

The peace process and ethnic education in Myanmar

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As Myanmar prepares for historic elections on 9th November, attention is understandably focused on the outcome - and above all, on who will be the country's next President. Another key issue is if and how the peace process could move forward, following the government and some Ethnic Armed Groups' (EAGs) agreement of a contentious Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). The answers to these questions will frame what kind of country Myanmar can be over the coming decade-plus. In general, discussions focus on the structure of power and who will hold it. Less attention is given to questions of policy - what the next government should do, and how. In this article we explore some of the issues and policy choices in relation to education, and particularly ethnic language teaching - a topic relevant to large sections of society, especially ethnic communities.

Ethnic education and Mother Tongue-Based teaching

Mother Tongue-Based (MTB) teaching means introducing children to education through using their first language (or 'mother tongue') as the medium of instruction, at least in the early years. Schooling in ethnic mother tongues is valuable in a multi-ethnic country like Myanmar, for both educational reasons (because non-Burmese speaking children make better progress in school, if taught in their mother tongue), and political reasons (because of the strong link between using ethnic languages, and pride in and maintenance of ethnic identity). MTB teaching also means that the national language (Burmese) is gradually introduced at an appropriate stage.

Since at least the 1960s, ethnic nationality people in Myanmar have experienced a forced assimilation on part of the military-dominated Myanmar state. Indeed, many ethnic stakeholders still regard the government *as* the military. It will take generations to overcome such fear and mistrust. Nevertheless, recent developments in education and

broader political reforms in Myanmar have seen the beginnings of introducing MTB teaching into government schools, but as a second language and not as a medium of instruction. In some areas (e.g. parts of Mon State), this has included teaching ethnic languages *during* school hours - one of the main demands of many ethnic nationalists. This is a positive development - although many ethnic stakeholders see only as a relatively small step in the right direction.

For decades, ethnic nationality EAGs and civil society actors have resisted 'Burmanisation' through a number of strategies, including the development of education systems that preserve and reproduce their languages and cultures, under often very difficult circumstances. There is a great variety of non-state ethnic education regimes in Myanmar, ranging from local input into government-run schools, through 'mixed schools' (jointly run by government and ethnic stakeholders), through schools administered exclusively by EAGs, where government education staff have no role.

Conflict, peace and education

We have spent the last year researching ethnic education and MTB teaching in Myanmar, for a report to be published soon by Chiang Mai University. Readers are welcome to get in touch with us, for copies of this when it is published.

Our research indicates that there is a direct link between conflict and how people feel about what language and curriculum their children are taught. Armed conflict makes parents and communities less likely to accept government schools and Burmese language education - rather, conflict motivates the creation of separate (parallel) systems both in language and curricular content. Education regimes developed by (or under the authority of) EAGs are shaped by peace and conflict dynamics - tending to be more separatist in character when conflict is rife, and less separatist (more willing to engage, and perhaps integrate, with state systems) when ceasefires are in place. Therefore, conflict and peace are key factors in shaping education policy and practice in ethnic areas, and education is also a key variable in the peace process.

In the Kachin context, the return of armed conflict since 2011 has led to greater pan-Kachin unity, and unification around an ethnic and -linguistic core. Many members of the

diverse Kachin community are deeply hurt and angry at what they perceive as the state armed forces' unilateral and brutal offensive. Associated with massive and widespread human rights abuses, the renewed fighting has alienated those in the community who previously were willing to consider a future as part of Myanmar. Since the resumption of armed conflict in 2011, schools under the authority of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) are switching more to Kachin and English, and less Burmese. This is part of a general move to separate from the government education system, and developed a more distinctively Kachin school system.

Before the 2012 ceasefire, the KNU and local communities had already developed an impressive education system, with some support from international donors and NGOs. While well-suited to local needs, and containing much good practice, this system is significantly different from the government education regime, not least through the promotion of Karen (mostly Sgaw) language and culture-identity, with only a limited focus on Burmese.

In the Mon context, where the New Mon State Party (NMSP) has had a ceasefire with the government since 1995, there is a growing 'convergence' between state and non-state education systems. The Mon National Schools administered by the NMSP's Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) use a curriculum broadly the same as in government schools, with additional lessons in Mon history and language. All subjects are taught in Mon at Mon National primary schools, with transition to Burmese language in middle school.

In the context of their respective ceasefires (in 1994 and 1995), the KIO and NMSP expanded their education systems, achieving what might be considered a form of self-determination in education - or 'federalism from below'. Despite great difficulties in securing resources (both financial, and human), the KIO and NMSP (and KNU/Karen) school systems are locally owned and delivered. These ethnic education regimes are concrete examples of local communities and stakeholders struggling for self-determination, developing the building blocks of what a future federal Myanmar might look like, working from the bottom up. Therefore, ethnic education systems can be seen as functional images of a future federal Myanmar. This is particularly important in a context where elite-level

political discussions around the peace process have yet to result in a political dialogue, where issues such as education and language policy can be addressed.

Turning to the peace process, Chapter 6 of the draft NCA acknowledges EAG authority in the fields of education, health, natural resource management, and security, and provides for international assistance in these fields with the joint agreement of government and EAGs. Many of the key issues in relation to ethnic education and MTB teaching in Myanmar need to be discussed as part of a structured multi-stakeholder debate - as part of a Political Dialogue, either coming out of the peace process (as envisaged in the NCA) or in relation to broader post-election political reforms elections in Myanmar. In the meantime, there is an urgent need to support EAG and associated civil society education and other services, during the probably lengthy and contested 'interim period', between the agreement of an NCA (and earlier bilateral ceasefires) and negotiation of a comprehensive political settlement.

One of the key issues emerging from the peace process is the status of and future EAGs' administrations and service delivery systems, which are often implemented in partnership with civil society actors. Will education and other service delivery systems under the authority of EAGs be displaced by the state system, continue in parallel, or undergo a process of 'convergence'? This is a key issue for Political Dialogue. In the meantime, ethnic concerns in the peace process focus on education (among other things), and particularly the government's use schools to expand its authority in previously contested, conflict-affected areas. Many ethnic stakeholders are concerned that international aid agencies and donors are supporting the government in pushing state structures into conflict-affected areas, without taking account of existing local activities and services, or the impacts on peace and conflict dynamics.

Education as a guide to political positions

Positions in relation to education can be taken as indicators of different actors' views regarding a broader range of state-society issues, and the distribution of power and resources between the central government and ethnic polities. The NMSP (MNEC) model can be seen as achieving a fairly high degree of local self-determination in education, while retaining strong links to the (hopefully future federal) Union. This was previously

the case with the KIO system, which under pressure of the resumption of armed conflict seems to be moving towards a more separatist model, similar to that adopted historically by the KNU.

Similar analysis can be applied to positions in relation to language use and policy, in schools and in government administration more broadly. Most stakeholders seem to accept the necessity (or desirability) of teaching children Burmese (*Bama saga*), and are willing to acknowledge the status of Burmese as a national/Union language (in some cases, together with English). The way in which Burmese and/or ethnic languages should be used for public administration, government and legal processes are indicators of how different actors view the distribution of power between the (Burman) centre and (ethnic) periphery in a reforming Myanmar - and might be taken as rough proxies for other sectors, for example in relation to natural resource management and revenue sharing between the Union government and ethnic States. For example, those who seek to use ethnic languages as a primary medium of governance and administration in ethnic States can be expected to adopt strong positions regarding the degree of natural resource revenue which should be retained at, and/or redistributed to, the local/State level (federalism) - and in extreme cases may argue for complete separation of the ethnic States from the Union. Moderates may adopt positions according to which ethnic languages are used together with Burmese, or in a supplementary manner at the State level - corresponding to varying degrees of autonomy or decentralisation, including various forms of federalism. Discussion of these issues can help to reveal the kind of country people imagine Myanmar to be - and their hopes (and concerns) regarding the peace process, and broader political transition. Within this discussion, further reflection is required on the position of 'minorities within minorities' - ethnic communities with different identities (and different language uses) to those of the locally dominant minority (e.g. Kachin linguistic sub-groups, the variety of Karen ethno-linguistic communities), and their possible vulnerability in the context of a potentially dominant local ethnic/national identity.

A sustainable resolution to Myanmar's long-standing ethnic conflicts will be difficult to achieve without education reform that addresses the right language policies. These issues have significant implications in terms of financial and human resources required, and ultimately need to be worked out during structured, multi-stakeholder political dialogue.