SOUTH-EAST MYANMAR

RETURN MONITORING UPDATE

September 2014

BACKGROUND

Launched in June 2013, in consideration of the changing politics of Myanmar, and in anticipation of an increase in the number of spontaneous return movements as a result, UNHCR's return monitoring system in South-East Myanmar is designed to capture the dynamics and trends of refugee and IDP returns through "return assessments." This return monitoring system replaced UNHCR's village assessment tool, which was employed from 2008 through 2012, and has since been discontinued. In order to focus on recent returns and current dynamics, and inform immediate and future interventions, the monitoring system is limited to return movements since January 2012.

A return assessment is a community-level assessment conducted with a key informant, typically a local leader such as a village tract administrator, in a potential return village. The system is designed to accomplish three key objectives:

- Confirm the presence of IDP and/or refugee returnees and capture the profile of their displacement, including their previous location (eg. refugee camps in Thailand)
- Assess the needs and vulnerabilities of both the returnees themselves and the community that is absorbing them
- Map the overall profile of the community, particularly regarding the availability of facilities and access to services

With 230 return assessments complete as of August 2014, the data suggests that relatively few refugees and IDPs have spontaneously returned so far, which is consistent with UNHCR's qualitative information from both sides of the border. Where such movements have been verified, IDPs are far more likely to return in large groups, while refugee returnees tend to be in smaller numbers, often only a partial household while the others remain in Thailand. Progress with the assessments has nonetheless been steady, and UNHCR expects the upcoming dry season (November 2014 – April 2015) will yield an increased rate of spontaneous returns.

The return assessment project has understandably faced certain operational challenges, some of which were anticipated and incorporated into the development of the system. For one, UNHCR cannot always immediately visit potential return areas due to the logistical challenges of reaching remote rural areas, particularly during the rainy season. Lingering security issues and government restrictions also prevent UNHCR from accessing sensitive areas, primarily in Kayin State, where assessments only began in earnest in July 2014, hence the fact only 21 assessments have been completed there so far.

The return assessment system is designed to be protection-sensitive, utilizing key informants as trusted interlocutors rather than interviewing individual returnees who may prefer to remain low profile. Protection space has been slowly but steadily expanding throughout the South-East, and although the return assessment questionnaire includes only a few direct protection questions, UNHCR also conducts qualitative protection assessments where appropriate.

DATA FLOW

As the chart below demonstrates, the return monitoring system is centred around deliberately targeting potential return villages, to ensure resources are allocated to conducting high-value assessments that can produce meaningful output products and inform assistance to appropriate communities.

With this in mind, many return assessments begin when a partner submits a "return report", an unconfirmed but reliable report of IDP or refugee returnees in a village, to UNHCR for entry into the "return log", a library of reported return locations, sorted by village. UNHCR has been actively training many partners in South-East Myanmar on return reporting in order to strengthen this monitoring system and improve the targeting of assessments.

From the return log, and after crosschecking with refugee population data, UNHCR identifies potential return villages and follows up with a return assessment, provided that access can be secured. Once completed, the assessment is entered into the return assessment database, which is maintained at the UNHCR field office in Hpa-An. The database not only yields information products, such as infographics and maps, but is also used to initiate assistance and plan response.

Depending on the circumstances, UNHCR also conducts qualitative protection assessments with the key informants as part of the return assessments. This is only carried out where appropriate, and if protection incidents are reported to UNHCR through the interview with the key informant, the details are entered into a separate and secure database.
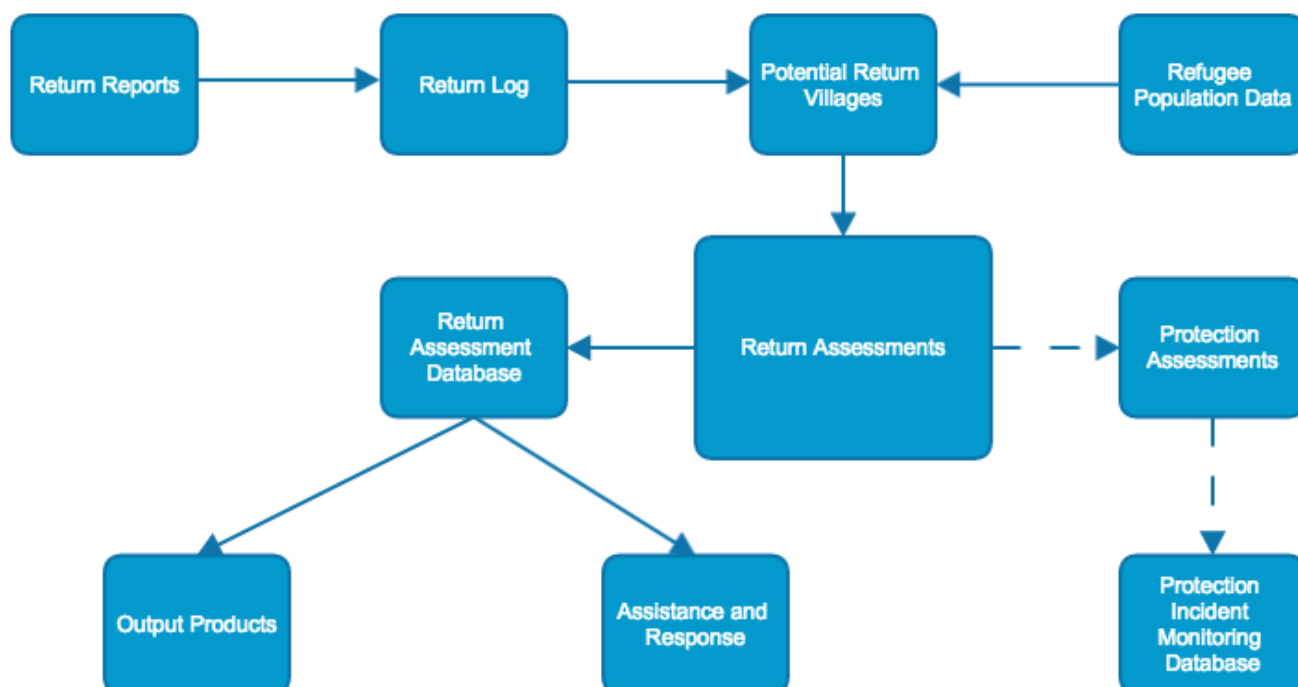
RETURN LOG

As 31 August 2014, the return log has 370 reports of returns from partners throughout South-East Myanmar and Thailand. Approximately a dozen agencies, including international NGOs, local community-based organizations (CBOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) have submitted reports of possible IDP and refugee returns, many of which prompted a follow-up return assessment by UNHCR.

The entries in the return log are spread relatively evenly across all four states, and those in Kayin State have been particularly useful in planning assessments there in recent months. Although the information is unconfirmed, return reports include estimated numbers of returns, and in a phenomenon that mirrors the results of the return assessments themselves, the reports estimate far higher numbers of IDP returnees than refugee returnees.

|	Kayah	Kayin	Mon	Tanintharyi	Overall
Return Reports	88	98	101	83	370
Estimated Refugee Returnees	227	312	53	198	790
Estimated IDP Returnees	1546	5204	470	1892	9112

RETURN ASSESSMENTS

As of 31 August 2014, UNHCR has conducted 230 return assessments across all four states and regions where UNHCR works in South-East Myanmar (Kayah, Kayin, Mon and Tanintharyi). There is a noticeable discrepancy in the number of assessments completed in each state/region, with the most assessments being conducted in Mon and the least in Kayin. This result underlines the challenges of data collection in this context, as Kayin is in fact the area of origin for two-thirds of Myanmar refugees in Thailand. On the other hand, 98 assessments have been completed in Mon State, where UNHCR has been able to visit almost all target villages without difficulty.

Of the 230 villages assessed throughout South-East Myanmar, 66 have been identified as verified return villages. The number of verified return villages – a village where UNHCR has confirmed, through the key informant, the presence of refugee and/or IDP returnees who intend to remain there permanently – likewise varies by state/region, despite consistent efforts to target assessments across the South-East. For example, UNHCR has verified the presence of returnees in 18 of the 40 villages assessed in Kayah, a far higher percentage than Mon or Tanintharyi.
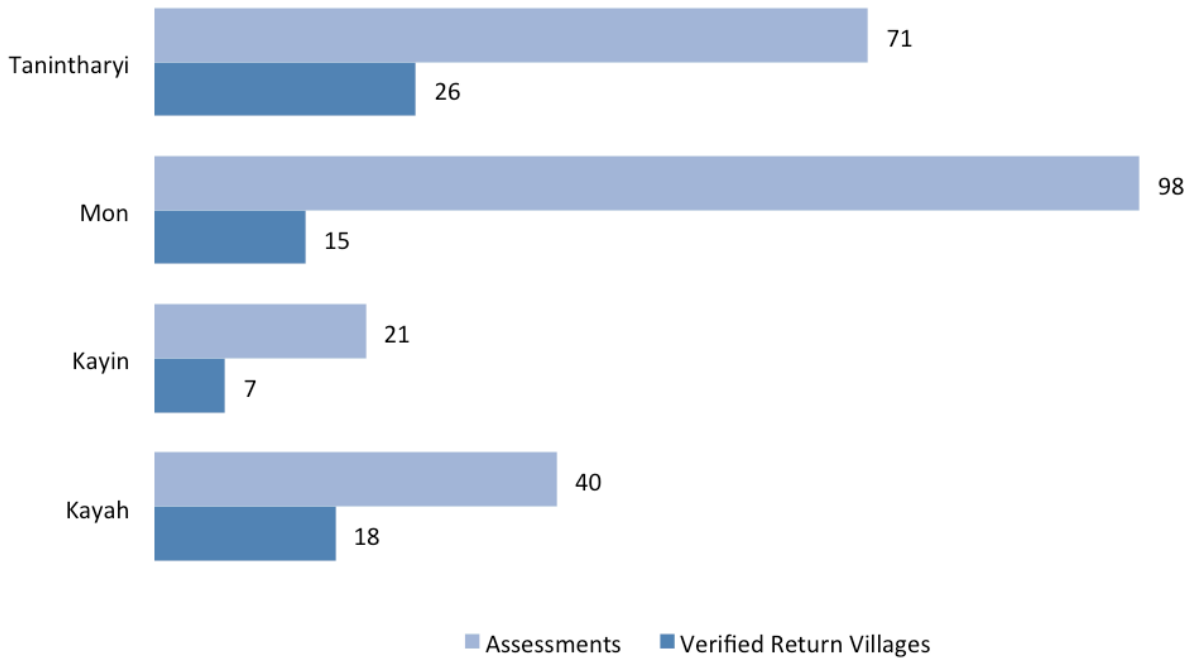
Verified Return Villages

Among the 66 verified return villages, 21 villages have been identified with IDP returnees, 32 with refugee returnees, and 13 with both. As shown in the graph below, refugee returnees have been identified in 11 more villages than IDPs, while Tanintharyi accounts for the largest number of refugee return villages.
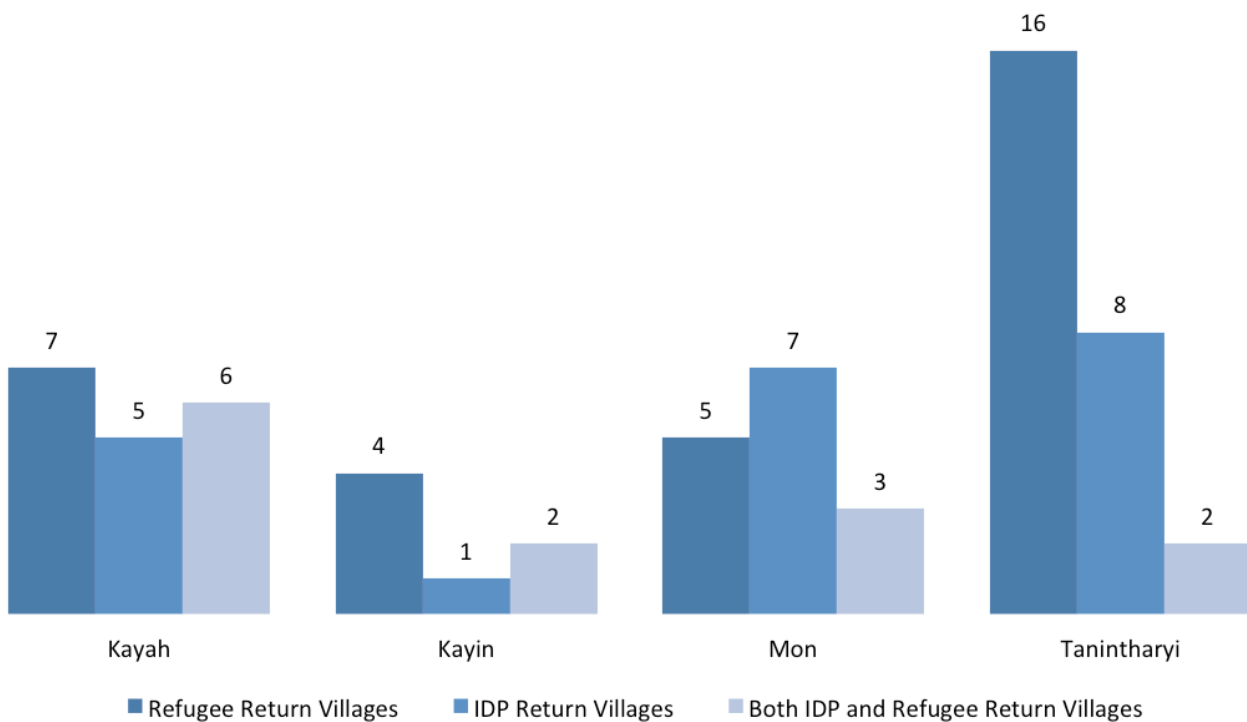
Refugee and IDP Returnees

Conversely, when examining the numbers of returnees (both individuals and households) according the key informants, far more IDPs have returned than refugees, which is consistent with the estimates in the return log. In fact, while only 492 refugee returnees have been identified in the 45 refugee return villages, 4,389 IDP returnees have been identified in the 34 IDP return villages. Moreover, the average household size is far larger for IDPs (5.8 individuals per household) than refugees (3.2 individuals per household), which strongly suggests that when IDPs return in South-East Myanmar, they are more likely than refugees to do so in large groups and complete households.
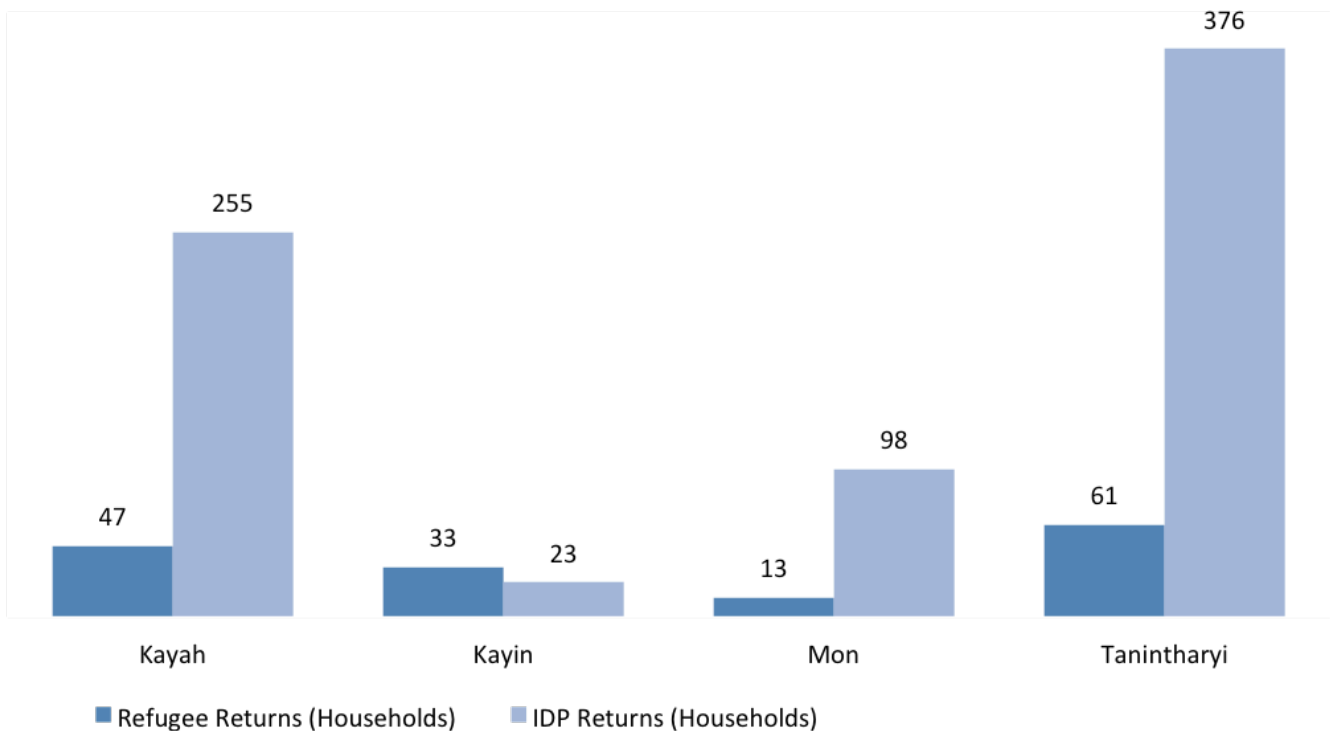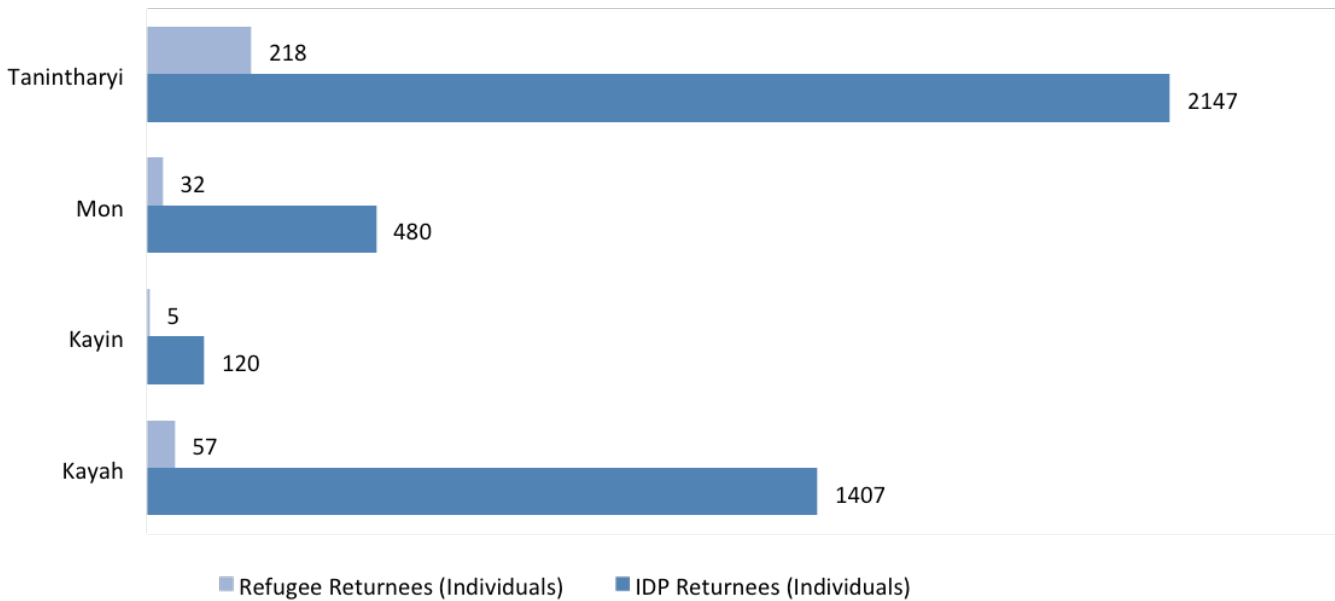
Community Needs

A crucial component of the questionnaire is the needs assessment section, which asks the key informant to identify the three priority needs of the community as a whole, from a list of approximately 25 possible options. This exercise is completed for each village assessed by UNHCR, regardless of whether returnees are identified or not. The graph below summarizes this data across all 230 villages visited in the South-East.

The results are fairly predictable, as basic services - health facilities, schools and water points – are each noted as important priority needs. There are, however, some interesting variations between the individual states and regions. For example, water points are identified as easily the greatest need in Kayah (39%), but score far lower in Tanintharyi (12%). By contrast, livelihoods are noted as a priority in Tanintharyi (21%), but rarely in Mon State (5%).

Perhaps more instructive are the individual community-level results, particularly insofar as the graph below does not distinguish between how a key informant ranks the three priority needs. Indeed, because UNHCR's approach to assistance is primarily to target return communities, rather than individual returnees, the outcome of a single assessment can be used to indicate which villages would most benefit from the provision of a particular form of support, and may lead to follow up community consultations and technical assessments.
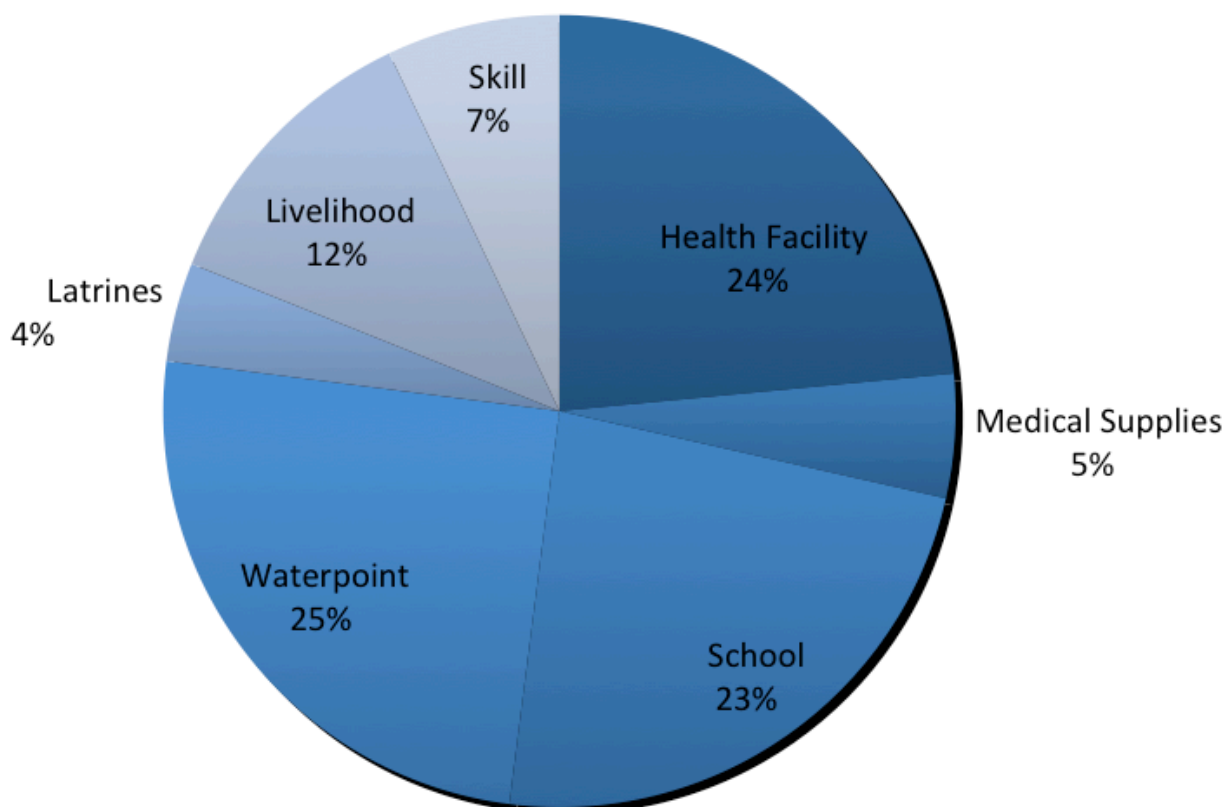
Returnee Needs

When returnees are identified, the interviewer also asks the key informant about the priority needs of this group, from the same selection of approximately 25 options. For the reasons mentioned earlier, UNHCR does not seek out individual returnees for interview, although in practice, where they are present in the village, one or more returnees sometimes join the discussion and become the key informants for this part of the assessment. The aggregate results across the 66 verified return villages in relation to returnee needs are noticeably different from the community needs identified above. Shelter emerges as the clear priority need for returnees, despite being almost completely absent among community needs.

Assessing the needs of returnees offers multiple possible benefits to UNHCR and partners. First, if returnees have acute needs that affect their ability to effectively reintegrate into the community, this assessment can capture those specific issues. For example, many of the distributions of Non-Food Items (NFIs) that UNHCR has conducted following return assessments were in response to household items such as kitchen sets being articulated as a priority for the returnees. For this purpose, the individual community assessments are useful in prompting immediate interventions.

Second, in contrasting the needs of returnees from those of the entire community, UNHCR is now reviewing whether to initiate specific programmes that should specifically target returnees, in addition to projects that benefit the entire community. However, with only 66 verified return villages, the sample size is relatively small for returnee needs, and the sampling was done primarily by convenience (ie. based on access, authorization and security). As a result, UNHCR remains reluctant to extrapolate conclusions from the returnee needs component of the assessment for the moment.
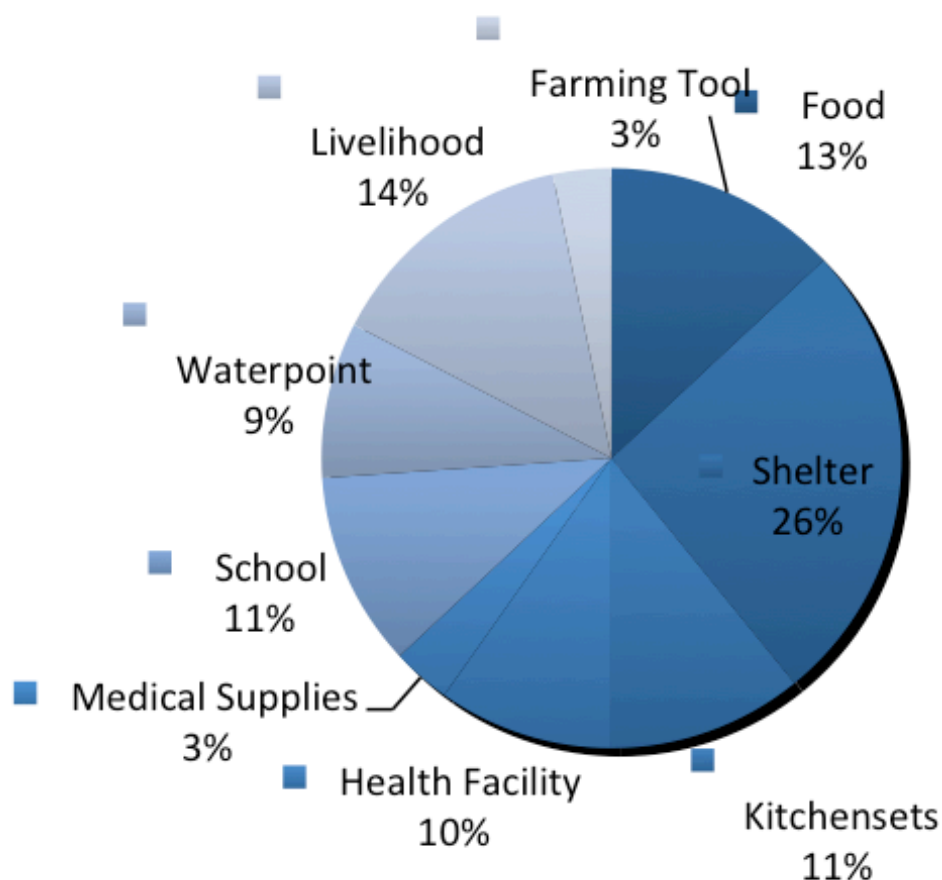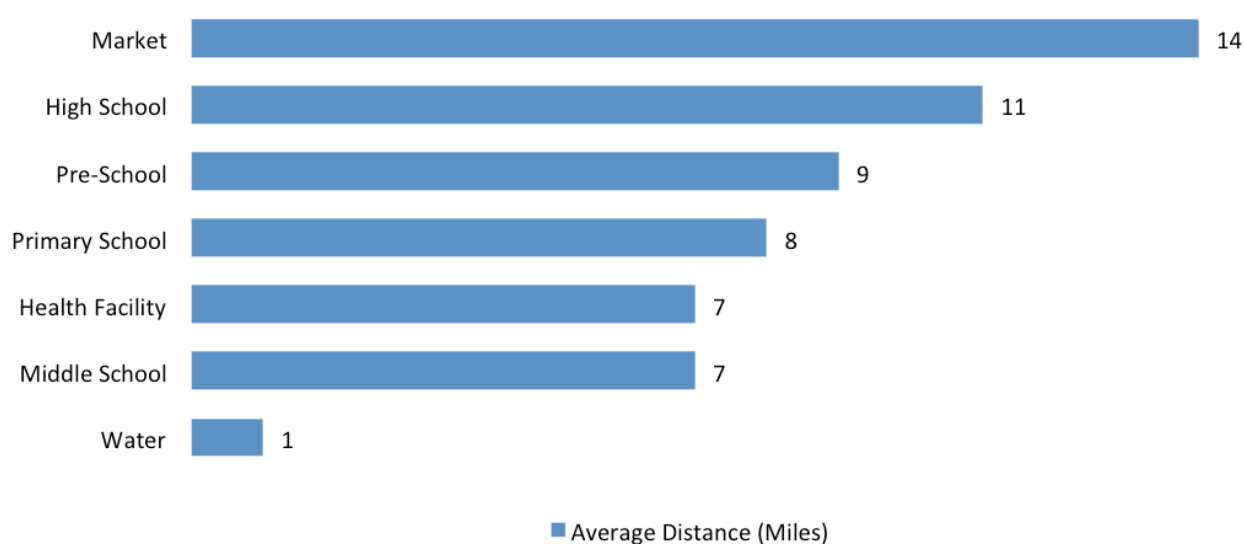
COMMUNITY PROFILES

The centrepiece of the return assessment tool is the community profile, which borrows from and improves upon the lessons of the previous village profiling exercise. After asking the key informant to identify the priority needs of the community – one of the limitations of a community-based approach is possible bias among key informants – UNHCR also inquires about the facilities, services and infrastructure in the community. The purpose is to objectively map out the profile of the village, an exercise that is again completed with each assessment, regardless of whether returnees are identified.

The community profile section begins with a focus on access to services, asking the key informant to identify which of a series of facilities are available within the village, and if they are not available, what is the distance to the nearest accessible and functioning such facility. The aggregate results for this question are summarized in the graph below. Miles are used as the unit of measurement, rather than kilometres, as that system remains the standard in South-East Myanmar.

Access to Services

Facility	Average Distance (Miles)
Market	14
High School	11
Pre-School	9
Primary School	8
Health Facility	7
Middle School	7
Water	1

Availability of Services

UNHCR also follows up with specific questions designed to further pinpoint specific services in the community. Sectors of interest include health, shelter, water, telecommunications, livelihoods, landmines, and access to electricity. There are also questions about whether the community has received any external (assistance in the past twelve months, and how, if at all, it can be reached during the dry and rainy seasons.

The graph below offers a sample of the data generated by the community profile section in regards to what health staff are regularly available in the village. While these results show, not surprisingly, that the more professional staff are less likely to be present, the profile can vary by state and region. For example, nurses are regularly available in 33% of the 40 villages assessed in Kayah State, which also scores far higher in the availability of health assistants and community health workers.
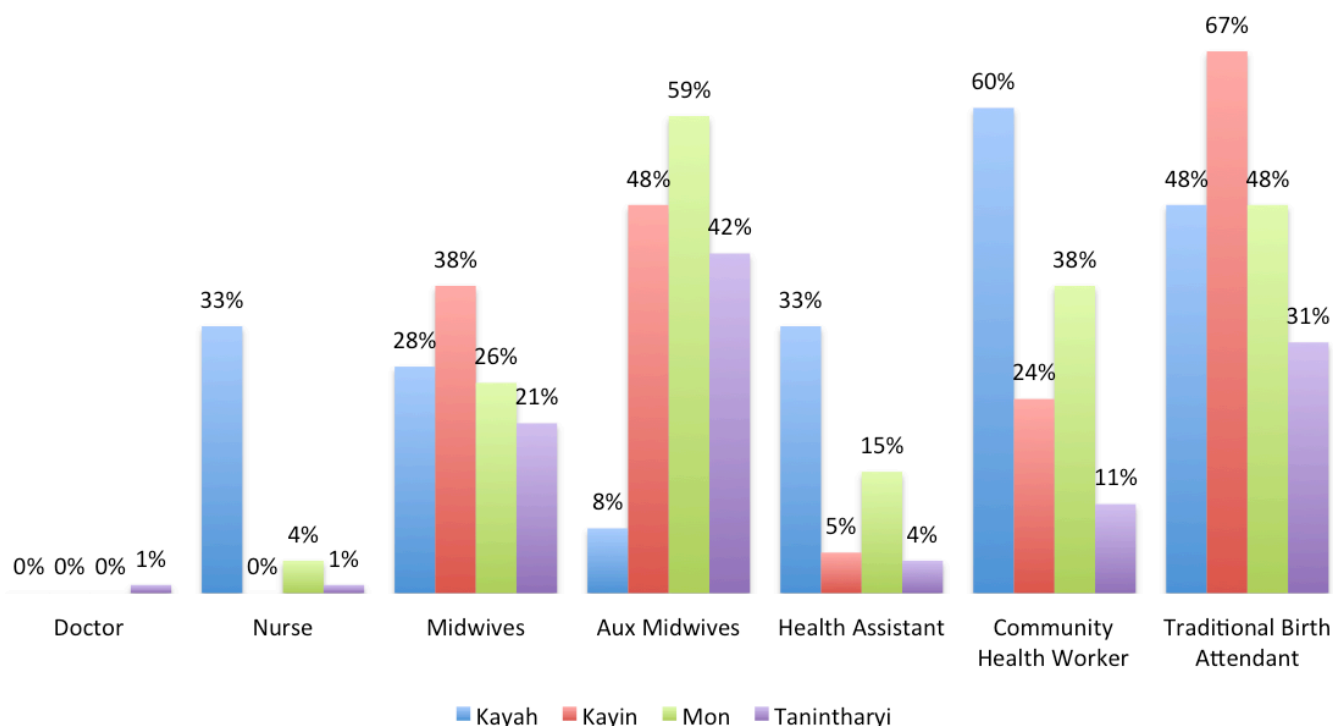
Dissemination

Although the community profile section can likewise be used to inform assistance and response, particularly in complement to the needs assessment section, its core purpose is to collect individual village information that can inform refugee decisions about return. In particular, there is considerable interest in the refugee community in Thailand about the specific situation in their villages of origin: what people do there, how they live, and what services are at their disposal. The purpose of the community profile is to enable UNHCR to respond to these inquiries with timely and reliable information.

With 230 community profiles now complete, UNHCR's offices in Myanmar and Thailand are developing individual community dashboards based on these results. These will disseminated in the refugee camps in Thailand, to provide refugees with information about the situation in communities UNHCR has accessed in South-East Myanmar, and to allow them to make informed decisions about whether they would like to return to these villages in the future.

The community profiles are also being developed as an external product, and will in time be made available to all interested parties both on a bilateral basis and through an online platform that is currently under development. In particular, UNHCR strives to provide these profiles as feedback to partners where they reported returns. Moreover, the aggregate results, both for the South-East and for individual states and regions, can also be provided to agencies interested in specific indicators of services and facilities where they operate.

PROTECTION

The return assessment questionnaire includes a selection of protection questions about the situation of returnees, including on vulnerability, identity documents, land and property, assistance in returning and whether any of the returnees were pressured to return. Each of these questions are designed to flag any immediate protection concerns, as well as to collect data on the broader trends about these key issues facing returnees, both for operational planning and to guide UNHCR's development of information products for refugees. These are only asked when IDP and/or refugee returnees are identified through the assessment.

The graph below summarizes the aggregate data on vulnerability. As always, the question employs a community-based approach, and the results therefore capture the number of verified return villages where the key informant responded that there were vulnerable persons among the IDP and/or refugee returnees. The totals in that graph are not the total number of vulnerable persons, but the number of villages where those types of vulnerabilities were reported among the group of returnees. As such, because the average number of IDP returnees per village is larger than refugee returnees (see page 5), IDP return villages are more likely to include vulnerable persons than refugee return villages.

## Vulnerability
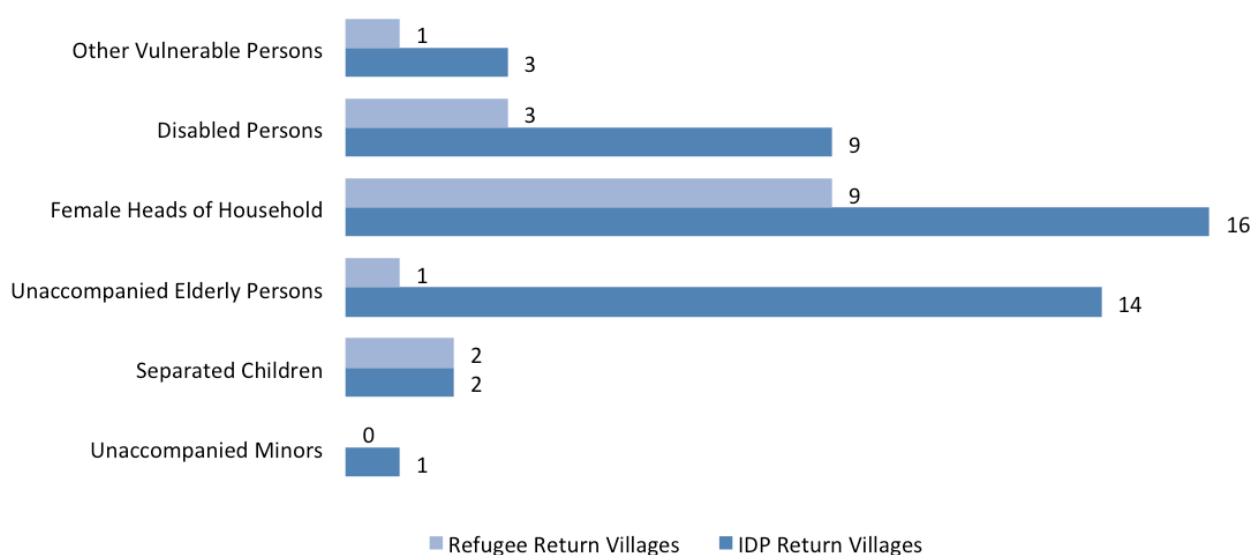
Protection Assessments

In verified return villages, UNHCR also conducts qualitative protection assessments where appropriate. These are in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the key informant about a broad range of protection issues affecting refugee and IDP return and re-integration. Space is slowly expanding to undertake such protection monitoring, and UNHCR now has approval to conduct protection assessments without government presence in three out of four states/regions.

Although serious incidents have so far been rare, several recurring issues have been identified, including: a) arbitrary taxation, which remains an issue, particularly in January each year; b) a lack of confidence in the peace process, and lingering concerns about the presence of armed actors (state and non-state) in potential return areas; c) a variety of challenges with acquiring documentation, particularly citizenship scrutiny cards for returnees. The protection assessments have also offered UNHCR a greater understanding of the coping mechanisms of returnees, especially regarding the splitting of households to spread risk between the area of displacement and village of return.

ASSISTANCE

UNHCR very carefully does not promise or raise expectations of assistance being provided to communities following a return assessment. Not only have some of these communities already received assistance, or other agencies may be active or planning programs, but UNHCR also does not wish to disrupt community coping mechanisms or encourage dependency on assistance. Moreover, implying that the responses to questions will lead directly to particular assistance could bias the responses from the key informant.

Nonetheless, UNHCR has provided assistance to 57 of the 66 verified return villages in the South-East, as part of a strategic goal of supporting the choices of refugees and IDPs who choose to return spontaneously by enhancing the capacities of receiving communities to absorb them, and contributing to confidence-building on the part of those who may be considering return in the future. As detailed in the graph below, assistance was in fact provided to 26 of the 66 villages before the return assessment, typically the provision of rural health sub-centres and water points in villages where UNHCR worked in the past, while even larger numbers have received assistance since the assessment and/or will be the beneficiary of a planned UNHCR intervention in 2014 or 2015. Evidently, some villages have received assistance more than once, primarily both before and after the assessment.
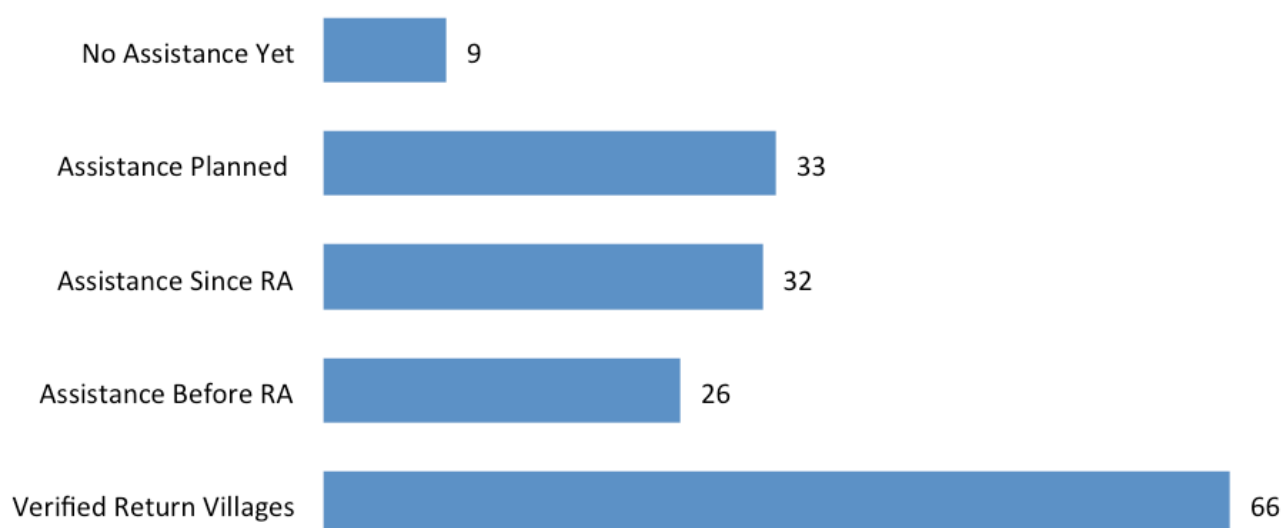
A common feature among villages where assistance has not been provided by UNHCR is the presence of other humanitarian activities. For example, in a verified return village in Kayah State, one international NGO provided WASH infrastructure in the past, and two more are planning a joint maternal and child health (MCH) program later this year. Because the community profile includes questions on external assistance to the village, and catalogues where, what and who has intervened in a village already, this data collection also enables coordination of assistance in return areas.

While assistance typically benefits the entire community, such as the provision of physical infrastructure or community-mobilization programs, sometimes it targets only vulnerable persons from both the community and the returnees. For example, the provision of NFIs following a return assessment is needs-based, and encompasses vulnerable members of the community, whether they are returnees or not. The most common form of assistance so far has been NFI distribution, but assistance may also include WASH projects, livelihoods support, community awareness-raising activities (for example, first aid, disease prevention, prevention of gender-based violence) and health or education infrastructure. Moreover, UNHCR has already used the list of verified return villages to help select target communities for interventions in the second half of 2014 and 2015.

GOING FORWARD

With the return monitoring system established in all four states and regions, UNHCR now actively uses the results from the database to inform planning and policy in South-East Myanmar. As noted before, verified return villages are increasingly being targeted for support, not only in regards to immediate response but medium and long-term interventions.

Whilst caution should be applied in extrapolating widely from the findings in a relatively small number of return locations, the needs identified may give an indication of those which will be of priority concern in the event of an acceleration of spontaneous IDP/refugee returns and/or an organised voluntary repatriation. UNHCR is now reviewing these findings, together with those of the recently completed refugee profiling survey in Thailand, as part of an ongoing recalibration of its programme in anticipation of an eventual shift towards an organised voluntary repatriation, as/when conditions become conducive to promotion of refugee return.

Another immediate focus is to actively feed back the results of the return monitoring system to refugees, as part of a broader strategy to disseminate information products to refugees in Thailand for the purpose of informing their decisions about return. The community profile dashboards mentioned above are a centrepiece of UNHCR Myanmar's effort in this respect, and the expectation is that providing these results to the refugee community will also engender open dialogue between UNHCR and the refugee community about possible areas of the return.

This information sharing is particularly crucial in light of the changing dynamics in Myanmar and Thailand. In Myanmar the momentum continues to build towards the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement and the related issues of refugee return and IDP return/resettlement have begin to receive some attention on the margins of the peace talks, and will almost certainly feature in a future political dialogue. Moreover, there are emerging discussions involving government officials and non-state actors, primarily at state/region-level, in relation to potential "pilot projects" which would target a range of conflict-affected groups, including (in the future) returning refugees or IDPs, although consultations with these groups to date have been very limited.

In Thailand, the installation of a military government has been followed by a more strict application of existing Royal Thai Government policy (for example, regarding freedom of movement outside the camps), generating a degree of anxiety on the part of refugees. The Royal Thai Government and the Government of the Union of Myanmar have nonetheless recently reconfirmed their commitment to supporting the eventual voluntary repatriation of refugees, in line with international standards, but have indicated that there is as yet no time frame. Overall, there is an emerging sense that voluntary repatriation is emerging more concretely as a future option for many.

Understood in that context, UNHCR's return monitoring system is well positioned to capture spontaneous return movements in the South-East during the upcoming dry season (November 2014 – April 2015), particularly with enhanced access in Kayin State. If, as seems likely, an acceleration in the rate of spontaneous returns occurs, a flexible, agile response will be required to ensure that IDP and refugee returnees and the communities receiving them are not exposed to protection risks and receive the support needed to ensure their sustainable reintegration.

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