Access to information on climate change in military-controlled Myanmar

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Myanmar, a country rich in natural resources and at high risk from the climate emergency, faces profound challenges at the intersection of climate change and human rights, exacerbated under military rule since the 1 February 2021 coup. This report responds to the call for inputs by the UN Special Rapporteur on climate change and human rights, focusing on Myanmar's specific context. It explores the critical information gaps, challenges in access, and potential pathways for improvement in ensuring transparency and safeguarding human rights amidst climate change impacts.

Myanmar has experienced decades of military rule interspersed with periods of partial civilian governance. The military has historically dominated politics, governance, and the economy, influencing environmental policies and exacerbating vulnerabilities among marginalised communities. The country's diverse ecosystems—from coastal regions vulnerable to rising sea levels to upland areas susceptible to deforestation—highlight the urgent need for comprehensive climate action.

Information needs

Climate change stakeholders, including civil society, academia, businesses, government departments, and the international community, urgently require detailed, location-specific data on climate change impacts, particularly in conflict-affected areas and regions with high social diversity. This includes assessments of water scarcity, agricultural disruptions, and health impacts exacerbated by climate variability.

Stakeholders also need information on large-scale infrastructure projects, such as dams and mining operations, and their environmental and social consequences on local communities, including intersectionally-marginalised groups including women, ethnic minorities, and the economically-deprived.

Challenges in accessing information

Access to information is fundamental for effective climate action and safeguarding human rights, yet Myanmar faces significant challenges, especially under military rule that hinder transparency and accountability.

Law and policy

The lack of comprehensive freedom of information legislation or any policies across government restricts public access to government-held environmental data, hindering informed public discourse and advocacy for climate justice. Myanmar's regulatory frameworks on environmental protection and human rights remain inadequate under military rule, contributing to impunity and lack of accountability for environmental abuses. Legal reforms are essential to strengthen environmental governance, enhance public participation, and ensure equitable access to climate-related information and resources.

National security

Under military rule, Myanmar's government tightly controls information flows, utilising censorship and restrictive laws to limit access to critical environmental data. This control extends to climate change-related information, which is often perceived through a national security lens. Climate-related information is often categorised as “sensitive” under national security pretexts, further restricting its dissemination and use. This classification not only limits public access but also complicates efforts by civil society organisations and researchers to gather comprehensive data on climate change impacts and mitigation strategies. Ambiguous definitions of what constitutes “sensitive” information allow authorities broad discretion in withholding environmental data, perpetuating a culture of secrecy.

Opaque governance

There are no open data initiatives to increase transparency and accountability in environmental governance, and highly limited opportunities for public access to information or participation in decision-making processes. Data-sharing mechanisms and institutional capacities are highly limited, which undermine the effectiveness of climate adaptation and mitigation strategies, particularly in remote and conflict-affected regions.

Government agencies, including the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC), oversee environmental policies and data but operate under opaque procedures that impede public scrutiny. Environmental policies and data collection processes are centralised within government departments, reducing opportunities for local communities and civil society organisations to participate in decision-making processes.

Censorship of media and civil society

Media outlets and journalists have faced censorship and self-censorship pressures, particularly when reporting on so-called “sensitive” topics such as environmental degradation linked to extractive industries or infrastructure projects.

Civil society organisations operate under stringent regulations, facing surveillance, harassment, and legal restrictions, limiting their capacity to monitor and advocate for environmental justice. Civil society organisations advocating for environmental justice and climate resilience face heightened surveillance and legal repercussions, discouraging independent research and advocacy efforts.

Marginalisation

Discrimination exacerbates challenges in accessing climate-related information, particularly in rural and remote areas of Myanmar. Unequal access to reliable internet connectivity and technological resources further marginalises vulnerable communities, hindering their ability to engage in climate adaptation and resilience efforts.

Myanmar's linguistic diversity poses additional challenges, as climate-related information and policies are often published in Burmese, limiting accessibility for ethnic minority groups and non-Burmese speakers.

Private sector

Businesses have significant responsibilities. The extractive industries in Myanmar, including mining and hydropower sectors, operate under opaque regulatory frameworks, contributing to environmental degradation and social conflicts. Corporate transparency and accountability remain inadequate, with limited public access to comprehensive environmental impact assessments and mitigation plans. Strengthening regulatory frameworks and enforcing corporate responsibility standards are essential to mitigate adverse climate impacts on local communities.

Conclusion

Myanmar faces formidable challenges in addressing climate change impacts and protecting human rights under military rule. The military’s control over information and limited civic freedoms undermine transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making processes critical for effective climate action. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from the international community, civil society, and private sector to promote transparency, uphold human rights, and foster sustainable development.

Recommendations

- Continue to apply **sustained diplomatic pressure** on the military to respect human rights, including the right to access information about climate change. This includes

condemning abuses in international forums, supporting UN resolutions, engaging in bilateral and multilateral discussions, and implementing targeted sanctions against military leaders and entities responsible for human rights abuses. Sanctions should focus on limiting the military's ability to finance and perpetuate violence, including against marginalised groups.

- Provide resources and support for the **systematic documentation and advocacy** on human rights abuses relating to climate change and access to information. This includes support for international mechanisms, for CSOs, training for activists, and platforms for sharing information internationally.
- Increase and **strengthen support** including funding, advocacy, training, capacity-building, humanitarian assistance, and, if needed, the offer of asylum and refugee support for individuals including from CSOs and media, whose human rights are threatened in retaliation for their work on climate change.
- Ensure **corporate accountability globally** and multi-nationally, particularly in those countries without rights-respecting governments, enforcing responsible business standards, including mandatory environmental impact assessments and community consultations, to mitigate adverse climate impacts on vulnerable groups.