



Conflict Sensitivity in Education Provision in Karen State

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About Thabyay Education Foundation

Founded in 1996, Thabyay Education Foundation educates, develops, connects and empowers individuals and organizations in Myanmar to become positive, impactful change-makers. We seek to achieve this through knowledge creation, innovative learning and guided skills expansion, as well as by forging connections to networks, information and opportunities.

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Acronyms and Glossary

BGF	Border Guard Force
CBO	Community Based Organization
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KED	Karen Education Department
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KNU/KNLA PC	KNU/KNLA Peace Council
KRCEE	Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity
KSEAG	Karen State Education Assistance Group
KTWG	Karen Teacher Working Group
MINE	Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NLD	National League for Democracy
NNER	National Network for Education Reform
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
DKBA	Democratic Karen Benevolent Army
SDA	Seventh Day Adventist
Tatmadaw	Myanmar Armed Forces

Executive Summary

Education is intimately linked with the concept of identity and plays a key role in any nation-building process.

In countries recovering from violent ethno-political conflicts, education can positively contribute to peace-building efforts, but it can also negatively affect peace, when it interacts with the conflict dynamics. Language of instruction, cultural relevance of the curriculum, teaching methods, teacher recruitment and placement - all play a role in how effectively education can contribute to peace-building. Overall, community acceptance of the education system is key to ensuring its conflict sensitivity. The Myanmar situation is particularly complex, as the government is not the only actor in education provision, with different schools widely present in the country, due to the long history of civil war. In Karen State, education services are delivered by ethnic armed groups, religious organizations, communities, as well as refugee camps and migrants schools along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Successive Myanmar governments have focused their nation-building efforts on the culture of the dominant Burman Buddhist majority. In a country, with some 135 minority groups, this approach was often perceived as an attempt of forced assimilation of ethnic minorities into the majority culture. As part of their self-determination struggle, ethnic armed opposition groups developed and maintained their own education systems, which they perceived as key to preserving their group's cultural identity. The KNU, the main Karen ethnic armed group, established the Karen Education Department (KED) to oversee education provision. The KED currently provides support to 1,430 schools, paying stipends to almost 7,911 teachers in areas under full or partial administration of Karen armed opposition groups. However, only one third of schools receiving KED support fall under its full administration, with the majority being mixed or government schools.

Christian networks provide support to areas where the government cannot reach, either helping to set up community schools and connecting them to the government system or offering their own education system. Furthermore, there is a wide variety of community-based and mixed schools, which teach a curriculum from the government, KED, or church, or a combination of different curricula. Monastic schools accept mostly poor students with experience in either state or non-state system and teach the government curriculum. Border-based schools are also important to consider, despite their location outside of Myanmar, due to the fact that students from Karen State continue travelling to the other side of the border to receive an education, which is often more affordable and perceived to be of better quality compared to opportunities available in Myanmar. While monastic schools are part of the government system, many community-based, some church-related schools and schools based on the other side of the border lack official government recognition.

Unsurprisingly, there are significant differences in the government and the KNU education systems. Unlike the government Burman-centric curriculum, the KED teaches Karen nationalism, in Sgaw Karen language. Under the government system, ethnic minorities are not allowed to teach their native languages during school hours or take subjects in those languages. This has often resulted in inability to fully understand the studied material, leading to student drop-outs from government schools. Conversely, in KED schools, Burmese is only taught as a subject and its graduates are sometimes unable to speak fluent Burmese. Teaching methods in the government system tend to be teacher-oriented, while those in KED schools are more student-centred. Furthermore, the KED and government curricula often have opposite visions of the same historical periods and events. For potential integration and convergence of the two systems in the future, curriculum revision, especially that of history textbooks, will present significant challenges. Finally, as the KED system relies on Sgaw Karen dialect, another issue worth attention is whether this system is an optimal solution for speakers of the other major Karen dialect – Pwo, as well as representatives of other ethnic minorities attending KED schools.

Another major problem in terms of potential integration of the different systems is that the government officially recognizes only its own education system. The lack of recognition makes it problematic to hold discussions regarding convergence of the state and ethnic education systems, because ethnic education providers are likely to perceive that they are forced to assimilate into the mainstream education system. At the same time, as KED schools are mostly primary, its students face problems continuing their studies in the government education system and accessing government jobs. Furthermore, with immensely more funds currently available at the government disposal due to donors' priorities, it is difficult in practice for ethnic education providers to compete with the government.

Despite representing the legacy of a protracted conflict in Karen State, education provision has not been addressed in detail during the nationwide ceasefire negotiations to date, with more progress due to be made during the political dialogue stage. While the peace negotiations are proceeding slowly, the reality on the ground is changing quickly. Since the 2012 ceasefire with the KNU, the government has built hundreds of new schools and assigned thousands of teachers to previously inaccessible areas of Karen State. How local stakeholders react to such expansion (particularly in areas where other education systems are already present) is crucial to understanding how education is likely to impact conflict dynamics. Evidence suggests that the current approach in terms of school construction, teacher placement and school administration is not implemented in a conflict-sensitive way.

The concerning issue regarding government expansion is that communities are too often not properly consulted about what kind of education system will be used in a newly

constructed school. Another issue is the government takeover of existing community schools, which often occurs without a proper consultation with local stakeholders. This happens, for example, when the government promotes its teachers to leadership positions inside a school, or promises communities an official recognition of their education, only if the school adopted the government education system. When a school passes under the government control, students lose the chance to study their ethnic language and culture and take subjects in native language. Despite providing support to many community schools, the KED is never consulted or even informed about the government intentions.

Furthermore, as the government makes efforts to expand education access in remote areas, trying to recruit the necessary numbers of teachers, it is often guided by the view that existing community teachers working in those areas are untrained. This often leads to displacement or demotion of local teachers. Since many government teachers are recent graduates with little work experience who come to rural areas to seek promotion, there is a potential for tensions between the newly arrived government teachers and more experienced local ones. This is even more likely to happen, when government teachers' compensation is considered relatively high for local standards.

Furthermore, government teachers generally find it difficult to integrate into the local context, as they normally come from a different ethnic background, and therefore do not speak the local language and have limited understanding of the local culture. Teacher absenteeism is a very common phenomenon, which has negative repercussions on the quality of education. Another concern regards teaching methods. As the government system focuses on rote learning, this approach is likely to be ill suited for a post-conflict environment, where it is generally recognized, student-centred methods are more likely to have a positive impact on peace. Unable to effectively communicate with students due to language barrier, teachers resort to corporal punishment.

Whether communities accept or reject government expansion varies greatly from one area of Karen State to another. Communities are generally willing to accept government education because of more opportunities for further studies, economic relief with government taking care of teachers' recruitment and stipends and in some cases lack of good alternatives. However, this acceptance may also signify, depending on the local political context, that communities are simply fearful of the government retaliation if they rejected the government support. Those who are not willing to accept government education may be afraid that this support does not come without strings attached, inevitably leading to the loss of their autonomy. The desire for self-reliance is strong in some areas, where communities distrust the government, being mindful of the past abuses by the Tatmadaw. Disputes among community members are already happening in some areas about whether to accept or reject government support. Besides the outlined issues, a concern that the loss of Karen education will result in the loss of the cultural identity is likely to be stronger with relatively more educated or nationalistic members of community.

Although ethnic armed opposition groups are generally distrustful of government expansion, their capacity to resist differs from one area to another. Lack of human resources to monitor and report on education issues and insufficient control over territory of the KNU's armed wing in some areas, is currently preventing a more effective and coherent response to the government expansion. In case of other Karen armed groups, such as the DKBA and KNU/KNLA PC, whether they accept government support often depends on how comfortable local commanders are with the government education system.

Only the KNU, among Karen armed groups, has its own education policy, which represents only a set of general principles for the time being. While the KNU's leadership has been involved in the nationwide ceasefire negotiations, the situation on the ground has been changing. This will inevitably represent obstacles to the political dialogue process, when education issues will be given more prominence. Finally, both ethnic armed groups and communities in some areas are concerned that together with education, the government may try to expand its administration system, thereby strengthening its foot in contested areas. Overall, the current approach risks increasing tensions with communities and ethnic armed groups and lead to disputes among the villagers at the community level.

While the government has been making efforts to expand its education services, ethnic armed opposition groups built their own schools. However, compared to the government expansion, this has happened only on a small scale. Being independent from the government (and sometimes with only partial assistance from ethnic armed opposition groups), schools adopt different strategies to raise funds necessary to cover their expenses, with Karen border-based CBOs and religious networks also playing a role. They adopt the KED education system or mixed systems depending on where the assistance comes from and whether all teachers are able to teach in the Karen language. The question stays whether the operation of these schools can be sustainable in the long run, as the KED and border-based CBOs have increasingly less funding.

Rather than competing with the government, Karen schools are currently filling the gaps, providing an important service to their communities and relying on dedicated volunteer teachers. They cater for all local children irrespective of their ability to pay, refugee and IDP returnees and students who dropped out from government schools. Besides funding, a major problem facing those schools is lack of opportunities for their graduates. Currently, refugee camps and other Mae Sot-based schools provide vocational training and other opportunities for further studies. As their future is currently uncertain, so are the opportunities available for Karen students outside of the Myanmar government system in the long run.

In order to offset the potentially negative impacts of government expansion outlined above, it is important to involve communities in the school management process. In this respect, a border-based CBO called Karen Teacher

Working Group has experience setting up parent-teacher associations in Karen communities, with the aim to strengthen community involvement. Furthermore, the KNU Central Committee could be in a good position to initiate a discussion about a memorandum of understanding on a conflict-sensitive delivery of social services in mixed administration areas, due to its current preference to deal with the government directly. This will help the KNU to address its present shortage of human resources and impede that its education system becomes undermined through the government expansion.

It is important to maintain ethnic education systems during the peace process, before their fate is decided during negotiations. Following the removal of all Karen armed groups from the government list of Unlawful Association as a result of the nationwide ceasefire agreement, international community will be able to work more easily with the KNU and other Karen armed opposition groups. This could address the issue of severe lack of resources currently facing schools under their administration. Finally, as the government is trying to upgrade its teaching methodology, there is potential to learn from the experience of ethnic education providers in implementing student-centred teaching methods. The same concerns ethnic language teaching in government schools, to which the government apparently became more open recently.

There is a clear need for regular multi-stakeholder dialogues. Networks uniting different ethnic education providers and community-based organizations could represent forums for experience sharing, passing information about communities' hopes and expectations, research and the development of policy recommendations on ethnic education to both government and ethnic armed opposition groups. Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education (MINE) represents a good model in this sense, comprising ethnic education providers and ethnic civil society interested in education and language rights. It already issued a declaration, expressing its concern that the government new education law still promotes social and cultural values of the Burman majority group and offered recommendations on how to improve the law. It is important to support and strengthen existing multi-stakeholders forums, such as MINE. The same forums could work towards the incorporation of peace education and conflict resolution into the school curricula and helping upgrade teaching methodology towards peace education.

Recommendations

To the Government of Myanmar:

- Ensure conflict sensitivity in education provision by holding extensive consultations with communities and ethnic armed opposition groups and their education departments
- Involve representatives from ethnic education departments in the development of materials for ethnic language teaching in government schools
- Engage with ethnic education departments, ethnic civil society groups and academics concerning the development of culturally relevant subjects to include in government school curricula
- Involve ethnic education representatives in ongoing Comprehensive Education Sector Review effort
- Draw on experience of ethnic education providers regarding the implementation of a student-centred teaching methodology
- Encourage information sharing and cooperation between government township education officers and KNU district education officers.

To the KNU political leadership:

- Initiate a discussion with the government around the development of a memorandum of understanding on conflict-sensitive social services provision during the interim period
- Consult with communities under KNU administration and local civil society around their expectations and concerns regarding education provision
- Consult extensively with the KNU social departments and consider education and health as a priority in negotiations with the government
- Hold discussions with other Karen armed opposition groups to develop a common approach to conflict-sensitive service provision in Karen-controlled and mixed areas.

To national NGOs:

- Conduct research on expectations and concerns of communities in ethnic areas regarding education
- Provide policy support regarding ethnic education to the government and ethnic education departments
- Organize joint teacher trainings for teachers coming from different education systems.

To the international community:

- Provide economic support to ethnic education systems during the interim period
- Encourage and financially support existing multi-stakeholder forums and networks on ethnic education
- Provide policy support and share international experience and expertise from other conflict-affected contexts to both the government and the KNU
- Encourage consultation between government and ethnic education representatives on development of student-centred teaching methodology and critical thinking
- Provide economic support and expertise to developing joint trainings for teachers coming from different education providers in cooperation with national NGOs
- Do not suspend economic support to border-based schools, before acceptable solutions have been found inside Karen State.

1. Introduction: Defining Conflict Sensitivity in Education

The governments of multi-ethnic states have often been confronted with the challenging task trying to decide in which direction to channel their nation-building efforts. Some states embrace unity in diversity, while others promote the dominant culture to the exclusion of minority groups, sometimes giving rise to conflict.

Being intimately linked with the concept of identity, education plays a key role in any nation-building process. As such, education policies are very conflict sensitive in nature. In countries recovering from violent ethno-political conflicts, education can positively contribute to peace-building efforts, promoting social cohesion, but it can also negatively affect peace when it interacts with the conflict dynamics.

Being intimately linked with the concept of identity, education plays a key role in any nation-building process.

Burma/Myanmar is one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries, with minority groups accounting for about one third of its population¹. The country officially recognizes 135 ethnic minorities grouped in eight major races, with each of them having their distinct languages and cultures. Successive post-colonial Myanmar governments based their nation-building efforts on the culture and history of the Burman ethnic majority, while failing to represent the interests of its different minorities². For decades the country has experienced conflict between the Burman majority government and a wide range of ethnic armed opposition groups, some of which have been fighting the central government since independence in 1948.

The situation in Myanmar is particularly complicated, because the government is not the only actor in education provision, with multiple and often-competing systems widely present in the country, due to the long history of conflict. As will be described in this report, some of these systems are often perceived as more legitimate and sometimes, more accessible and better, than those of the

state. Lack of official recognition of these systems by the government, coupled with efforts to replace these systems with a state education system is therefore likely to increase tensions.

In general terms, in order to promote peace, education policies would normally require the development of culturally, socially and linguistically relevant curricula through a participative process, while being underpinned by supportive national education laws, policies and regulations³. Education systems, which tend to reproduce the values, attitudes and social relations of a dominant group in a society are likely to contribute to conflict⁴. Thus education provision in post-conflict environments that aims to ensure conflict sensitivity would typically entail curriculum revision, which requires eliminating messages that explicitly or implicitly hinder the development of attitudes of tolerance for ethnic, cultural and religious differences, as well as a dedicated incorporation of peace education in school curricula⁵. History textbooks, in particular, have the potential to feed inter-ethnic conflict, as they convey concepts of ethnicity and nation, and play an important role in defining an ethnic identity⁶. In linguistically diverse societies, governments may adopt a multilingual education policy, or as a minimum, promote ethnic language teaching as part of the school curriculum.

Teaching methods are also essential for a conflict-sensitive education system. In a society emerging from conflict, a student-centered learning environment is particularly important; it should foster critical thinking and encourage learners to evaluate their own perceptions, behavior and values⁷. This in turn calls for appropriate teacher training to produce qualified teachers, who are aware of conflict dynamics and their own biases and adapt their instruction accordingly⁸. Teacher deployment policies should be fair and transparent, taking into account teachers' needs and community acceptance⁹. Finally, teacher compensation should be conducted in a transparent and equitable way that does not increase intergroup tensions¹⁰.

3. International Network for Education in Emergencies, *Conflict-Sensitive Education: Quick Reference Tool*. toolkit.ineesite.org

4. World Bank, *Reshaping the Future: Education and Postconflict Reconstruction*, Washington DC, 2005, p.27

5. World Bank, *Reshaping the Future*, p.61

6. R. Metro, *History Curricula and the Reconciliation of Ethnic Conflict: a Collaborative Project with Burmese Migrants and Refugees in Thailand*, PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 2011, p.18

7. International Network for Education in emergencies, *INEE Guidance Note on Conflict Sensitive Education*, 2013, pp.49-50

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid, p.34

10. Ibid, p.37

1. Transnational Institute, *Neither War nor Peace. The Future of the Ceasefire Agreements in Burma*, Amsterdam, July 2009

2. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *The Politics of Language Policy in Myanmar: Imagining Togetherness, Practicing Difference?* In Lee Hock Guan and Leo Suryadianata (eds.), *Language, Nation, and Development in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008

2. Objectives and Methodology

This study provides an overview of the different education systems present in Karen State and addresses the conflict sensitivity aspect of the increase in government education services in Karen conflict-affected areas.

While focusing on the government and KNU education systems, the study also considers border-based education providers and faith-based schools, recognizing them as an integral part of the education landscape in Karen State. The study attempts to offer insight into the present challenges relating to the development of constructive relationships between the government and Karen education providers and potential integration of those systems. It ends with recommendations to the government, ethnic armed opposition groups and NGOs about how the different stakeholders could contribute to the development of an equitable, quality and conflict-sensitive education in Karen State during the transition period.

The methodology includes literature review and field work conducted during the period May to September 2015 in different parts of Karen State. Around 50 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with representatives of Karen civil society, school principals, teachers and high-school or post-high school students¹¹, including two representatives of the KNU Education Department (KED) and six national and international experts in peace-building and/or education. Interviews were complemented by informal conversations, wherever possible. Most interviews took place in Yangon, Hpa-an and Mae Sot. Furthermore, the author visited five schools, which are not under the Myanmar government system. School visits occurred on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Thandaunggy Township. Furthermore, four government schools were visited in Myaing Gyi Ngu, Hlaingbwe Township.

The choice of schools for the purpose of this research was mostly conditioned by their accessibility. Nevertheless, the research attempted to cover different school types and education systems in areas managed by different authorities. Limitations of this study are linked to the fact that interviews did not cover leaders of ethnic armed opposition groups, besides the KED¹², and government education officials. Although where possible, the author tried to interview community members, the study would have benefited from field research aimed at understanding the views of parents and other community members, but was constrained by a lack of human resources.

11. In case of faith-based education providers, this includes representatives of Buddhist and Christian organizations

12. Efforts were made to reach out to brigade leaders in August 2015, but traveling arrangements were hampered by logistical difficulties of the rainy season

3. Background: Conflict and Education in Myanmar

Origins of conflict in Myanmar

The origins of conflict can be traced back to the pre-colonial period. Before the British, the territory of Burma was home to different kingdoms. Although the Burmese military claimed that, historically, different ethnic and religious groups lived together in peace, which was disrupted by the British colonialists, internal expansion of the Burman kings into areas of other ethnic groups, was also a major factor contributing to mistrust between ethnic minorities and the Burmans¹³.

After conquering the territory of Burma in 1886, the British relied on Indian officials to administer the central Burma and traditional leaders in the periphery¹⁴. Burmans were gradually excluded from the British armed forces, and preference was given to Karen, Kachin, Chin and other minority groups, as a strategy to minimize the risk of a Burman-led rebellion against the colonial administration¹⁵. The choice of the British to exclude the Burmans and favor ethnic minorities contributed to mutual mistrust between the Burman majority and ethnic minority groups. When Burman nationalist leaders fought against the British during the World War II, aided by the Japanese army, many Karen, Kachin and other soldiers joined the British forces¹⁶.

Before withdrawing from Burma, the British had tried to unite various ethnic groups inhabiting the territory of Burma, which resulted in the conclusion of the Panglong Agreement. Ethnic groups were promised autonomy in internal administration and rights and privileges, which are regarded as fundamental in democratic countries¹⁷. When the new government did not deliver on these promises, the well-organized Karen nationalist movement, led by Western-educated elites, started an armed rebellion in 1949¹⁸. Numerous ethnic armed opposition groups were formed in the following years, to fight against the central government in what is often described as the world's longest running civil war.

13. D. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p.20

14. M. Walton, Ethnicity, *Conflict and History in Burma: the Myths of Panglong*, Asian Survey, Vol.48, No.6, University of California Press, 2008

15. Ibid.

16. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *The Politics of Language Policy in Myanmar*, p.151

17. *Panglong Agreement*, 12 February 1947, peacemaker.un.org

18. M. Lall & A. South, *Education, Conflict and Identity: Non-state Ethnic Education Regimes in Burma*, ESP Working Paper Series, N54, 2013, p.14

Conflict, identity and education

In the course of its nation-building process, the successive Myanmar governments were unable to define the concept of the Myanmar national identity, with most cultural activities undertaken by the government focusing on the Burman majority culture¹⁹, which had an influence on its education system as well.

As a consequence, ethnic minorities felt that they were treated as second-class citizens and perceived that the government tried to promote forced assimilation. The teaching of ethnic languages in schools, for example, represented a thorny issue for successive Myanmar governments. After independence, Burmese replaced English as the official language. While the teaching of ethnic languages was first allowed in primary schools, after 1962 it was totally suspended²⁰. Subsequently, during the socialist and military periods, local government officials responsible for promoting ethnic cultures were appointed from the above, instead of being elected by local people²¹. Fearing to be perceived as sympathetic to armed opposition groups, who were actively promoting their languages and cultures, the appointed officials ultimately failed to work in the best interest of ethnic minority people, being mostly concerned with keeping their jobs²².

At the same time, government spending on education remained among the lowest in the world, in stark contrast to the country's military spending²³. As root causes of conflict in Myanmar are related to the right to govern populations, as opposed to just territory control or natural resource management, delivery of social services has been highly conflict sensitive in nature²⁴. The long-standing conflict led to the development of parallel education systems in conflict-affected areas, with government, ethnic armed opposition groups, faith-based providers and community-based schools with or without links to the government education system or ethnic armed opposition groups. As fighting in Southeast Myanmar sent thousands of people to refugee

19. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *The Politics of Language Policy in Myanmar*, 2008

20. Thein Lwin, *Languages, Identities and Education in Relation to Burma/Myanmar*, October 2011

21. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *The Politics of Language Policy in Myanmar*, p.151

22. Ibid.

23. 2008-2010 Public Spending as a % of GDP allocated to education was only 0.8% www.unicef.org The military spending surpasses health and education combined. Consider: Zaw Oo et al., *Fiscal Management in Myanmar*, ADB Economics Working Paper Series No.434, June 2015

24. Ibid.

camps in Thailand in a few waves, a distinct education system developed on the Thai side of the border to meet the education needs of the refugee population.

Persistent fighting and the government counter-insurgency policy 'four cuts', implemented since the 1960s, had devastating consequences in the country's ethnic minority areas. The policy attempted to block insurgents' access to food, funding, recruits and intelligence²⁵. Destruction of villages, food supplies and human rights violations led to waves of forced migration from the conflict-affected areas. In some cases, Tatmadaw treated civilian population in ethnic armed groups' areas as an enemy and targeted them. Furthermore, the Myanmar Army regularly relocated people from areas outside of its control into a government territory, in order to establish firmer control over civilian population²⁶. Some villagers in conflict areas would flee into ethnic armed groups' strongholds, where those groups could provide protection, which in turn strengthened the relations between ethnic armed groups and the people they were assisting²⁷.

In this context, schools in conflict areas faced difficulties operating during the whole academic year. In addition, schools and health facilities were often targets of attacks during the course of the civil war²⁸. Those schools in ethnic armed groups' territory that were spared by the Tatmadaw would have to pass under its control²⁹. Schools teaching local curriculum would be perceived sympathetic with the rebel movement. As a result, community schools would have to switch to teaching the government curriculum, as a protection measure, when government soldiers arrived³⁰.

Present situation

As Myanmar undergoes a complex transition from an authoritarian regime to a more democratic one, the government has expressed its commitment to resolving the long-running conflicts.

During the peace process started by President Thein Sein in 2011, bilateral ceasefires have been signed with 14 ethnic armed groups. The nationwide ceasefire negotiations lasted four years. Despite the numerous challenges and perceptible mistrust, ethnic armed opposition groups have been committed to the peace process and showed the desire to start a political dialogue,

25. Felbab-Brown W., *Shooting Up, Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs*. Brookings, 2009, p.167

26. Consider for instance, *Karen Human Rights Group*, 'Village-level Decision Making in Responding to Forced Relocation: a Case from Papun District', March 7, 2008. www.khrg.org

27. Kim Joliffe, *Ethnic Conflict and Social Services in Myanmar's Contested Regions*, Asia Foundation, June 2014, p.6

28. Karen Human Rights Group, *Attacks on Health and Education: Trends and Incidents from Eastern Burma, 2010-2011*. www.khrg.org

29. J. Fong, *Revolution as Development: the Karen Self-Determination Struggle against Ethnocracy*, Universal Publishers, 2008, p. 263

30. Interview, Karen Education Department, Mae Sot, June 2015.

to pave the way for the resolution of Myanmar's long-standing conflicts. At the same time, NGOs gained access to previously inaccessible areas, while the government made efforts to bring more schools, hospitals, roads and bridges to ethnic areas, in order to deliver a peace dividend to people from conflict-affected areas³¹.

Although bilateral ceasefires have already brought numerous benefits to conflict-affected population, concerns abound too. Land confiscation in newly accessible ceasefire areas, continued fighting in some parts of the country, and fear of government expansion in contested territories are likely to seriously damage confidence in the peace process. In this respect, a study by The Border Consortium, an alliance of international NGOs assisting refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border, notes that traditional development objectives, such as increasing economic growth, improving service delivery and building government capacity may even become counterproductive for the peace process, due to a lack of government legitimacy in some areas and the fear that expansion of government services may constitute new forms of government control³².

Healthcare and education have not yet been addressed in detail during the peace negotiations to date.

Despite their importance, healthcare and education have not yet been addressed in detail during the peace negotiations to date, with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) containing only small provisions related to education. The provision on protection of civilians prohibits destroying schools and hospitals, obstructing students and teachers' access to schools and hindering the preservation of local customs, literature and culture³³. The provisions relate to course of action during the transition period recognize that there should be coordination between the government and ethnic armed opposition groups regarding healthcare and education activities³⁴. Importantly, as all Karen armed opposition groups signed the NCA, they have been removed from the government list of illegal organizations, which will allow national and international stakeholders to work more closely with the ethnic armed opposition groups.

Before the NCA was signed, bilateral ceasefires in Karen State had been considered fragile. The NCA is likely to strengthen the ceasefire; however, it remains to be seen to what extent it will stabilize the situation. As the Myanmar

31. Aung Naing Oo, "In praise of peace dividends", *The Myanmar Times*, 13 October 2014

32. The Border Consortium, *Poverty, Displacement and Local Governance in Southeast Burma/Myanmar*, 2013, p25

33. NCA, Article 9

34. NCA, Article 25

ruling party has been defeated in the recently held 2015 elections, a new government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) will be formed in March 2016. The long transition period between the current and new administrations casts a degree of uncertainty on the political dialogue process, with the aim start date of December 2015. The NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi states she will continue to build on the progress made by the current government, including in peace negotiations³⁵. However, it remains to be seen whether the democratically elected government will be able to work effectively with the military, in order to ensure its continued support for the peace process.

More progress regarding health and education should be made during the political dialogue. However, this is likely to take up to a few years. More specifically, questions about the future of the different education systems should be discussed, how they will be able to co-exist and evolve during the peace process, and what can be done for a potential integration of those systems in a future peaceful Myanmar. While education provision in Myanmar's conflict-affected areas remains conflict sensitive, the lack of a clear agreement or understanding between the parties to conflict regarding service delivery may still give rise to tensions.

35. NLD Pre-election Press Conference, Yangon, 5 November 2015

4. Karen State: Socio-Political Context and Local Governance Structures

For the purpose of this study, Karen State includes the territory within the government-defined boundaries of Karen/Kayin State and adjacent areas of Mon State and Bago divisions where Karen people live. The number of Karen people is not known with precision.

According to the most recent government census, the estimated number of Karen is 1.57 million people. However, according to other sources, they number at least 5-7 million people³⁶. Most of Karen people live outside of Karen State. The state itself is also home to several other ethnic groups, such as Burmans, Mon, Pa-o and others. Most Karen are Buddhist or Animist, with around one-fifth Christians. There are 12 Karen dialects, with the majority speaking either Sgaw, especially among Christians and in the highlands, or Pwo, especially in the lowlands³⁷.

Karen State has witnessed a long history of conflict and maintains high levels of militarization. The Karen National Union (and its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army – KNLA) has been historically the most important armed opposition group representing the Karen people, which has fought the government since the independence. The KNU is organized in seven brigades representing seven districts of the KNLA. The seven brigades maintain relative autonomy from the central level, with some leaders, particularly the Brigade 5 in Hpapun/Mutraw District, being unwilling to proceed fast in the peace process. For decades, the KNU represented a de-facto government in areas under its administration. Provision of social services required the development of health and education departments under the KNU.

While the KNU led by the Christian elites tried to impose a homogeneous idea of a Karen identity on a very diverse society³⁸, as a way to promote unity inside its ethnic group, the government tried to apply a ‘divide and rule’ approach, encouraging splintering inside ethnic armed groups in exchange for territorial, political and economic concessions. The Democratic Karen Buddhist/Benevolent Army (DKBA) splintered from the KNU in 1994, in a protest to the perceived domination of Sgaw Christians inside the organization³⁹. The DKBA immediately concluded a ceasefire with the government and fought against

the KNU until 2010, with DKBA soldiers taking orders from Tatmadaw commanders⁴⁰. The KNLA was seriously weakened, as a result of the split, and lost much of its territory, including its headquarters at Manerplaw in 1998, forcing its leaders to move across the border to Thailand.

In 2007, another group splintered from the KNU brigade 7, which became known as KNU/KNLA Peace Council. The group signed a ceasefire with the government, which has held ever since. When in 2010, the government ordered the ceasefire groups to transform into Border Guard Forces (BGF) under the direct control of the Tatmadaw, the DKBA splintered into two factions, with units that accepted the scheme and those that did not. The DKBA entered a new fighting with the Myanmar army, before concluding a new ceasefire in 2011, which, as the 2015 fighting demonstrated⁴¹, remains unstable. The KNU/KNLA Peace Council never accepted the BFG scheme. The two smaller groups never developed their own social departments, although they have also been involved in social service delivery.

The KNU does not possess clearly demarcated territories, with most of its territory being essentially areas of mixed control. While the KNLA no longer controls the extensive territory as it once did, its influence spreads across large areas of contested land in Karen State, as well as parts of Mon State, Bago and Tanintharyi divisions, which is also enhanced by its ability to extend its guerilla presence⁴². The Myanmar Army, Tatmadaw, is widely present across Karen State and is aided by numerous Karen BGFs – Karen ethnic armed groups, which transferred under the government command. In many areas, the KNU and DKBA’s access to territory overlaps with that of the Tatmadaw and Karen BGFs⁴³, making those areas highly contested. Following the 2012 ceasefire, the KNU complained about expansion of the government military troops in Karen State.

Reflecting the complex governance arrangements is the fact that many Karen villages have a KNU headman, a government headman and sometimes a village leader accountable to another armed group⁴⁴. Even after the ceasefire, many villagers are still reluctant to work as headman, as they fear to be caught between the differing agendas of the parties to conflict⁴⁵. In this context,

36. A. South, *Karen Nationalist Communities: The “Problem” of Diversity*, Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs, Volume 29, Number 1, April 2007, pp. 55-76
Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, *Environmental Protection, Indigenous Knowledge and Livelihoods in Karen State*, in Burma Environmental Working Group, *Accessible Alternatives*, September 2009, p55

37. A. South, *Burma’s Longest Running War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict*, Transnational Institute, March 2011, p.10

38. A. South, *Karen Nationalist Communities*, pp. 55-76

39. A. South, *Burma’s Longest War*, 2011, p19

40. Karen Human Rights Group, *Attacks on Health and Education: Trends and Incidents from Eastern Burma, 2010-2011*. www.khrg.org

41. The fighting occurred in July 2015 along the Asia road in Kawkaireik Township and in Hlaingbwe Township

42. K. Joliffe, *Ethnic Armed Conflict and Territorial Administration in Myanmar*, Asia Foundation, 2015

43. Ibid.

44. A. South, *Burma’s Longest Running War*, p.12

45. S. Kempel & Aung Thu Nyien, *Local Governance Dynamics in Southeast*

religious leaders such as monks and pastors have often played the role of traditional leaders, as they were perceived to be above politics and as such representing less of a threat to the government. Furthermore, in ethnic armed groups' strongholds, such as areas close to the border and highlands, the Myanmar government has been often perceived as a threat, with the only Burmese soldiers that villagers had experience dealing with during the war being soldiers. On the other hand, the KNU enjoyed a certain degree of legitimacy, operating as a de-facto government and providing services where no government support was present. These are areas where communities are still likely to resist government expansion, even if it comes through well-meaning projects, such as school construction.

Persistent conflict between the KNU, the Tatmadaw and other Karen armed groups, sent thousands of refugees across the border to Thailand in a few waves since the 1980s. According to the UNHCR statistics, the number of refugees originating from Karen State reaches approximately 52,000 people, while the number of internally displaced people being higher, between 89 and 100 thousand people⁴⁶. Since the 2012 ceasefire, internally displaced villagers started going back on visits to their original villages, to work on their plantations, but permanent returns represent not more than 10%⁴⁷. As the security situation becomes conducive to return, more refugees and IDPs may start going back to Karen State. This would require more schools to accommodate the demand for education provision, particularly if returnees go back as communities rather than individual families.

46. UNHCR, *Kayin State Profile*, June 2014.

47. Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People, Interview, Yangon, July 2015. The IDP population is not homogeneous, with people hiding in the jungle, living in relocation sites and in IDP camp. There is only one big IDP camp, called Ee Thu Ta, in Hpa-pun Township, numbering a few thousand people, and several very small camps.

5. Education Providers and Systems in Karen State

Typology of providers and administration

The main education providers for students in Karen State are the Myanmar government, the KNU and other ethnic armed opposition groups, communities, and faith-based organizations (monasteries and churches).

Another alternative for students from Karen State is to enrol in border-based schools at refugee camps or migrant learning centers in and around Mae Sot⁴⁸. Education systems vary according to the type of school and the governance arrangements on the ground. As a reflection of a complex political situation, Karen State is home to many mixed schools, which adopt a combination of different education systems. While the KNU has its own education system, the DKBA and KNU/KNLA PC do not have their own education policies, with some DKBA schools teaching the government curriculum, others being KED oriented or mixed, depending on the preferences of the local military commanders⁴⁹. The same concerns KNU/KNLA PC schools.

Myanmar government schools

The Myanmar government is the main education provider in Karen State, with all public schools falling under the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

Despite the creation of departments of education in ethnic states, decision-making, budgeting and planning remain highly centralized within the Ministry of Education, with a top-down administration coming from the ministry to the



Government middle school in Myaing Gyi Ngu, Karen State

48. This is in addition to students who live in the camps as refugees, or those whose families are already in Thailand as migrant workers

49. M. Lall & A. South, *Education, Conflict and Identity*, p.25

township level and little information flowing up⁵⁰. The role of state education departments is mostly to promote or transfer principles and township education officers, while that of a township education officer is to contribute to identifying school facility and staffing needs⁵¹. Teachers are accredited by the government and are normally sent from outside rather than recruited from local communities.

Public schools in Myanmar run from the kindergarten to grade 10. At the end of grade 10, government schools administer a matriculation exam, which also serves as a university entrance exam⁵². All government schools use Burmese as a medium of instruction, and generally do not allow the teaching of ethnic languages during official classroom hours, unless some ad hoc arrangements are made⁵³. Textbooks for science subjects are in English at the high school level. The government tried to introduce ethnic language teaching into government primary schools, with books being produced in Yangon, and translated from Burmese rather than developed by ethnic language experts⁵⁴. These books are mostly used in areas where communities can speak Burmese⁵⁵. In addition, ethnic language teaching has been mostly extra-curricular, taught after school hours.

The government adopts a single curriculum and single textbook approach for all of its schools across the country, be it Burman majority areas or ethnic minority areas. This does not give an opportunity for the country's 135 ethnic minorities to teach their own local culture and history. The most problematic area in conflict areas concerns the history curricula. After achieving independence, the Myanmar government attempted to produce a national history conducive to ethnic unity⁵⁶. However, the approach undertaken failed to include ethnic minorities, and reproduced instead a Burman-centric version, with lessons on the great Burman kings and their success in unifying

50. B. Zobrist & P. McCormick, *A Preliminary Assessment of Decentralization in Education: Experiences in Mon State and Yangon Region*, MDRI CESD and The Asia Foundation, December 2013, p.7

51. Ibid, p.30

52. The Myanmar basic education school system consists of three years schooling at the lower primary level, two years at the upper primary level, four years at the lower secondary level and two years at the upper secondary level. www.ibe.unesco.org

53. For instance, the Mon State Parliament passed a bill to allow ethnic language teaching in government school during regular school hours

54. Zon Pann Pwint, "Textbooks for State Schools Translated into Kayin Language", *The Myanmar Times*, 20 August 2012. www.mmmtimes.com

55. Key informant interview, Mae Sot, June 2015.

56. N. Salem-Gervais & R. Metro, *A Textbook Case of Nation-Building*, p.34

the country⁵⁷. On the other hand, ethnic armed opposition groups are referred to as rebels or terrorists, with refugees also being described in a negative light⁵⁸.

In terms of teaching methods, the government education system has long been characterized by teacher-centered and subject oriented learning with weak curriculum and lack of teacher training⁵⁹. Rote learning has been a long-standing tradition in Myanmar, as a Buddhist majority country, since Buddhist Scriptures were learned by heart⁶⁰. Since 2002, the government has been trying to switch to a child-centered approach, but has been largely unsuccessful to date. With the government exam system being centered on asking students to simply reproduce facts studied in the classroom, teachers still widely use the rote-learning system based on memorization⁶¹. Adding to this is a generally large students-to-teacher ratio, insufficient teaching aids and outdated curriculums in some subjects, which constrain the implementation of a student-centered learning environment⁶².

As of now, government spending on education remains low, with schools facing a shortage of teachers, supplies and low teacher salaries. Families often have to supplement a broad range of costs, such as stationary, maintenance of school facilities and donations for festivals and ceremonies⁶³. In urban areas, teachers often rely on paid tuition after class to meet their expenses. As government middle and high schools are mostly concentrated in towns, where affordable boarding facilities are often lacking, families from rural areas frequently cannot afford sending their children to study in urban areas. Lack of middle and high schools outside of urban areas, the above-cited extra costs of education, as well as a language barrier have led students to drop out of secondary school. Although school inspections are conducted at least twice a year, they mostly focus on the state of educational facilities, rather than on teachers' performance and learning outcomes⁶⁴.

Karen education system (KED)

Karen education has a long tradition and draws on experience of Karen missionary schools under the British colonial regime. The KNU Education Department – Karen Education and Culture Department (KED) – was formed in the 1970s to provide education and preserve the Karen language and culture.

During the civil war, the KED was the main education provider in KNU-controlled areas. Currently, it administers Karen schools in Karen-controlled⁶⁵ and mixed areas, trains teachers and education administrators at the district, township and school levels and delivers school supplies⁶⁶.

The KED has its own district education officers, who are involved in identifying school staffing and funding needs. However, the number of its education officers and therefore their capacity to cover different areas is limited, when compared to the number of human resources available to the government. In 2014, the KED provided support to 1,430 schools, 7,911 teachers and more than 153,000 students⁶⁷. However, not all of these schools fall under the KED's direct administration, as will be described below. All KED teachers are considered volunteers, receiving only a small subsidy of around 7,100 baht a year. What often distinguishes a Karen school is a Karen flag set in front of the school. However, up until now in some mixed administration areas, displaying a Karen flag is perceived sensitive⁶⁸.

The KED system is not recognized by the Myanmar government, and students face problems joining the government education system and accessing government jobs.

One of the main problems is that the KED system is not recognized by the Myanmar government, and students face problems joining the government education system and accessing government jobs. Unlike the government education system, the KED education runs from the kindergarten to the grade 12. As the KED curriculum was developed in Sgaw Karen, KED schools teach only in this dialect to the disadvantage of Pwo speakers. In the apparent effort to make its education system more inclusive, the KED has reported plans to develop Pwo Karen language materials, to give the chance to students to learn both languages at

57. Ibid.

58. KRCEE, interview, Mae Sot, June 2015

59. Thein Lwin, *Education in Burma 1945-2000*, 2000. www.ibiblio.org

60. Ibid.

61. M. Lall et al., *Teachers Voices: What Education Reforms Does Myanmar Need?*, Myanmar Egress, March 2013

62. Ibid.

63. CRC Shadow Report Burma: *The Plight of Children Under Military Rule in Burma*, Child Right Forum in Burma, 29 April 2011, p.13

64. UNDP Myanmar, *The State of Local Governance: Trends in Kayin*, 2014, p.72

65. Areas under the control of Karen armed opposition groups, which did not transform in BGF

66. World Education, *KED Factsheet*. thailand.worlded.org

67. KED statistics. Interview, Mae Sot, July 2015

68. Interview, teacher from a KED school, September 2015

least up to grade 2, so that Pwo and Sgaw Karen could better communicate with each other⁶⁹. English is used for science subjects, while Burmese is taught as a subject and not used as a language of instruction. In this respect, what may be viewed as a drawback of the KED system is that its graduates are often unable to speak fluent Burmese⁷⁰.

As can be expected, the KED history curriculum greatly differs from that expressed in government textbooks. The Karen view the colonial period in a positive light, free from the Burman oppression, while at the same time using the Burman aggression to define some elements of their national identity around a common suffering⁷¹. Furthermore, the KNU, as much as other ethnic armed opposition groups, has tried to preserve unity and cohesion inside its own ethnic group⁷². Despite significant differences among the Karen, history textbooks portray the Karen as a rather homogeneous group, represented as peaceful and innocent farmers⁷³.

Previously, the KED administered camp schools for Karen refugee students. When in 1997 the Thai government allowed NGOs to assist refugees, camp education was reformed with foreign donor assistance and enriched with improved teaching methodology and curricula. The KED in turn was able to extend some of the benefits of the improved camp system to its schools across the border⁷⁴. Since then, the KED has emphasized a student-centered approach, encouraging critical thinking in its teaching methods⁷⁵.

Furthermore, the Karen education system also benefits from the efforts of the community-based organization called Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG), which strives to improve access and quality of education for Karen students. The KED is part of the Karen State Education Assistance Group (KSEAG), together with KTWG and a Thailand-based NGO Partners in Relief and Development. The purpose of KSEAG is to better coordinate education support of these three organizations in Karen State. The KTWG was formed in 1997, in order to improve access and quality of education for Karen students. After the 1997 fall of Manerplaw, the KNU long-standing headquarters, the Karen education system was in 'free fall', with no district education office and no information flowing to the district leadership⁷⁶. The KTWG started empowering the KED down to the village track to be able to collect information, thereby strengthening the KED's capacity to run its education system⁷⁷.

69. Ibid.

70. M. Lall & A. South, *Education, Conflict and Identity*, p.8
Some students in Mae Sot-based migrant learning centres were reluctant to answer questions in Burmese, referring to their lack of skills to express themselves in the language.

71. N. Salem-Gervais & R. Metro, *A Textbook Case of Nation-Building*, p.66.

72. Ibid, p. 67

73. Ibid., p.67

74. M. Lall & A. South, *Education, Conflict and Identity*, p.27

75. Interview, Padoh Lay Say, KED, Yangon, June 2015

76. Interview, KTWG, Mae Sot, June 2015

77. Interview, KTWG, Mae Sot, June 2015

Currently, KTWG provides help to more than 1,000 Karen schools (mostly KED, community-based, mixed schools with a small number of government schools) across Southeast Myanmar, and promotes community participation and ownership through building capacity of school management committees and parent-teacher associations (PTAs). The KTWG has also played a role in improving teaching methods, with training being delivered on student-centered classrooms and critical thinking. In 2004, it founded the Karen Teacher Training College, providing a two-year teacher preparation program in culturally relevant education for students in Karen State. It also provides mobile teacher training, and has established relationships with local communities in Karen areas. While working closely with the KED, the KTWG has not been involved in assisting the KED at the policy level.

Community-based education and mixed schools

Where neither the government, nor ethnic armed opposition groups could reach, community-based schools would emerge to provide primary schooling to children in conflict-affected and remote areas.

During the civil war, many community schools in contested areas tried hard to maintain their independence, by distancing themselves from either side of the conflict, in order to protect themselves from possible attacks, especially by the Burmese Army⁷⁸. Some community-run schools sought external support, often from the KED, border-based CBOs or churches. Some represented just 'home schools' bringing together children from several neighboring houses to gain literacy skills under difficult conditions, such as displacement⁷⁹.

In order to pay community teachers, community members have to contribute funds for a teacher subsidy, which often represents a hardship for poor communities.

In order to pay community teachers, community members have to contribute funds for a teacher subsidy, which often represents a hardship for poor communities. Furthermore, recruiting qualified teachers is also a challenge. In terms of curriculum, community-based schools can use KED, missionary materials or the government curriculum. In the latter case, sometimes an informal arrangement would be put in place for the students to transfer to government schools after completing a few years of community primary

78. M. Lall & A. South, *Education, Conflict and Identity*, p.23

79. Interview, Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People, Yangon, July 2015

school⁸⁰. While using the government curriculum, these local schools would often teach the Karen language and other culturally relevant subjects within the school curriculum⁸¹.

In mixed administration areas, which often have a village head from the government side and the KNU side, many schools ended up having mixed characteristics. Teachers are recruited locally, sent by the KED or the government. The number of government teachers varies from one or two, up to 70% of all teachers being from the government side. Most mixed schools use the government curriculum with a curriculum supplement provided by the KED⁸². The ability to teach the Karen language and use it, at least partially, as a medium of instruction, therefore also varies⁸³. Recently, as the government increased its support to remote and conflict-affected areas, backed by international donors, many community schools are becoming government schools, and it has also been reported that the government tries to standardize curriculum in mixed schools⁸⁴. Two-thirds of schools where the KED currently provides support are either government or mixed schools⁸⁵.

Faith-based education providers

Faith-based organizations providing education for students in Karen remote and conflict-affected areas fall under two categories: church-linked providers and monastic schools. This research has not dealt in depth with religious schools and attempts to provide only general information.

Evidence suggests that religious networks provide diverse support, either filling the gaps (e.g. assisting poor students to attend government schools or providing support to community-based schools) or offering their own education system. For instance, schools set up by Baptist church often have an associate status with local government schools, allowing students to sit for the matriculation exam and enter government universities⁸⁶. Christian missionary networks also sponsor children from some conflict-affected areas to attend a government school in Pathein, Irrawaddy Division, while living in a Christian boarding house⁸⁷. Whether this support requires Buddhist students to change their religion also varies⁸⁸. The research has not covered church-related schools in non-government areas, where they are likely to work differently.

80. Interview, Hpa-an Baptist Church, Hpa-an, July 2015

81. Interview, Hpa-an, July 2015

82. For a classification of schools in Karen areas, see: Karen Teacher Working Group, *Supporting Karen Education Throughout Eastern Burma*. Presentation. www.lc.mahidol.ac.th

83. Ibid.

84. Key informant interview, Mae Sot, June 2015

85. Interview, KED Secretary Saw Law Eh Mu, Mae Sot, June 2015

86. M. Lall & A. South, *Education, Conflict and Identity*, p.30

87. Interview with a civil society member. Hpa-an, 16 March 2015

88. A key informant from Hpa-an noted that most students end up converting to Christianity



Seventh-Day Adventist School's mission statement, Thandaunggy Township, Karen State

On the other hand, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church has its own education system and a network of schools sponsored by international SDA donors, including in Karen State. It brings together underprivileged students from different ethnic backgrounds to study in Burmese and English languages. It has its own teaching methodology, emphasizing an all-round development including physical, social and spiritual aspects, while the curriculum is developed by the SDA General Conference Education Department and is the same in all countries⁸⁹. The SDA School visited for this research reported welcoming students of different denominations and not requiring them to change their religion⁹⁰. As SDA schools are not recognized by the government, students are unable to enrol in the government higher education system.

Monastic schools, falling under the Ministry for Religious Affairs, provide education to mostly poor and disadvantaged students. The school at the Taungalay Monastery in Hpa-an accepts roughly 500 students from marginalized backgrounds, with previous experience in either state or non-state education systems. Monastic schools follow the government curriculum, but at least some teach the Karen language too⁹¹. Whether students have to be Buddhist, in order to be admitted, generally varies. For instance, all students at the Taungalay monastic school have to become nuns and monks, but some of its branch schools in Hpa-an accept Christian students as well⁹².

Border-based education providers

Students from poor families or rural areas of Karen State, where schools are lacking, sometimes enrol in refugee camp schools or migrant learning centers in Thailand.

Inability to meet school attendance costs inside Karen

89. The SDA General Conference is based in Maryland, USA and has a Southeast Asia and Pacific division in the Philippines

90. All information is based on the interview with a SDA School principle, Thandaunggyi Township, September 2015

91. The monastic school at Taungalay Monastery reports teaching both Pwo and Sgaw Karen language within school hours. Interview, Hpa-an, June 2015

92. Interview, Taungalay Monastery, Hpa-an, July 2015

State is usually the main reason, as Thailand-based providers only charge very small fees for school attendance and boarding houses, while refugee camps provide students with food rations too. Other reasons include the desire to study in the mother tongue and the perception that education quality is better in Thailand-based schools, with better opportunities to access vocational training after high school. Networks also play a role, with students who have relatives or friends in the camps or in Mae Sot, being more likely to enrol in border-based schools⁹³. Established relationships between Mae Sot-based migrant schools and community leaders in Karen State is also a way for students to receive information about study opportunities in Mae Sot. However, as a key informant from Hpa-an noted, families often lack information about scholarship opportunities available in Hpa-an⁹⁴.

Analogous to the KED system, refugee camp schools run from the kindergarten to the grade 12. Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), established in 2008 to distance refugee education from that of the KED, administers 70 camp-based schools⁹⁵. Instruction is conducted in Sgaw Karen and English. Like in KED schools, Burmese is taught as a subject and not used as a language of instruction. Furthermore, before the 2012 ceasefire, Burmese was never considered important and was only taught starting from grade 3. By contrast, English was perceived to be more important to learn, so as to enable Karen refugees to better advocate for their cause internationally⁹⁶. As has been outlined above, in terms of curriculum, KRCEE draws on the KED education system with textbooks being developed by or benefiting from input of international and local NGOs.

Mae Sot-based migrant-learning centres mostly use the Myanmar government curriculum, with some also providing Karen and Thai language classes. Teaching methods vary, with some schools replicating the Myanmar rote-learning approach and others adopting a more student-centred method. As for the history curriculum, while using the Myanmar government textbook, some migrant-learning centres are reported to supplement the government textbook with other available materials, such as excerpts from newspapers, in order to encourage discussion⁹⁷. Some migrant learning centres in Mae Sot have long-established relationships with communities in Karen State, particularly

93. Focus group discussion with students from a post-ten migrant school Minmahaw, Mae Sot, June 2015. Questionnaires filled by Education Gathering Group students in Hpa-an. Individual interviews with five students from CDC school and five students from Kaw Tha Blay learning centre, Mae Sot, June 2015

94. Hpa-an based Karen Student Centre provides scholarships for disadvantaged students, with students being allowed to live in the boarding house free of charge, if they otherwise could not afford to pay. A new boarding house called Akyin Nar Mi Ein was established in 2013 providing accommodation for students from conflict-affected areas attending secondary schools in Hpa-an.

95. M. Lall & A. South, *Education, Conflict and Identity*, p. 26

96. Interview, KRCEE, Mae Sot, June 2015

97. Interview, Burmese Migrant Teachers' Association, Mae Sot, June 2015

villages just across the border. This is, for instance, the case of Hsa Thoolei school, which used to serve as an IDP learning centre for displaced and otherwise disadvantaged Karen students. As the situation in Karen State becomes more stable since the 2012 ceasefire, the number of IDP students has decreased, as the school principle reported⁹⁸. The number of students travelling to Thailand for secondary education is expected to decrease further, as refugee camp schools and migrant learning centers have increasingly less funds to cover their operations expenses.

The Myanmar government does not officially recognize certificates issued by refugee camps or migrant schools.

The most problematic issue concerning border-based education is that the Myanmar government does not officially recognize certificates issued by refugee camps or migrant schools. This leads to the fact that returning students are unable to access government higher education and government jobs. A positive development in this sense is that since 2013, graduates from migrant learning centres are allowed to take the government matriculation exam at a partner school in Myawaddy, Karen State. Placement tests can also be taken in Myanmar in order for students to transition from a refugee camp or migrant school to a government school. However, in case of refugee students, a recent report by Save The Children notes that the implementation of the placement test has not been consistent and lacks clear guidelines that schools should follow⁹⁹. Lack of recognition of refugee teachers' qualification by the Myanmar government is another point of concern, with many teachers having years of pedagogical experience and being unable to work in government schools, if they wished to return to Myanmar.

Concluding remarks

The wide variety of school types and education systems are a product of decades of civil war and complex governance arrangements in Karen State, with the system of education in a certain area often reflecting the local political context.

As Myanmar is moving toward a peaceful future, it is important that different education providers try to cooperate with each other and share experience, rather than compete. With Burmese being Myanmar's official language, more efforts should be made to raise the level of Burmese language proficiency of Karen students attending KED and refugee camp-based schools. On the other hand,

98. Interview, Hsa Thoolei principle, Mae Sot, June 2015

99. A. Dare, *Beyond Access: Refugee Students' Experiences of Myanmar State Education*, Save the Children, 2015

ethnic language teaching in government schools should be implemented in a more solid way, for instance, allowing a local ethnic language/s to be taught in all government schools during regular school hours. Research should also be done on how to use an ethnic language as a medium of instruction in government schools in Karen State and nationwide.

In order to win support of Karen communities, especially in conflict-affected areas, the development of language textbooks should draw on the experience of ethnic education providers, community-based or religious organizations, which worked to preserve and promote ethnic language teaching during the war. In this regard, several teachers working in the Karen education system noted that Karen language readers recently developed by the government even included Burmese poetry translated to Karen, but its literal translation made little sense in the Karen language¹⁰⁰. In this respect, it seems that no attempts have been made to draw on the existing Karen cultural heritage. A government approach centered on developing materials “for” Karen people, rather than together with them, is likely to meet with resistance, at least in some areas. Another issue to be addressed is how to represent the interests of both Sgaw and Pwo dialect speakers of the Karen language.

Curricula revision will also require eliminating messages that speak negatively about refugees, and possibly incorporating more information about the history of displaced communities, in order to promote understanding between returnees and their host communities, thereby contributing to social cohesion. Finally, lack of government recognition of ethnic and refugee education, in terms of student and teacher qualifications, is a major obstacle for the development of constructive relationships between the government and its ethnic counterparts and potential integration of the different systems. As long as ethnic education systems are not recognized in Myanmar, convergence-related initiatives are likely to be perceived by ethnic education providers as an attempt to assimilate their education systems into the mainstream system.



KED teacher training, which focuses on student-centered methods

One of the most problematic issues, quite common of post-conflict environments, is the potential revision of history curricula, which will be essential in order to promote inter-ethnic unity. Different visions of history concern not only the 60 years of civil war, but also the colonial and pre-colonial periods, which different ethnic groups view differently. Given the different visions of history not only between the Burman majority and ethnic minorities, but also among ethnic minorities themselves¹⁰¹, the development of a standardized history curriculum acceptable to all ethnic groups is likely to present significant challenges. In broad lines, the question how to find a middle way between a Burman-centric curriculum and one promoting ethnic nationalism should be addressed.

100. The Karen language has a different way of structuring a poem, making it difficult to translate literally. Group discussion with three teachers, Mae Sot, June 2015

101. For instance, several ethnic groups, such as Mon, Shan and Karen (besides Burmans themselves) claim to have been the first to inhabit the territory of what later became Burma

6. Expansion of Government Education Services in Karen State

Since the 2012 ceasefire, the government, NGOs, companies and private individuals have financed the construction of schools in remote areas¹⁰².

Thousands of government teachers have been assigned to Karen areas. This has become possible thanks to an improved security situation, as well as funds provided by international donors¹⁰³. At the same time, funding available for the KED and border-based schools has been steadily decreasing. There are certain benefits to the improved access to the government education system. While the KED schools are mostly primary, students gain the chance to access government middle and high schools and potentially continue their studies in Myanmar universities. Furthermore, communities are relieved from the responsibility to recruit teachers on their own and provide a teacher subsidy. Nevertheless, concerns abound too.

The question how local stakeholders, such as communities, the KED and existing education providers, react to the expansion of government education services is central to understanding how this approach is likely to affect conflict dynamics. Furthermore, as has been outlined above, in order to win support of local people in the mid- to long-term, not only access, but also quality of education are important. Below are the main points to consider, which have been identified during interviews and literature review. However, this should not be considered representative of the general situation in the whole Karen State, and is only intended to highlight relevant issues deserving attention.

Communities lose ownership of schools

As the government makes efforts to expand education access in remote areas, trying to recruit the necessary numbers of teachers, it is mainly guided by the view that existing community teachers working in those areas are untrained.

In line with this vision, the government opened up

102. Companies sometimes offer communities and local authorities to build schools, hospitals and other facilities in their area, in exchange for a permission to implement a business project. Such an approach has been criticized by some members of Karen civil society, not only because it substitutes an appropriate community consultation with 'buying' support, but also because it does not address the staffing needs of these facilities, which sometimes leads to abandoned buildings.

103. Multi-Donor Education Fund (MDEF), comprising partners from Australia, the European Union, UK, Denmark and Norway. In 2012, UNICEF concluded a strategic partnership with MDEF as donor and implementing partner in the framework of the *Quality Basic Education Programme* (2012-2015)

opportunities for young people to undergo a short training of less than a month and subsequently be deployed to rural areas. Teachers are lured to rural areas by higher salaries and promises of quick promotion upon return to their home towns. Furthermore, government teachers tend to be quickly promoted to leadership positions inside a school, which effectively brings a community-owned school under the government control, with the government education system being put in place. In other cases, the government conditions the recognition of a community school (and therefore access to further education) or its increased support of the school, in terms of staff and school materials, on the acceptance of the government education system. When a community school becomes a government school, the Myanmar flag would be flown in front of it. When the government education system is put in place, students normally lose the chance to study Karen language and culture.

Local teachers replaced by government teachers

Following the arrival of government teachers, local teachers are frequently displaced or demoted. In areas where KTWG works, the number of government teachers is reported to have risen dramatically.

Equipped with government-recognized qualifications, newly arrived teachers are said to look down upon community teachers, who in their view have no qualification. They often tell community teachers that those are teaching illegally and therefore should leave¹⁰⁴. At the same time, many government teachers are recent graduates, with limited work experience, unlike local teachers who have often worked in their communities for many years. Therefore, when government teachers come to substitute them, community teachers feel belittled¹⁰⁵. Finally, in at least one instance reported by the KHRG, government teachers were assigned to an area where student-to-teacher ratio was already good (with no need for new teachers), but all the teachers were from the KNU side¹⁰⁶.

104. Karen Human Rights Group, *Hpa-an Interview: Saw U*, December 2013. www.khrg.org

105. Key Informant Interview, Mae Sot, June 2015. This information relates to events happening in different parts of Eastern Myanmar

106. Karen Human Rights Group, *Hpa-an Interview: Saw U*, December 2013. www.khrg.org

Lack of consultation with local stakeholders

Reports suggest that the government strategy in conflict-affected generally lacks transparency and appropriate consultation with local stakeholders in mixed administration areas of Karen State.

These cases concern the assignment of government teachers to Karen and mixed schools and construction of government schools in contested areas, which is often followed by confusion over what kind of education system would be adopted. In many cases, villagers and school administrators are not properly consulted and sometimes not even informed. There is no communication with the KED, although it administers or provides support to schools in the area.

In some instances, villagers have not received any information at all about government teachers coming to work in their schools, followed by the installation of the government education system. In other instances, inaccurate or partial information has been provided to communities during the consultation. For example, a report from KHRG mentions a case in Kyaukkyi Township, where the government offered villagers to repair their primary school, but instead a government school was built next to it, while the headmistress of the community school had not been informed at all¹⁰⁷. The KHRG reports a few other instances, where community consultation regarding the construction of a new school was held by NGOs responsible for the projects, but it failed to inform the villagers that the school would be a government school with the government education system¹⁰⁸. Another case was reported during an interview in Mae Sot and relates to an offer of school construction by a Myanmar company. The company reportedly obtained permission from the DKBA authorities, but the villagers expressed concern that they were not informed about what kind of education system the future school would offer.

In some instances, villagers have not received any information at all about government teachers coming to work in their schools.

Teachers' difficulty to integrate into the local context

Limited evidence suggests that current teacher deployment policies do not take into account the teacher's ethnic background, making it challenging for the teacher to integrate into the local environment¹⁰⁹.

Government teachers find it hard to stay in rural areas among people of a different ethnic and linguistic background, as well as different climate and food. Government teachers are not always Burman, with people of other ethnic minorities, being assigned to Karen areas too¹¹⁰. Inability to fully integrate into local communities due to a different culture and language barrier is a probable contributing factor to teacher absenteeism during the academic year, which is described in more detail below.

Concerns about the quality of education

While access to education generally improves, the strongest concern that many interviewees have expressed is teacher absenteeism in rural areas.

Teachers often have to travel to town, in order to attend training or pick up their stipend, and often return only after a few weeks. Sometimes teachers arrive two months after the school year has started. In the meantime, students cannot attend school, and when the national exam comes, they are likely to be unprepared¹¹¹. According to the KTWG, up to 30% of teachers in their area of operation never come back¹¹². Furthermore, language barrier makes it difficult for teachers to communicate with students. Being unable to communicate effectively, teachers would sometimes resort to corporal punishment¹¹³. Moreover, interviews suggest language barrier and corporal punishment are reasons behind children's dropout¹¹⁴. A key informant working with Karen community schools noted that this approach has "seriously disrupted the local education system." Further concerns about the quality of education are also related to the fact that many government teachers assigned to rural areas lack pedagogical experience, as has been noted above.

109. Interviews with several key informants from the border area suggest that the government teacher deployment policies do not take into account the teacher ethnic background. However, as interviews did not cover government officials, it is difficult to understand exactly what is the government policy in terms of teacher placement

110. Eastern Burma Community Schooling Project, for instance, reported a case of Shan teachers being sent to a Karen rural school, who were unable to integrate due to different culture, language and climate

111. Interview with two representatives of Eastern Burma Community Schooling, Mae Sot, June 2015

112. Interview, KTWG, Mae Sot, June 2015

113. Interview Eastern Burma Community Schooling Project, Mae Sot, June 2015

114. Also see, Karen Human Rights Group, Hpa-an Interview Saw U, December 2013.

107. Karen Human Rights Group, *Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Kyaukkyi Township*, July 2014. www.khrg.org

109. Karen Human Rights Group, *Hpa-an Situation Update*, October 2014. www.khrg.org
Karen Human Rights Group, *Hpa-an interview Saw U*, December 2013. www.khrg.org

Communities have to contribute to teachers' expenses

One of the major benefits of the government policy is the fact that poor communities are relieved from the responsibility to provide a teacher subsidy.

But very often they still have to contribute to teachers' living expenses, such as rice and transportation fees, because it is considered a sacrifice for a teacher to stay in a remote area¹¹⁵. As the government does not normally provide support to building a boarding house either for students or teachers, communities have to take care of their accommodation as well¹¹⁶. When communities have to pay for teachers' transportation costs each time teachers need to travel, that becomes a burden to them¹¹⁷. Finally, significant disparities in income between government and community teachers may eventually lead to tensions between the two.

Concerns over expansion of government control in contested areas

As has been outlined in a previous section, in areas where Myanmar government support is not present and ethnic armed opposition groups provided social services, local people are likely to distrust the government.

They are concerned that the government may try to strengthen its position in contested areas, at the time when territorial arrangements between the government and ethnic armed groups are not fixed, and there is no code of conduct for respective military in place. As an informant who assists community-based schools in the KNU brigade 7 mixed administration area notes, communities are afraid to accept government help, as they think that would allow the government and by extension the Tatmadaw, an easier access to their territories. Villagers are concerned that along with building new schools or taking existing ones under control, the government would try to put a village administration system in place, which would ultimately result in the loss of autonomy in managing their affairs¹¹⁸.

Analysis: how do local stakeholders react to government expansion?

Evidence suggests that the current approach in terms of school construction, teacher placement and school administration is not implemented in a conflict-sensitive way.

As there is no appropriate consultation taking place between the government and local stakeholders, the

115. Interview, KED, Mae Sot, June 2015

116. This sometimes results in teachers having to stay with students' families or students staying in a teacher's house. Interviews:

117. *Karen Human Rights Group, Thaton Situation Update*, January-June 2014. www.khrg.org

118. Key informant interview, Hpa-an, July 2015

government's de-facto takeover of Karen schools risks increasing tensions with communities and ethnic armed groups and lead to disputes among the villagers at the community level. In this connection, the arrival of government teachers has already created arguments among villagers¹¹⁹, over decisions about whether to accept or reject government teachers. However, it should be noted that the way communities react to government expansion is likely to differ across Karen State.

In some conflict-affected areas, with only limited or no education opportunities available during the war, villagers are likely to welcome the chance to study, whatever the education system¹²⁰. There are certain benefits to having access to government schools as well, as the government education system offers opportunities for further study and work in Myanmar. Communities are relieved from the responsibility to recruit teachers on their own, as well as provide a teacher subsidy. However, in many cases economic relief is reported to be minimal due to the fact that villagers have to supplement a broad range of teachers' expenses¹²¹.

A key informant also noted that in some contested areas communities still have a 'war mentality', thinking that a government school signboard in their village may protect communities from attacks by the Tatmadaw, and therefore they accept government's help¹²². In some other cases, communities fear that the government may take action against them, if they rejected government teachers. In this connection, in mixed administration areas where villagers have a village head from the KNU side and another from the government side, villagers have to accept some teachers sent by the government¹²³.

Those who are against the government expansion are afraid that the loss of Karen education may ultimately lead to a loss of their cultural identity¹²⁴. Furthermore, in areas where no government support was present, communities fear that while accepting help from the government, they would have to obey the government rules and regulations and ultimately lose their autonomy¹²⁵. This is, for instance, the case in areas under a firmer control of Karen armed opposition groups (e.g. along the border), where communities are more likely to be unwelcoming to government offers of help. In the case of war-isolated Karen communities, villagers have little understanding about how to negotiate with the government, and therefore are likely to be generally suspicious about the government expansion¹²⁶.

119. Saw Eh Na, "Conflict erupts over Govt teachers deployed to KNU areas", *Karen Information Centre*, 20 August 2013. karennews.org

120. Interview, Committee for Displaced Karen People, Yangon, July 2015.

121. KTWG, Interview, Mae Sot, June 2015

122. Key informant interview, Mae Sot, June 2015

123. Interview, Mae Sot, June 2015

124. Interview, KED, June 2015

125. Interviews with four key informants in Mae Sot, June 2015

126. Key informant interview, Mae Sot, June 2015

Ethnic armed opposition groups themselves are reported to prohibit the government to access some areas under their administration, rejecting offers of school construction¹²⁷. The nationwide ceasefire agreement, indeed, says that any development activities should be carried out in coordination with ethnic armed groups who also administer the area. The capacity to resist government expansion, however, depends on the situation of each particular district and on how much control the KNLA has on the ground. Lack of human resources to gather information, verify and report to the leadership in order to lodge an official complain with the government is likely to be a reason behind a sometimes inefficient response to the government takeover of Karen schools. While KNU political leadership has been involved in the ceasefire negotiations, leaving political issues including education to the political dialogue, the situation on the ground has been changing.

Another issue is that KED-linked education providers may be experiencing transfer of their staff to government providers, because the work with KED schools is voluntary, while that with the government is relatively well paid¹²⁸. Without a proper discussion between the government representatives and the KED taking place, this approach is likely to increase tensions between the government providers and those related to the KNU in the long run. Finally, as there is no discussion between the KED and the government regarding school construction, government expansion in contested areas is likely to create competition with the local education system. All these issues will inevitably become obstacles during the political dialogue negotiations.

As access to government education system improves in Karen State, it does not always translate into good quality education. As a key informant working with Karen community schools noted in this respect, the government system is focused on nation building and instilling citizenship ideas, with government teachers guided by their own vision and not what is better for the community. Government teachers' deployment policies, which apparently do not take into account ethnic background, result in a lack of understanding between students and teachers, and, as a consequence, drop-outs from school. As government teachers often lack pedagogical experience and regularly miss some of the academic year, rural ethnic minority students do not get the same chance to receive quality education as students from urban areas do. Training and assigning teachers from the same ethnic and religious background to government schools, wherever possible, may partly address this problem.

The failure to integrate into the local context leading to teachers' departure from the village, proves to be disruptive for the local education system. Coupled with the financial burden that communities still have to bear (providing food, accommodation and transportation fees for government teachers) and replacement of community teachers, the current approach raises questions whether benefits ultimately outweigh the costs. Indeed, one report from the KHRG mentions, that disillusioned with the government teachers, villagers wish to be granted autonomy in managing their school¹²⁹. A revered Buddhist monk from Karen State in this respect also observes that the current strategy is mostly about the government's political advantage, rather than a real education improvement¹³⁰.

127. Key informant interview in Hpa-an, concerning education situation in Hlaing Bwe Township. July 2015

128. Karen Human Rights Group, *Thaton Situation Update* January-June 2014. www.khrg.org
Also K. Joliffe, *Ethnic Conflict and Social Services in Myanmar's Contested Regions*, p.51

129. KHRG, *Thaton Situation Update* Hpa-an Township, January-June 2014. www.khrg.org

130. It is difficult to say whether the government pursues a particular strategy in this respect or whether it finds the current approach to be the easiest way to expand education access to conflict areas, with little understanding how to do that differently. However, in terms of impact on conflict dynamics, local perception matters as much as government intentions

7. Education Provision Outside the Government System

While the government has been making efforts to bring more schools to conflict-affected areas, ethnic armed opposition groups and communities have built their own schools.

As the situation in Karen State became more stable, different schools emerged to give Karen students a chance to continue their study in the Karen education system at the secondary level. However, compared to the government expansion of education provision, this has happened only on a small scale. Being independent from the government (and sometimes with only partial assistance from ethnic armed opposition groups), schools adopt different strategies to raise funds necessary to cover their expenses, with Karen border-based CBOs and religious networks also playing a role. They adopt the KED education system or mixed systems depending on where the assistance comes from and whether all teachers are able to teach in the Karen language.

Generally, it is difficult for Karen ethnic armed groups to compete with the government in terms of expansion of their associated education services, due to their relatively limited human and financial resources. Rather than competing with the government, Karen schools apparently perceive to be filling the gaps and providing an important service to their communities. As a rule, they try to be inclusive in terms of giving access to education to local children, irrespective of their ability to contribute to costs. For instance, when charging small fees for boarding house students, they may also waive the costs for those who are unable to pay. As the procedure to access government schools for returning displaced villagers remains unclear, Karen schools, on the other hand, welcome both refugee students and teachers. As one teacher working in the KED education system mentioned: “We do not want to persuade anyone to come to our school. We want to give students the chance to experience our education system, and if they like it, they can join.”

The most important issue concerns the recognition of student education and future opportunities available for graduates. As the peace process is ongoing, Karen education providers prefer to wait and observe the political developments, while maintaining their autonomy rather than make steps to integrate with the mainstream system. The case of K’paw Htaw School, described below, stands out in this respect. While being located in a KNU area, it maintains its independence, and teaches the Myanmar government curriculum with a KED supplement. The school also offers the government matriculation exam, and its students can potentially enrol in government universities. Its links to alumni from the migrant school Hsa Thoolei in Mae Sot, which in certain aspects adopts a similar

approach, are likely to have played a role¹³¹. More research should be done to find out whether this pattern repeats in other areas of Karen State.

The challenges that Karen schools normally face is a lack of opportunities for graduates inside Myanmar, due to the fact that their education is not recognized by the Myanmar government. For further studies, graduates continue attending Thailand-based providers, e.g. vocational training at refugee camps or post-10 migrant schools. However, as those schools increasingly face difficulties in covering their costs, providing these opportunities for students from Karen State (in addition to refugees and children of migrant workers) may become problematic in the mid to long term. Christian students may benefit from opportunities offered by religious colleges, while those opportunities are not always available for Buddhist students. A teacher from a KED school, for instance, expressed the opinion that the lack of opportunities after students leave school results in students’ lack of ambitions; in order to encourage students to do their best, she said, her school should establish links with NGOs or educational institutions that could offer opportunities for further study.

“The peace process means there is no fighting, so villagers are happy, but now we are losing our schools.”

Lack of Karen teachers is a problem already facing Karen schools. The KED education relies on dedicated teachers who become volunteers to serve their communities. However, it is not clear whether this can be sustainable in the long term, as the KED has increasingly less funding, while the government is expanding its education services and raising teacher salaries. Adding to this is the uncertainty around the peace process and whether the Karen education system will be allowed to operate in the future. A teacher working in the Karen education system lamented that if the KED could no longer support schools, they may have to accept support from the government: “The peace process means there is no fighting, so villagers are happy, but now we are losing our schools.”

Finally, the choice of a school that families make does not always depend on its perceived legitimacy, and very often it also depends on its accessibility. Due to lack of

¹³¹ Hsa Thoolei uses the Myanmar curriculum, while also offering Karen classes, and prepares its students for the government matriculation exam.

boarding facilities for students, government secondary schools (which are mostly located in or around towns) often become inaccessible. While Christian and Buddhist leaders sometimes lend their support for the construction of boarding houses, this support is available only in some areas. Faith-based schools, refugee camps and migrant learning centers prove to be essential for poor families who despite the lack of financial means want their children to receive an education. This may change, if opportunities to enrol in border-based schools, for instance, were no longer available. A mother of seven children from an IDP relocation village, for instance, notes that she considers education to be very important, as her generation did not have the chance to study, but she cannot afford to cover the school expenses. She mentions that she sends two of her children to a government primary school available in the area, three other children to a refugee camp secondary school, while waiting to see what to do with her other two children.

Case Studies

The following case studies represent schools visited during the research period, with three schools being located close to the Thai-Myanmar border and one in Thandaunggyi Township, with different systems of territorial administration in place. Several government schools were also visited in Myaing Gyi Ngu, Hlaingbwe Township, and are represented here for the sake of comparison. The schools that are not falling under the government system were built through contributions from ethnic armed opposition groups, communities and/or NGOs, and none of them currently receives support from the Myanmar government, trying to maintain autonomy.



Taw Naw High School

1. Taw Naw High School

Taw Naw High School is located in the DKBA-controlled area on the Thai-Burma border, which is home to Buddhist and Christian communities. The project was developed

by the Karen Community-Based Network Group, a CBO operating in East Dawna mountain ranges. The construction of the school and the adjacent boarding houses for students and teachers was financed through contributions from the DKBA, KNU and a Canadian NGO called Global Neighbor. Before 2013, the village only had a primary school, and students used to go to Thailand-based education providers, such as Mae Sot-based migrant schools and refugee camps. In 2014-15 the school had 177 students, with 250 students expected to join in the year 2015-16. Taw Naw school operates under the KED education system, with Sgaw Karen being the language of instruction. It has 16 Karen teachers and 1 Burman teacher, who teaches Burmese (but is not assigned by the Myanmar government). The KED provides teacher subsidies, textbooks and teacher training. Students are encouraged to wear Karen traditional clothes once a week. Since the school is not recognized by the Myanmar government, students have to go to Thailand for further education

2. War Ler Mu School

Located on the Thai-Burma border, War Ler Mu School in KNU/KNLA PC (KPC) area provides education to local children from nursery to high school. While the primary school has been operating since 2005, middle and high schools were established later, in 2010, when the situation in the area became relatively stable. The village is home to KPC soldiers and their families, while children from neighboring villages join the school too. For those coming from other villages, there is a boarding house, which is free of charge. The construction of the school building was funded by the KPC, and the armed opposition group also provides teacher salaries. Some stationary materials come from the Karen State Education Assistance Group, while the school was also successful in raising some funds through a Facebook group. As the KPC leadership is Adventist, they also make use of SDA networks. The language of instruction is Karen and Myanmar, while the school uses both KED and Myanmar government curricula. Although War Ler Mu school prefers the Karen language as a medium of instruction, lack of Karen-speaking teachers make it currently impossible to teach all subjects in the native language. The choice of the curriculum and textbooks to follow also depends on the teacher's ability to read and speak the language. The school has a total of 20 teachers for 285 students, with teachers coming from refugee camps, local villages and recruited through Seventh Day Adventist Church's missionary networks. The school principle reported difficulties recruiting teachers due to lack of trust in the peace process and the perception among qualified teachers that refugee camps offer better opportunities. While the Myanmar government matriculation exam is inaccessible to students, the Seventh Day Adventist Church provides opportunities for further studies. Students who pass the church exam can attend 11 and 12 grades at Yeboo college in Hlaingbwe Township. After graduating from Yeboo, students can attend the Myanmar Union Adventist Seminary in

Myaungmya, where they can obtain a Bachelor Degree, which is not recognized in Myanmar, but is recognized in other countries.



War Ler Mu School

3. K’Paw Htaw School

Located in a KNU area of Myawaddy Township, K’Paw Htaw School was opened in 2013 to provide middle and high school education to students from nearby villagers. Before the school was established, students who wanted to continue their education in a middle school, went mostly to the Thailand-based migrant learning centre called Hsa Thoolei. Later, after the ceasefire was signed and the security situation was becoming more stable, three alumni of Hsa Thoolei school helped build K’Paw Htaw School in their home village and financed the construction of the school building. A Karen NGO called Kaw Lah Foundation supplied solar panels to the school. The school currently provides education for 110 students and has 10 teachers, with boarding houses available for both students and teachers. What distinguishes K’Paw Htaw School is its stated independence from both the Myanmar government and the KNU. Teachers are recruited by the school, their salaries are paid by the village leader, and the school principle is a local villager. Most of the teachers are Karen, while there are also two Burman teachers who



K’Paw Htaw High School

were invited to stay in the village to teach at the school. The school follows the Myanmar government curriculum, with Karen subjects’ materials provided by the KED and being compulsory for all students. Sgaw Karen is taught 45 minutes a day. The language of instruction is both Myanmar and Karen, and depends mostly on the teacher and subject. While using Myanmar textbooks, Karen-speaking teachers often explain the material in the local language. Students are asked to wear Karen traditional clothes at least twice a week. As the school follows the Myanmar curriculum, students are eligible to sit for the matriculation exam if they wish to, and nine out of 19 high school students have expressed their desire to take the test at the next session.

4. Hto Lwi Wah High School



Hto Lwi Wah High School

Hto Lwi Wah School was built by the KNU brigade 2 and had its first intake in June 2015. The school offers grades 7 to 12, under the KED system. It has 10 Karen teachers: three male and seven female for around 80 students. Some teachers are returnees from refugee camps, where they attended a teacher preparation program, as well as taught for camp students before joining Hto Lwi Wah School. A boarding house is available for children whose families live far away. The policy of the school is to provide access to education to students who otherwise could not afford an education. Students mostly come from IDP families in relocation sites nearby or IDP returnees, for instance from the Ee Thu Ta camp on the Thai-Myanmar border. There are several returnees from refugee camps too. Some students also enrol in this school, after dropping out from a government school due to a language barrier. The school notes that its doors are open to all poor children regardless of ethnicity. However, one must speak Karen, as it is the language of instruction. One Burman family living beside Karen villages has already expressed a desire to enrol a child in this school, as the child is able to speak Karen. Once a week students are encouraged to wear Karen traditional clothes. As the school is not recognized by the Myanmar government, students are ineligible to take the state matriculation exam. Some high school students shared their plans to attend a post-12 refugee camp training to become teachers or doctors for their communities.

5. Government Schools in Myaing Gyi Ngu

Myaing Gyi Ngu case study is presented for the sake of comparison. The Myaing Gyi Ngu special region is unique, being established in 1995, following the split of the DKBA from the KNU under the guidance of Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw U Thuzana. It served as the DKBA headquarters, before the transformation of its units into BGF. During that time, the area was essentially under Sayadaw's administration. After the DKBA had transformed into BGF, Myaing Gyi Ngu passed under the government administration, but Sayadaw still has influence in local decision-making, maintaining his role as a patron for the BGF commanders. In terms of education development, the region saw school construction since its establishment, with contributions from Sayadaw, the DKBA and more recently the government. Sayadaw has also reportedly supported the construction of one student boarding house.

Currently, Myaing Gyi Ngu special region has 15 schools, all falling under the government administration, with Burmese being the only language of instruction. Four school principals interviewed reported a progressive improvement in education compared to the past. There is no lack of school buildings in the area and the government supplies school uniforms. However, the schools still experience a lack of teachers, with classrooms being crowded. Schools have to rely on the government to send teachers, rather than recruit from local communities, based on needs. Furthermore, one school reported that teachers coming from outside do not like staying for a long time, and seek to be transferred to their home towns after one year. It is generally difficult to immediately substitute a departing teacher. Qualified local people who passed the matriculation exam can teach as volunteers, but as one principal reported, the government generally does not allow collecting money from parents to provide a teacher subsidy, while local residents are not interested in teaching for free. However, the principal also mentioned that if a teacher does work as a volunteer, he or she gets a priority, when there is a job opening at the school. Two principals from a primary and middle school also reported that students experience difficulties understanding the Myanmar language, with Karen teachers or classmates sometimes having to translate from Burmese into their native language.

In terms of Karen language teaching, Thkwet Phoe middle school reported to have started teaching Pwo Karen with a textbook supplied by Karen Literature and Culture Committee as a compulsory subject for 45 minutes a day for all primary and middle school students, starting from the age of eight years old. There are currently four Karen teachers who are able to teach the subject, while the government will provide an additional stipend of 500 kyat per hour for Karen language teaching. The school principal says all students are interested in learning the language, and hopes that more books will be developed soon to teach different levels of Karen. A local resident, however, mentioned that it would be better to teach both Pwo and Sgaw Karen, as there may be a conflict between the two groups, if one dialect is prioritized. The study of the ancient Karen script called 'chicken scratch', discovered by Sayadaw, is reported to be popular in the area, with summer literacy courses held at local monasteries. Students, who drop out of government schools, sometimes take up studying the 'chicken scratch' script, and become volunteer teachers in Myaing Gyi Ngu and Karen villages elsewhere.

8. Relevant Initiatives and Steps Forward

The government education system is currently undergoing a significant reform.

Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR), which is led by the Ministry of Education with the assistance from UNICEF and UNESCO, aims to create a two and five-year education action plans, in order to provide quality education for all Myanmar children, which in the government words also “strengthens the traditions and culture of Myanmar”¹³². The government’s new national education law, enacted in 2014, also mentions the objective to create, value and preserve all ethnic groups’ languages, cultures, histories and traditions. However, only the Myanmar and English languages are allowed as a medium of instruction, with the possibility to use an ethnic language at the primary school level, but alongside the Myanmar language. While the government is attempting to upgrade its education system, there has been no genuine consultation with ethnic education providers and community-based organizations, which have worked hard through the war to maintain their education system, which they often see as central to maintaining their cultural identity¹³³. A relevant initiative in terms of ethnic language teaching was organized by UNICEF, Save the Children and Partners of the Myanmar Quality Basic Education Programme. It brought together Ministry of Education Staff, the KED, members of National and State parliaments, civil society groups and academia in several workshops, in order to share national and regional experience on language education and national cohesion¹³⁴.

The KNU has been responding to the changing circumstances. In March 2015, the KNU presented its own education policy, which so far contains only a set of basic principles. Among the principles, it mentions, for instance, that every Karen should know their own culture, history and customs and peaceful coexistence with other ethnic nationalities should be promoted, based on mutual recognition of each other’s culture, customs and traditions. To this end, Karen national education schools should be allowed to operate from nursery to higher education level in areas where Karen people reside¹³⁵. The KED recognizes that in a future peaceful Myanmar the school curriculum should be partially developed at the central level, but it wants each ethnic group to be given the right to develop 40% of the school curriculum comprising subjects such as

native language, social studies, geography and English¹³⁶.

The KED also signed up to a strategic plan towards education convergence, together with KTWG and refugee camp education providers. The plan supports mother-tongue based multilingual education, quality and culturally relevant local curriculum development and recognition of refugee students and teachers’ qualifications¹³⁷. The KED also reports to have met with the Kayin State education department, in order to discuss the teaching of Karen in mixed schools up to grade 10. However, as the education department has no decision-making power, it has to submit the information to the central level, which represents a lengthy process.

As the KNU Central Committee prefers to deal with the government directly, this also puts it in the position to initiate a discussion, for instance, about a memorandum of understanding on a conflict-sensitive delivery of social services in Karen-controlled and mixed administration areas. This could be in addition to an agreement on a ceasefire code of conduct for respective military, which the KNU has been requesting. As the ethnic armed group has long derived legitimacy from providing protection, social services to communities and preservation of the Karen identity, its ability to represent the Karen people will continue to depend on its ability to stand for the Karen education. Finally, research should be done about the future role of ethnic education providers in the national education system. As the KNU administers and provides support to schools in areas where Karen people live – Karen and Mon states, as well as Thanindaryi and Bago regions – the question remains whether relevant policies should be developed at state/region level or national level.

Myanmar civil society has been very vocal regarding a new national education policy.

Myanmar civil society has been very vocal regarding a new national education policy. The National Network for Education Reform (NNER), comprising ethnic and national civil society organizations, ethnic education providers, religious organizations and teacher and student unions, conducted 25 local consultation meetings around the country, in order to come up with recommendations for the government concerning education reform. NNER has been critical of the centralized decision-making concentrated in the Ministry of Education, and promotes

132. CESR, Important Progress is Achieved on Myanmar Government’s Education Reform Program. www.cesrmm.org

133. The KED reports to have attended a CESR consultation meeting and was allowed only to ask a few questions

134. *Language and Education: A Force for Peace*, Save the Children Myanmar Website, 9 October 2014. myanmar.savethechildren.net

135. Karen National Union, *Karen National Education Policy*, 30 March 2015

136. KTWG and Karen Information Centre, *Our Schools, Our Language, Our Future*, 20 October 2014 [Video]. ktwg.org

137. KRCEE, KnED, KED and KTWG, *Strategic Plan toward Education Convergence*, May 2014

decentralization in education, mother-tongue-based learning and community-based curriculum development. It has emphasized that one textbook approach is not relevant for Myanmar's different ethnic minorities, and learning materials should be developed based on ethnic minorities' languages, cultures, history and geography¹³⁸.

Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education (MINE) comprising ethnic education providers (including the KED and KRCEE) and ethnic civil society interested in education and language rights, issued a declaration, setting out a framework of recommended actions to be taken for the development of quality and equitable education for ethnic minorities. MINE expressed a concern that the government curriculum reflects social and cultural values of the Burman majority, with Burman traditions being taught instead of local ones. Its position is that only mother-tongue based education can deliver quality learning outcomes for children from ethnic minorities. The declaration also mentions that teachers must understand the language and culture of the area where they are working. It also urges government support for different ethnic education systems at least in the short to medium term.

Networks uniting different indigenous education providers and community-based organizations could represent forums for experience sharing, passing information on communities' hopes and expectations, research and the development of policy recommendations on ethnic education. It is important to support and strengthen the existing multi-stakeholder forums. The same forums could work towards the incorporation of peace education and conflict resolution into school curricula and upgrading teaching methodology towards peace education. Furthermore, two experts in peace-building interviewed for this research emphasized a more general need for a mindset change after decades of civil war, with people challenging their assumptions about others and self, while practicing to be more open towards others¹³⁹. Relevant trainings and research support could be provided by local and international NGOs.

Clearly, there is a need for a regular constructive dialogue among ethnic education providers, ethnic armed opposition groups, civil society and government officials, in order to develop ethnic education, which is acceptable to all stakeholders and, most importantly, seen as legitimate by communities. A positive development concerning the new national education law is that it envisions the application of student-centred methods, encouraging critical thinking. It should not be forgotten that ethnic education providers already have experience applying such methods and implementing teacher training in child-centred approaches, and therefore could share their expertise. The KED reports to have invited government teachers from mixed schools to attend its teaching methodology trainings, but there is reportedly a lack of

interest on the part of government teachers. Nevertheless, such opportunities should not be missed. Local educational NGOs could facilitate joint trainings for teachers from different education systems, which in turn may contribute to the development of constructive relationships between the teachers, as well as better education quality.

Finally, all these actions would be insufficient if communities' concerns were not addressed. This especially relates to concerns about security, expansion of government control and trust in the peace process. In order to offset the potentially negative impacts of government education expansion outlined above, it is important to involve communities in the school management process. KTWG has experience in doing so, as has been outlined in previous sections. Another good model is a pan-ethnic network called the Eastern Burma Community Schooling project, which unites ten ethnic groups. Its aim is to strengthen community involvement in school management and provide mobile teacher training for community teachers, essentially replicating the KTWG model to other regions.

For NGOs that provide support to school construction, ensuring that the project contributes to peace-building efforts, wherever possible, is important. In this connection, the Japanese philanthropic organization, The Nippon Foundation has reported facilitating confidence-building measures in supporting the peace process and ongoing negotiations through the development of social infrastructure, working directly with ethnic armed opposition groups, including in Karen State. These social infrastructure projects aim to maintain functional lines of communication between ethnic armed opposition groups and respective state governments by encouraging continuous dialogue between the parties outside of the formal talks. It is expected that communities will take ownership of the proposed infrastructure projects. However, as discussions between ethnic armed opposition groups and state governments regarding the implementation of these projects are ongoing, the details are not yet public¹⁴⁰. Following the removal of all Karen armed groups from the list of Unlawful Association as a result of the NCA, international NGOs working in Karen areas will be able to deal more easily with the KNU and other Karen armed opposition groups and channel their education-related assistance in a more conflict-sensitive way.

140. Projects include construction of houses for IDPs, a number of schools or healthcare facilities, roads and bridges and some livelihood support for conflict-affected communities. In order to generate its contribution to the peace-building process, the projects are agreed in consultations between ethnic armed groups and the respective state government and presented to The Nippon Foundation in a tripartite meeting facilitated by the Myanmar Peace Centre. Furthermore, the approval of the Union Government and the Tatmadaw is also facilitated by the MPC. The Nippon Foundation is in discussions with the ethnic armed groups and State Governments to contribute to the maintenance and sustainability of these social infrastructural assets. Interview, Nippon Foundation, Yangon, October, 2015

138. Interview, Dr. Thein Lwin. Yangon, July 2015

139. Interview, Yangon, July 2015 and September 2015

9. Recommendations

To the government of Myanmar:

- Ensure conflict sensitivity in education provision by holding extensive consultations with communities and ethnic armed opposition groups and their education departments
- Involve representatives from ethnic education departments in the development of materials for ethnic language teaching in government schools
- Engage with ethnic education departments, ethnic civil society groups and academics concerning the development of culturally relevant subjects to include in government school curricula
- Involve ethnic education representatives in the ongoing Comprehensive Education Sector Review effort
- Draw on experience of ethnic education providers regarding the implementation of a student-centred teaching methodology
- Encourage information sharing and cooperation between government township education officers and KNU district education officers

To the KNU political leadership:

- Initiate a discussion with the government around the development of a memorandum of understanding on conflict-sensitive social services provision during the interim period
- Consult with communities under the KNU administration and local civil society around their expectations and concerns regarding education provision
- Consult extensively with the KNU social departments and consider education and health as a priority in negotiations with the government
- Hold discussions with other Karen armed opposition groups to develop a common approach to conflict-sensitive service provision in Karen-controlled and mixed areas.

To national NGOs:

- Conduct research on expectations and concerns of communities in ethnic areas regarding education
- Provide policy support regarding ethnic education to the government and ethnic education departments
- Organize joint teacher trainings for teachers coming from different education systems.

To the international community:

- Provide economic support to ethnic education systems during the interim period
- Encourage and financially support existing multi-stakeholder forums and networks on ethnic education
- Provide policy support and share international experience and expertise from other conflict-affected contexts to both the government and the KNU
- Encourage consultation between the government and ethnic education representatives on the development of student-centred teaching methodology and critical thinking
- Provide economic support and expertise to developing joint trainings for teachers coming from different education providers in cooperation with national NGOs
- Do not suspend economic support to border-based schools, before acceptable solutions have been found inside Karen State.

‘ In a refugee camp, you dare speak out, express your opinion and even disagree with the teacher. ’

student who attended a school at Mae La Camp

‘ Although my parents don’t want me to, I would like to become a nurse for our Karen soldiers [KNU and DKBA], they protect our village. ’

16 year-old female student from a migrant school in Mae Sot

‘ Government teachers are government employees, they are guided by their own vision rather than what is better for the community. ’

representative of a border-based organization working with communities inside Karen state

‘ If we don’t have education, other people will oppress us. ’

KED teacher from a mixed administration area

‘ We don’t learn textbook, we learn contents [...] Burma’s system needs to change, it does not respond to students’ needs. ’

border-based education provider

‘ Convergence - they call it this way, but they [Myanmar government] want to force us to integrate. ’

border-based education provider



Website: www.thabyay.org