



# Food Security in Rakhine (Arakan) State, Myanmar

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Rakhine State, home to over 3.2 million people, faces a critical food security crisis driven by conflict, economic isolation, and environmental shocks.

Since November 2023, the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) has extended its control beyond 14 of Rakhine's 17 townships until today—securing additional strategic townships—while the SAC enforces road and naval blockades, lays landmines, and disrupts aid delivery (Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO), personal comm., Apr. 25, 2025).

Cyclone Mocha in May 2023 and recurrent floods have destroyed infrastructure and reduced yields by up to 60% in key rice-producing areas (World Bank, 2023; local interviews). Informal trade with India and unregulated trade from Bangladesh provide unstable relief, driving price spikes and exploitation (Scoones, 2009; DE discourse, 2024). IDPs face soaring rents and limited livelihood options, deepening their vulnerability (BNI Online, 2024).

This brief synthesizes document analysis of over 30 policy reports and 15 semi-structured interviews, employing systems thinking (causal loop diagrams) and stakeholder mapping to identify leverage points.

Three conflict-sensitive policy packages are proposed:

1. **Discreet Supply-Chain Corridors:** Establish shared logistics hubs in ULA-administered areas, pre-position buffer stocks, and develop covert liaison cells to secure imports of fuel, fertilizer, and medicine.
2. **Local Livelihood Recovery & Market Resilience:** Subsidize inputs, formalize micro-markets at India–Arakan checkpoints, deploy mobile market units, and provide microgrants and vocational training for displaced youth.

3. IDP Shelter & Rental Protections: Implement conditional rental vouchers, temporary land allocations, and low-cost reconstruction partnerships to stabilize housing and free household income for food.

Comparative insights from Yemen's humanitarian corridors and South Sudan's market rehabilitation demonstrate feasibility within months. Immediate, discreet engagement with ULA/HDCO, transparent monitoring, and flexible donor frameworks are crucial to avert famine and build long-term resilience.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

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This policy brief aims to:

- Analyze root causes of food insecurity.
- Map key stakeholders and power dynamics.
- Evaluate and prioritize interventions.
- Provide an implementation roadmap.

## 3. CONTEXT & PROBLEM STATEMENT

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**Historical Marginalization & Conflict:** Rakhine which lies along the Bay of Bengal, remote coastal geography has long resulted in neglect by central Myanmar authorities. According to the Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO) of the ULA, at least 426 civilians were killed and over 1,000 injured due to conflict-related violence between November 2023 and March 2025 (HDCO, personal communication, April 25, 2025; HDCO, 2025a). These figures were also publicly shared via HDCO's official communication channels in July 2025, underscoring the urgent need for localized humanitarian coordination ([HDCO, 2025a](#)).

**Economic Isolation & Informal Trade:** Roadblocks, naval patrols, and the complete suspension of humanitarian assistance to Arakan by the central authority have choked formal supply chains. Local farmers report up to a 60% drop in 2024 rice yields due to fertilizer and fuel shortages (interviews, May 2025). Informal smuggling via India and Bangladesh accounts

for 30–40% of staple imports but carries high cost and security risks (Scoones, 2009; BNI Online, 2024).

**Humanitarian Constraints:** INGOs and UN agencies face bureaucratic hurdles, fear SAC reprisals for cooperating with ULA/HDCO, and suffer from donor fatigue following USAID cuts (OCHA, 2025). Since June 2024, relief convoys bound for Rakhine have been held at the Bangladesh–Arakan border. As of May 2025, Bangladesh authorities continue to deny passage to these aid shipments (UNDP, 2024).

**Environmental Shocks:** Cyclone Mocha (May 10, 2023) destroyed over 50% of paddy fields in southern Rakhine and wiped-out fishing infrastructure (World Bank, 2023). Erratic monsoons and landslides further disrupt planting cycles and market access.

**Implication:** Without targeted, conflict-sensitive, and locally anchored interventions, Rakhine risks widespread malnutrition, livelihood collapse, and further displacement by late 2025 (WFP, 2024).

To unpack these dynamics, I first outline my conceptual framework in Section 4.

## 4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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### 4.1 Systems Thinking (Causal Loop Diagrams):

Loop	Feedback Type	Core Mechanism
R1 Conflict–Displacement	Reinforcing	Roadblocks ↑ → Farmer displacement ↑ → Production loss ↓ → Aid reliance ↑ → SAC intensifies blockades ↑
R2 Market Disruption	Reinforcing	Naval patrols ↑ → Price spikes ↑ → Informal trade ↑ → Exploitation ↑ → Market instability ↑
R3 Aid Constraints	Reinforcing	SAC threats ↑ → UN/INGO withdrawal ↑ → Aid delays & halts ↑ → Hunger deepens ↑ → SAC maintains blockades ↑

<b>Loop</b>	<b>Feedback Type</b>	<b>Core Mechanism</b>
R4 Environmental Shocks	Reinforcing	Cyclones/floods ↑ → Crop failures ↑ → Displacement ↑ → Social cohesion ↓ → Community resilience ↓

#### 4.2 Stakeholder Mapping (Power–Interest):

<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Power Level</b>	<b>Interest Level</b>	<b>Engagement Strategy</b>
ULA/HDCO	High	High	Oversees local operations; key implementer and gatekeeper.
State Administration Council (SAC)	High	Low	Enforces blockades; potential spoiler if challenged.
UN Agencies & INGOs	Moderate	Moderate	Provide funding and technical support; affected by security.
India & Bangladesh	Moderate	Low	Informal trading partners; influence via cross-border flows.
Smallholders & IDPs	Low	High	Primary beneficiaries; limited influence on policy decisions.
Regional media outlets	Low	Low	Issue press releases at major milestones; ad hoc interviews as needed.
Adjacent-region NGOs (peer actors)	Low	Low	Share high-level brief; invite to semi-annual learning workshops.

#### 4.3 Theoretical Lenses:

- Human Security: Focus on safety, dignity, and rights to food access.
- Political Economy: Examines trade blockades, power asymmetries, and centralized governance impacts.
- Conflict Sensitivity: Ensures interventions do not exacerbate tensions and remain adaptable to shifting frontlines.

## 5. RESEARCH DESIGN & METHOD

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- Document Analysis: Reviewed 30+ reports (UNDP 2024; OCHA 2025; FAO 2006), extracting themes on supply chains, livelihood disruptions, and shelter vulnerabilities.
- Key Informant Interviews: Conducted 15 semi-structured interviews (Apr–May 2025) with ULA/HDCO logisticians, local farmers, IDP representatives, and UN/INGO coordinators. Data were transcribed, thematically coded in NVivo, and triangulated against secondary price bulletins and rental assessments.
- Causal Loop Diagramming: Identified core variables—conflict intensity, market access, aid delivery, environmental events—and mapped reinforcing and balancing loops. Loops were validated with local experts via secure channels.
- Impact & Stakeholder Assessment: Each policy package was evaluated across economic, social, and humanitarian dimensions using a scoring matrix, and stakeholder power–interest dynamics informed feasibility and risk mitigation.
- Ethical Considerations: Informed consent, confidentiality, and the “do no harm” principle guided all interviews. Data were stored encrypted, and identities anonymized.

## 6. IMPACT ASSESSMENT & SCENARIO ANALYSIS

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### 6.1 Impact Assessment Matrix

Policy Package	Dimensions	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Package 1	Economic	Reduced import delays, cost savings	Risk of supply diversion, market distort.
	Social	Improved food access	Perceived favoritism, Received SAC reprisals
	Humanitarian	Uninterrupted aid flows	Staff security risks linked to possible SAC reprisals

Policy Package	Dimensions	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Package 2	Economic	Job creation, productivity rebound	Upfront subsidy costs, dependency risks
	Social	Youth engagement, Reduced migration	Uneven benefit distributions
	Humanitarian	Strengthened local CSOs	SAC's use of diplomatic channels to impede input flows
Package 3	Economic	Lower Household rental burden	Funding sustainability
	Social	Housing stability, improved nutrition	Land-use disputes
	Humanitarian	Better protection for IDPs	SAC interference in land allocation

## 6.2 Scenario Analysis

- **6.2.1 Best-Case Scenario:**

International agencies rapidly engage with the ULA/HDCO, establishing shared logistical hubs and enabling the flow of essential goods through informal trade routes with India and Bangladesh and secure internal supply chains. Local livelihoods rebound through targeted agricultural support, microenterprises, and rental subsidies for IDPs. Donors resume flexible funding in recognition of local capacity. Malnutrition rates begin to decline by late 2025.

- **6.2.2 Most Likely Scenario:**

Limited cooperation emerges between INGOs and ULA, but donor risk-aversion slows implementation. Informal trade provides modest relief, but fuel and fertilizer shortages persist. IDP shelter conditions remain strained, and youth migration continues due to inadequate job creation. Food insecurity remains high, with localized improvements in ULA-administered zones.

- **6.2.3 Worst-Case Scenario:**

Donor support continues to shrink, and UN agencies remain disengaged from ULA-administered areas due to political hesitation. The SAC intensifies blockades and detains more civilians. Bangladesh cracks down on border crossings. Crop failures from erratic weather

coincide with logistical collapse. Rakhine spirals into famine by late 2025, with humanitarian actors unable to scale up response.

## 7. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

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- **Conflict & Displacement:** Roadblocks and landmines cut supply lines, causing farmers to abandon fields and deepen aid dependency (CLD R1). Analysis: This cycle of production loss and increased aid reliance perpetuates blockades—establishing secure corridors is essential to break it.
- **Market Disruption & Informal Trade:** Rice prices spiked by 70% in ULA-administered zones but later eased as informal trade increased; SAC-controlled areas remain significantly more expensive and unstable. Analysis: Informal relief is fragile—formalizing micro-markets could stabilize prices and extend benefits.
- **Humanitarian Access Constraints:** Threats of registration revocation have led to the suspension of operations by 60% of INGOs, effectively halting humanitarian aid delivery to Rakhine State by the SAC. Analysis: A dual engagement strategy—leveraging trusted ULA channels while maintaining discreet coordination with the SAC—may help mitigate delays and improve access.
- **Environmental Vulnerabilities:** Cyclone Mocha wiped out 40,000 acres of paddy; floods delay planting by 2–3 weeks, cutting yields 20–30% (World Bank, 2023). Analysis: Climate-smart plots and resilient seed varieties can buffer against future shocks.
- **Governance & Coordination Gaps:** Formal aid corridors have been blocked for over two years, forcing risky informal channels (HDCO, personal comm.). Analysis: Third-party monitoring and transparent reporting could rebuild trust and reopen formal routes.
- **Famine Risk:** Over 120,000 acres of rice fields face 60% yield losses, threatening staple shortages and potential famine. Analysis: Time-bound input subsidies can quickly boost production and move toward food self-sufficiency.

- Comparative Lessons: Yemen’s corridors restored 80% of flows in 3 months (UNOCHA, 2019); South Sudan’s mobile markets cut price volatility by 40% (World Food Programme, 2021). Analysis: Discreet, locally led interventions work rapidly—even in conflict zones.

## 8. Recommendations

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### 8.1 Policy Package 1: International Cooperation with ULA for Supply Chain Access

**Objective:** Strengthen humanitarian delivery capacity by enabling UN/INGOs to work directly with ULA/HDCO to access essential goods via alternative supply chains.

**Rationale:** Although the ULA/AA has signalled its willingness to cooperate with humanitarian operations, donor fatigue—exacerbated by USAID’s funding cuts to Myanmar’s response—continues to strain international supply chains (UNOCHA, 2025). Most agencies remain hesitant to engage with the ULA/AA as a de facto authority in Rakhine, limiting formal partnerships and operational reach (HDCO, interview). Many critical items—such as fertilizer, fuel, oil, and medical supplies—must still be imported from mainland Myanmar, India, or via informal networks. With Bangladesh refusing to open humanitarian corridors, direct engagement with local governance and trade facilitation in Rakhine becomes urgent.

**Mechanism:** UN agencies and INGOs should collaborate with HDCO and local networks to procure essential supplies from India or safe mainland routes.

- Establish shared logistical hubs inside AA-controlled areas with accountability systems.
- Facilitate dialogue between ULA and international procurement teams for flexible cross-border arrangements, including informal trade where necessary.

**Feasibility:** High. ULA’s political will is clear. The constraint lies in donor coordination and risk tolerance by UN/INGO actors.

**Implementation Considerations:**

- UN and INGO actors must assess and update internal policies to permit engagement with authority like the ULA, while ensuring compliance with donor guidelines and international humanitarian principles.

- Monitoring mechanisms must be locally grounded yet transparent—co-designed with ULA/HDCO and civil society—to ensure that supplies reach intended populations without diversion.

- Joint coordination cells could be set up in secure areas (e.g. India border regions) to manage logistics, track commodity flows, and troubleshoot cross-jurisdictional constraints.

- Risks include reputational concerns for INGOs hesitant to engage with armed actors, potential surveillance from SAC, and dependency on volatile informal trade channels.

Expected Impact: Ensures uninterrupted humanitarian supply flow into Rakhine, bolsters local trust, and sidesteps central obstruction.

## **8.2 Policy Package 2: Local Livelihood Recovery and Market Resilience**

Objective: Rebuild food production and economic self-reliance through localized trade, agricultural recovery, and microenterprise support.

Rationale: Naval blockades, fuel shortages, and aerial bombardments have crippled food systems. Meanwhile, many young Rakhine seeking jobs outside the state have been arrested by SAC forces; therefore, restoring livelihood opportunities within Rakhine is vital (Narinjara News, 2025).

Mechanism:

- Support smallholder farmers with seed, fertilizer, and fuel subsidies.
- Formalize and support unofficial India–Arakan trade by facilitating local markets and transport hubs.
- Offer microgrants or job placement programs for displaced youth in sectors like construction, agroforestry, and community kitchens.

Feasibility: Moderate. Political risks exist but localized actions can be negotiated through civil society intermediaries.

Implementation Considerations:

- Adapt programs to environmental shocks (e.g., droughts, cyclones) by supporting climate-resilient agriculture and local seed systems.

- Introduce mobile markets and barter-based systems in remote areas where currency is unreliable or circulation is restricted.
- Design youth job programs in consultation with community leaders to avoid risks of SAC targeting and forced recruitment.
- Monitor informal trade dynamics closely to reduce price gouging and limit the influence of black-market actors.

Monitoring & Indicators:

- Number of hectares restored with input support
- Participation of IDPs and youth in employment programs
- Market price stability for staple goods across five monitored townships

Expected Impact: Increases food availability, reduces dependency on external aid, and deters dangerous migration.

### **8.3 Policy Package 3: Safe Shelter, Land Use, and Rental Protections for IDPs**

Objective: Address rising rental costs and shelter insecurity among IDPs in urban and semi-urban areas of Arakan.

Rationale: As reported in recent BNI investigations, displaced families face exorbitant rental prices and housing instability. This deepens poverty and reduces their ability to access nutritious food.

Mechanism:

- Temporary land allocation by local authorities for IDP resettlement.
- Conditional rental subsidies funded by humanitarian donors.
- Public-private partnerships for low-cost housing reconstruction in cyclone-affected areas.

Feasibility: Moderate. Requires coordination with AA-administered zones and community leaders.

Expected Impact: Improves housing stability and frees up household income for food and healthcare.

## 9. Implementation Roadmap & Timeline

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Action	Lead	Timeline	Resources
Negotiate discreet MOUs with ULA/HDCO	WFP/UNDP/OCHA etc	0–1 month	Liaison teams
Establish 2–3 logistical hubs near India border	ULA/HDCO + INGOs etc	1–3 month	Warehousing, transport assets
Launch 5 mobile market units	INGOs + Local NGOs etc	2–4 months	Vehicle retrofit, staff
Roll out rental vouchers for 1,000 IDP families	UNDP + ULA/HDCO etc	1–2 months	Donor funding, legal support

Monitoring & Evaluation: Track metrics such as delivery delays, input-supported hectares, youth employment rates, market price indices, and IDP rental burden quarterly.

## 10. Conclusion

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Rakhine’s food crisis is systemic rooted in conflict, marginalization, and environmental shocks. The three policy packages offer a balanced blend of short-term life-saving measures (supply corridors, rental protection) and medium-term resilience building (market recovery, livelihood support). Success depends on discreet, context-sensitive engagement with ULA/HDCO, robust monitoring to mitigate SAC reprisals, and flexible donor commitments. Comparative lessons from Yemen and South Sudan underscore that localized, politically informed interventions can restore food flows and stabilize markets within months. Immediate action can avert famine and lay a foundation for sustainable, community-led food security in Rakhine State.

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