portal so that the app can receive the advertising revenue from each view.

“There should be a proper platform for education and organising. Everyday people from Myanmar are having to navigate through posts and news, not knowing which ones are reliable and which ones are fake. If possible, there should be a secure social media platform dedicated to giving out accurate information on news, politics, political processes, dictators, through videos, photos etc. Or hosting fundraisers and the like.”

“We need to provide training for children and adults in areas not taught in Myanmar: Psychology, Politics, Law, good leadership skills, all need to be taught. Consider this as an open challenge to create a secure platform that everyone can use that gives people access to this kind of information and knowledge.”

“I want to teach and volunteer, but my house has been marked due to an informant, so I have to worry for my safety and security.”

“I can contribute by organising, leading, teaching and guiding. But since I am a CDM police officer, it is frustrating to receive people's doubts, disobedience and negative attitudes towards me.”

When asked about what kind of support they needed the most, respondents overwhelmingly answered that there is a need for financial support, followed by education, mentoring, and access to information. Many cited a lack of clear information for the opportunities available for Myanmar youth as something they struggle with. Many cited a need for mentorship and guidance on how to proceed in both their education and careers.

“For me to keep being a journalist and learn more, I need financial support first and foremost. Plus, mentoring from experienced people, learning about proper procedures and carrying them out. Journalism is a skill that needs to be honed, so I also need a lot of educational support.”

“As a CDM university student, I need a lot of support, especially education, financial support, practical experience, and direction.”

The intentional power outages across Myanmar represent the blanket of darkness with which the military is hoping to once again shroud the potential of Myanmar youth. Despite the struggles faced by the young people interviewed in this report, there were a myriad of inspiring ways people were keeping their spirits up and continuing to support the movement despite the danger and obstacles.

Conclusions

"You can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming." – Pablo Neruda.

Politically engaged youths are important actors in their own right, and even though they find themselves in precarious situations in both their safety and access to resources, our interviews

found that youths are overwhelmingly determined to support the revolution, and have or are willing to acquire the relevant skills to do so. However, there are significant challenges that prevent many from being able to contribute fully to the resistance.

Modern connectivity, predominantly through the internet, is making it easier for youth to organise, share information and connect, as well as to gain new skills and utilise them despite the junta's suppression. Much of the coordination of the Civil Disobedience Movement, nationwide protests, and fundraising for the resistance have been done online through social media and encrypted apps such as Signal, Telegram, and others.

Junta troops have in turn tried to quash dissenting voices within the country by inspecting civilians' phones for any subversive materials or documents.¹⁸ The increase in mobile phone bills, due to the increasing costs of internet data, also makes it harder for those inside Myanmar to get online. The increase in length and intensity of power cuts and intentional internet blackouts since the coup have become a powerful way for the military to exert control and limit youth access to resources.

Those inside who wish to leave are heavily impacted by the inflation and devaluation of the Myanmar Kyat. Currency devaluation has made international travel prohibitively expensive for many whose earnings have been reduced in value by up to 60%.¹⁹ Passports have also become more difficult to acquire, and many applying for them are under scrutiny from the regime as potential 'terrorists'. This has significantly impeded young people's ability to access work and education opportunities abroad.

There has been significant displacement of Myanmar's politically engaged youths since the coup. In our research, 55% of respondents have moved either to another city or outside of the country since the coup. Moving between different locations has made it easier to lose contact with those back home, as relocation may result in having to change phones or numbers, or cut communications with networks altogether in order to maintain one's security. For those relocated abroad or on the border, contact with those inside becomes increasingly dangerous and difficult, as those left behind continue to have their digital communications scrutinised by junta troops.²⁰

For youth at the border of Thailand and India, a lack of legal documentation prohibits them from accessing education and job opportunities or other services in neighbouring countries. For them, survival becomes the priority, where avoiding arrest and deportation, paying rent and basic subsistence, and trying to find employment impede their ability to continue working in the resistance full time. Some await asylum, while others struggle to find ways to legitimise their stays in their host countries. The lack of documentation and status makes it difficult for many to access opportunities for education, work, or access to other resources.

¹⁸ ("Security Forces Inspect Civilians' Phones, Make Arrests in Magway Region" 2020)

¹⁹ (Reuters 2021)

²⁰ More research needs to be done on whether these communication disruptions have led to siloing of different parts of the resistance.

It is evident that Myanmar youth are looking for ways to build up their communities, but face the challenges of physical danger, financial risk, and housing stability. These challenges do not provide people with the energy to achieve their goals of leadership, vision-building, and creating a better future for their communities. Given the enormity of the crisis, and the difficult situations they find themselves in, it is not surprising that youth are reaching out for further support.

Throughout the research, a large proportion of respondents discussed that self care and education are important in keeping up the spirit of their struggle. Mental health and stress are a significant issue and a priority for many. Reading and studying are some of the most popular ways young people are motivating themselves and addressing the key issues faced in the movement. The topics of study include foreign languages like English and Thai, politics and history, and organising and advocacy, among others. Work and education are what help the youth to feel most useful during this time. Other significant activities include exercise, talking to family, communicating with the community, and meditation and/ or religious practices.

Access to finance and further education are the most needed support for youth. The respondents articulated that they are keen on receiving guidance or mentoring in helping them forge their path forward. While there are few education and work opportunities available for youth, they do not know where to access these opportunities and they are unlikely to meet the full demand or needs of youth. This finding is consistent with some of our previous findings that a majority of youth have yet to access education resources online – it may be that they do not know what is available or have not been directed to the right resources.

Due to their current and immediate struggles, youth are having difficulty with imagining their long-term futures. There is variation in their priorities in the short-, mid-, to long-term. Short-term needs including basic survival skills, first aid, and martial arts. Mid-term needs began to include topics such as language courses and work-related skills courses. While politics was not considered an important skill in the short term, many considered it a priority in the long term.

The interviews and survey responses illuminated that Myanmar's youth envisage a different future for Myanmar than the current reality, and one that is at the core of the revolution and that the military will never be able to provide. This is unsurprising given that they are a generation that entered adulthood in a period of democratic reforms, and have experienced the full force of a brutal military who has stolen, at the very least, their former hopes and dreams. The future the youths imagine is inclusive and celebrates diversity in all of its form, is peaceful, prioritises education, citizens well-being, entails economic opportunities and prosperity to be shared by all, has a place for the voice and input of youth. All of which is possible because of a new Myanmar constitution based on federalism and democracy.

The military has wrested away opportunities and resources from a whole generation of youth. But this provides us with the opportunity to give people resources that are even better than what existed before rather than simply putting in stop-gap measures for filling in what the military is taking away. Higher education in Myanmar has been some of the worst in the region for

decades – the best ranked university in Myanmar sits at 7759th in global rankings.²¹ There are many online short and university courses available that are internationally recognized and accredited, that many English speaking Myanmar youth could potentially access, but they would need access to resources and financial support in order to participate. Supporting these opportunities for youth education also supports the long term investment in the country, as young people are already eager and able to give back to their communities.

²¹ (AD Scientific Index 2022)

Recommendations for future programming

1. This report should be shared with other donors and implementing partners who are working with Myanmar's politically engaged youth, or others who can provide the relevant assistance to politically engaged youths.
2. Whilst being mindful of security challenges, efforts should be made to promote linkages and coordination between groups organising and supporting education for youths in Myanmar.
3. There is a need for a centralised online database of education and work resources available to youth, including scholarships and funding opportunities.
4. While there are many one-off courses and workshops being offered online, few groups are developing learning resources that are downloadable, printable and shareable, and accessible offline.
5. As the connectivity issues increase in Myanmar, youth need more resources that can be passed informally and offline, in addition to workshops, courses and training that can only upskill a relative few at a time.
6. There is a need for youth mentoring programs that provide services such as career guidance, support with applying to schools and further education, and general advice for life and personal development.
7. Considering most people are spending their time reading, there should be more resources available for reading, and guides on where to find information, and direction of what to read. It is evident that most people are taking in information, and this provides an opportunity to curate information that is relevant for the political education of youth.
8. The research methodology for conducting this research worked, and it is possible to hear from people in precarious situations in Myanmar – not just leaders or those in senior positions. Such research can be continued and expanded with other sub-groups in different thematic areas, or repeated at a future date.

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