

## **Education, Conflict and Identity: Non-state ethnic education regimes in Burma/Myanmar *Summary of report***

**Marie Lall and Ashley South**

April 2012

This paper is the product of a research project conducted between May and November 2011. It addresses the research question *‘How has the agreement of a ceasefire between an armed ethno-nationalist group and the military government affected the provision of non-state education for the Mon community, and how does this compare to the situation in Mon and Karen-populated areas not affected by a ceasefire?’* The research examined the provision, funding and regulation of non-state ethnic minority education regimes in Burma/Myanmar, and analysed the roles of various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, domestic and international donors.

Despite facing many difficulties, Karen and Mon communities demonstrate great commitment to education, under often very difficult circumstances. During the period of research and writing, most Mon-populated areas of southeast Burma were relatively stable, following a 1995 ceasefire between the military government and the main Mon armed ethno-nationalist group (the New Mon State Party: NMSP). Nevertheless, significant tensions remained between the government and the NMSP, in a context where state security forces were implicated in widespread human rights abuses and political suppression. Notwithstanding these problems, the research found that the Mon ceasefire had created the space within which the Mon national education system expanded and improved. Administered by the NMSP, with strong community support, more than 150 Mon National Schools offered a distinctly indigenous education system, providing native language teaching at primary level. While retaining the advantages of indigenous language education at the primary level, the Mon National Schools prepared graduates to sit government matriculation exams and integrate with the nationwide higher education system - thereby allowing students of this non-state system to integrate with the state education regime. Furthermore, the Mon National Education Committee had established informal partnerships with over 100 government schools in Mon-populated areas ('mixed schools' - ownership of which is shared between the government and non-state actors). These 'mixed schools' teach the government curriculum, with extra modules on Mon language and history.

During the period of research, the Mon National Schools were under threat, due to administrative problems, and political tensions with the government. However, with the re-confirmation of an NMSP ceasefire in early 2012, threats to the Mon National Schools decreased. By this time however, in order to safeguard the future of the Mon schools, the NMSP had transferred administration of 30 Mon National

schools and 30 'mixed' schools to the newly re-established Mon Literature and Culture Committee (MLCC). In the MLCC schools, a Mon CBO has introduced community-based income-generating projects, which may help to deliver a more sustainable funding model in the middle-to-long-term. In the meantime, the Mon education regime continues to face administrative and funding challenges (including now a dual-administration education system). Nevertheless, this is a successful non-state education regime which offers a model for dual-language schooling in a multi-ethnic country such as Burma - a prototype 'federal' education system.

The Mon context offers another successful case study. Particularly since the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, Mon Buddhist monks and civil society groups have developed an impressive network of summer literacy trainings, providing native language and history-culture education to Mon communities across southeast Burma. These trainings are sustainable and resilient, due to strong community support, despite extremely limited assistance from international donors. Similarly (but apparently with no communication between the two initiatives), Karen community groups working out of government-controlled areas implement summer literacy campaigns in a number of areas, again with limited external support. Some Mon and Karen monastic schools (organised by monks, linked to the state education system) also provide indigenous language education, as do a number of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and local Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), as well as individual community members.

Karen education regimes are complex and fragmented, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of this ethnic community - which is larger, with more linguistic and religious diversity than the Mon. Many Karen-populated areas are affected by an armed conflict which has persisted for more than half-a-century. While some Karen armed factions have agreed uneasy truces with the government, during the period of research the main Karen insurgent organisation (the Karen National Union: KNU) remained at war. This insecure and militarised context has had profound impacts on education provision in Karen areas.

Different Karen armed groups undertake education initiatives in areas under their control or influence. The most significant of these is the KNU's Karen Education Department (KED), which administers a school system accessible to many conflict-affected communities, including Karen refugees in Thailand. Both the NMSP and KNU education systems receive limited donor support. In the Karen context in particular, local NGOs and CBOs working cross-border from neighbouring Thailand provide teacher stipends, curriculum support and training (in-service and at a college on the border). These local NGOs support over 1000 Karen schools, in KNU controlled and influenced areas, as well as in government-controlled zones ('mixed schools'), and in communities under the authority of non-KNU armed groups. This is an important initiative, based on strong community support for education.

The research raises questions about the relationship between education and national identity, in a context of on-going armed and ethnic conflict. By developing curricula and teaching materials in the refugee camps, international donors have supported the development of a Karen nationalist education regime very different to that in government schools. Many Karen schools produce a cohort educated into a separatist identity; able to work for aid agencies or resettle

overseas, but not qualified to integrate with the Union education system. Karen school graduates often speak little Burmese language. In part, this is due to unresolved armed and political conflicts, and the desire among Karen educators to reproduce their language and culture; it is also an unintended consequence of developing a refugee camp-based curriculum, without taking account of the wider political context. There are also questions regarding the position of speakers of non-dominant Karen dialects (and indeed non-Karen students) within Karen education regimes.

#### **Karen case study**

The network of more than 1000 KED-administered, community-run, 'mixed' and other schools in Karen-populated areas of southeast Burma attests to communities' great commitment to the education of their children, under often extremely difficult circumstances. A number of education initiatives are also underway in relatively secure, government-controlled areas. These include non-formal (part-time and/or summer vacation) initiatives, implemented by a range of civil society actors.

In the conflict-affected countryside, the KED and its partners have developed an education system which provides basic schooling, and reproduces elements of the Karen culture. Particularly over the past decade, the KTWG and its partners in the KESAG network have supported these (mostly non-state) schools, providing much-needed teacher stipends and training. Nevertheless, this diverse education regime faces great challenges, including a lack of school and teaching materials.

A particular issue facing the Karen nationalist education regime is its divergences from the government system. Particularly in schools administered or otherwise supported by the KED (including in the refugee camps in Thailand), the curriculum does not prepare students for integrating with the government system. Rather, these schools educate a cohort of students unable to speak good Burmese, who are socialised into a separatist Karen identity. This outcome has been a largely unintended consequence of attempts to support and improve a distinctly Karen education system, under conditions of armed conflict, in a context where ethnic nationality communities have struggled for self-determination vis-à-vis a militarised state perceived as having an agenda of forced assimilation in relation to ethnic communities. In the context of political changes in Burma in 2011-12, and the negotiation of a ceasefire between the government and KNU, it is necessary to re-assess the basic aims of Karen non-state education regimes.

#### **Mon case study**

Since the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, the MNEC has expanded the Mon National School system to 156 schools in 2010-11 (plus 116 'mixed' schools - a decrease from previous years, due to political tensions with the government). These schools reproduce and transmit Mon language and elements of the Mon historical tradition - activities of great importance to the NMSP's ethno-nationalist agenda.

Whereas, before the ceasefire, a small number of MNS were accessible only to children in the NMSP zones of control, the 1995 truce allowed the Mon education authorities to expand into government-controlled areas. As a result, Mon-speaking children have access to an indigenous language education at the primary level, with significant pedagogic advantages. The language of instruction shifts from Mon to Burmese at the middle and high-school levels, allowing MNS graduates to sit government matriculation exams, and enter the state higher education system (which however, faces many problems). This model promotes native-language learning (particularly at primary level), while not replicating the Karen nationalist education regime's production of a cohort unable to speak Burmese, or integrate with the state system.

During the period of research, the MNS were under threat of suppression by the government, in the context of a possible breakdown of the NMSP ceasefire. However, at the time of writing, relations between the government and NMSP have improved, following the re-negotiation of a peace agreement between the two sides. This development should allow the Mon education authorities to focus

on administrative reforms. The situation is complicated by the transfer in early 2012 of 60 schools from the NMSP's MNEC to the MLCC. The MLCC and its CBO partners are attempting to implement a community-based income-generating approach to school support, which in the middle-to-longer term offers a more sustainable funding model, as well as enhanced community participation in education. In the short-term, Mon communities and educators must learn to live with a dual-administration of the Mon school system.

The MNS offer full-time, non-state (or in some cases, 'mixed') schooling. A number of monastic schools also operate in Mon and other parts of Burma - although in most cases these follow the government curriculum, and do not use ethnic languages in the classroom. Another important initiative is the Mon Summer Buddhist Literature and Culture trainings (and similar programs in Karen areas). These provide language and literacy training to ethnic minority students (mostly from government schools) during the summer holidays. The MSBLC is a sustainable initiative, strongly grounded in the community - as demonstrated by the continuation of these trainings, when donor funding was withdrawn in 2010. However, there is a need for improved teacher-training and teaching materials.

As with the Karen case study, the Mon findings raise questions regarding the role of indigenous language and non-state education regimes within a multi-ethnic Union of Burma/Myanmar. These issues are particularly relevant, in the context of substantial social and political changes of 2011-2012.

### **Outstanding issues**

The Karen and Mon case studies raise questions regarding the role of indigenous language and non-state education regimes within a multi-ethnic Union of Burma/Myanmar. These issues are particularly relevant in the context of substantial political changes in 2011-2012. How will non-state education systems be affected by recent political changes? What is the role of indigenous language and non-state education regimes within a multi-ethnic Union?

Further research could focus on non-state education regimes among other ethnic communities in Burma (e.g. Kachin, Shan, PaO), and comparisons with minority education regimes in neighbouring countries (e.g. India, China and Thailand). Other useful research topics include the relationship between changing state structures and education policies, and non-state education regimes.

For more information contact:

Marie Lall [mariecarine.lall@googlemail.com](mailto:mariecarine.lall@googlemail.com)

Ashley South [lerdoh@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lerdoh@yahoo.co.uk)