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# SCHOOLING AND CONFLICT: ETHNIC EDUCATION AND MOTHER TONGUE-BASED TEACHING IN MYANMAR

Ashley South and Marie Lall

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# SCHOOLING AND CONFLICT: ETHNIC EDUCATION AND MOTHER TONGUE-BASED TEACHING IN MYANMAR

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## ONE: INTRODUCTION

This policy brief focuses on two important issues in Myanmar: education reform, and the peace process and broader political transition.<sup>1</sup> These are mother-tongue-based (MTB) teaching in state and nongovernment schools in Myanmar – what languages are used in classrooms – and the relationship between various types of schools in the country, particularly those administered by the government and those by ethnic armed groups (EAGs). Two key terms require definition. “Ethnic education” refers to teaching provided by ethnic stakeholders, both civil society actors and EAGs. “Mother-tongue-based teaching” is instruction in a child’s first language, usually with a gradual transition to a second language or foreign language.

This brief takes Kachin and Mon states as case studies, together with some coverage of the situation in Karen (Kayin) areas and elsewhere. Focusing on Kachin and Mon allows for an examination of contexts where key EAGs that agreed to ceasefires with the military government of Myanmar – the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), in 1994, and the New Mon State Party (NMSP), in 1995. The KIO ceasefire broke down in 2011 and returned to armed conflict, while the NMSP truce has held, despite considerable political stress. These cases allow for a “controlled comparison” of the two different contexts.

The military government that held power between 1962 and 2011 was closely identified with the Burman ethnic majority. During this period, Burmese (the majority language) became the sole language of governance and education, while the languages of ethnic minorities – or “ethnic nationalities” as many groups prefer to be designated – were suppressed and marginalized.<sup>2</sup> The “Burmanization” of state and society has constituted one of the primary grievances of ethnic leaders, who have mobilized minority communities to resist militarized central government authority, contributing to the world’s most protracted armed conflict.

Despite, and because of, the repressive system, EAGs and ethnic civil society have developed MTB education systems to serve ethnic communities in their own language and preserve their culture, literature, and traditions in the face of Burmanization policies. The histories of Mon, Karen, and Kachin education organizations illustrate the different EAG governance regimes and service delivery systems that developed outside the state education system over the past half century in Myanmar.

This brief identifies key issues surrounding mother-tongue education and explores ways to provide equitable education and MTB teaching for all Myanmar’s children. It focuses on basic education (pre-tertiary school) and does not address further education, higher education, or teacher training, except in passing. It also does not address the education situation for migrants from Myanmar, whether in Thailand or other neighboring countries.

## TWO: BACKGROUND

### 2.1: MTB and ethnic education in Myanmar

Since the late 1940s, the right to MTB education has been an issue for Myanmar’s prolonged ethnic and state-society conflicts. At a minimum, ethnic nationalists have demanded the teaching of minority languages in schools (especially state schools). A stronger version of this position has demanded teaching of the full curriculum in the mother tongue, at least through primary school.

Language policies are not only linked to concerns about learning and cognition in schools. In many developing countries, especially those with diverse ethnic groups and subject to state-society conflict, state authorities are often concerned that promoting minority languages and ethnic identities will lead to greater social division. Government and non-state education regimes often use language policy to serve other purposes, such as building a national identity. This can discriminate against “others,” including vulnerable minority groups, and lead to resentment, resistance, and conflict.

#### *Mon*

Conflict between the NMSP and the government began with the NMSP’s founding shortly after independence. A 1995 ceasefire between the NMSP and government brought fighting to an end, although many of the social and political issues underlying the conflict have yet to be resolved. (The NMSP ceasefire was reaffirmed in February 2012.)

In 1972, the NMSP Central Education Department was established, and in 1992 the fledgling school system was reformed with the creation of the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC), and the foundation of the first Mon national high school. At the time of the 1995 ceasefire between NMSP and the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the Mon national school (MNS) system consisted of 76 schools, including one high school, located in NMSP “liberated zones” (most of which were transformed into “ceasefire zones” in June 1995) and in the three main Mon refugee camps.<sup>3</sup> The ceasefire allowed for the Mon education system to spread to the government controlled zones, with some two-thirds of MNS operations outside of the ceasefire areas. In 2016, the MNEC administered 142 Mon national schools, with nearly 30,000 students.

Since the mid-1990s, Mon has also been taught as part of the curriculum in so-called “mixed schools,” which numbered over 100 in 2016. These are government-run schools where the MNEC provides, and usually pays, one or more teachers, and also has some input into the syllabus, especially on history and language subjects. The relationships between state and non-state education regimes vary across areas, but in most cases, cooperation

<sup>1</sup> We use ‘Myanmar’ (or before 1988, when the military government changed the name of the country, ‘Burma’) to refer to the country. ‘Burmese’ refers to the language of the majority *Bama* (Burman) community (*Bama saga*).

<sup>2</sup> The 1974 constitution made Burmese the country’s official language. Jaquet (2015: 21) reminds us that, even before independence, political leaders such as General Aung San regarded the Burmese language as a proper basis for cohesive national identity and unity.

between Mon and state education authorities is based on personal relations in the local (district/township or village) setting.

### **Karen**

At the time of independence in 1948, the Karen nationalist movement was well organized, and it went underground in January 1949. Armed conflict with the Myanmar government only ended with a ceasefire in 2012. Following the military takeover in 1962, Karen and other minority language instruction was suppressed, including in government schools. Reflecting the heterogeneity of the Karen community, the Karen education system is highly diverse.<sup>4</sup>

Most schools are organized and owned by communities, with varying degrees of external support. In government-controlled parts of southeast Burma, as elsewhere in the country, most, but not all, children have access to state schools. In areas controlled or influenced by Karen “ceasefire groups,” such as the Karen National Union (KNU), there is a degree of stability for civilian populations. Some schools have been built by the government and follow the state curriculum. These schools mostly teach only in Burmese – often supplemented by Karen language teaching after school and during the summer holidays. In areas under the authority of Karen EAGs such as the KNU, schools are administered under the authority of the KNU’s Karen Education Department (KED). The curriculum used in these schools is often significantly different from that of the state Department of Education, being mother-tongue based and following a different syllabus. In addition to state and KED schools, a number of part-time and informal initiatives exist, including civil society programs in the Karen language, and training initiatives implemented by international and national NGOs both inside government-controlled areas and in the opposition-oriented borderlands.

### **Kachin**

The KIO remains the largest and politically most significant EAG on a war footing with the government and the Myanmar army. For three decades the KIO fought for freedom and self-determination for the Kachin people. A 1994 ceasefire was followed by 17 years of relative peace, allowing conflict-affected communities to take the lead in their own rehabilitation. A strong and dynamic civil society sector reemerged within the diverse Kachin society over this time. In June 2011, however, the KIO ceasefire broke down when the Myanmar army launched new offensives against the organization.

In the four years since fighting resumed, the KIO has lost control of significant territory. In the process, many civilians have fled to KIO-controlled areas rather than fall under the authority of the Myanmar government. In KIO-controlled areas, the organization

has built a functional and efficient government. The KIO Education Department was established in 1978-79, and in 2015 it administered 180 schools, with 26,879 students and 1,591 teachers. At present KIO schools teach the government curriculum, with additional modules covering Kachin language and culture. From 1993 to 2011, KIO high school graduates could matriculate at associated government schools, but this ended when fighting resumed. Also since 2012, the KIO schools have begun to emphasize Kachin and English and deemphasize Burmese. This is part of a general move to disengage from the government education system and develop a more distinctively Kachin school system.

## **2.2: Peace process and Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs)**

Many armed groups seeking to represent ethnic aspirations and grievances have been fighting the government for decades, but most are now engaged in an emerging, but in many ways still problematic and contested, peace process. The KIO and NMSP agreed on ceasefires with the then-military government in the mid-1990s. For a decade and a half, both groups maintained uneasy truces, which allowed for limited rehabilitation of conflict-affected communities and the reemergence of rich civil society networks in and among ethnic nationality communities in Myanmar. The KIO and NMSP expanded their already existing education networks to provide mother-tongue teaching to children in their areas of control and in adjacent government-controlled areas. In contrast, KNU did not agree to a ceasefire in the 1990s. The KNU-administered education system developed a separatist outlook and syllabus, with KNU high school graduates finding it difficult to return to Myanmar and join government schools.

On October 15, 2015, in Naypyidaw, leaders of eight EAGs (including the KNU, but not the NMSP or the KIO) signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with the Myanmar government and army. The result of two years of negotiations, this document has proven problematic. Many actors and observers have questioned the credibility of the NCA, reflecting broader problems in the peace process. Many of those EAGs that refused to sign the NCA are calling for a fully “inclusive” agreement, including three small groups and three EAGs that have reemerged since the beginning of the peace process. In contrast, government negotiators, and particularly the Myanmar military, insist on dealing only with established EAGs. Nevertheless, the NCA has resulted in the emergence of structures for political dialogue, and the creation of the Joint Monitoring Committee, comprising EAGs, the Myanmar army, and some civilian participants. Chapter Six of the NCA acknowledges EAGs’ authority in the fields of education, health, natural resource management, and security, and provides for international assistance in these areas with the joint agreement of government and EAGs.<sup>5</sup> EAG

<sup>3</sup> Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake* (2003; reprint London: Routledge Curzon, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> Karen dialects occupy the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan languages. There are some 12 Karen dialects. The majority speak Sgaw (particularly in hill areas and among Christian communities) and Pwo (especially in the lowlands and among Buddhist communities). The size of the Karen population is unknown, no reliable census having been undertaken since the colonial period. Many commentators emphasize the Christian identity of the Karen, but not more than 20 percent of the Karen population is Christian. There are also some small populations of “Karen Muslims.”

education and other services will need support during the probably lengthy and contested “interim period” between the adoption of the NCA and the conclusion of a comprehensive political settlement. This is also relevant for those EAGs that have not signed the NCA, but that have bilateral ceasefires with the government, such as the NMSF.

### 2.3: State education reforms and 2015 elections

The education sector in Myanmar has been in crisis since at least the 1962 military coup. However, education reform was one of the main priorities of President Thein Sein, together with national reconciliation with the NLD and economic reform. These efforts included the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR), a three-phase process that produced a comprehensive education plan in the summer of 2014 and established the Parliamentary Education Promotion Committee, tasked with developing an overarching education “mother law” to provide a framework for education reforms. The CESR education consortium, led by UNICEF and other development partners such as AusAID and the World Bank, created a space for development partners to engage with the Ministry of Education for the first time. The CESR’s responsibilities encompassed all sectors of teaching and learning, from early childhood to higher education, and involved a wide range of ministries and departments with a stake in education policy. The CESR also reviewed language policies (including the teaching of English) and recommended the translation of textbooks into ethnic languages.

In September 2014, the National Education Law was passed, setting the stage for the National Education Sector Plan (2016-2021) that would bring a new curriculum, reform student assessment, and emphasize child-centric approaches. The new education “mother law” resulted in mass student protests, with complaints that the government retained too much control over education matters. Many of the contentious issues relate to decentralization and local power, and it remains unclear whether significant fiscal decentralization will take place, and at what level (state/region or township) policy decisions will be made. The hope of ethnic elites is that if education policy decisions are decentralized to state governments, state parliaments will be able to entertain debate on issues of language, and curricula adapted to local culture and context. Although some state/region governments have begun to introduce minority languages into government school curricula at the primary school level, such initiatives remain under-resourced.

Education issues were little discussed during the campaign for Myanmar’s 2015 elections. Ethnic parties, moreover, generally fared poorly. Many citizens who identified proudly with their ethnic nationality voted for the NLD, in hopes of change. Given

the poor electoral performance of ethnic political parties, the main EAGs might have been reassured that their role as primary representatives of ethnic communities’ grievances and aspirations had not been taken over. On the other hand, Myanmar’s new leaders-elect are unlikely to accord EAGs a high degree of political legitimacy, given the NLD’s commitment to achieving political authority through democratic elections. Among the many questions raised by the election results is whether a future NLD-led government will be able to transform the lives of conflict-affected communities, or if these areas will continue to be dominated by militarization and violence. A key test will be whether the new NLD-led government is able and willing to address the concerns of ethnic communities in relation to education reform and language policy.

## THREE: KEY ISSUES AND FINDINGS

### 3.1: Importance of MTB teaching

Recent developments in education and broader political reforms in Myanmar have seen the introduction of ethnic languages as a subject of instruction in some government schools. In some areas, this has included the teaching of ethnic language during school hours – one of the main demands of many ethnic nationalists. This is a positive development, as many interviewees identified the strong link between using ethnic languages and pride in maintaining ethnic identities. In general, ethnic respondents spoke strongly of their experience of the suppression of minority languages and cultures by the Bama-dominated state. Ethnic people feel discriminated against, as their cultures and languages have not been included in the official state curriculum. In spite of such widespread views, little progress has been made towards teaching subjects in government schools *in* ethnic languages.

Most ethnic stakeholders interviewed agreed that ethnic schoolchildren in Myanmar should learn Burmese, and perhaps English, as a common language. To be effective, other subjects should be taught in the mother tongue, at least at the primary level, rather than just teaching the mother tongue as a subject in the curriculum. Many stakeholders would like to see MTB teaching at the primary level along with some teaching of Burmese, then a transition in middle school to mostly teaching in Burmese, while keeping modules for the ethnic language, culture, and history throughout high school. There have also been demands in some ethnic schools (for example, in Kachin) to eliminate Burmese entirely and replace it with English. The promotion of MTB teaching in schools also raises questions regarding funding for teachers and school materials and finding adequate teachers. These concerns have centered on the quality of ethnic materials used in schools – often translations from Burmese

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<sup>5</sup> Education is mentioned four times in the NCA: in Article 9 (a), “Both parties agree to jointly strive to provide necessary development assistance to improve the livelihoods of civilians in the fields of health, education, nutrition and housing, and regional development”; Article 9 (h), “In accordance with the laws, no educational opportunities shall be prohibited; there shall be no destruction of schools or training facilities, and no disturbances to school staff or students”; Article 9 (k), “There shall be no destruction of public facilities such as hospitals, religious buildings, schools, and medical clinics without credible reason. No stationing of military bases shall be permitted in such public facilities”; and Article 25 (a) (“Work programs during the interim period”): “We recognize that all ethnic armed organizations who have signed are key parties responsible for promoting development, security, regional stability, and peace for civilians living in their respective states and regions. During the interim period of conducting and implementing peace negotiations, it is agreed to carry out the following programs and projects in consultation with each other in ceasefire areas. (1) Projects regarding the health, education and socio-economic development of civilians.”

textbooks – as they often do not accurately reflect the culture and history of minority ethnic nationalities.

### 3.2: Fragmented policy environment

It often seems that key stakeholders in ethnic education in Myanmar only engage substantively with others in their network who share similar values and political approaches. This leads to a somewhat “siloed,” contentious, and politically fragmented approach to education, which reflects features of the broader Myanmar political culture. Positions on education are often polarized, as is the case in wider political debates.

### 3.3: Language policy and practice, and conflict

Since the advent of military rule in 1962, the Myanmar state has been perceived as pursuing a project of forced assimilation of ethnic communities. EAGs and civil society actors have resisted this “Burmanization” through a number of strategies, including armed conflict and the development of education regimes that preserve and reproduce their language and cultures, under difficult circumstances.

Table 1 indicates the variety of non-state ethnic education regimes in Myanmar. The relationship between locally owned and delivered education regimes and EAGs varies considerably. Non-state education regimes should be understood as organic parts of broader societies in nongovernment-controlled areas.

**Table 1: Typology of ethnic education provision in Myanmar (progressing from those closest to government system to those further away)**

Type	Characteristics	Examples
Type 1 Ethnic-in-put schools	Government-run schools with civil society input.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government-run schools with some teachers and teaching materials provided by the local community or civil society.</li> </ul>
Type 2 Mixed schools	Government schools in EAG-controlled and contested areas, with some EAG or civil society input.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes schools in remote areas that accept volunteer teachers.</li> </ul>

Type 3 Hybrid schools	Part government, part EAG, sometimes also with civil society input.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDAK) schools in Kachin ceasefire areas.</li> <li>Internally displaced persons (IDP) schools in Kachin areas.</li> <li>Schools that were previously under the authority of EAG education departments, but have now been “flipped” (or “poached”) by government Ministry of Education.</li> </ul>
Type 4 EAG (government curriculum) schools	Schools managed by EAGs, with no government teachers, but which use government curriculum (often in translation), and from which children can sometimes transfer to the state system after a test or local arrangement. Curriculum is supplemented by ethnic materials, especially for history and social studies, but sometimes also other subjects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NMSP/MNEC Mon national schools.</li> <li>KIO schools (initially teach government curriculum in Jinghpaw, etc., and later in Burmese).</li> <li>Some Karen schools, particularly those supported by the community with limited KNU/KED input.</li> </ul>
Type 5 EAG schools	Schools built and run by EAGs or associated civil society groups, with separate MTB curriculum; no recognition, accreditation, or student transfers to government schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>KED schools, “community schools” in areas under KNU authority or influence, and refugee camp schools.</li> </ul>
Type 6 Civil society private schools	Separate MTB curriculum and different teaching methods; no recognition, accreditation, or student transfers to government schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community-supported schools in northern Shan and Kachin States.</li> <li>Some Karen schools in KNU-controlled areas (sometimes administered and funded by churches).</li> </ul>
Type 7 Foreign curriculum schools	Curriculum developed in another country, allowing (some) students to transfer to other schools in that country.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools with Indian curriculum in Kachin; some Karen mission schools.</li> </ul>

Type 8 Supple- mentary schools	Schools that focus on ethnic language, culture, and religion, but in after-school or summer classes.	▪ Mostly provided by civil society groups; often linked to the <i>Sangha</i> and the churches.
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### 3.4: Ceasefires, ethnic education, and MTB teaching – “federalism from below”

There is a direct correlation between conflict and how people feel about the language and curriculum their children are taught. Armed conflict makes parents and communities less inclined to accept government schools and Burmese-language education. Instead, conflict acts as an incentive to create separate (or parallel) systems. Ethnic education regimes tend to be more separatist when conflict is rife, and less so when ceasefires are in place. To the extent that ethnic education regimes reflect more “separatist” or more “pro-Union” sentiments, they also play a role in socializing children with such attitudes and understandings.

The resumption of armed conflict in Kachin since 2011 has led to greater pan-Kachin unity and cohesion around an ethno-linguistic core. This is framed in terms of a strong patriotic spirit and defiant resistance to what is widely perceived and experienced as an alien, violent, and predatory central government and army. Until 2011, all children in KIO schools were allowed to take the government high school tenth standard exam. Since the resumption of armed conflict, state authorities have refused to allow students from KIO areas to take government exams, further exacerbating the breakdown in relations between Kachin communities and the state. The outbreak of fighting has significantly affected the quality of schooling in rural areas, and many who have been displaced are facing financial obstacles to sending their children to school. Since then, KIO-administered schools have increasingly been switching to Kachin and English and teaching less Burmese. This is part of a general move to disengage from government education and to develop a more distinctively Kachin school system.

The KNU, which agreed to a preliminary ceasefire with the government in January 2012, has developed an impressive education system based on the efforts of the Karen communities and with support from international donors and NGOs. This system diverges significantly from the government education regime, with only a limited focus on Burmese. However, these schools lack recognized qualifications, therefore KED school graduates often find it difficult to enter the government education system or access opportunities in Myanmar or abroad. As a result, one of the challenges facing Karen political and education leaders in the context of the peace process is how to build on the strength of a school system that includes some very good practice in the field of MTB education, while articulating a vision and practice for the future of the KED system.

The NMSP, which agreed to a ceasefire with the government in 1995, developed an MTB education regime in which Mon is used at the primary level, transitioning to Burmese at middle school, and more or less following the government curriculum. Although problems persist, access to education has improved greatly over the 20 years since the NMSP ceasefire.

In the absence of a top-level political settlement, ethnic education regimes in Myanmar are “building federalism from the bottom up,” with local stakeholders developing their own education systems. Where substantive, top-level political discussions around the peace process have yet to begin in Myanmar, non-state education systems are concrete examples of self-determination. Issues of language and education policy need to be addressed as part of a structured political dialogue, which most ethnic stakeholders hope will lead to a federal settlement to end decades of ethnic and state-society conflict in Myanmar. While ethnic communities in Myanmar may not have had these broader considerations in mind when devising their education systems, these enterprises display a strong element of self-determination that speaks to the goals and struggles of ethnic communities during decades of conflict. The positions of various stakeholders on language policy are good indicators of where these actors stand on a range of issues related to the peace process (Table 2).

The peace process in Myanmar has had both positive and negative impacts on ethnic education and MTB teaching. Overall, there has been a lack of connection between education issues and the politics of the peace process – other than widespread local resentment of the government expanding its authority into previously autonomous ethnic areas, often by building schools and offering government education. Many of the key issues in ethnic education and MTB teaching in Myanmar must be discussed in a structured, multi-stakeholder debate, as part of a political dialogue emerging from the peace process or related to broader political reforms and elections in Myanmar.

During the “interim period” between the NCA agreement and the negotiation of a comprehensive political settlement, there is an urgent need to support EAGs and the provision of education and other services by civil society. Although education is more sensitive and “political” than health issues, for example, some of the needs and challenges related to education and language policy may be relatively “low hanging fruit” for the peace process. These topics could be addressed post-NCA in fast-track talks to provide concrete benefits – “peace dividends” – to conflict-affected communities.

In the meantime, in the absence of such concrete and relatively political developments, ethnic concerns in the peace process focus on education, and particularly on the government’s use of service delivery to expand its authority in previously contested, conflict-affected areas. For example, new government schools are being built in contested areas such as NMSP Tavoy District, on the edge of areas controlled by the Mon armed group. Elsewhere, the Department of Education is reportedly building new state schools next to run-down MNEC schools. In this context, ethnic stakeholders are concerned that international aid agencies and donors are inadvertently supporting a government strategy of pushing state structures into conflict-affected areas without taking account of existing local activities and services, or the impact on

peace and conflict dynamics.

### 3.5: Language and education policies – proxies for broader political positions

Positions on language and education policy reflect the broader identities of different stakeholders, their attitudes towards the peace process, and the kind of country they want Myanmar to be. The following table illustrates these propositions in terms of “ideal types,” with actual positions varying on a case-by-case basis.

**Table 2: Mapping political demands, and positions on language and schooling**

Political demand	Schools	Language in governance
Independence for ethnic polities (secession, separatism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Independently owned, administered, and financed schools (perhaps under EAG authority).</li> <li>Focus on ethnic languages (and English, Chinese; less (but not necessarily zero) Burmese language instruction).</li> <li>Curriculum significantly different from government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of ethnic language(s) in government administration (justice system, etc.).</li> <li>Limited use of Burmese; some use of English, Chinese</li> </ul>
“Strong federalism” (radical autonomy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Independently administered and financed schools (perhaps with funds from Union government).</li> <li>Focus on ethnic languages (and English) and Burmese.</li> <li>Curriculum related to Union government, but with significant local variation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of Burmese (common Union language, <i>lingua franca</i>) and ethnic language(s) in government administration (justice system etc.).</li> </ul>

<p>“Weak federalism” (decentralization) – “Union Ethnic Nationalities”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schools could be either government run (in context of nationwide education reform) or locally administered; significant financing from state and/or Union government.</li> <li>Burmese language, with ethnic languages (and English) as subjects rather than medium of instruction.</li> <li>Curriculum based on Union government, but with some local variation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Burmese as primary national language (<i>lingua franca</i>); some provision for ethnic language(s) in government administration.</li> </ul>
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The positions of various actors on education can be read as proxies for their views on a broader range of state-society issues, and on the distribution of power and resources between the central government and ethnic polities. In this framing, the NMSP model has achieved a fairly high degree of local self-determination in education, while retaining links to the Union. This was previously the case with the KIO system, which, under the pressure of renewed armed conflict, seems to be moving towards a more separatist model.

Similar mapping may be applied to positions on language policy and use in schools and in governance functions more broadly. Most stakeholders accept the necessity of teaching children Burmese as the common Union language. Views on the use of Burmese or ethnic languages in public administration, government, and legal processes indicate how different actors view the distribution of power between the Burman center and ethnic periphery in a reforming Myanmar. These positions can be taken as rough proxies for attitudes towards issues in other sectors, such as natural resource management, or revenue sharing and distribution between the Union government and ethnic states. Exploring different positions on language and education can help to reveal the kind of country people imagine or desire Myanmar to be.

### 3.6: Educational reforms, elections, and the peace process – “convergence”

The state’s unwillingness to countenance the existence, or support the development, of locally owned education regimes is changing. The U Thein Sein government promoted significant reforms in education, including elements of decentralization. Education reforms have opened some space for MTB education in government schools, although not to the extent demanded by most ethnic educators. While it is increasingly possible to teach ethnic languages in government schools, there is as yet very little teaching of other subjects in mother tongues. The NLD’s policy in this respect is yet to be revealed.

The new education law and broader political reforms have had both positive and negative impacts on ethnic education and MTB teaching in Myanmar. In many areas, particularly those affected by conflict, there is little knowledge and even less appreciation of new legislation and practices in the government education sector. It is clear that for many ethnic stakeholders the government still *is* the military. It will take generations to overcome this legacy of fear and mistrust.

What has not yet been considered in any depth is the relationship between state and non-state provision of basic education in conflict-affected areas, and how this relates to the peace process. Although Chapter Six of the NCA acknowledges the authority of significant EAGs in a number of fields, including education, the status of education and other services under the authority of EAGs remains unclear. Will education and other service delivery systems under EAGs be rapidly or gradually displaced by the state system, continue in parallel with that system, or undergo a process of “convergence”? Thus far, those engaged in the broader movement of political reform in Myanmar have largely addressed education and peacebuilding as separate issues, while states, international donors, and other actors in the peace process have for the most part ignored issues of language and education.

### 3.7: Needs and challenges

Teachers identified chronic needs in Myanmar’s ethnic education sector. Many educators stated that their principal need is for capacity building, including teacher training. Other challenges include the need for better school buildings and furniture, a lack of teachers for different subject areas (especially in high school), and not enough time for proper preparation. Many, especially Mon teachers, cited the urgent need for better and more regular salaries. It remains unclear who should pay for teacher salaries, teacher training, and textbook development: the government, international donors, parents and the community, the relevant EAG, or some combination of the above.

Another identified need was accreditation of schools with language policies and curricula different from the government system. For MNEC’s Mon national schools, accreditation is less of an issue, as the “Mon model” is based on MNS students taking government exams that allow them to enter the government education system. Accreditation is a particular issue for Karen and Karenni refugee camp students, and for those attending “community”/KED schools in KNU areas inside Myanmar. Karen CBOs and supporting international NGOs are calling on the government to recognize the qualifications of refugee camp students and teachers, and to develop a transition or “bridge” program to help align the government and KED education regimes.

The needs of displaced communities, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in neighboring countries, are particularly acute. The renewal of conflict between government forces and the KIO has had a direct impact on the education of tens of thousands of children. Due to their particular vulnerability as forced migrants, refugees and IDP children have special needs for assistance and protection, as specified in international refugee

law and the UN’s 1999 *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*.

## FOUR: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

**Pursue education and language policy reform:** A sustainable resolution to Myanmar’s longstanding state-society and ethnic conflicts will be difficult to achieve without significant education and language policy reforms. Consider negotiating the relationship between state and non-state education systems, and where possible, oversee their gradual convergence in the context of a reforming state system, which itself should move towards a federal relationship between the central government and ethnic states.

**Introduce MTB teaching:** Mother-tongue-based teaching should be introduced in all schools, particularly the government’s, in areas with significant ethnic populations, so that non-Burmese-speaking children can be taught most subjects in their own language, at least through primary school.

**Negotiate a system of accreditation and transfer:** In order to prevent further marginalization of the poor and vulnerable communities, a system of accreditation and transfer should be negotiated that includes Burmese language training for those who want to join government schools. The administration of transfer (or bridging) programs should be as simple as possible, and government teachers should not be expected to bridge the language deficit without proper support.

**Expand the government curriculum model:** The MNEC “Mon model” is an example of best practice. The curriculum is similar to that of the government, but with extra modules on ethnic history and culture. Teaching is in local languages through primary school, transitions to Burmese in middle school, and in high school is mostly in Burmese, with the mother tongue taught as a subject. This model allows for easier transition between non-government and government schools, produces greater fluency in both mother-tongue languages and Burmese, and offers recognizable qualifications. It also supports the teaching of previously suppressed ethnic languages.

**Consider education in government decentralization efforts:** As part of the government’s commitment to *Education for All*, it should consider recognizing locally owned schools and offering alternative education in these areas, along with funds to improve non-state schools. Given the government’s commitment to providing quality education in local languages to ethnic communities, partnerships should be developed between state and non-state education providers in remote and conflict-affected areas. Negotiating the status of independent ethnic schools should be part of the peace process; they will not fit easily into the “private school” sector. In the meantime, in the process of greater decentralization and on-going political dialogue regarding the future of state-society relations in Myanmar, the government should consider providing funds for teacher salaries and building maintenance in non-state schools.

**Reform state education:** Reforms need to move towards MTB teaching, and towards greater local control and ownership of

education (decentralization). This could include the training and hiring of teachers who have links to EAG schools, but without “poaching” them from local school systems. The best way forward may be to expand the “mixed school” system across areas with majority ethnic majority, and agree locally how much time in primary school should be spent teaching in the mother tongue.

**Support structured, multi-stakeholder political dialogue:** To address the aforementioned issues and policy reforms, dialogue is necessary – whether framed by the peace process or as part of broader political reforms in Myanmar.

**Support and improve non-state education regimes:** Recognize and support, or at least encourage donors to fund, locally owned education systems based on commonly agreed, minimum educational standards. Where possible, government should provide financial and other support to non-state schools in ways that allow them to retain their autonomy.

**Recognize Myanmar’s main ethnic languages:** In relevant states, the main ethnic languages should be recognized as official languages in public administration, judicial institutions, and schooling. Resources should be made available to develop teaching materials and expertise in these languages.

## FIVE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND FURTHER READING

### Discussion Questions

- What are the best ways to support mother tongue-based education in schools, including as a medium of instruction (as well as taught subject)?
- What is and should be the status of Burmese language teaching in schools in ethnic nationality areas?
- What steps are required by Union and State governments, EAGs and other stakeholders, to collaborate towards acceptable (or joint) standards of quality in the field of education?
- How can government and international agencies best support mother tongue-based teaching and ethnic education actors, in the context of the peace process, during the interim period between initial ceasefires and a negotiated political settlement?
- What are EAG and other ethnic stakeholders' priorities in relation to education and language policy, and how can they be supported to develop these positions?
- How can the local education stakeholders build on recent reforms and decentralization?
- What lessons can be learned from the structure and functioning of the MNEC 'Mon model' of ethnic education, and how could these be adapted in other ethnic areas (and other sectors)?
- What national-level structural reform is necessary to support an integrated education model?

### Further Reading

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