

REPORT



2025

ETHNIC HEALTH RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT SEMINAR

Date: May 19 - 20, 2025

Venue: Wattana Village Resort, Mae Sot, Thailand

Theme: Health Systems in Disrupted Situations

Welcome Message



Dr. Cynthia Maung
The director of Mae Tao Clinic

Dear All the participants,

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who participated in this seminar, including organizers and participants, representatives from all the organizations, health professionals, university representatives, and partner organizations, for your unwavering support and commitment.

We have faced many difficulties over the years, including political instability, funding gaps, and the challenges of serving migrants and conflict-affected populations. Following the coup, despite the worsening situation, we have seen increased collaboration and coordination among health organizations working along the border and within Myanmar.

To our fellow humanitarian organizations, universities, and health professionals, thank you for your collaboration and partnership. We are strong together, and your support and collaboration have helped us expand opportunity and help more people in need.

We will continue to serve all the communities we currently support, and over time, work to expand our reach and deepen our impact across the region. Through dialogue, we can deepen our understanding of the services we provide, identify gaps, and strengthen our collective efforts moving forward.

Dr. Cynthia Maung
Director of Mae Tao Clinic

Chair's Note

Welcome Message



Dr. Zaw Wai Soe
Minister of Health and Education,
National Unity Government

Dear Esteemed Participants,

I would also like to express my appreciation and gratitude to the Burma Medical Association (BMA) and Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) for hosting this important research seminar and all the participants for taking part in this event.

Building a strong health system in times of crisis and disruption requires both resilience and evidence-based approaches. Understanding the situation on the ground and creating a health system that can adapt and benefit everyone, particularly in conflict-affected areas, requires research and data.

I would especially like to express my gratitude to all the researchers, presenters, and organizers who helped make this seminar possible.

I am excited to see what this research seminar will produce, and I believe this kind of Ethnic Health Research and Development seminar is essential. I am determined to support and take part in more initiatives like this in the future.

Dr. Zaw Wai Soe
Minister of Health and Education, National Unity Government

Chair's Note

Welcome Message



Saw Win Kyaw
Deputy Chief, KNU- KDHW

Dear Esteemed Participants,

I am honored to speak on behalf of the Karen National Union- Karen Department of Health and Welfare. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) and the Burma Medical Association (BMA) for organizing this important seminar.

When we look closely at the health situation along the Karen-Thai border, it is clear that we are still facing significant challenges. In certain places, outbreaks of diseases such as polio, filariasis, and leprosy are still occurring because of a weak and unsystematic healthcare system. Vaccination coverage is very low in areas like Pha Pon, Karen state. In addition, malnutrition is widespread, and some areas are still facing serious shortages of food and clean water, especially areas affected by recent flooding.

Legitimacy and the political system are closely related to these issues. We must put in more effort to advocate for leaders, both within and beyond our organizations. It is essential to ensure that all Ethnic Health Organizations (EHOs) feel their roles and areas of responsibility are respected.

Thank you so much for allowing me to join this seminar. For the benefit of the communities as well as the health and welfare of everyone in the nation, we stand ready to continue our contributions and cooperation.

Saw Win Kyaw
Deputy Chief, KNU- KDHW

Chair's Note

Welcome Message



Nai Aye Lwin
Secretary, BMA-BPHWT

Dear Esteemed Participants,

I am grateful for the opportunity to give such a welcome speech in this significant seminar. Special thanks to the chairpersons, the National Unity Government (NUG), researchers, and all the participants.

We have been working to create health policies that address the needs of our communities for more than a decade. While providing essential health services throughout conflict-affected areas, Ethnic Health Organizations (EHOs) have persisted in adapting and implementing the federal health system. We have worked with international institutions, including Johns Hopkins, and Thai universities. These collaborations have been essential to our efforts to increase institutional knowledge and service quality. However, to continue improving our services, we require more high-quality data and research that represent our ethnic health organizations.

To develop an inclusive federal health system, we need to strengthen collaboration and coordination between organizations, institutions, and professionals across borders. I believe that we can create a better health system that can serve the needs of our communities.

Nai Aye Lwin
Secretary, BMA-BPHWT

Introduction

The Ethnic Health Research and Development Seminar 2025 was convened by the Burma Medical Association (BMA) in collaboration with Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) on May 19–20, 2025, at the Thai-Burma border under the overarching theme, “Health Systems in Disrupted Situations.”

The seminar aimed to freshen research and development efforts, particularly in light of the significant challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing disruptions following the 2021 military coup d'état in Burma. The seminar highlighted ongoing health challenges in conflict-affected and border areas, including limited service access, weak referral systems, and unmet needs of displaced populations. Drawing from diverse research studies, key priorities emerged: strengthen local research leadership, improve data and training systems, and promote sustainable, equity-focused financing. Emphasis was placed on cross-border collaboration and evidence-based, locally led approaches to build a resilient and inclusive federal health system.

Seminar Overview

Chairpersons and Moderators

Chairpersons	Dr. Cynthia Maung, Dr. Myint Cho
Moderators	Dr. Aung Myint Thu, Nwe Ni Aung, Wah Wah Aung, Hay Mar Wai

Participants

Males	80
Females	94

The seminar achieved excellent participation with strong gender representation

A total of 174 participants (80 male and 94 female) attended the seminar. Attendees included representatives from Ethnic Health Organizations (EHOs), Ethnic Community-Based Health Organizations (ECBHOs), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, public health experts, community health workers, and humanitarian partners.

Objectives

The seminar was organized with the primary objectives of:

- Enhancing research capacity among ethnic health organizations
- Fostering collaboration across sectors and borders
- Advocating for strengthened cross-border assistance mechanisms

Highlights

Day 1 (May 19, 2025)

On the first day of the Ethnic Health Research and Development Seminar 2025, eleven research topics related to health systems in disrupted situations were presented;

- The first presentation, titled “A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH PATTERNS AND GAPS OF HEALTH SYSTEM STRATEGIES IN MYANMAR CONFLICT SETTINGS,” was presented by Tay Zar Lynn from Chiang Mai University. The research focused predominantly on border regions, with distinct thematic clusters around refugee health, women's health/violence, and COVID-19 response. Analyses were conducted using VOSviewer and QGIS to visualize keyword clusters and author affiliations. While international support has been valuable, the researcher noted the disparity in resources and representation, urging for greater investment in training and funding to build Myanmar-based research capacity. In addition, the researcher emphasized the significance of community-led initiatives and advancing research on referral networks for emergency obstetric care, non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and war injuries.
- Secondly, “Mapping the Community Health Worker Programs in Southeast and Northwest Regions of Myanmar” was delivered by Dr. Zay Yar Phyo Aung, representing Community Partners International (CPI). The research highlighted a depth assessment of the Community Health Worker (CHW) roles, structures, and gaps in the ethnic controlled areas. Notably, the Northwest region has better-organized career advancement models and community mobilization initiatives compared to the Southeast region in Myanmar. The presentation provided key recommendations, such as standardizing CHW roles, training models, clarifying incentive structures for both financial and non-financial rewards, strengthening accreditation systems, and promoting collaboration between EHOs and the central-level health authorities for broader policy alignment and future system integration.
- Saw Kyaw Myint presented “Evidence to Impact: Advancing the Ethical and Quality of Cardiovascular Disease Care in Ethnic Health Systems through Community-Based Model”. The researcher highlighted that although infectious diseases are prioritized by EHOs, Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) among EHOs remain low. Key points in the presentation included the importance of raising NCDs, strengthening CHW/VHW capacity with context-specific training, and developing contingency plans to ensure service delivery. The researcher emphasized that while cardiovascular disease (CVD) is one of Myanmar’s leading causes of death, effective and consistent care is limited, especially in regions served by Ethnic Health Organizations (EHOs). The researcher focused on how frontline health workers' confidence, knowledge, and behaviors can be greatly enhanced by carefully planned, context-specific training and continuous supervision.

- Dr. Nay Lynn Htet presented the topic “OUTCOME OF TAILORED TRAININGS ON CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASES RELATED KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE OF MEDICS AND VILLAGE HEALTH WORKERS IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED SETTING”. The presentation highlighted the impact of cardiovascular disease (CVD) training delivered to medics and village health workers (VHW) operating in conflict-affected areas. Key challenges included human resources, supply chain gaps, data system limitations, and high workloads. The presentation emphasized the importance of continued support, supervision, and the integration of VHW.
- Aye Nyein Ei from Community Partners International (CPI) presented her study titled “Implementation of Nutrition-Sensitive Interventions in Remote Rural Populations Experiencing Conflict in Karen State, Myanmar: An Equity-Focused Application of the RE-AIM Framework.” The research focused on Project Nourish, which aimed to improve maternal and child nutrition during the critical first 1,000 days through a combination of behavior change communication, mother support groups, community gardens, sanitation improvements, and cash transfers. The researcher prioritized the need to adapt program design and implementation, particularly those related to poverty and conflicts. Finally, the researcher recommended quality assessments and community-centered modifications in conclusion.
- “Survey of Myanmar Migrants Towards Influenza Vaccination and Respiratory Infections Along the Thai-Myanmar Border in Tak Province” was presented by Mae Fah Luang University (MFU). The research was conducted in partnership with the Mae Tao Clinic (MTC), the Thai Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reflecting an encouraging model of cross-border collaboration. The study looked into the health-seeking behaviours and obstacles to influenza vaccination among migrants in Thai-Myanmar Border. The research recommended sustained cross-border partnerships and policy advocacy to address gaps in healthcare access, particularly for undocumented migrants, and encouraged continued support for migrants in shaping healthcare services in border contexts.
- A seasoned humanitarian and cross-border assistance professional with decades of experience with Myanmar issues, Duncan McArthur delivered "Strategic Financing of Cross-Border Aid." The researcher focused on the urgency of restructuring aid financing for the better support of vulnerable populations in Myanmar's ethnic and conflict-affected areas, especially after the military coup. The researcher advocated for a locally driven, decentralized financing approach that supports sub-national authorities and ethnic health organizations.
- Dr. Eindra Htoo presented “ENHANCING ETHNIC HEALTH ORGANIZATION CLINIC SERVICES THROUGH THE STRATEGIC PURCHASING PILOT PROJECT IN KAREN STATE, MYANMAR”. The research focused on how healthcare delivery, accountability, and autonomy can be strengthened through performance-based financing mechanisms. Dr. Eindra Htoo highlighted that data reporting is customized based on available information and is managed by Strategic Purchasing Projects (SPP) coordinators and the overseeing mother organizations. The researcher noted that the SPP model helps improve healthcare delivery in EHO settings. However, addressing coverage gaps, especially in EHO clinics, and reinforcing understanding of SPP are essential for future development.
- Dr. Nang Lyan Zar Presented “2024 NUTRITION SURVEY OF CHILDREN (0-59 MONTHS) IN DISPLACED PERSONS RESIDING IN TEMPORARY SHELTERS ALONG THAI-MYANMAR BORDER”. The survey demonstrated that newly arrived displaced people are not being systematically screened. And there has been no comparative analysis between IDPs and refugees, although the nutritional needs of these vulnerable groups are still high. The researcher noted that even the Border Consortium (TBC) food program was recently cut off by USAID, and it created a double burden for the vulnerable population. Therefore, Dr. Nang Lyan Zar emphasized the significance of targeted nutrition support, early screening, and developing sustainable funding mechanisms to make sure essential services are not disrupted in these fragile settings.

- **IMPACT OF THE MYANMAR MILITARY COUP ON LOW BIRTH WEIGHT: A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF ANTENATAL AND DELIVERY DATA FROM KAREN STATE (2021–2024)** was presented by Hung Kee Htang. The presenter analysed antenatal care (ANC), delivery records, and low birth weight (LBW) trends among internally displaced populations (IDPs) in Karen State. It is noticeable that maternal malnutrition appears to be at least five times more common than child malnutrition in the area. In addition to structural challenges, behavioral and social factors were discussed. The researcher concluded the presentation by giving recommendations such as strengthening maternal nutrition and antenatal care services in IDP settings, and implementing targeted community-based awareness programs.
- **“UTILIZATION OF ANTENATAL CARE SERVICES AMONG WOMEN RESIDING IN PROTRACTED INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS CAMPS IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE AND SOUTHERN KACHIN STATE, MYANMAR”** was presented by Nang Kham Naw from Mahidol University. The research emphasized how important antenatal care (ANC) is for reducing maternal and newborn mortality, especially in conflict-affected areas. Although there are available ANC services in the camps with no cost, challenges such as limited service hours and the need to travel outside of the camps for comprehensive care remain. Therefore, the researcher made recommendations for the comprehensive and accessible ANC services through collaboration for the improvement of maternal health care services in IDP camps.

Highlights

Day 2 (May 20, 2025)

On the second day of the Ethnic Health Research and Development Seminar 2025, twelve research topics were presented;

- Dr. Zaw Soe Htike from Mae Tao Clinic presented a relevant assessment of emergency care facilities in conflict-affected areas, titled **“HEALTHCARE FACILITY EMERGENCY CARE NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN SOUTHERN SHAN STATE AND KAREN STATE, BURMA”**. The research found that although basic emergency care is available, critical gaps, including unreliable electricity, inadequate diagnostic capabilities, and a lack of protocols for emergency care, raise concerns about effective service delivery. The adaptation of the HEAT tool’s scoring system to reflect local context was thoughtful. However, further discussion is needed on how the study’s recommendations can be operationalized under current situations of insecurity and resource scarcity. The presentation concluded by giving recommendations such as developing context-specific emergency care protocols and strengthening basic infrastructure.
- Naw The' Phyu from Khon Kaen University, presented the research paper, titled **“Prevalence and Sociodemographic Determinants of Betel Quid Chewing Among Myanmar Migrants in Northern Thailand”**. The researcher highlighted comprehensive data from 556 participants, which found that 50.9% of respondents were current betel quid users. According to the research, Maesot had the highest prevalence due to high numbers of newcomers, the normalization of betel chewing, even among those in leadership positions. In order to address this behaviour at the community and policy levels, the researcher underlined the need for health education and public health initiatives, and possible regulatory approaches.
- **“STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY-BASED PRIMARY HEALTH CARE FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN BURMA: IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF BPHWT SERVICES”** was presented by Kyaw Thurein Htun from the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT). The researcher highlighted that malnutrition rates appear to be declining, while malaria incidence is still high after the military coup in 2021. Challenges such as poor birth registration and difficulties tracking immunization in mobile communities were highlighted, with some children under five having greater immunization rates than those under two. The research provided recommendations focusing on enhancing standardized monitoring tools, improving vaccine coverage among displaced and mobile populations, and strengthening birth documentation systems in conflict-affected areas.

- The Joint Information Coordination Centre (JICC) gave a presentation describing its three primary areas of focus: coordination, research, and training. It also mentioned that a fourth strategic pillar will likely be established shortly. JICC underlined the region's substantial migrant population, which accounts for about one-third of health service users, and the continuous burden this places on regional health systems.
- “CO-DESIGN AND EVALUATION OF A SCALABLE ENTERTAINMENT-EDUCATION INTERVENTION FOR REDUCING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND PROMOTING POSITIVE PARENTING AMONG MIGRANT CAREGIVERS ON THE THAILAND-MYANMAR BORDER” was presented by Nway Nway Oo and Khine Zar Lwin from Global Parenting Initiative (GPI). The presenters noted the importance of parenting programs to overall health outcomes, although many people are not typically seen as it is related to health. The presenters showed a short film that showed a significant reduction on physical violence and improved positive parenting practices. One participant inquired about online access to the video, to which the presenters responded that, due to contractual limitations, the film cannot be published publicly. The session finished with a strong endorsement of community-led behavioral interventions such as entertainment education, as well as encouraging engagement with local community support.
- Dr. Aung Myint Thu presented “Declining Accuracy of Malaria Rapid Diagnostic Tests in Kayin State, Myanmar: Findings and Implications”, highlighting the comparison of two malaria rapid diagnostic tests, such as Abbott-Bioline™ and First Response®. The researchers advocated for independent validation of RDTs before procurement, transparent reporting of such findings to the Global Fund and WHO, and a shift toward locally informed product selection. Dr. Aung emphasized the significance of operational research in ensuring diagnostic accuracy, particularly in conflict-affected areas.
- The title, “MORE THAN THREE DECADES OF CAPACITY BUILDING MILESTONES BY THE BURMA MEDICAL ASSOCIATION,” was given by Dr. Nyein Htet Yan. Through a variety of training programs, such as Community Health Worker, Medic, Maternal and Child Health, Emergency Obstetric Care, and Public Health Training, BMA has been promoting the right to health of the people, enhancing the capacity building of health workers, and supporting their accreditation. The presenter also acknowledged the challenges, such as budget limitation, difficulties in participant selection (eg, sending a janitor for refresher courses). The presentation closed with some key recommendations such as selecting training participants through quality assurance measures, mapping training needs based on population and facility distribution, and strengthening data systems to track training impact and gaps.
- Dr. Aung Thura Htoo presented “STRENGTHENING HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEM AT MAE TAO CLINIC: ADOPTION OF AN ELECTRONIC MEDICAL RECORD SYSTEM”. The presenter highlighted that the EMR was piloted in two phases between 2023 and 2024, including around 90 staff members and 620+ patients, with the goal of improving clinical continuity and data accuracy. The technology increased staff digital capability, decreased transcribing errors, and improved record access. However, problems like the usage of parallel paper, low levels of computer literacy, and gaps in infrastructure still exist. The survey revealed that the political instability after the 2021 coup had an impact on service utilization trends. The audience discussed the impacts of political changes, clarification on M-Fund coverage, feasibility of capturing more detailed patient mobility data.

- Saw Than Lwin from Mae Tao Clinic presented an overview of the Community Ethical Advisory Board (CEAB). The presenter demonstrated that CEAB has received an increasing number of proposals in recent years, and approximately 90% of submissions are health-related proposals. It is noted that CEAB is essential in promoting ethical standards in community-based research. The presentation is closed by making key recommendations such as continuing to raise awareness about CEAB's roles and procedures, strengthening CEAB's capacity to handle increasing proposals and diverse research topics, and encouraging broader community engagement.
- “Health under Crisis: Cross-Border Healthcare and Ethnic Health System responses along the Thailand-Myanmar Border”, the qualitative research was presented by Than Tun Oo. The researcher emphasized the ethnic health cross-border collaboration and coordination after the military coup. In addition, it highlighted how political instability and human rights violations significantly affect health outcomes, mentioning the importance of integrating Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) networks into cross-border health systems. The presenter called for a rights-based approach in health system strengthening and collaboration between health actors and human rights organizations.
- Nang Ei Lawnt Ying presented the implementation and challenges that the M-Fund project faces. The presenter highlighted that M-Fund covers over 250 clinics and allows for enrollment and services via online platforms. The primary aim is to empower the underserved population to be able to access quality health care services. A key topic of discussion on the issues was the financial sustainability of the model, the current political instability, and the irregular payment capacity of M-Fund members. There is a possibility for the refugees in Thailand to be M-Fund members in the future when the political situation gets better.
- The final presentation, focusing on the Ethnic Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS), was presented by Naw Tee Ter Sway. It covered a retrospective study including the data and survey from approximately 800,000 people across ethnic areas. The presentation focused on the results from the key health and demographic survey collected from the community. The presenter highlighted that the difficulties in producing accurate estimates of Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) are due to limitations in data availability. The presenter indicated hope for more detailed and reliable MMR data in the future through improved methodological preparation. Finally, the presentation was closed by highlighting the importance and complexity of data collection in conflict-affected areas and the need for continued support in health surveillance systems.

Key Achievements

A total of twenty-three research papers were successfully presented in the two-day Ethnic Health Research and Development Seminar 2025. The seminar fostered cross-border collaboration, coordination, knowledge exchange, and advocacy efforts. Moreover, the seminar highlighted critical and ongoing health challenges faced by conflict-affected and border communities, including limited access to healthcare services, weak referral systems, and the persistent unmet needs of displaced populations. In addition to oral presentations, four poster presentations were showcased as below;

- LIMINAL HEALTH SYSTEMS: EXPLORING THE RESILIENCE STRATEGIES OF HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS AND COMMUNITIES ALONG THE THAILAND-MYANMAR BORDER
- HARNESSING HEALTH INFORMATION SYSTEMS TO STRENGTHEN CARE FOR DISPLACED POPULATIONS ALONG THE THAILAND-MYANMAR BORDER
- INEQUITIES IN COVERAGE OF CHILD ILLNESS INTERVENTIONS IN REMOTE AREAS OF ARMED CONFLICT IN MYANMAR
- MICROFILARIA INFECTION IN KAYIN STATE, MYANMAR: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

Way Forward

The Ethnic Health Research and Development Seminar brought together a diverse group of leaders, researchers, and practitioners working along the Thailand-Myanmar border and in conflict-affected areas. Moving forward, participants highlighted the need to emphasize the significance of collaboration, resilience, and the importance of investment in health workforce capacity and health service delivery.

Conclusion

It is recognized that the seminar concluded with strong inspirational notes delivered by Dr. Cynthia Maung, Dr. Myint Cho, and Dr. Khin Saw Win. The closing speeches included satisfaction and appreciation to all the researchers, participants, and representatives from all the organizations.

All the researchers, organizers, chairpersons, moderators, and organizations that participated in the seminar were honored with certificates of appreciation and certificates of participation. In short, the Ethnic Health Research and Development Seminar (EHRDS) served as a valuable platform and a bridge to enhance future collaboration, research development, and health equity in ethnic areas and beyond.

