

# FOOD INSECURITY SNAPSHOT: RAKHINE STATE FARMERS (SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 2020)

## Mercy Corps - Market Analysis Unit

February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021

*This document is designed as a supplement to the MAU's four Snapshots of Farmers' Perspectives. The data are based on interviews with 147 farmers in six townships, including Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk U, Pauktaw, Ponnagyun and Sittwe. Two-thirds of respondents had previously participated in Mercy Corps' agricultural support programs. Surveyors asked respondents about their food-related situation each month from September to December 2020.*

### I. Key Highlights

- **Indicators of food insecurity generally improved from September to December**, notwithstanding further deterioration of some indicators in October.
- **September registered the highest prevalence of the most severe indicators** of food insecurity, such as running out of food, skipping meals, or going hungry.
- **October was worst for the less-severe indicators of food insecurity** such as worrying about food, eating less, or eating unhealthily.
- **In December, 39% of respondents still worried about having enough food to eat**, although this was nearly half of the October high of 72%.
- **In December, 20-25% of respondents were still unable to eat healthy meals**, ate only a few kinds of food, and ate less than they thought they should (down from 40-60% in October).
- **From September to December, fewer than 12% of respondents skipped meals**, went hungry, and went a day without eating.
- **Respondents furthest from township centers more often reported food insecurity**, particularly in September.

### II. Background

The **Food Insecurity Experience Scale Survey Module (FIES-SM)** is a series of questions designed by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations to measure individual or household access to adequate food. FIES-SM consists of eight questions focused on behaviors and experiences associated with difficulty in access to food due to resource constraints. The FIES-SM questions are designed to be analyzed together as a composite scale, however this document presents a simple summary of responses for each question.

### III. Data Summary

**General Observations** – Less-severe indicators of food insecurity were widely reported in September and worsened in October before improving in November and December. For example, the portion of respondents who worried about not having enough food to eat rose from 61% in September to 72% in October, before falling to 39% in December (Charts 1-8). Similarly, the portion who said they ate less than they thought they should rose from 34% in September to 46% in October but fell to 21% in December. Others indicators were also prevalent but did not spike as dramatically in October. For example, 60% of respondents said they were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food in both September and October, and 40% said they ate only a few kinds of foods. Both indicators improved by December, falling to 24% and 20%, respectively.

**The indicators which measure the most severe signs of food insecurity were most widely reported in September, but improved significantly beginning in October.** For example, September saw the highest rates of respondents saying they ran out of food, skipped a meal, or went hungry (10-20% of respondents each). However, from October onward each of these was reported by less than 10% of respondents, and by December each was reported by just 1-3% of respondents.

**Township Subgroups – Across all townships, indicators of food insecurity appear to have followed a similar trend, being worst in September-October and improving thereafter.** Slightly more variation between townships was visible in September and October when rates were highest. However, caution should be taken in reading too much into these figures as individual township samples were very small (only 20-35 respondents each, Charts 9-12).

**Rural Subgroups – Some food insecurity indicators were more prevalent among respondents who self-identified as living in more remote locations.** Respondents who said they lived further from township centers or markets more often reported food insecurity measures than those who did not. The largest such differences between the two groups were visible in September when food insecurity was highest (Charts 13-16).

## **IV. Causes of Change in Food Insecurity**

**The FIES-SM indicators cannot explain the causes of food insecurity, but they may be tied to a fourth-quarter recovery from the more severe effects of Rakhine State's mid-August rise in COVID-19 cases.** Data gathered in mid-September suggest that access to food in town markets worsened at that time, when many businesses and households faced travel restrictions (*MAU Snapshot of Market Actor Perspectives – Sept. 22*). For example, nearly half of vendors and traders from eight townships said prices were rising for vegetables and items like oil and pulses, and one-quarter said availability was declining. One-quarter also said prices for rice were rising at that time. Furthermore, later interviews in October suggested that some root causes of this—like supply and transportation bottlenecks caused by travel restrictions—had begun to improve (*MAU Snapshot of Market Actor Perspectives – Nov. 30*). Unfortunately, a proper baseline for food insecurity in Rakhine State is unavailable, but it is plausible that food insecurity worsened in September and October during the worst effects of the local COVID-19 outbreak and improved in November and December when those effects began to recede.<sup>1</sup>

**Changes in food insecurity indicators may also be tied to reduced conflict in the region, particularly after the November 8 Myanmar general election.** November and December saw fewer armed clashes between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army as they sought a negotiated solution to election concerns. Data gathered from respondents from Dec. 2 onward suggests that fewer clashes likely helped reduce transportation and livelihood challenges from November onward (*Snapshots of Farmers' Perspectives – Jan. 5 and Jan. 26*). For example, the portion of respondents who reported conflict-related livelihood challenges fell from 49% in early-November to just 13% in early-January. In the same period, the portion who reported transportation-related challenges fell from 56% to just 12%. Although the data in these reports cannot establish a conclusive relationship, it suggests that conflict-related improvements in transportation and livelihoods may have helped improve food security.

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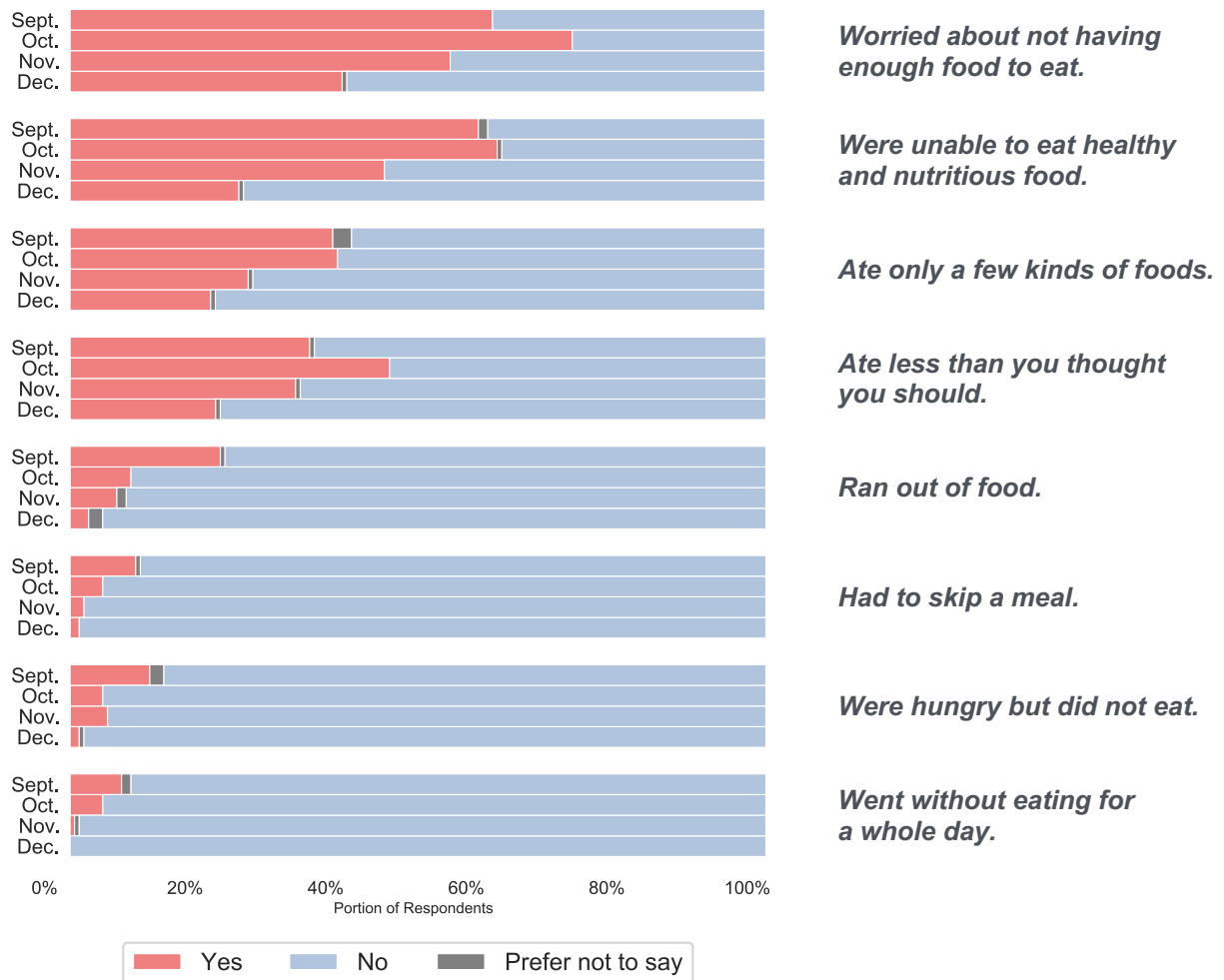
<sup>1</sup> The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) published similar food insecurity indicators measured in Yangon and the Delta in September and October 2020. The data show lower rates for this period in Yangon, such as 6-8% running out of food (compared to 9-22% in Rakhine), 17-18% eating less (34-46% in Rakhine), and 25-30% lacking access to healthy food (59-61% in Rakhine). The context differs significantly, but this may offer a starting point for contextualizing data in this report.

## V. Charts

Charts 1-8 summarize all responses for eight indicators of food insecurity. Charts 9-16 provide subgroup disaggregates for four indicators with the widest incidence. Disaggregates are intended to provide general impressions only and should not be interpreted as causal or definitive.

### Charts 1-8. Overall Responses

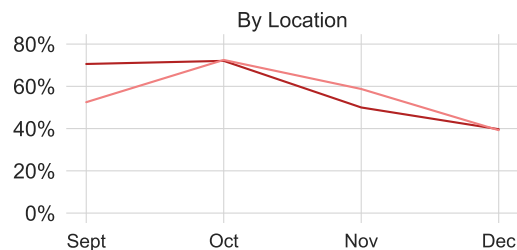
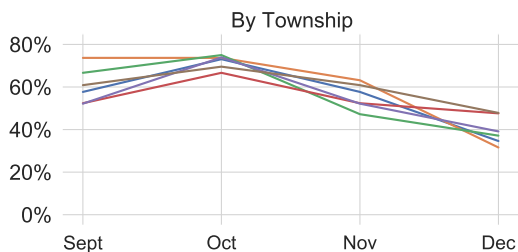
*"In the past 30 days, was there a time when you or others in your household..."*



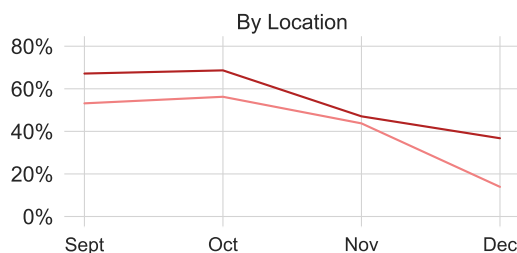
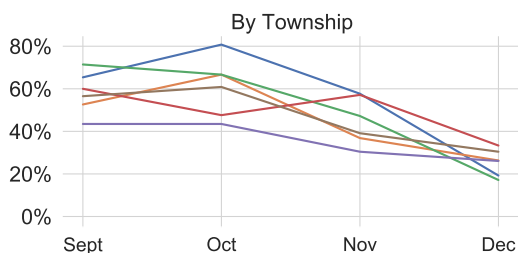
## Charts 9-16. Subgroup Disaggregates

*"In the past 30 days, was there a time when you or others in your household..."*

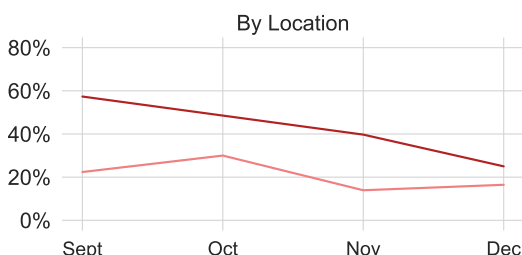
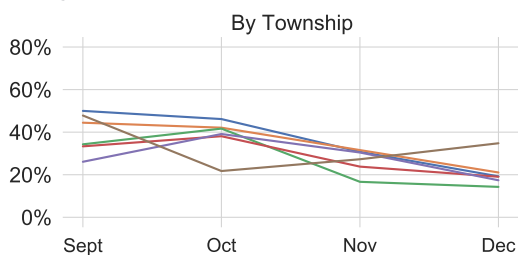
### **Worried about not having enough food to eat.**



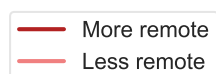
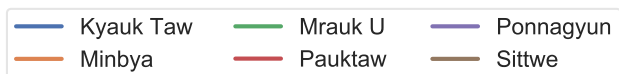
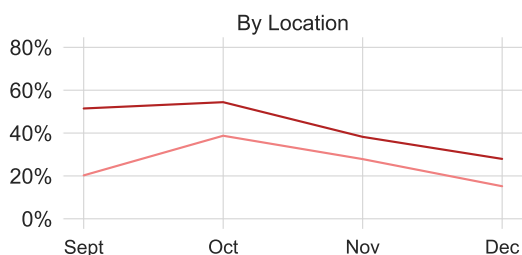
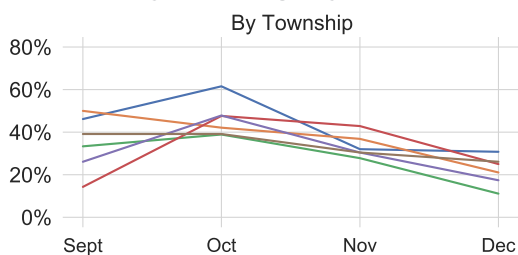
### **Were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food.**



### **Ate only a few kinds of food.**



### **Ate less than you thought you should.**



## **Mercy Corps' Market Analysis Unit (MAU)**

The Market Analysis Unit provides development practitioners and policymakers operating in Rakhine State with data and analysis to better understand the present and potential impacts of COVID-19, conflict and other crises on:

- **Household purchasing power, coping mechanisms and access to basic needs;**
- **Value chains**, including **trade** (ag. Inputs, machinery, supply), **cross-border dynamics**, and **market functionality** (particularly as it relates to **food systems**);
- **Financial services**, including **financial services providers**, household and business **access to finance** and **remittances**; and
- **Labor markets** (formal and informal), with a focus on agricultural labor and low wage sectors (construction, factories, food services).

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