



## MYANMAR

### International cooperation

**In response to the recent political, economic and social changes in Myanmar, the Swiss Federal Council took the decision to relax sanctions and to open an embassy. The Swiss cooperation programme, which began under the Humanitarian Aid Unit in 1994, is being strengthened to a comprehensive programme that supports the transition to democracy, consolidated peace and poverty reduction. Funding will gradually increase to CHF 35 million per year.**

#### 1. Justifiable and necessary aid

At least a quarter of Myanmar's 60 million inhabitants live below the poverty line. The 2011 Human Development Index ranks it at 149th out of 187 countries, falling behind all its neighbours in the region (e.g. Bangladesh at 146th, Cambodia 139th and Thailand 103rd). Although the country is potentially rich in natural resources such as gas, precious stones and timber, only a small élite currently benefit from these resources. The sanctions against Myanmar have meant that---at USD 7 per person---the level of development aid is by far the lowest of any of the least developed countries in the world. The rapid changes that have taken place in recent months in Myanmar provide unprecedented opportunities for Switzerland to contribute to Myanmar's sustainable development. The Swiss Cooperation programme can help consolidate the restoration of peace by providing tangible benefits to vulnerable sectors of the population and can also help support the opening up and democratisation of the country. Programme components supporting development, political opening and peace complement one another, as Switzerland wishes to make a significant contribution in line with the needs of local people.

#### 2. Real prospects for Swiss Cooperation in Myanmar, both now and in future

A new cooperation programme for the 2013-2017 period is currently being finalised in close cooperation with Swiss and local NGOs, the government authorities and representatives of the ethnic minorities, and in coordination with other donors active in Myanmar.

The four priority thematic areas for international cooperation with Myanmar are the following: **a) Employment and vocational skills development, b) Health, access to social services and local governance, c) Agriculture and food security, d) Promotion of peace, human rights and protection.** Gender equality, conflict-sensitive programme management, governance and disaster risk reduction will be at the heart of the interventions comprising Switzerland's strategy in Myanmar. The total budget will increase to approximately CHF 35 million per year for the combined support of the SDC and the Human Security Division of the Federal Department Foreign Affairs, managed through an integrated Embassy of Switzerland in Yangon.

- a) The unemployment rate among youth is an estimated 70%, and job creation is a priority. With greater freedom of speech now granted, there is a high risk that young people choose to vent frustrations through revolt, as happened in the 'Arab spring'. In the sector of **Employment and Vocational Skills Development**, the intention is to bring greater dynamism to local job markets in close cooperation with the Myanmar government, civil society and the private sector. Creating jobs and income is absolutely vital for social stability. The school construction experience of the Humanitarian Aid unit could be applied to improve or construct professional training centres, particularly in the country's southeast. Supporting training in this geographic region would strengthen outcomes of the ongoing peace negotiations and give refugees (those displaced internally or exiled in Thailand) prospects of returning home and settling down.

- b) Access to **health and social services** for local populations, particularly ethnic minorities, will be improved through increased community infrastructures and quality care. SDC's Humanitarian Aid program will continue to help communities gain access to social infrastructure including schools, health centres, water supply, and small-scale irrigation. SDC will support **citizen participation** in access to and management of public services at the local level with a view to responding to people's needs and helping the State become more accountable towards its citizens. Switzerland can offer Myanmar first-hand experience in making the most of linguistic diversity, ethnic minorities and federalism.
- c) Nearly one-third of Myanmar's children, or around 16 million, are critically underweight, though the average family spends approximately 70% of its income on food. In the field of **agriculture and food security**, strengthening farmers' productive capacity and product marketing are priority tasks to help reduce the rural poverty that affects the majority of the population. Access to productive natural resources such as land, forest and fisheries are also critical foundation for livelihoods development. SDC's sectoral expertise in this region, for example in rice production, agricultural extension and strengthened value chains in Laos, is an asset. Specific programme support in the sector will complement the work of the multi-donor Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund, known simply as LIFT, to which SDC contributes.
- d) **Peace** is an essential precondition for reducing poverty and boosting development. Myanmar suffered a military dictatorship for over 45 years, and also armed conflict in the various ethnic areas along its mountainous borders for even longer, of which some have lasted for over 60 years. These areas although rich in timber and natural resources are woefully underdeveloped and people living there do not have access to the most basic services, let alone profit from the substantial resources in their regions. Several hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced, some of which multiple times, and landmines as well as various militia groups continue to pose a security threat to them. Now that a fragile peace process is underway, it is essential to support those people who have been displaced or have fled, to return and settle into productive lives as soon as they feel safe. The Swiss programme will directly contribute to the peace efforts and to the return of displaced people through activities that **promote peace, human rights and the protection of the civilian population**.

### 3. Switzerland's commitment in Myanmar up to the present

Switzerland has been involved in Myanmar (including refugee camps located in Thailand) since 1994, primarily through SDC's Humanitarian Aid. In 2001, SDC's Humanitarian Aid declared this a priority region and seconded a regional humanitarian coordinator to take charge of the humanitarian activities in Thailand and Myanmar. In connection with the support provided to the victims of the disaster caused by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, a programme office was set up in Yangon the following year.

In this framework SDC Humanitarian Aid has been actively improving access to local **community infrastructures and quality services**, including in the vulnerable communities living in the Cyclone Nargis-affected areas of the Irrawaddy Delta, as well as in the southeast of Myanmar, and in the camps for refugees from Myanmar in Thailand and their surroundings. Additionally SDC Humanitarian Aid has been reinforcing **food security** and assuring a **livelihood** for displaced persons. The following programme components continue to be implemented as of today:

In the regions of the Irrawaddy Delta affected by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, Switzerland has entered into a commitment to rebuild schools which are also suitable for use as shelters in the event of disasters. By the end of 2013, 42 schools/storm shelters will have been constructed in rural areas with cyclone, flood and earthquake disaster criteria taken into account. These schools will provide a total of 133 classrooms and benefit a minimum of 6'650 students. The local communities are being trained to

manage the schools/shelters in a sustainable way that improves their preparedness for potential/future catastrophes.

In the south-east of Myanmar, which has been marked for decades by internal armed conflicts, human-rights violations and large numbers of displaced persons and refugees, Switzerland is active to improve living conditions and access to community infrastructures: building schools, health centres and drinking-water supply systems as well as training the local population in managing these infrastructures in a sustainable way. Today five schools with a total of 17 classrooms and five rural health sub-centres serving about 2,000 households have been completed, while 150 local labourers earned money as daily worker for contractors. Through these direct actions, Switzerland aims to promote improved humanitarian access to the vulnerable populations in the ceasefire zones and to contribute to adequate living conditions for the return of internally displaced persons and refugees.

In Kayah, one of the poorest and most vulnerable provinces in the whole of the country, Switzerland supports two water and sanitation projects: drinking-water supply in combination with the construction and remediation of sewers, the construction of sanitary facilities in the schools and health centres, and sensitisation of the population to hygienic habits. These projects are being implemented by Action Contre la Faim and CARE, who partner with local civil society organisations. Switzerland's involvement is thus contributing to the ongoing peace processes while also bringing immediate benefits to the people at large.

Through its contributions to the World Food Programme (WFP), Switzerland also provides crucial support to vulnerable populations affected by seasonal uncertainties in food supplies and trapped in spiraling debt.

Switzerland offers support in the form of emergency aid in the event of natural disasters (cyclones, floods and earthquakes), which are unfortunately frequent in Myanmar. Lastly, it supports the mission of a number of international organisations involved in Myanmar, notably the International Committee of the Red Cross (management of orthopaedic clinics, supply of water and sanitary facilities in prisons and assistance to prisoners' families), the UNHCR (improving the protection of refugees from Myanmar in the camps in Thailand) and UNICEF (demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers). Support for these activities is provided in the form of finance and by making experts available through the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit.

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