

# Sweden ends development aid to Myanmar, abandoning media and civil society

September 2025

Sweden will end all development aid to Myanmar from 2026, following the [U.S. government](#). This includes \$2.65 million per year for media and human rights groups. The shock decision, [confirmed](#) on 11 September 2025, is a profound blow to Myanmar's civil society, human rights defenders, and independent media, severing a final and critical lifeline of support in the face of a brutal military regime.

The back-to-back withdrawal of Sweden and the [U.S.](#), two of Myanmar's most significant donors in the democracy and governance space, triggers more than a financial shortfall. Donors like Sweden have championed international standards, and yet their decision severely undermines the “do no harm” principle.

It also sends a demoralising political signal to civil society, journalists, and human rights defenders on the front lines. It suggests that long-term, principled support for their struggle is unreliable, subject to the shifting political priorities of donor capitals rather than the escalating needs on the ground. This erosion of solidarity is a more damaging consequence than the loss of funding alone.

## An ideological shift, not just a pragmatic withdrawal

Sweden has [justified](#) its decision by citing the need to reallocate aid to Ukraine as well as the “progressively worsened” conditions for development work in Myanmar. While operational challenges are undeniable, this withdrawal is a direct consequence of a broader ideological shift in Swedish foreign policy under its [Development Assistance for a New Era](#) agenda.

This new agenda has abandoned Sweden's long-standing commitment to allocating 1% of its Gross National Income to development assistance and pivoted toward priorities such as trade and migration control. The “deteriorating conditions” in Myanmar serve as a convenient justification for a decision that aligns with pre-determined budget cuts and new geopolitical interests. This approach disregards the established consensus that in repressive environments like Myanmar, flexible support to agile, local civil society is the most effective and critical form of engagement.

## A withdrawal at odds with international standards

The manner of Sweden's withdrawal is as damaging as the decision itself. A complete, unilateral, and rapid exit, especially without meaningful consultation with local stakeholders, violates the spirit, if not the letter, of established international norms for responsible donorship.

Core frameworks like the [Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles](#) demand predictable, partnership-based funding. The [OECD-DAC peer reviews](#) call for coordinated exits that adhere to the principle of "do no harm." Furthermore, the [Core Humanitarian Standard](#) insists on accountability to the affected communities, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of aid.

While these frameworks are not legally binding, they represent widely endorsed expectations for good-faith cooperation. By announcing a complete phase-out driven by domestic political priorities and a timeline that precludes a responsible transition, Sweden is disregarding these fundamental principles. If a complete withdrawal could ever be necessary, it should be coordinated, consultative, and phased to mitigate harm.

## The data behind the disengagement

According to Human Rights Myanmar's data analysis, Sweden has provided a total of \$176 million (1.85 billion Swedish krona) in development aid for Myanmar since the coup. Sweden's planned aid budget for 2024 alone stood at around \$41 million (434.56 million krona). Its removal will leave a significant void.

Sweden's cuts directly target the foundations of a free society. Although the majority of Swedish aid was allocated to emergency response (42%) and conflict resolution (10%), a significant amount was donated for democratic participation and civil society (8%). Most of that was awarded to media programmes (6.3%), with a smaller amount spent on human rights (0.6%). Myanmar is the third-largest recipient of Swedish media aid globally.

This is a projected loss to Myanmar's already vulnerable independent media of \$2.4 million per year from 2026 onwards. Approximately \$255,000 per year will be lost from the human rights community. The withdrawal of this support threatens to dismantle critical infrastructure for independent reporting and human rights monitoring.

This is not to say that Swedish aid is without fault. There was always a disparity in funding channels. Of the 61.45% of post-coup funds that Sweden directed through non-governmental organisations, the majority went to international and Swedish-based INGOs (60.68%). In stark contrast, only 0.76% was provided directly to local Myanmar NGOs. The termination of aid will now dismantle programmes that local civil society actors had become reliant on.

## The profound impact on the ground

The withdrawal of USAID had already created a precarious funding landscape. Sweden, as one of the last major donors with a strategic focus on human rights and media freedom, was a final pillar of

support for these embattled sectors. While other international partners remain engaged in Myanmar, few possess the same mandate or dedicated budgets for democracy and governance work.

For Myanmar's civil society and media, the long-term implications are therefore profound. This is not simply about the closure of projects, but the potential collapse of entire organisations. The withdrawal signals an impending loss of institutional knowledge and capacity built over decades of partnership. The fear within the community is not just of financial insolvency, but of a gradual return to the information darkness that characterised previous eras of military rule, leaving the regime's atrocities undocumented and its power uncontested.

## Recommendations to Sweden

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1. Immediately commission a rapid Human Rights and Conflict-Sensitivity Impact Assessment of its withdrawal, in line with the OECD-DAC principle of "do no harm." This assessment must map the direct and indirect consequences on local partners, at-risk human rights defenders, and marginalised communities.
2. Based on the findings of this assessment, develop and fund a responsible, consultative transition plan. This plan must extend beyond the current deadline to ensure the institutional survival of its partners and mitigate the most severe impacts of the funding termination.

All international donors, including the EU, UK, and Australia, must recognise the profound funding and confidence gap now facing Myanmar's civil society and step forward to fill it. Crucially, new and existing support must be channelled through reformed aid models that prioritise flexible, direct funding to local actors.

The international community must not abandon the people of Myanmar. It is time to replace fragile, top-down funding structures with resilient, direct partnerships that empower the legitimate agents of the country's democratic future.