

Myanmar (Burma)

New opportunities for development

In response to recent political, economic and social changes in Myanmar, the Swiss Federal Council has decided to open an embassy in Myanmar. The current humanitarian aid programme is to be strengthened with a development programme to support the transition towards democracy, consolidate peace and reduce poverty. Funding will gradually increase to CHF 25 million per year.

Justifiable and necessary aid

Myanmar has 60 million inhabitants. With a GDP of USD 1,300 per person, it is in a similar position to that of Nepal and Rwanda. The Human Development Index ranks it 132nd (out of 169 countries) behind all its neighbours (Bangladesh 129th, Cambodia 124th and Thailand 92nd), and a quarter of the population is living below the poverty line. Although the country is potentially rich (in gas, precious stones and timber), it is still under-exploited and only a small class of elite linked to the old junta is benefiting from these resources. The sanctions against Myanmar have meant that the level of development aid there is by far the lowest of any of the least developed countries. At USD 7 per person, it lies well behind that of other countries with repressive regimes such as Zimbabwe (USD 59) and Laos (USD 69). The rapid changes that have taken place over recent months in Myanmar provide unprecedented opportunities for Switzerland. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) can help to restore peace by providing concrete benefits to vulnerable sectors of the population and also help to support the opening up and democratisation of the country. The development, political and peace components complement each other, and Switzerland wishes to make a significant contribution in line with the needs of the local populations.

Concrete prospects for the SDC in Myanmar, both now and in the future

The three key thematic areas selected are the same as those for the regional Mekong programme: **a) professional training, b) agriculture and food security, and c) social inclusion and social accountability.** Gender equality, conflict-sensitive programme management, and governance will be at the heart of the SDC's activities and future strategy in Myanmar. Funding will increase to CHF 25 million per year for humanitarian aid and regional cooperation activities.

1. The unemployment rate among young people is an estimated 70%. Job creation is a priority because with the greater freedom that has now been granted, there is a high risk of young people giving vent to their frustrations and revolting, as happened in the 'Arab spring'. On the subject of **professional training**, the intention is to collaborate closely with local authorities and strengthen local job markets, working together with Myanmar NGOs and the private sector. Creating jobs and income is absolutely vital for social stability. One Swiss NGO is already working wonders in Myanmar, and the SDC is in contact with it, with a view to continuing this work. The knowledge and experience of Humanitarian Aid in Myanmar with regard to building schools could be used to improve or construct professional training centres, particularly in the south-east of the country. Supporting training in this region would strengthen the knowledge base for peace negotiations and give refugees (those displaced internally or exiled in Thailand) prospects of returning home and settling down again.
2. In the field of **agriculture and food security**, strengthening farmers' production capacity and commercialising products are priority tasks in order to reduce the rural poverty that affects the majority of the population. Particular emphasis will be placed on

water and food production (water for food), following on from the work currently being done with the multi-donor fund LIFT (Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund), to which the SDC contributes. The SDC's regional successes in this field (e.g. rice production, agricultural training and outreach in Laos) show it has a proven track record. Assistance with clearing mines is a priority as it is vital for the safety of very vulnerable farmers.

3. In the field of **social inclusion**, Humanitarian Aid will continue to deploy all its knowledge to improve access to social infrastructure: water supply, small-scale irrigation, schools and health centres, and will step up activities to protect the population. The SDC will also support **citizen participation** at a local level to improve its understanding of people's needs (access to and management of public services, minority needs) and improve the state's accountability towards its citizens (checks and balances). Myanmar is very interested in Swiss experiences with regard to linguistic diversity, minorities and federalism.

Peace, an essential condition for reducing poverty and boosting development

Some 40% of Myanmar's population have suffered from inter-ethnic conflicts that have lasted for decades. It is vital to enable those people who have been displaced or have fled, to return and settle down as soon as a cease-fire is observed and peace restored (rapid dividends of peace). The SDC programme will contribute to this directly.

The current humanitarian aid programme

The SDC, which has operated in Myanmar for over ten years now, is currently concentrating its operations on improving the access of vulnerable people (such as victims of cyclone Nargis and those affected by internal conflict) to basic infrastructure. This includes (re)building schools that will withstand cyclones in the Ayeyarwaddy Delta and (re)building schools and health centres with sanitary facilities in the south-eastern states affected by inter-ethnic conflicts. These activities are being implemented directly by the SDC. Humanitarian Aid is also committed to helping Burmese people living in refugee camps in Thailand, in close collaboration with the UNHCR. The SDC is contributing towards the efforts made by multilateral partners such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the ICRC and UNICEF.

From humanitarian aid to development cooperation – current activities in the areas of agriculture and water

Food security. Children are suffering from malnutrition, and 32% or around 16 million of them are underweight. The average family spends approximately 70% of its income on food, which is a huge proportion. The SDC contributes towards the *Livelihood and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT)*, a fund set up in Myanmar in 2009 in response to the urgent need for aid and reconstruction following cyclone Nargis, and which has realigned its priorities to focus on agricultural development. Switzerland is contributing CHF 4,500,000 to this fund.

Water. The SDC is involved in two water and sanitation projects in Kayah, one of the country's poorest and most vulnerable provinces. The people here, who have been affected by decades of ethnic conflict, are benefiting from the provision of drinking water via the construction and renovation of the mains water system, the construction of a sanitation infrastructure in schools and health centres, and campaigns to raise awareness of good hygiene practices. A total contribution of CHF 1,400,000 covering two years (2011-2013) has been made through Action Against Hunger and CARE, whose implementing partners are local NGOs.