STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY: TOWARDS UNIVERSAL EDUCATION IN MYANMAR'S ETHNIC AREAS

Kim Jolliffe and Emily Speers Mears

Policy Dialogue Brief Series No.14

The Asia Foundation
Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY: TOWARDS UNIVERSAL EDUCATION IN MYANMAR'S ETHNIC AREAS

KIM JOLLIFFE AND EMILY SPEERS MEARS

POLICY DIALOGUE BRIEF SERIES NO.14

October 2016

ONE: LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

Throughout many of Myanmar's non-Bamar regions, basic education has long been provided by local ethnic actors, including community-based organizations, religious organizations, and the education departments of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). These "ethnic basic education providers" (EBEPs) usually work by providing services to community schools that are further funded, managed, and maintained by communities under the guidance of school committees. This policy brief provides a detailed rationale for the importance of EBEPs to Myanmar's education sector. It also gives comprehensive, actionable recommendations for government, EAOs, EBEPs, and the international aid community for further enabling EBEPs to help the country reach its education goals.

Due to poor financing and lack of access to EAO territories, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has struggled to reach all populations in Myanmar, and EBEPs have often formed to fill the large gaps in government education services. Additionally, EBEPs have often sought to provide mother tongue-based (MTB) education for their communities, as the MoE system has remained largely Bamar-centric and has only recently introduced meager MTB services, for the first time since the first military coup in 1962. Furthermore, EBEPs have often been created due to the desires of EAOs and other ethnic organizations to become autonomous from state control and serve their own communities. There are numerous territories in Myanmar that have never been under centralized state control, including some where the same EAO has served as an alternative government for decades. Meanwhile, government education has been perceived by many ethnic elites as a tool for ethnic assimilation or "Bamanization" of non-Bamar people, making it a particularly sensitive area of governance.

EBEPs have long depended on relatively small amounts of international aid, while the schools they support remain largely reliant on time and resources committed by influential people and members of their communities.[1] In recent years, however, donors have faced difficult choices as they have normalized relations with the Myanmar government and gained greater space to support the MoE, on which the majority of the population depends. Meanwhile, Myanmar government spending on education has more than quadrupled in recent years, and new ceasefires have allowed the MoE to reach new populations. While offering communities many potential benefits, however, MoE expansion has often been poorly managed, leading to a range of political and administrative challenges, sometimes wasting resources and damaging confidence in the ceasefires. All of these challenges are surmountable if cooperation between the MoE and EBEPs can increase and more efficient ways of working can be developed.

EBEPs have many benefits to offer Myanmar's education sector, and they should be viewed by the government and international development actors as crucial partners in achieving the country's education goals. These institutions are of particular importance for four main reasons: (1) their unique access to territory, (2) their experience in providing mother tongue-based and multilingual education (MTB-MLE), (3) their value in the eyes of communities, and (4) their potential to contribute to building peace and reconciliation. While the MoE is – and will remain – the main provider of education throughout the country, it is not – and need not be – the only one. Given the diversity that already exists within the education sector, much can also be achieved through government reforms that enable, facilitate, and allow space for the contributions of other education actors to a common process based on common aims. In addition to the educational benefits, ensuring that EBEPs have a future as valued institutions within the Union will be crucial to achieving peace and national reconciliation. This will require a range of reforms to increase the complementarity of MoE and EBEP systems, to ensure that students can transfer between systems smoothly, that all qualifications are recognized, that the quality of education of all providers is high, and ultimately, that all services are financed in-country.

---

[1] The United States, in particular, has been a mainstay of support to many EBEPs, along with Norway, the United Kingdom, Australia, the European Union, and other Western countries.

TWO: A SHORT HISTORY OF EDUCATION AND CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

Myanmar's political development has long been affected by conflicts between successive centers of power in the mostly ethnic Bamar regions of the lower Ayeyarwady River and surrounding plains, and elite actors representing the multitude of other ethnic groups in the periphery. In the present era, armed conflicts have been fueled, in part, by issues related to the policy and practice of education, as the government's heavy focus on Myanmar language, literacy, and culture has been among a wide range of political grievances held by non-Bamar ("ethnic") elites towards the Bamar-centric state. In turn, these conflicts have catalyzed the emergence of a wide range of alternative basic education providers, including the education departments of EAOs and various religious, civil society, and community actors working in ethnic areas.

The pre-independence era: At least since the sixteenth century, education in Myanmar has been provided by multiple actors in parallel.[2] From then onwards, Catholic missionaries began establishing missionary schools in central and southern Myanmar. Following the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852, the space for Christian missionaries to provide education increased significantly, leading to a particularly sharp rise in American Baptist schools.[3] The missions, with centers in Mawlamyine and Yangon, became particularly active in mountainous areas populated by Karen, Kachin, Chin, Zomi, and other, mostly hill-dwelling non-Bamar groups, and taught local and European languages. At the same time, the British colonial state began developing a state education system. Some English-language schools were set up to educate an elite; for the rest of the population the colonial administrators initially attempted to graft Western subjects and concepts onto the existing monastic education system. After this proved unsuccessful, the British, supported the development of networks of secular, vernacular schools, with some help from missionaries, and later also established universities. Monastic schools continued to provide education in many areas, but they received less support from the colonial administration than secular schools.

Educational developments in the colonial era played a key role in the rise of ethnic nationalism, as they produced educated (often English-speaking), ethnically identified elites that often rose into key jobs within the colonial system or had traditional leadership roles. Indeed, it was literate, Christian leaders who gave rise to Karen, Chin, and Kachin national movements. Meanwhile, there were fewer new education opportunities for predominantly Buddhist nationalities such as the Bamar and Mon.[4] It was probably these dynamics, too, that inspired Bamar nationalist movements, from the 1930s onwards, to place Myanmar language and culture at the heart of their campaigns for independence.[5]

Post-independence and the construction of a national system (1948-1962): Immediately following independence in 1948, armed conflicts broke out between the state and separate ethno-nationalist and far-left movements. This led the Bamar-dominated national armed forces (the Tatmadaw) to significantly expand its presence into non-Bamar, rural areas for the first time.[6] Meanwhile, the new government, led by Prime Minister U Nu, attempted to establish a national education system that would provide at least primary education to all children across the country, with a school in every village. At the same time, the government began promoting Myanmar as the majority language, motivated by the desire to diminish the authority of Chinese- and Hindi-speaking minorities who had worked with the colonial government,[7] and also to promote unity.[8] However, for people in non-Bamar areas, particularly elites with their own nationalist aspirations, this was often interpreted as part of a process of Bamanization. Literacy education in non-Bamar languages was continued by monastic, Christian, and other schools, while ethnic societies in some areas were able to continue teaching their own languages through the government system. Meanwhile, as large areas came under the control of EAOs, some promoted education through their own systems.

Ne Win's socialist era (1962-1988): In 1962, the commander in chief of the Tatmadaw, General Ne Win, staged a coup d'état and then instigated a broad program of centralization, aimed at achieving "the Burmese way to socialism." The state began nationalizing all religious and private schools in 1964 and 1965, instituting a national curriculum and subjecting them to centralized administration. At the very least, this made it much harder for local teachers to continue teaching ethnic languages as official subjects. In some areas, ethnic literacy apparently continued to be taught in schools, while in others it was ended or heavily suppressed.[9] While the government certainly nationalized at least 137 large and prominent community schools in 1964-5, it probably also began to incorporate many rural community schools into its system. However, as it banned private schools, it may also have cracked down on community schools that it was unable to subsume.

Armed conflicts became more intense as the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) stepped up its insurgency and numerous

---

[2] Traditionally, monasteries were principally responsible for teaching literacy, primarily in Pali, but also in Myanmar, Mon, Shan, Rakhine, and possibly other languages. Buddhist proselytism was used to expand the purview of these states to surrounding animist communities, and education may have played a role in this expansion.

[3] Kim Jolliffe (2016).

[4] Lall and South (2011), 11.

[5] Callahan (2003), 151.

[6] As almost 50 percent of the Tatmadaw's original forces had defected to various insurgencies, rapid and extensive recruitment drives were undertaken, leading the force to become predominantly Bamar.

[7] Callahan (2003), 144.

[8] Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007), 154.

[9] Additionally, as Shan, Kachin, Kayah, and Kayin States and the Chin Special Division saw their local governments dissolved and replaced by military councils, it is possible that any support local schools had received from these local governments was reduced or stopped.

Shan armed movements got underway.[10] In 1972, the New Mon State Party (NMSP), which had formed in 1958, established its Central Education Department, and the KIO Education Department was established in 1978. From 1968, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) took control of extensive territory along the China border and built alliances with a range of EAOs in other areas. It is not clear, however, if it provided any education services. In the 1970s, the Karen National Union (KNU) was successfully pushed out of the Ayeyarwady delta region and Bago mountain range by the Tatmadaw, but consolidated its control over much of the southeast. In 1976, the KNU, the KIO, the NMSP, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and six other non-communist EAOs formed an alliance called the National Democratic Front and took up an official position in favor of a federal, democratic Union of Myanmar.

New regime, new policies (1988-2011): Following the country's second military coup in 1988, the new military government achieved ceasefires with seventeen major EAOs and dozens more small factions. In 1995, a large splinter faction of the KNU formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), and entered a 16-year conflict against the KNU, as a proxy of the Tatmadaw.

During the 1990s, some ceasefire EAOs were able to establish more stable administration systems in their areas and began cooperating with the military government. Cooperation allowed the education departments of the NMSP and KIO to put students through government exams and to more openly support community schools in government-controlled areas. Meanwhile, in the southeast, the Tatmadaw undertook joint offensives alongside three other ceasefire EAOs,[11] and made significant gains against the KNU, the KNPP, and a Shan EAO called the Mong Tai Army (MTA).[12] To serve those displaced, the Karenni National Education Department and the Karen Education Department (KED) established networks of schools in refugee camps in Thailand, and networks linked to the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) set up schools in five Shan internally displaced person (IDP) camps.

The 1990s also saw improvements in government-provided education. Extensive school construction and teacher training programs were undertaken, including in ethnic areas. However, the state faced a range of challenges to effective education in conflict-affected areas. Government education policy and programs during this period remained opaque and subject to the inefficient, top-down approach that characterized most of the military government's planning. However, the regime also relaxed some of the restrictions on nongovernment schools that had been imposed during the socialist era. Monastic schools were allowed to reopen in 1992 if they registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) and taught the government curriculum. During this period, as Myanmar became subject to international sanctions, most international donor support for education was provided to non-state education providers, particularly to the monastic education sector and cross-border support networks linked to EAOs.

The reform era (2011-2016): Since 2011, government education spending has increased enormously, and new policies have been introduced to move toward free and compulsory education for all. In 2011 and 2012, the conflict environment changed dramatically. Ceasefires with the KIO, the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), and other groups broke down shortly before seven EAOs, including the KNU, the RCSS, and the KNPP signed unprecedented new ceasefire agreements. These events caused levels of armed violence to decrease significantly in southern Shan State and southeast Myanmar, but to rapidly increase in Kachin State and northern Shan State.[13] Meanwhile, a new peace process achieved a breakthrough in 2015 when it reached a consensus among all major political stakeholders on the need to form a federal system of government. This has been the primary aim of the majority of EAOs and other ethnic leaders for decades.

---

[10] The first Shan armed revolts began in 1958, leading to the existence of at least four main EAOs by the mid-1960s. The KIO was formed in 1961.

[11] During this period, the Tatmadaw fought with the DKBA against the KNU, with the United Wa State Party against the Mong Tai Army, and – to a lesser extent – with the Karen Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) against the KNPP. The DKBA and KNPLF were both also used in cross-border attacks on refugee camps in Thailand.

[12] These campaigns substantially reduced the military and governance capacity of the KNU and the KNPP, and damaged their education systems, while displacing hundreds of thousands of people, mostly to internally displaced person (IDP) sites in KNU, KNPP, and RCSS territories, or across the border to EAO-established refugee camps in Thailand.

[13] In addition to the KIO and the SSPP, armed conflicts are ongoing in Kachin and Shan States with the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Arakan Army (AA).

THREE: ETHNIC BASIC EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Ethnic basic education provider: This term refers to any organization that defines itself in relation to ethnicity and that provides basic education services – kindergarten, primary school, middle school, and high school. This term includes the education departments of ethnic armed organizations, as well as independent civil society, religious, or community-based providers.

Basic education through community schools: In most areas affected by armed conflict, the majority of schools can be best understood as "community schools," which are managed and maintained by a management committee or parent-teacher association made up of local residents. There are also ethnic community schools in some stable, government-controlled villages and towns where government schools are also available. Community schools often rely first and foremost on funds provided by the communities themselves, through donations and student fees paid by parents. Fundraising is usually organized by members of the school committee, sometimes with help from religious or other influential figures. Student fees, while typically not mandatory, are expected.

Support provided by EBEPs: Common forms of EBEP support include teacher stipends, pre-service or in-service teacher training, administrative oversight, quality control and assessment, organizing teachers for communities that lack them, textbooks and other teaching materials (their own, the MoE's, or from other textbook developers), stationery and other classroom materials, and furniture. EBEPs also play an important role in providing education pathways beyond primary level. Some do this through relations with the MoE or government-affiliated monastic schools; others have their own middle and high schools. EAO local authorities may also help community schools by securing materials, funds, or labor for new school buildings. Some schools in EAO areas are fully administered by the EAO and become known more as public schools than as community schools.

Support provided by MoE: While government support is often meager overall, the MoE is typically one of the most active government bodies in conflict-affected areas, typically close to Tatmadaw battalions or in areas where state-backed paramilitary actors are dominant. In such areas, EBEPs may or may not also be supporting local schools. As in other remote areas, MoE-supported community schools are often attached to a "host school" in a town or more secure village, where students can take government exams. If MoE teachers are provided, then the school is known as a "branch school"; if not, it is known as an "affiliate school," though the latter are rare. In both types, the MoE usually provides textbooks and other basic materials. The Tatmadaw has also been known to provide uniforms, furniture, and other material support after taking control of a new area. MoE teachers have been prone to high rates of absenteeism and dropping out, seemingly because the majority are from towns and are often Bamar, and so find it difficult to adjust to rural, ethnic environments.

Given the fluctuating support coming from various sources, it is sometimes hard to decide whether schools should be considered MoE schools, EBEP schools, or simply community schools. EAO education departments and other large, centralized EBEPs sometimes consider them *their* schools.[14] The MoE does not appear to formally recognize when schools are receiving support from other actors, and so also seemingly records them as MoE schools. But even when community schools receive regular funding and administrative support from EBEPs or the MoE, the community often retains multiple responsibilities. Furthermore, school committees play a central role in coordinating with external providers to determine what forms of support the community would like to receive from each actor, which subjects are prioritized, what tests are taken, and so on. Therefore, they are often best understood, first and foremost, as community schools.

---

[14] However, some EBEPs recognize schools that are also receiving support from the MoE as "mixed schools," such as the NMSP's Mon National Education Department.

FOUR: CASE STUDIES

The findings and recommendations are based primarily on three case studies, looking at the work of Karen, Mon, and Shan EBEPs and the related political contexts. This section provides an overview of how these EBEPs work and what education services they provide, as well as conflict and other political dynamics that surround them.

Karen Education and Cultural Department: Throughout decades of conflict, education provided by the government has been extremely limited. During this time, Karen populations in conflict-affected areas mostly experienced the state in the form of its infantry battalions. Education has long been provided primarily by these communities themselves, with support from the Karen State Education Assistance Group (KSEAG), a collective made up of the KNU's Karen Education and Cultural Department (KED), the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG), and Partners for Relief and Development.[15] Community-established school committees are typically responsible for building, maintaining, managing, and raising funds for schools, with varying levels of support from local EAO authorities, while KSEAG provides administrative guidelines and rules, teacher stipends, teaching materials, and other resources.

The KSEAG network model helps to coordinate approaches among the three providers and pool resources for common aims. KED is the formal education authority in all KNU areas, is recognized by local KNU authorities, and is the primary body actually administering schools at the local level, while KTWG provides teacher training and a number of other services. A KED affiliate, the Karen Refugee Committee-Education Entity (KRCEE), administers 64 schools in five predominantly Karen refugee camps in Thailand, where it mostly uses the KED curriculum. There are dozens of other Karen migrant schools in Thailand, stretching along much of the border with southeast Myanmar. There are also dozens of higher education institutions (normally called "post-10" schools) in refugee camps and nearby areas. In addition to serving refugee and migrant populations, these schools have served tens of thousands of students, from KED/KSEAG primary schools in Myanmar, who have traveled across the border to continue their education due to limited school availability at home.

There has always been some overlap between KED/KSEAG services and those provided by the MoE, due to the fluid nature of territorial control. As the Tatmadaw expanded its presence in the late 1990s, the MoE sent teachers to areas near its new military positions or those of its proxy militias, often where schools already received some support from the KED and its networks. Following

the ceasefires, however, the number of MoE teachers in KED/KSEAG schools almost tripled between the school years 2012-13 and 2015-16.[16] This rapid expansion of the MoE has raised a number of bureaucratic and administrative issues, and has caused tensions to arise on several fronts as two largely incompatible education systems have collided at the school level without any proper coordination to help them integrate. Furthermore, the practice of mother tongue-based education, and the teaching of Sgaw Karen literacy, have been disrupted — or discontinued altogether — in some schools where government teachers have been able to take over.[17]

New Mon State Party: Armed conflict between the state and Mon nationalists has been ongoing since shortly after independence. The principal Mon EAO, the New Mon State Party, was formed in 1956 by rebels who had been fighting since the late 1940s. In 1972, the NMSP established its education department, which was strengthened in the early 1990s as politically active Mon students established the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC). The NMSP signed a ceasefire with the government in 1995, established the NMSP's authority in a number of autonomous territories in Mon and Kayin State. The NMSP's ceasefire has remained intact since 1995, and the group has been closely engaged in multilateral peace negotiations with the government since 2013. But it did not sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, unlike most other EAOs in the southeast.

Today, the NMSP education system is organized under two main entities: the MNEC, which is an executive body that leads the development of policy and relations with the international community and other domestic education actors; and the Mon National Education Department (MNED), which oversees the actual administration of education services and is one of eight line departments that fall under the NMSP's administration department.

As of 2015-16, the MNED administers 137 Mon national schools across NMSP and government territories, which also rely on local donations and are managed by school committees made up of community volunteers.[18] Mon National schools provide mother tongue-based and multilingual education in the primary grades, using a Mon-language curriculum that is mostly translated from the MoE's curriculum. Middle and secondary schools transition to the MoE's Myanmar-language curriculum, while maintaining Mon as a language of instruction. Mon history and language lessons are continued as part of the school day throughout the years of basic education. The MNED also provides 154 teachers for 95 MoE-administered schools, known as "mixed schools," to teach Mon language and sometimes Mon history, too, as part of

---

[15] KSEAG was established in 2005. The KED was founded in the 1950s and organized into its current structure in the 1970s. KTWG was established in 1996, following the fall of the KNU's former headquarters and subsequent massive territorial losses.

[16] In 2015-16, 49.3 percent of KSEAG-supported schools have MoE teachers as well, up from 26.6 percent in 2012-13. Among this 49.3 percent, KSEAG reports that nearly all also have a strong MoE "administrative presence."

[17] Finally, these government advances have threatened the stability of ceasefires by deepening suspicions among the KNU that the government is using "development" programs such as education to expand its territorial control over contested areas in advance of political negotiations.

[18] Some schools have parent-teacher associations, and others have school committees, but it is not clear if these differ in their organization or if any schools have both.

the formal curriculum.[19]

Rural Development Foundation of Shan State: This case study looks at five village tracts in Hsipaw Township, Shan State, where the MoE has very limited access. Communities there receive education primarily from a local network of monastic schools with support from a Shan civil society organization called the Rural Development Foundation of Shan State (RDFSS). RDFSS has no formal relationship with any EAOs, and works with a network of 25 monastic primary schools that staff 28 teachers and serve 800 students, administered under the leadership of the *seyadaw* (abbot) of Kaung Hat Monastery. Shan State is home to dozens of EAOs, paramilitary actors, and EBEPs, representing a range of Shan and non-Shan ethnicities, so this is just an example of one area.

The MoE administers four primary schools in the region, which is more than any EAO. It has been hindered, however, by skepticism among local people, particularly due to the MoE's inability to source teachers locally. More successful have been the 25 schools in the Kaung Hat network, which use the government's Myanmar-language curriculum, put students through government exams, and get some funding from the MoE. At the same time, they recruit local teachers, who can use the Shan language for instruction and who receive training through the monastic network and from RDFSS. Everyone in the community is expected to contribute to salaries, regardless of whether they have a child attending school, and contributions are weighted according to income. The teachers are locally recruited through the local contacts of the monasteries. All of the teachers are Shan, and most have reached grade 11 in the government basic education system, with some having passed the matriculation exam.[20] All children receiving education from the Kaung Hat network have Shan as their first language, and very few speak any Myanmar.[21]

Each school has a school committee that reports to specific monks, who are each responsible for the administration of clusters of a few schools. These monks then each report to the Kaung Hat *seyadaw*, who is the lead administrator of the network. In turn, the *seyadaw* reports to MORA at the beginning and end of the school year on student enrollment, other basic student figures, and budgets. RDFSS, which helped to establish the Kaung Hat school network, provides monitoring and mentoring support, teacher training, and for some of the schools, funding.

---

[19] The extent to which these schools are recognized as "mixed" by the MoE is unclear, and they have been established through local-level relationships between MNED administrators and MoE township education officers (TEOs) and head teachers. Mixed schools also have school committees made up of local volunteers, and tend to rely on support from the local community, which subsidizes the incomes of MNED teachers.

[20] In practice, this means teaching children to memorize Myanmar-language textbooks, as there is no curriculum framework or flexibility to teach using locally relevant material.

[21] There is currently no Shan literacy curriculum in the schools, due to the lack of textbooks and the additional burden it would place on teachers who teach multiple grades, but Shan literacy programs are provided in the monasteries in summer and occasionally after school hours.

FIVE: THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND ITS REFORM AGENDA

The Ministry of Education is the largest provider of education in Myanmar.[22] For decades, education in Myanmar has been chronically underfunded and poorly managed, due to decades of authoritarian rule. Since 2011, the government has initiated numerous reforms, recognizing the need for significantly increased investment in education, and pledging to work with international actors to improve education quality and access. Education spending as a percentage of GDP also rose, from 0.6 percent in 2009-10 to 2.1 percent in 2013-14. The new resources available to the MoE have been directed towards four main areas: wages, contract teachers (known as daily-wage teachers), school construction, and making education "free and compulsory." In addition, the Quick Wins program was implemented in 2015-16 as part of the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) process.

Staff and teacher salaries: The majority of MoE expenditure goes towards recurrent spending – predominantly staff salaries,[23] which the government began increasing on a yearly basis in 2011. In 2012, the government boosted salaries and added a monthly bonus of MMK 30,000 for all civil servants, including primary and secondary teachers on permanent contracts. The MoE has also started to provide salary subsidies for teachers in the monastic education system.[24]

Daily-wage teachers: In 2013, the government began a program of mass recruitment of daily-wage teachers, in a bid to meet targets of five teachers per primary school. Unlike their salaried counterparts, daily-wage teachers have not graduated from teacher training colleges and are not civil servants. These teachers have been disproportionately deployed to remote schools, which lack experienced and well-qualified teachers due to the undesirability of the posts.

School construction and improvements: The MoE has also instituted a school construction and renovation program, building 7,616 new schools and 11,776 new classrooms and renovating 8,945 schools and 13,555 classrooms between 2010-11 and 2014-15.[25] In some areas, these renovations have enabled the MoE to upgrade branch and affiliate schools to the status of fully administered MoE schools. School construction and improvements have also been offered to community schools administered by EBEPs as a way for the MoE to begin providing teachers and bringing the schools under government administration.

Making primary education free and compulsory: In academic year 2009-10, families still bore 63 percent of the cost of education, contributing to school renovations and paying for school supplies, textbooks, and uniforms on top of registration fees and other costs. In response, in 2012, the MoE initiated a free and compulsory education program, giving stipends to low-income families to keep their children in school and providing uniforms and other school supplies. The government also introduced a small scholarship program for high-achieving students.

Quick Wins program 2015-16: In September 2015, to complement these initiatives and introduce some strategic activities in anticipation of the NESP (2016-21), the government introduced the Quick Wins program, intended to expand access, improve quality, address inequities, and strengthen the national education system.

Legal reform: On September 30, 2014, the president signed the National Education Law, which had been drafted by the parliamentary Education Promotion Committee. The law was intended to establish the framework for education reform, and included provisions for limited decentralization, the introduction of mother tongue-based learning, the addition of kindergarten and grade 12, and a promise to institute free and compulsory education, initially at the primary level. In the lead-up to the law's passage and its aftermath, there were regular student and teachers union protests, which came to a head in March 2015 when the police violently dispersed gatherings of student protesters and arrested many of the protest leaders. Subsequent negotiations between activists and the government led to some minor revisions and amendments to the law in June 2015.

In addition, constitutional amendments enacted in June 2015 allowed for greater decentralization of education, specifically according states and regions the right "to administer basic education schools…in accordance with Union law," to directly receive overseas development assistance, and to raise taxes in a wide range of new areas. However, these provisions do not give the state and region governments any new authority over the Ministry of Education or its schools in their areas, and it is not clear what form schools administered directly by them would take.

---

[22] Ministry of Education (2016), 9.

[23] Recurrent spending rose from MMK 274 billion to MMK 1.13 trillion between 2011-12 and 2015-16.

[24] MMK 36,000 monthly towards one teacher's salary for the first 20 students in each monastic school, and an additional salary for each additional 40 students.

[25] These figures were taken from a draft version of the NESP circulated in December 2015.

SIX: LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN EDUCATION

Mother tongue-based and multi-lingual education: Non-native speakers of the Myanmar language are at a huge disadvantage in the current education system, as Myanmar is the main language of instruction and examination. As many as 30 percent of all rural school children will not have heard the Myanmar language before they enter school.[26] Meanwhile, an estimated 70 percent of teachers working in ethnic areas are unable to speak the local language or dialect.[27] Children's Myanmar-language competence is particularly low in communities that have lived primarily under the governance of EAOs and thus separate from mainstream Myanmar society.

Since 2015, tentative steps have been taken to introduce ethnic-language teaching in schools. Some students in the MoE system have long received ethnic-language education in mixed schools, where EBEPs provide additional classes, but these are a minority. Mother tongue-based and multilingual education in the early years of schooling is internationally recognized as the most cost-effective way for children who speak a minority language to get the chance to perform well in school.[28] MTB-MLE not only uses students' mother tongue as the language of instruction, but it also draws on culturally relevant resources to improve cognition in multilingual environments. While competence in the Myanmar language is a crucial, practical and cultural asset, and is much sought after by many ethnic parents, evidence suggests that it is best learned as a second language, rather than by forcing children to spend years in a state of mild confusion in class.

Ethnic language, culture, and history: Education systems that simply reproduce the values, attitudes, and social relations of a dominant group in a society are likely to contribute to conflict, as has been seen repeatedly in Myanmar's modern history. Therefore, even at later stages in a child's education, if they have successfully transitioned to understanding the Myanmar language, it is important that they be able to keep studying their own language, history, and other relevant subjects. This relates most obviously to the promotion of ethnic *literacy* – ensuring that people are able to write in their own languages – and to the investment in ethnic *literature* – preserving and building on the bodies of literature that exist in non-Myanmar languages. Further reform is needed in the teaching of history and civics, as current approaches are felt to be deeply biased towards a particular nationalist vision of the Bamar. On the other hand, the curricula that some ethnic groups have developed also promote a politicized (and sometimes biased) understanding of culture and history.

Finding the right balance of Myanmar and the mother tongue: It is also crucial that ethnic students become fully competent in the Myanmar language, to ensure that they have equal access to employment and education opportunities across the Union. As noted above, MTB-MLE supports the objective of fluency in both mother tongue and Myanmar language, as the mother tongue medium gives children a solid basis from which to begin learning other languages once their basic learning skills and confidence have been built. As such, a multilingual education framework is often considered most appropriate for multilingual contexts, even where one language is considered of particular importance. Such a framework typically aims to maintain the mother tongue as the language of instruction for "as long as possible," but gets students to a point of where they are using two languages for the acquisition of knowledge from the lower grades of school to the university level. Finding the right balance of Myanmar and mother tongue languages must be a government priority, to ensure that minorities have equal access and opportunities.

Steps towards MTB-MLE: In recent years, the MoE has made limited progress towards introducing MTB-MLE in its schools, and the need for MTB-MLE appears to be gaining recognition within the ministry. This recognition is reflected in a nine-point national language policy that was introduced by the MoE at the International Conference on Language Policy in Multicultural and Multilingual Settings, held at the University of Mandalay in February 2016.

The 2015 version of the National Education Law also permitted ethnic languages to be taught as subjects. Some MoE schools actually began teaching these subjects outside of school hours in 2013 or 2014, but the law appears to have allowed increased space for in-school-hours teaching and for state/region governments to allocate specific funds for teachers. The governments of Mon, Kayin, Shan, Kachin, Bago, and other states/regions have begun developing textbooks and teacher training programs for teaching local ethnic languages, leading hundreds of teachers to be mobilized across the country. The coverage of these programs varies greatly.

These efforts have been hindered, however, by an overall lack of funding and administrative support from the government. Ethnic languages are still not compulsory subjects, and are usually taught outside of school hours.[29] A deeper challenge is the lack of qualified teachers with ethnic-language skills, as 70 percent of teachers working in ethnic areas are unable to speak the local language or dialect.[30] MoE efforts to provide ethnic-language curricula have been hampered by an initial government

---

[26] Pyoe Pin. 2014. The Political Economy of Basic Education in Myanmar. 8.

[27] Ibid.

[28] As described by UNESCO, MTB-MLE approaches generally start children's education in their mother tongue. The national or dominant language (e.g., Myanmar) is introduced in early childhood, but is not used for instruction until students are sufficiently well versed in it as a second language.

[29] A 2015 amendment to the National Education Law provides that "if there is a need, an ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar as a language of instruction at the basic education level."

[30] Cited in Pyoe Pin (2014), 8.

requirement that ethnic-language textbooks be translated word for word from existing Myanmar-language texts, meaning they often make little sense. Progress has also been hindered by lack of resources for printing and distribution, which can be extremely expensive in rural areas.[31] Additionally, there appear to have been no government attempts to help teachers with ethnic languages to use them as the medium of instruction where necessary. Indeed, the National Education Law states that ethnic languages should only be used "if necessary," and "alongside Myanmar," rather than asserting that teachers should use whatever language is most conducive to learning.

If the NESP is carried out, a specific component of broader curriculum reforms will be implemented to develop "local curriculum, including ethnic languages, to support and uphold the languages, literature, culture, arts, customs, heritage, and traditions of all nationalities."[32] The plan also frequently emphasizes the need for culturally relevant curriculum content, particularly to stimulate early childhood learning.

Framing the challenge ahead: Under the National League for Democracy-led (NLD) government, Myanmar has a great opportunity to boost the role of MTB-MLE. The NLD's 2015 election manifesto commits its government to developing an education system that supports and promotes ethnic languages and cultures as part of a commitment to federalism. Seeing this commitment through would provide huge pedagogical benefits and be a key step towards peace and national reconciliation, addressing a core grievance that has driven conflict.

However, success will require serious political will and the investment of time and funds. Languages are not confined to specific states and regions, or even townships. Any given township varies in ethnic composition and prevalent languages from village tract to village tract. Furthermore, there are great differences between towns and villages, with the former tending to be much more mixed in terms of ethnicity and also more likely be dominated by fluent Myanmar speakers.

There are, then, difficult decisions to be made about how student performance in ethnic-language subjects will be assessed. In some areas, the MoE may have to hire teachers who have not completed MoE high school education themselves. All of these decisions are being made at a time when the MoE and other education actors are also confronting much broader decisions about what pedagogical approaches should be adopted as part of reforms, and what forms of curriculum need to be used.

[31] These difficulties were cited by a representative of the Kachin State Education Department at the Mandalay NLP conference, February 2016.
[32] Ministry of Education (2016), 32.

SEVEN: THE BENEFITS OF HAVING MULTIPLE EDUCATION PROVIDERS

International precedents for non-state actors and complementary systems: Education sectors consisting of a wide range of actors, guided by common frameworks, are the norm internationally. Globally, non-state education actors come in many forms, including both for-profit and not-for-profit entities that can receive funds from students' families, from donations (from the community or individual donors), from government, or from other sources.[33] Lower- to middle-income countries have in recent decades seen a consistent rise in enrollment at non-state schools. In developing countries, there are countless contemporary examples of nongovernmental education systems being embraced by governments and international aid actors alike; indeed, these systems are in some cases favored for their ability to reach underserved populations.

The term "complementary education" emerged in the 1990s to describe the growing number of basic education programs for hard-to-reach children who were excluded from state education due to remoteness, not speaking the dominant language, or other disadvantages. Complementary systems exist in at least 35 countries, and are effectively defined by their ability to provide a recognized form of basic education while retaining characteristics, intended to make the schools more suitable for specific populations with specific needs, that differentiate them from the mainstream schooling system.

The importance of EBEPs to Myanmar's education sector: EBEPs have a critical role to play in reaching Myanmar's education targets due to four main factors: their unique access to territory; their experience in providing MTB-MLE; their value in the eyes of their communities; and their potential to contribute to building peace and reconciliation. Most pressingly, access-to-education targets will simply not be achievable without the work of EBEPs, as they remain the only providers able to work in many areas. While the 2015 National Education Law recognizes the need for "temporary" or "emergency" services for conflict-affected areas, it seemingly fails to appreciate that many areas have never been consolidated under government control and so naturally rely on alternative arrangements for education.

EAO guardedness towards MoE access often results from their lack of trust in the state in general, following decades of military rule and armed conflict. Expansion of state services can damage confidence in ceasefires by stoking fears among EAOs that the government intends to use "development" to extend its control, rather than to engage in serious political discussions about federalism. Rapid proliferation of mixed schools without clear guidelines has often led to impractical education arrangements, and MoE teachers in remote areas are prone to high rates of turnover and absenteeism.[34] In areas that are difficult to access, MoE would benefit from recognizing and cooperating with these EBEPs rather than just approaching schools directly, community by community.

Ethnic education systems are firmly rooted in community networks and have generally been structured, by evolution or design, to provide continuing services regardless of the security or political situation. Given the likelihood that the ebb and flow of conflict will continue in many ethnic areas, EBEPs will remain the most effective providers in reaching some areas for many years to come.

Moving towards MTB-MLE: EBEPs typically have significant experience both in teaching ethnic literacy and in using ethnic languages to teach Myanmar-language curricula. In its 118 primary and post-primary Mon national schools, the MNEC/MNED uses a full Mon-language curriculum until grade five.[35] It transitions to the government's Myanmar-language curriculum for middle and secondary school, while maintaining Mon as a language of instruction.

Most other EBEP schools, including those in the Kaung Hat network, primarily use the Myanmar-language government curriculum so that students can take government exams. Crucially, however, these EBEPs typically provide teachers who can use the students' mother tongue as a language of instruction to help guide them through materials in what is essentially a foreign language. EBEPs that focus on the MoE curriculum sometimes also teach ethnic languages as additional subjects, either as elective subjects outside of school hours or as part of the standard curriculum.[36] KED/KSEAG and some Kachin EBEPs among others provide ethnic-language curricula for the full course of basic education. It should be noted, however, that there is still much room for improvement of the MTB-MLE services provided by some EBEPs.

At the heart of the community: On the whole, communities continue to invest heavily in their EBEPs, and many exhibit a clear preference for them over the MoE. Indeed, most EBEP schools receive donations from a wide range of local people, beyond those that have children attending the schools. This is so for a number of reasons. Firstly, where EBEPs are well established, ethnic communities often view them as their own national education system, and even take pride in them. Some EAO education departments have been the established education

---

[33] See a visual representation of these types of non-state education actors in Steer, Liesbet, Julia Gillard, Emily Gustafsson-Wright, and Michael Latham. 2015. Non-state actors in education in developing countries: A framing paper for discussion. Background paper, Annual Research Symposium of the Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution, March 5-6, Washington, DC: 28.

[34] This is because they often struggle to adapt to these communities, and because they must regularly travel to towns to collect salaries and carry out administrative tasks.

[35] This curriculum is all in Mon except for science subjects, which use Myanmar- and English-language terms. Most subjects were adapted and translated from the government's Myanmar-language curriculum in the 1990s.

[36] For example, numerous Kachin EBEPs teach ethnic languages alongside the MoE curriculum. Schools in the Kaung Hat network do not provide Shan language as a subject, but they help organize a summer Shan literacy course.

authority for decades and are recognized as such by parents who themselves were educated in those systems. Even when EBEPs are new to an area, they tend to work more collaboratively with school committees and parents than the MoE does, because their staff and teachers speak the local language, understand the local customs, and often take the time to build trust with elders, village leaders, and school committees.

Furthermore, EBEP-supported teachers are often from the village they serve or nearby. This means that they are in the village, or are easy to contact, during school holidays. While EBEPs also suffer from high teacher turnover in some areas, there are many communities that have had the same EBEP-supported teacher for years, which is often difficult for MoE teachers to do because they typically come from urban areas and are unlikely to move permanently to a remote area.

Building peace and reconciliation through recognition of EBEPs: Explicit efforts by the new government to recognize and formalize EBEPs, to ensure that they have a future as valued institutions within the Union, would give a significant boost to peacebuilding efforts. This would build confidence in the peace process among EAOs and communities. It would demonstrate that ceasefires will not be used to undermine their existing systems and structures, and would be a constructive first step towards incorporating those structures into the future state. It would also facilitate real and tangible forms of cooperation between the state and EAOs – as well as formerly marginalized ethnic, religious, and civil society organizations – to help build trust and demonstrate that hostile relationships are being transformed. Increasing access to MTB-MLE also helps build peace by building a more inclusive education sector that is representative of the country's diversity.

EAOs often feel that the education systems they have built under incredibly challenging circumstances are a symbol of their legitimacy and their claim to represent the communities in areas they control. Meanwhile, other EBEPs are often connected to locally influential religious or other community figures, and also hold significant social capital within their societies. EAO leaders and other ethnic elites involved in education provision understandably trace their legitimacy to the long history of self-government in their regions, even during British colonial rule.

At the same time, many ethnic societies affected by war and oppression remain deeply skeptical of a state that they have mostly experienced in the form of the Tatmadaw. For communities that have yet to be brought under government administration, particularly those that are under the firm control of EAO parallel administration systems, questions around the incorporation of community schools into the Union's education system relate to much bigger questions around the identity of a particular community. Reconciliation, therefore, will involve processes that can bring societies that have been formed outside of the state's purview into the Union of Myanmar and allow for the development of more representative and locally relevant institutions to accommodate them.

EIGHT: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking the first steps

Framing the challenge ahead: Establishing a diverse but cohesive education sector that is under the guidance of the state should be seen as the ultimate aim of all stakeholders. However, many ethnic leaders will see this as possible only with significant reform of the state to make it more inclusive. Therefore, building up the state to assume this kind of role will depend on far more than technical solutions and the development of the right capacities. The following recommendations outline the general approach that major stakeholders should take towards reforming their systems and increasing cooperation:

> ### Government recommendation #1
>
> EBEPs should be seen as valued partners in reaching the government's education targets. Policies should be developed to enable and support EBEPs, through active cooperation, and avoid undermining their activities.

> ### Government recommendation #2
>
> Ensuring that EBEPs have a future as valued institutions within the Union should be seen as crucial to achieving peace and national reconciliation. This will boost confidence in ceasefires in the short term, and help lay the foundations for the "establishment of a genuine, federal democratic union."

> ### EAO/EBEP recommendation #1
>
> EBEPs should work to improve coordination and cooperation with the government to ensure that MoE and EBEP services are complementary and coherent. EBEPs should recognize that the government now has a democratic mandate to serve the population, including managing the education sector.

> ### International aid community recommendation #1
>
> As long as conflicts continue, supporting both the MoE and EBEPs is crucial to helping the country meet its education targets and to ensuring conflict sensitivity. EBEPs should be seen as particularly valuable partners in reaching some of the country's most vulnerable communities and in improving access to MTB-MLE.

Formally recognizing EBEPs: As an overture to EBEPs, the NLD government should explicitly acknowledge EBEPs and the role they currently play in providing basic education. It should openly recognize the status quo by stating that EBEPs of various types and affiliations are important providers of formal, basic education in the country and may receive funds from communities and international actors.

> ### Government recommendation #3
>
> Provide legal recognition to EBEPs, without specific conditions or registration requirements.

Towards improved coordination: Many of the challenges outlined in this brief demand more systematic communication and coordination between the government and EBEPs. Some limited forms of coordination that already exist can be built upon, including local-level engagements involving teachers and local administrators, and more formal coordination meetings facilitated by UNICEF in Mon and Kayin States.

Improved coordination and communication should involve both concerted engagement to solve practical issues at appropriate administrative levels and Union-level efforts towards alignment of strategies and targets. It is a responsibility of the government to make reform processes more inclusive, to gain buy-in from EBEPs and to mobilize all education providers around common aims. At the same time, EBEPs should recognize that the government has a democratic mandate to lead on education strategies. Where EBEPs can align with MoE agendas and demonstrate that they are helping to reach government targets, they will likely encourage greater support from the government in general, and from major international development partners as well.

> ### Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #1
>
> Establish formal coordination mechanisms at appropriate administrative levels.

> ### Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #2
>
> Develop mechanisms for Union-level coordination to align education strategies, agendas, and priorities, as well as and to allow greater space for lower-level engagement.

> ### Government recommendation #4
>
> Foster more inclusive approaches to education planning and policy by making other education providers genuine and valued stakeholders.

> ### EAO/EBEP recommendation #2
>
> Recognize that the MoE is responsible for leading the development of education strategies, and that EBEPs can benefit from aligning their agendas and strategies with the government's.

> ### International aid community recommendation #2
>
> Continue to support coordination initiatives where participants deem them worthwhile, but encourage the MoE to take more initiative.

Ministry of Education expansion into ceasefire areas

Benefiting from extensive new resources and new access, the MoE has extended its coverage significantly in some new ceasefire areas where territories remain contested and where EBEPs are often already providing education support. This has been most vivid in Karen areas, where KSEAG/KED are already providing support. While MoE expansion has the potential to improve education for underserved communities, in practice it has often led to a range of practical and political complications, damaging confidence in ceasefires and hampering service delivery.

EAO concerns and risks to the ceasefires: Rapid expansion of the MoE often appears political, as the state has never fully governed these areas, and because education is often already being provided by EBEPs. In the case of the KNU, this has deepened suspicions that the government aims to use ceasefires to overrun territory through development rather than to negotiate a political settlement. While the exact responses of KNU authorities on the ground have varied greatly, skepticism of government intentions is widespread, and leaders often emphasize that the government should cooperate with the existing education authorities. One executive committee member of the KNU explained, "The government is going into the villages and making many offers…. [People] simply think the government is improving things for them, but they don't understand the bigger [political] problems and the need for genuine change."[37]

Community responses to MoE overtures vary greatly depending on their own feelings and on their relations with various authorities. Some communities defer to EAOs in their area, who might allow or disallow MoE access, while others act on their own initiative. For many communities, government teachers are immediately attractive because they come without cost, whereas communities have to provide money or food to support EBEP teachers. On the other hand, government teachers also have often led to extra costs for communities. Even in these cases, communities have often pushed to keep their existing EBEP teachers too, leading to the creation of mixed schools. In many other cases, communities reject government support outright, and just continue with their EBEP. This was the case with one village head, who exclaimed that the government was trying to use education "to tame us."

Wasting human resources: As a result of MoE teachers being sent to community schools, seemingly hundreds of EBEP teachers have been effectively ousted from their schools, including many who have long served in their own villages. According to a survey conducted by the KTWG, local KED/KSEAG teachers had been ousted in 38 percent of the 32 communities where interviews were held. This demonstrates poor use of resources in a context where communities remain underserved, and where many gaps could be filled if deployments were coordinated more systematically.

As a first step, the MoE should make it mandatory for state education department staff, township education officers (TEOs), and high school teachers involved in outreach to rural areas to contact all existing education providers for any school where they plan to send teachers or other support, rather than just dealing with the school itself or the local village leader. Communities studied in Karen areas often insisted that the government coordinate new support directly with the KED or the KNU, but the government typically failed to do so, leading to mixed outcomes. In many EBEP catchment areas, EBEPs have been receptive to government support for schools they administer, but remain insistent that it be well coordinated to ensure the best use of resources and the protection of existing values and structures.[38]

Government recommendation #5

Consult all existing education providers whenever deploying teachers or offering resources to schools in new communities.

Providers should aim to delineate areas where the MoE is the main provider, where EBEPs are the main providers, and where there is a high degree of overlap. Specific local protocols could then be developed for the areas of greatest overlap, at least to provide formal and mutual recognition of the status quo.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #3

Through regional coordination, delineate areas of coverage where possible, while recognizing that many areas are inevitably areas of mixed coverage.

In order to avoid disputes, to assure communities that MoE support is authorized, and to ensure the personal security of MoE teachers, approval for teacher deployment should always be sought from local EAOs (who may or may not be connected to existing EBEPs). In practice this is complicated and not always possible – or even justified – as EAOs vary in their legitimacy as representatives of local communities, and communities may sometimes favor MoE support. Nonetheless, arrangements are likely to be safer for teachers, and far more sustainable, when formal permission can be secured.

Government recommendation #6

Always consult EAOs that have well-established authority in target areas before dispatching MoE teachers or offering other support to communities.

When new education support is offered, formal discussions should take place at the school level between the MoE, EBEPs, and the communities (represented by school committees, parents, respected local teachers, and possibly village leaders). Such discussions should allow communities to consider the forms of support available from each provider and decide what to accept.

---

[37] Interview with the KNU's joint general secretary two, Padoh Thaw Thi Bwe (February 2014).
[38] As noted, there are still some areas under the authority of EAOs or EBEPs that remain totally averse to MoE activity.

This would provide greater conflict sensitivity and allow communities more influence over education arrangements.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #4

When new forms of support for a community school are proposed, the MoE, EBEPs, and the community should hold formal meetings to agree on services to be provided. Initial sessions should seek consensus on the support to be accepted from each system.

Where trust can be established, the MoE and EBEPs should use coordination meetings to devise joint strategies for particular regions, where each provider takes on specific responsibilities, and joint responsibilities are developed for areas of mixed coverage. This would be a very sensitive area of engagement, and would not be possible everywhere. However, pilot projects in areas where relations between the government and EAOs and EBEPs are particularly strong might provide useful lessons.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #5

Consider options for more strategic coordination of services at appropriate administrative levels.

International aid community recommendation #3

If local will exists, international actors could facilitate information sharing and planning programs, including joint mapping exercises.

Formalizing and managing mixed schools

Another key area where better coordination would improve education is the formalizing of mixed schools. These include longstanding MoE schools where EBEPs or communities themselves provide local teachers, typically to teach local languages and other subjects, but sometimes just to fill gaps. The mixed-school model has many potential benefits. Tens of thousands of students have access to MTB-MLE through mixed schools, while also gaining a full MoE-recognized education. In a context where all service providers have limited resources and capacities, and where the government has been unable to provide MTB-MLE, mixed schools have found a way to pool resources to come closer to meeting community needs. A wide range of challenges must be addressed, however, to ensure that resources are used efficiently, communities' needs are met, and potential sources of conflict are mitigated.

When MoE teachers have been sent to EBEP-supported schools for the first time, there has typically been little or no coordination with the EBEPs to determine how these schools will be managed.

Out of 379 new MoE-KED/KSEAG mixed schools, the government reportedly has a "strong administrative presence" in all but 31, as a result of its greater resources, and in a few cases due to Tatmadaw pressure on school committees. This has allowed the government to prevail on a number of issues in schools, even where EBEPs have been the main education authority for decades, leading to various tensions, which are detailed below.

While many of these challenges are particular to areas of rapid MoE expansion, established mixed schools face a range of challenges that are sometimes similar. These generally stem from the lack of formal arrangements, particularly as the MoE does not officially recognize mixed schools. This makes it extremely difficult for certain administrative, financing, testing, and other arrangements to be precisely tailored to the providers unique to those schools.

Language, culture, and nationality: Language issues are perhaps the most contentious, along with others related to nationality. In schools that have previously been under the KED/KSEAG system, and have thus had the Sgaw Karen language as a major subject and the primary medium of instruction, communities have often pushed to keep KED/KSEAG teachers in service where possible.

In an unknown number of schools, however, MoE teachers have arrived and have restricted local-language teaching, consigning it to outside of regular school hours, allowing it only for certain grades, or blocking it altogether. Out of 32 communities surveyed by KTWG, 12 "were prevented from teaching the Karen language as a subject."[39]

The Women and Child Rights Project (WCRP) and the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) have documented conditions attached to MoE grants to MNED-supported Mon national schools that included making Mon an out-of-hours subject, but it is unclear if this is because MoE teachers were also being sent to these schools.[40] Notably, the MNEC/MNED has a policy that it will not support mixed schools unless they allow Mon subjects to be taught in school hours.

Additionally, even where EBEP teachers provide local literacy, history, or other ethnic subjects during classroom hours, these subjects are not given priority by students or administrators in mixed schools, because they are not required for graduation to the next grade or to meet MoE targets. There are further issues around language of instruction. Although the 2014 National Education law states that "an ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar as a language of instruction at the basic education level," the curriculum and teacher guidelines are built from the base up around Myanmar language as if it were the first language of the learner.

---

[39] KTWG (2016). The document gives the figure of 38 percent.
[40] Women and Child Rights Project and Human Rights Foundation of Monland. 2015. Inaccessible and Under-Resourced: Concerns over Education in Rural Mon Communities. Kanchanaburi, Thailand: HURFOM: 28-29.

Administrative differences, unprofessional conduct, and poor community relations: Disputes also tend to emerge due to differences between the administrative practices of each system, such as reporting and evaluation protocols, scheduling systems, sizes of classes, and so on. At the same time, there are widespread reports of unprofessional behavior among new government teachers in remote areas, particularly absenteeism.

Reasons given by Karen Human Rights Group interviewees for lack of teacher professionalism include lack of oversight from TEOs, low seniority and qualifications of teachers, and lack of commitment to the job. Communities have also recounted difficulties in establishing good professional and social relationships with new MoE teachers, whom they sometimes have to provide with housing, food, and other support.

EBEP teacher morale and retention: Despite the apparent prevalence of unprofessional conduct among MoE teachers, teachers supported by KSEAG have often reported that they feel demeaned by their MoE seniors and colleagues because they are not formally recognized by the ministry, and because their main subjects have been degraded.

Recommendations for formalizing mixed schools: The MoE should begin documenting and understanding all schools that also receive support from EBEPs as "mixed schools," and should work with EBEPs to develop formal procedures for establishing and administering them. These efforts should be aimed at maximizing the contributions of each provider according to community needs and other education priorities.

A wide range of issues need to be considered in managing mixed schools, ranging from deployment of teachers from each system, to school grants, to ethnic-language teaching hours and prioritization. Due to great differences in context from school to school, many of these decisions would be best made at the school level, within guidelines and parameters set by the MoE and EBEPs at higher levels. Better coordination on these matters could be achieved through multilateral school steering committees that include the MoE, EBEPs, and the community. Communities could be represented by school committees, parents, and long-serving local teachers. Among guidelines and parameters established at higher administrative levels, promotion of ethnic-language teaching and other ethnic subjects should be a priority consideration.

Government recommendation #7

The government should formally recognize and record any school that also receives EBEP support as a mixed school.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #6

Establish formal guidelines and school-level steering committees for the administration of mixed schools.

The MoE needs to comprehensively address issues of professionalism among its teachers deployed to remote areas, as this is central to their acceptance and their success in those communities. Substantive recommendations to improve professionalism are beyond the scope of this paper. However, these issues underscore the value of local teachers working in their own communities, and the need for MoE to support the efforts of existing providers in areas where they exist, rather than dispatching its own teachers from faraway places. This seems particularly sensible because many daily-wage teachers do not meet the traditional teacher recruitment requirements either.

Government recommendation #8

Ensure that teachers serving in remote ethnic areas are able to do so professionally, and are able to develop good professional and social relations with their host communities.

Disputes, belittling by senior MoE teachers, and feelings of degradation among teachers create an inefficient working environment and set a bad example for children, particularly where ethnic and political factors are involved. These issues can also exacerbate ethnic grievances, as EBEPs and communities receive the message that the government does not value their contribution to the Union or respect their aspirations to provide education based on local values and cultures. It is crucial that head teachers and other teachers from MoE and EBEPs be supported and encouraged to find compromises on their rules, regulations, and practices.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #7

MoE and EBEPs should start joint initiatives to develop more harmonious working relationships in mixed schools.

Student assessment, qualifications, and transfers between systems

There are currently a range of challenges related to assessments, qualifications, and transfers between MoE and EBEP systems. These include a lack of recognition for EBEP qualifications and levels of attainment, the related difficulties that EBEP students face in transferring between systems, and the reality that the MoE system does not assess students on ethnic subjects.

The need for children to acquire officially recognized qualifications or to qualify for entry into MoE schools was frequently raised as a major challenge for EBEPs. It is important that qualifications provided by EBEPs are recognized and that students who need to transfer between systems (such as from primary to middle school) are able to do so without difficulty. This might be necessary if families migrate or if their closest middle school is under a different system to that of their primary school. Some families might prefer that their child attend an EBEP primary school and study in their first language, but then to transfer to the MoE system in middle school to improve their Myanmar-language

skills and earn MoE qualifications. Overall, EBEPs said students transferring from MoE primary schools had not been a problem – schools in the refugee camps in Thailand, for example, have taken thousands of former MoE students for secondary education. It has often been much more difficult, however, for students transferring the other way.

Interviews conducted by Save the Children with students who had attempted to transfer from EBEP schools into the MoE system discovered a variety of required placement tests, required fees, required documentation, and one case of bribery of a head teacher.[41] Interviews with parents, school committee members, and EBEP teachers and administrators indicated that placement tests are often used, with students who fail facing rejection or being put back one or more grades. This is of questionable utility, as students are unlikely to be any more familiar with the previous year's material.[42] Overall, the transfer system suffers from a high degree of inconsistency, leaving students with a great deal of uncertainty about their future, and failing to maximize access and retention rates.

Some EBEP-supported community schools, as well as monastic schools registered with MORA, use the MoE curriculum and can administer MoE examinations and matriculation. This allows students to get permission to transfer to MoE secondary schools in towns. These EBEPs sacrifice their ability to prioritize local languages or locally relevant curriculum, as any study on top of what is needed for MoE exams becomes a lower priority for students and school administrations.

Long-term reforms: Many of these issues would best be addressed over the long term, through comprehensive reform of the country's assessment and qualifications framework. Such reform will be crucial to developing a more inclusive and diverse education sector, one that supports and enhances the roles of all providers and that is supportive of MTB-MLE. The NESP aims to implement a "more balanced [assessment and qualifications] system that assesses student learning progress against national learning standards."[43] This shift, in itself, could be crucial, as it would make it easier for alternative education providers to prepare students for MoE exams using their own approach.

Additionally, the MoE should introduce official assessment of ethnic-language and other ethnic subjects, and where possible should allow ethnic students to study other, Union-wide subjects in local languages. These changes would increase the importance attributed to these subjects in MoE and mixed schools and would encourage more EBEPs to use at least parts of the MoE curriculum and prepare students for MoE exams. In the future, the government could also establish systematic processes for accrediting qualifications provided by EBEPs, particularly for ethnic-language subjects.

Government recommendation #9
As part of the MoE's broader agenda for curriculum and assessment reforms, improve compatibility between EBEP and the MoE systems to promote MTB-MLE and to build a more diverse and inclusive education sector.

All of these reform processes would benefit greatly from direct cooperation between the MoE and EBEPs. This would ensure greater complementarity between systems, and make MoE frameworks better suited to accommodate the diversity that exists across Myanmar's education sector. In particular, collaborative work is needed to compare existing curriculum and assessment frameworks, and to identify areas where approaches could be aligned to ensure greater compatibility.

Government recommendation #10
Include EBEPs in the reform of curriculum and assessment frameworks as much as possible.

EAO/EBEP recommendation #3
Become involved in and influence government reforms of curriculum and assessment frameworks, and support complementarity between systems.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #8
Undertake collaborative research and curriculum design projects to increase complementarity between education systems.

International aid community recommendation #4
Develop programs to support collaborative research and curriculum design projects to increase complementarity between education systems.

Immediate and near-term measures: The above "long-term" measures are likely to take years of negotiation and compromise, but there are several immediate or near-term measures that would help address these issues for the students of today and the near future.

The MoE should make it a priority that all students be enrolled and kept in school, including students previously enrolled in EBEP schools and students with poor Myanmar language skills. Enrollment should not depend on parents paying any informal fees or on personal connections. Such practices are antithetical to the government's constitutional commitment to provide all children with an education and should not be tolerated by the

---

[41] Dare, Aoife. 2015. Beyond Access: Refugee Students' Experiences of Myanmar State Education. Save The Children.

[42] The MoE has extremely strict requirements for grade promotion even within its own system, as many students are held back for failing end-of-year exams, which appears to have extremely negative effects on student retention. Hayden and Martin (2013), 49.

[43] Ministry of Education (2016), 34. An unpublished daft of the full NESP circulated in late 2015 stressed that these learning standards would be related to "child educational development and the skills they will need for lifelong learning."

MoE under any circumstances.

Government recommendation #11

No child should be rejected from enrollment in basic education, including those previously enrolled in EBEP schools and those with poor Myanmar-language skills.

A basic system should be developed such that pro forma transfer slips issued by EBEPs can be accepted by MoE schools as confirmation of the student's level of experience. If placement tests must be used, there should be clear policies, so that EBEPs can prepare likely transfer students. In line with such efforts, the MoE and EBEPs should collaborate to develop more consistent and systematic protocols for transfers.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #9

As soon as possible, establish these basic protocols to ease transfers between EBEP schools and MoE schools:
▪ Pro forma transfer slips issued by EBEPs that are recognized by MoE.
▪ Consistent policies on the use of placement tests.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #10

Pursue concerted coordination between government and EBEPs to develop consistent and systematic protocols for student transfers.

New research should be conducted to help guide the development of these protocols, which could benefit from international assistance. Particular research agendas could include: comparisons of current curriculum and assessment criteria of the MoE and EBEPs; surveys of the difficulties faced by children transferring from each EBEP and at each grade into the MoE; comparative studies of transfer students who are put back to earlier grades and those who are not; and how to manage EBEP-to-MoE transfers in this context.

Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #11

The development of transfer protocols should be guided by new primary research and monitoring of student and school experiences.

International aid community recommendation #5

International development partners should assist government and EBEPs in developing new primary research and monitoring of student and school experiences.

Once students are enrolled, if they are underachieving due to language difficulties or lack of prior education, the MoE should provide additional assistance to maximize their performance. Ideally, classes with significant numbers of non-native Myanmar speakers should have teachers or assistants who can communicate

in the dominant first language. The MoE should also ensure that students are placed in the most appropriate grade, and reduce the risk of students dropping out due to being held back.

Government recommendation #12

Students transferring from EBEP schools should receive additional assistance to improve their level of achievement and remediate any linguistic or academic weaknesses.

Government recommendation #13

Students transferring from EBEP schools should be placed in the grade most appropriate to their prior experience and most beneficial to their learning.

If EBEPs are unable to offer pathways to the next phase of education, and they know that students will want to transfer, they should ensure those students are being adequately exposed to the Myanmar language, and should even begin preparing them for placement tests, where possible. The MoE and EBEPs could significantly ease transfer preparation by agreeing on a consistent transfer process.

EAO/EBEP recommendation #4

EBEPs have a responsibility to ensure that students are well prepared for transfers to MoE schools if this is a pathway they are likely to take.

Prior to more comprehensive reforms, the MoE should also explore short-term measures to give more weight to ethnic-language subjects as other subjects in MoE assessments, and to recognize the qualifications provided by particular EBEPs, such as KSEAD/KED and KNED. Thousands of students – if not tens of thousands – have already attained these qualifications, including large numbers of refugees that the government hopes will be repatriated to Myanmar. The government should evaluate these qualifications to verify that they match the levels of attainment of MoE qualifications, and officially recognize them, where appropriate, as valid. Ideally, they should be recognized as equivalent to MoE qualifications.

Government recommendation #14

In lieu of more thoroughgoing assessment reforms, ensure that the assessment of ethnic subjects is given the same weight as other subjects by school administrations and students

Government recommendation #15

In lieu of a more comprehensive system for accrediting EBEP qualifications, the government should take steps to ensure that credible qualifications issued by EBEPs are recognized as official. Those issues by Karen and Karenni EBEPs, such as from schools in refugee camps are the best known, but there may be others that have similar credibility.

Quality and financing of EBEP services

EBEPs face significant challenges in improving the quality of the education they provide. Some of these challenges are similar to those of the MoE, but EBEPs also suffer particularly from poor financing, leading to high teacher turnover and difficulties in developing long-term strategies.

Sources of financing and support: Funds are typically raised from the entire local community, and schools often rely on the committed support of local leaders to encourage and organize support from communities. Parents also make specific donations for teacher stipends. It should be noted that government schools also depend on community support, with school committees often raising additional funds, and parents burdened with expenses and informal fees to keep their children in school.

Beyond funds provided by communities, most EBEPs depend on international aid, typically provided through partnerships with INGOs or consortiums. Funding is often provided on a project basis, making long-term planning difficult. Where EAOs play a governance role, they often provide some support, particularly if they have ceasefires and more stable sources of funding. The only non-MoE schools in ethnic areas that receive government support are monastic schools registered by MORA. Schools associated with other religions receive no government funding.

Teacher support and training: Teacher salaries are extremely low and are usually not guaranteed for more than a year. When asked what the main challenges were in ensuring quality Mon language education, an MoE head teacher in a mixed post-primary school said that the difficulty was in retaining the school's only MNED teacher, despite having paid her the small government funds provided for Mon-language teaching. "It is difficult for [the MNED teacher] to continue." Keeping EBEP teachers in their jobs often depends on their personal willingness and desire to serve the community. Most EBEPs lack significant resources to provide systematic training, and high turnover makes it difficult to ensure that even active teachers have been trained. Insufficient school materials are a common problem.

EBEPs should be viewed as high-value partners in reaching the most remote and vulnerable populations and helping the country meet targets for universal education. At least until comprehensive political settlements to armed conflicts can be achieved, EBEPs will likely remain independent from the state and removed from public education funding mechanisms. For the next five or ten years, donors should commit to providing consistent and stable support to EBEPs. In particular, donors should focus ongoing support on two main aims:

- Increasing and stabilizing EBEP teacher salaries to bring them closer to those provided by the MoE.
- Developing long-term partnerships with EBEPs aimed at systems strengthening and strategic planning.

The Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC) represents a crucial step in collective donor action. In 2016, the MEC has developed a strategy that "shifts [the consortium's] focus to strengthening ethnic and monastic systems, with a substantially increased focus on policy engagement and coherence between education systems."[44] Additionally, a wide range of other INGOs, such as World Education, Child's Dream, Save the Children, and others have well-developed relations with EBEPs and remain crucial conduits of international assistance.

International aid community recommendation #6
Donors should commit to providing consistent and stable support to EBEPs, with two main aims: increasing and stabilizing EBEP teacher salaries, and supporting long-term partnerships aimed at systems strengthening.

EAO/EBEP recommendation #5
EBEPs, in partnership with trusted international actors, should make systems strengthening central to their organizational strategies, particularly in the context of ever-improving government services.

International aid community recommendation #7
International actors should collaborate extensively with EBEPs from the early stages of program development onwards to ensure that programs are well suited to those EBEPs and their ways of working.

Additionally, EAOs should make efforts to increase their own budgets for social services, including education. Increases should not be financed by raising taxes on local people, as this adds to the burden on communities, but should be funded in other ways, such as through taxes and fees levied on large companies.

EAO/EBEP recommendation #6
EAOs should increase budgets for their education departments.

Towards public financing: Ultimately, all education services should be funded in country. However, establishing effective public financing instruments for EBEPs will take time, and will depend on careful negotiation between all parties to address the technical challenges and to build trust. Indeed, for some EBEPs, this might only be possible following a political settlement and significant reform of the state. On the other hand, it is not uncommon around the world for the state to develop public financing mechanisms for other providers. MoE and EBEPs should use formal coordination mechanisms to begin discussions about possible ways this could be done – indeed, some already have. Pilot initiatives might be helpful to build closer relations and to experiment with channels for funding and mechanisms for distribution, and could be supported by international development

---

[44] Myanmar Education Consortium (2016), p. 4.

partners.

Even if government financing of EBEPs can be arranged, without a comprehensive and sustainable end to armed conflicts EBEPs will need to remain adaptable to potential conditions of renewed conflict. If public financing were to suddenly be cut, donors should be prepared to restore funds to EBEPs that are able to operate in conflict-affected areas and IDP camps.

> ### Government and EAO/EBEP recommendation #12
>
> Develop mechanisms for public financing of EBEP services.

> ### International aid community recommendation #8
>
> Explore options for supporting government and EBEP efforts to establish public financing mechanisms for EBEPs, but remain prepared for disruptions if there is renewed conflict.

> ### Government recommendation #16
>
> Increased support could be provided through MORA to expand assistance to schools in areas that the MoE cannot access.

Towards official accreditation: Options should also be explored for accrediting EBEP teachers, schools, and training centers so they can be fully recognized, and to allow for greater regulation and quality assurance. This might be achieved through an independent accreditation body. Whatever models are used, increased public financing of EBEPs will likely come with some degree of centralized regulation and oversight. Nonetheless, the state should focus on building trust with EBEPs rather than attempting to bring them under rigid control too fast or attaching too many strings to financing and accreditation offers. While EBEPs might be averse to government control and loss of autonomy, they are generally eager to receive greater official recognition of their credentials and services, which formal accreditation could provide.

> ### Government recommendation #17
>
> Options for independent accreditation of EBEPs should be explored and discussed with them.

> ### EAO/EBEP recommendation #7
>
> EBEPs should seek formal accreditation from a state-sanctioned body.

NINE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND FURTHER READING

Discussion Questions
• How can the Union and state/region governments better support EBEP systems and teachers, and how can coordination between systems be improved?
• How can mixed-school arrangements be formalized so as to leverage the comparative advantages of each education provider?
• What budgetary and financing decisions must be made to reduce the prevalence of out-of-pocket and private services while retaining community ownership and influence over services?
• How can EBEPs gain recognition from the Union and state/region governments as valued partners amongst a multitude of education providers?
• What steps can EBEPs and other education providers take to align their agendas with those of the government now that it carries a democratic mandate to lead education reform?
• How can peace-process negotiations aid the effective coordination of education services in conflict-affected areas, and how can cooperation in the field of education contribute to the emergence of a more federal system of government?

Further Reading

Callahan, Mary. 2003. "Language Policy in Modern Burma." In *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia,* edited by Michael Brown and Sumit Ganguly, 143-175. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hayden, Martin, and Richard Martin. 2013. "Recovery of the Education System in Myanmar." *Journal of International and Comparative Education* 2 (2): 47-57.

Jolliffe, Kim. 2014. *Ethnic Conflict and Social Services in Myanmar's Contested Regions*. The Asia Foundation. Available at: http://asiafoundation.org/publication/ethnic-conflict-and-social-services-in-myanmars-contested-regions/.

Jolliffe, Pia. 2016. *Learning, Migration and Intergenerational Relations: The Karen and the Gift of Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Karen Teacher Working Group – KTWG. 2016. *Impact of the Daily-Wage Teacher (DWT) Policy on Education in Karen Areas*.

Kyaw Yin Hlaing. 2007. "The Politics of Language Policy in Myanmar: Imagining Togetherness, Practicing Difference?" In *Language, Nation and Development in Southeast Asia,* edited by Lee Hock Guan and Leo Suryadinata. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Lall, Marie, and Ashley South. 2011. *Education, Conflict and Identity: Non-State Ethnic Education Regimes in Burma*. Education Support Program Working Paper No. 54. Privatisation in Education Research Initiative. Available at: http://www.periglobal.org/role-state/document/education-con%EF%AC%82ict-and-identity-non-state-ethnic-education-regimes-burma.

Lenkova, Polina. 2015. *Conflict Sensitivity in Education Provision in Karen State*. Thabyay Education Foundation. Available at: http://www.thabyay.org/uploads/2/6/7/4/26749033/cs_ed_prov_karen.pdf.

Myanmar Education Consortium. 2016. *Myanmar Education Consortium Program Strategy*. January 2016.

Myanmar Ministry of Education. 2016. *National Education Strategic Plan: Policy and Programming Framework*.

Salem-Gervais, Nicolas, and Rosalie Metro. 2012. "A Textbook Case of Nation Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar." *Journal of Burma Studies* 16 (1): 27-78.

South, Ashley, and Marie Lall. 2016. *Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother-tongue-based Teaching in Myanmar*. The Asia Foundation. Available at: http://asiafoundation.org/publication/schooling-and-conflict-ethnic-education-and-mother-tongue-based-teaching-in-myanmar/.

Speers Mears, Emily, Poul Erik Rasmussen, Liza May Thet Thet Oo, and Zaceu Lian. 2015. *Analysis of Education Services in Contested Areas of Myanmar: Final Report*. Myanmar Education Consortium. Available at: https://mecmigration.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/mec-contested-areas-report-july-20151.pdf.

World Education. 2016. "School Committees and Community Engagement in Education in Karen State."

The Asia Foundation

Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

No.17, Thu Khi Tar Street
Pyi Thar Yar Residence Lane 1
15 Ward, Bauk Htaw, Yankin Township
Yangon, Myanmar