Comparing Models of Non-state Ethnic Education in Myanmar: The Mon and Karen National Education Regimes

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Published online: 06 Aug 2013.

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Comparing Models of Non-state Ethnic Education in Myanmar: The Mon and Karen National Education Regimes

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ABSTRACT   *This article explores two models of non-state education provision in Myanmar (Burma), in order to draw conclusions regarding templates for ethnic education regimes in this fast-changing country. Ethnic Armed Groups in Myanmar have developed education systems in the context of long-running armed conflicts. This paper examines two such regimes. Karen communities struggle with few resources to educate their children. Despite great difficulties, the Karen National Union has developed a curriculum based upon one Karen dialect, which is employed in about 1,000 schools. Graduates of this education regime are mostly unable to speak fluent Burmese, or to integrate with the Myanmar tertiary education system; they are orientated towards a Karen national identity, rather than Myanmar citizenship. However, with the beginnings of a substantial peace process, Karen educators will need to re-think their implicitly separatist agenda. A comparative case study is offered by the Mon ethnic minority. The New Mon State Party has had a fragile ceasefire since 1995. Some 270 Mon National Schools provide Mon language instruction at elementary levels, shifting to Burmese at middle school. As the Mon Schools follow the government curriculum, with extra classes in Mon language and history-culture, graduates are able to matri-culate and enter the nationwide tertiary education system. We argue that the Mon experience can be a useful model for education reform in a transitional Myanmar, as political and civil society leaders negotiate a more decentralised state.*

After a half-century of military rule, economic and developmental stagnation and poor governance, education systems in Myanmar are in a state of serious decline.[1] In this context, over the past two decades, a variety of non-state education providers have emerged, in both the private (for-profit) and civil society (public service) sectors. Very little research has been undertaken regarding these non-state education regimes. This is particularly the case among ethnic minority/nationality communities, many of which have been associated with armed insurgency against a state perceived as dominated by the Burman majority (Conversi 2004). This article, based on extensive fieldwork, explores education systems administered by community groups and non-state authorities among two ethnic communities – or nationalities: the Mon and Karen.[2] Both have developed extensive ethno-nationalist-orientated school systems running parallel to those of the

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official state system – which has effectively banned ethnic language education, since the 1960s. As well as non-state armed groups (NSAGs), Mon and Karen civil society groups, including secular and religious agencies, have also been active in the education sector. These activities are particularly significant in the highly politicised and contested context of southeast Myanmar, which has been affected by armed conflict for more than half a century. Over the course of the world's longest civil war, the state has come to be associated with the language and culture of the ethnic Burman majority. Among ethno-nationalists and insurgents' main grievances has been the sometimes forcible assimilation ("Burmanisation") of non-Burman minorities, manifested for example in the suppression of minority languages in the state school system (Houtman 1999).

This article compares the Karen and Mon case studies, in order to reach conclusions regarding the most appropriate model for ethnic education provision in multi-ethnic Myanmar. We explore whether the ethnic nationalist education systems, based on mother-tongue teaching and a differentiated history curriculum, are necessarily separatist. Notwithstanding the problems that both communities face, the research found that the Mon ceasefire had created the space within which the Mon national education system expanded and improved. Administered by an armed ethnic group, the New Mon State Party (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 matricula-tion 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-sate actors). These "mixed schools" teach the government curriculum, with extra modules on Mon language and history.

This article locates its argument in the mother-tongue rights debate, arguing that in the Myanmar context the Mon education regime has managed to strike a balance, offering Mon education to those who would like their children educated in the Mon language and culture, whilst still allowing these children to integrate later into the mainstream Myanmar system. In contrast, in a context of more than 60 years of armed conflict, the Karen education regime educates children for a life outside of Myanmar (or in an autonomous Karen state) and, therefore, is indicative of a more separatist agenda. This finding is not intended as a criticism: Karen parents and educators have struggled hard to teach their children, under incredibly difficult circumstances. Furthermore, the marginalisation of the Karen education regime is partly explained by the fragmented nature of the Karen national community (with different sub-groups speaking different dialects, and practising different religions), in combination with the influence of various external factors, including mis-sionaries and aid agencies. As hill-dwelling minority peoples, Karen communities have rich indigenous cultures, reflected in the diversity of their education regimes – which include non-formal forms of instruction.[3] It is important that these educational traditions are respected and supported, in a rapidly changing ("modernising") context. At the same time, however, Karen children have a right to schooling which prepares them for active citizenship in Myanmar.

The recent legalisation of private schools in Myanmar, and President Thein Sein's call for the expansion of non-state education provision, places these issues high on the

national agenda.[4] This study is also topical because of recent debates in Myanmar, including in the Ministry of Education and Parliament, on allowing the use of minority language education in some state schools. Although such concerns are beyond the scope of this article, it is likely that allowing ethnic groups to use minority languages in state schools would address long-standing grievances and aspirations among ethnic communities, thus promoting peace and national reconciliation in Myanmar.

Framing Ethnic Politics and Education: Mother-tongue Education

Although research has been carried out in other settings regarding the positive and negative aspects of mother-tongue education, no in-depth analysis has been undertaken on the role of minority languages in Myanmar. Indeed, the academic literature on education in contexts of armed conflict is sparse, particularly in relation to Myanmar, with Salem-Gervais and Metro (2012) being a rare exception, although there is increasing interest in the relationship between education and violence (see Lange 2012).

Ethnic minority communities in Myanmar make up approximately 30% of the population (South 2008, xv). For several decades following independence in 1948, communist and ethnic insurgents controlled large parts of the country (Smith 1999; see also Lintner 1994; Smith 2007). Since the 1980s, however, and especially over the past 10 years, Karen, Mon and other armed opposition groups have lost control of their once extensive "liberated zones" to the government, precipitating further humanitarian and political crises in the borderlands (TBBC 2011).

Myanmar's sometimes bewildering ethnic diversity has been the object of a number of surveys (for example, Gravers 2007). However, much of the literature has been rather simplistic and unhelpful, often framing ethnicity as a given, essentialised category. This, despite the clear warning provided by one of the foundational texts – Taylor's (1982) use of historical evidence to analyse how categories of ethnic identity are framed, and often assumed as relatively unproblematic, in much of the (particularly non-academic) literature. Taylor shows how concepts of ethnic identity are in part at least a product of British colonial administration. In making this important point, however, he goes too far, implying that because of the external influence of colonialists and missionaries, ethnic identities in contemporary Myanmar are somehow inauthentic. In response, Gravers (1999) has observed that identity is something constantly (re-)created and, therefore, novel elements do not make this quality less authentic. Among the few contemporary academic authors to focus critically but sympathetically on ethnicity in Myanmar is Mandy Sadan (2007, with François Robinne), who provides a sophisticated analysis of the development and shifting significance of categories of ethnic identity, from the pre-colonial period the present. The ethnic Karen scholar Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2011) has done much to nuance understandings of identity and conflict among minority (particularly Karen) communities in Burma/Myanmar, in particular examining the lives and politics of minority communities in government-controlled areas (see also Cheesman 2002).

In addition to South (2008, 2011), the most useful study of Karen insurgent society is Falla's (1991) delicate and detailed description of life in the "liberated zones." For the Mon, the most recent book-length historical study is that of Guillon (1999), on the pre-colonial non-civilisation, and South's (2003) account of the Mon nationalist and political movement in the modern period.

The Myanmar literature has rarely focused on educational matters, or the issue of mother tongue education. Callahan's (2003) chapter on language policy is a rare exception and examines official language policy (mainly outside the classroom) from colonial times to the 1990s. Her analysis shows how the Burmese language in the 1950s and 1960s was used in official settings and later, in the 1990s, how the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military dictatorship imposed a policy of cultural homogenisation "to assimilate and disempower Burma's minorities" (Callahan 2003, 167). According to Kaur Gill (2009), language is a key part of the ethnic minority determinant, an integral part of the construction of ethnic identity, a point also made by Smith (1988) in a comprehensive study of the relationship between language use and ethnicity. In many developing countries, especially nations made up of diverse ethnic groups, there is often a concern that minority languages and ethnic identities will lead to greater divisiveness. This results in a widespread political dilemma regarding how ethnic groups around the world can sustain their ethno-cultural, linguistic and national identities in multi-cultural societies. The challenge for many multi-ethnic states is how to allow ethnic communities to practice their customs and language, while encouraging them to adhere to the overall nation. Kaur Gill (2009, 7) professes that

> If one is sure of one's ethnic roots then one can have a strong sense of collective identity which is based on the language of the dominant ethnic group. But if you take that away from the ethnic groups then it will be difficult for them to reconcile to their loss of ethnic identity whilst at the same time face the challenges of working towards a collective identity.

She goes on to cite Fishman: "… an accepting and unconflicted view of one's own culture may be a building block of and a pre-condition for accepting unconflicted views of other cultures. Security begets security."

State support and the development and rooting of ethnic identity is, therefore, essential for the multi-ethnic population to possess a sense of inclusion, which in turn will spur and enhance loyalty for a national language. Language policies allowing the use of mother tongues in schools are a part of this. However, language policy is not necessarily linked directly to concerns of learning and cognition in schools. Governments often use language policy to serve an instrumental purpose, such as building a national identity and making sure there is only one language within the labour market (UNESCO 2007). The key question for many multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic states is how to make education inclusive, with respect to the socio-political, pedagogical and psychological needs of different stakeholders in society, and their rights, as specified in various international agreements.

In the rights literature, children have the right to access education that meets their needs. The literature on the right to instruction in the mother tongue is diverse. For example, there are a number of UNESCO briefs and reports which locate the right for children to be taught in their mother tongue in the wider "Education for all" (EFA) agreement that was signed by 155 countries in 1990, and forms the basis for the Millennium Goals. The UNESCO Advocacy Brief (2005) argues that one of the biggest obstacles for achieving EFA is the use of foreign languages for teaching and learning as it creates a handicap which can often only be overcome by the middle classes. The disadvantage increases for the poor, who also have to deal with hunger and remote

rural conditions. In any community where there is a linguistic mismatch between school and community, there are likely to be issues regarding access to and quality of schooling. This is particularly – but not only – the case where parents do not speak the language used in school.

Years of research have shown that language and identity are linked, and children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language. The same applies to adults seeking to become literate (UNESCO 2003a, b). Mother-tongue education and multi-lingualism are accepted and common around the world and speaking one's own language is increasingly recognised as a right. As governments have become increasingly aware of the issue, many have revised their language policies and national integration no longer means giving up a mother tongue. UNESCO, which proclaimed International Mother Language Day in 1999, has the following position on mother-tongue education (UNESCO 2003, 6):

● Promoting education in the mother tongue to improve the quality of education.
● Encouraging bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of schooling as a means of furthering social and gender equality and as a key part of linguistically diverse societies.
● Pushing languages as a central element of inter-cultural education.

This is not something new. In fact, in 1951 UNESCO emphatically stated that:

> it is important that every effort should be made to provide education in the mother tongue … On educational grounds, we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible (UNESCO 2007, 4).

Subsequently, UNESCO's recognition of the importance of mother-tongue education acquired the status of an internationally endorsed "right," with its incorporation into the Convention on the Rights of Children in 1989. According to UNICEF (2010, 2):

> People from minority groups often face issues with regard to government account-ability as well as often facing obstacles in manifesting their ethnic identity, especially when it comes to using their language in educational settings. Minority children have therefore been singled out by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as a particularly vulnerable group, along with girls, children with disabilities, children in hospitals and foster care, and children of migrant parents.

Special minority rights include, *inter alia,* the right to: (i) "express their minority characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions, and customs;" (ii) speak minority languages in private and in public situations; (iii) "maintain minority educational and training establishments and the right to learn mother-tongue language and have instruction in mother-tongue education;" and (iv) "self-identify as members of a

minority group and to be recognised as such by the states in which they live" (UNICEF 2010, 5).

Much of the literature argues for mother-tongue education due to the fact that the "unifying" language in many post-colonial countries was the colonial language. Things are different in multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic nations (such as Myanmar) that chose the dominant local language as a vehicle for teaching and learning across the country. Despite this not being a colonial language, the problems experienced by teaching only in the dominant language is often the same as when teaching the whole country in the old colonial language. Despite this, many developing countries that are characterised by individual as well as societal multilingualism still allow only one language to be used in schools.

Since language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom, using a "foreign" language can lead to quality issues in learning and teaching. As Benson (2004, 2) explains:

> Instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called "submersion" … because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Compounded by chronic difficulties such as low levels of teacher education, poorly designed, inappropriate curricula and lack of adequate school facilities, submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

Benson also argues that the myths generally put forward to maintain monolingual education do not stand up to scrutiny. The first myth ("one nation – one language") is located in the colonial concept that a nation-state requires a single unifying language. However, events in monolingual countries, such as Somalia, Burundi or Rwanda, show that a unifying language does not necessarily guarantee unity and can lead to conflict (see also Benson 2004). A second myth ("bilingualism causes confusion") is disputed by evidence that shows that children who have developed competencies in their first language have better results in the second language (Cummins 1999, 2000; Ramirez et al. 1991; Thomas and Collier 2002, cited in Benson 2004). The myth that "parents want L2-only schooling" (that is, schooling only in the "national language") is also proved to be untrue. Most parents, when given the choice, will opt for bilingual education (see, for example, Heugh 2002, cited in Benson 2004).

Research has shown that bilingual education improves classroom participation, has a positive effect on self-esteem and valorises the minority language, with communities developing more pride in their culture and increasing parent participation in education – all of which have an effect on the quality of education in the community. Bilingual education also increases the participation of girls (UNESCO 2005).

Benson (2004), however, argues that simply changing the language of instruction without resolving other pressing social and political issues is not likely to result in significant improvement in educational services. Students and teachers' basic needs must be met for reforms to be effective; usually this will mean increased state support to meet the resource needs of bilingual teaching (which, however, is offset by reduced repetition and dropout rates). The involvement of all stakeholders in education decisions is also essential to securing the grassroots commitment to education among the linguistic

community, as well as the support of state agencies which will have to facilitate the implementation of schooling.

Political Background

For more than half a century, a range of armed ethnic groups has been fighting for autonomy against the militarised central government (Smith 1999). After decades of "low intensity" conflict, most armed ethnic groups are now severely weakened. Nevertheless, they still enjoy varying degrees of legitimacy among the communities they seek to represent (South 2011).

Since the 1960s, the suppression of minority languages within a centralising, militarised state (associated with the Burman majority) has been one of the main grievances under-lying more than half a century of armed ethnic conflict (see Walton 2013). In response to government suppression, and the military regime's perceived "Burmanisation" of national culture (Houtman 1999), ethnic nationality elites have sought to develop separate educa-tion systems in order to preserve and reproduce minority languages and cultures. Some of these alternative education actors have come from the civil society sector and, in parti-cular, Christian and Buddhist associations. *Ad hoc* ethnic nationality education regimes were developed by some armed ethnic groups during the chaotic early years of the Civil War in the 1950s and 1960s, with attempts to standardise these systems during the 1970s. Since the 1980s, and particularly with an influx of external support following the 1988 democracy uprising in Myanmar, non-state education regimes have been expanded – at least in the case of Karen, Mon and some other ethnic nationalist groups, such as the Kachin. In the meantime, a wide range of civil society actors has remained active in the field of non-state education provision among minority communities, including through implementing non-formal and part-time programmes.

Following elections in November 2010, a new government took office in late March 2011. In his inaugural speech, President Thein Sein addressed the need for widespread changes in the country, and for national reconciliation between the state and Myanmar's diverse social and ethnic groups. Over the following months, the government implemen-ted a series of initiatives and reforms, including: allowing the two new national-level parliaments to function with a surprising degree of freedom; release of most political prisoners; understandings reached with opposition groups, such as Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD); government responses to social action (e.g. suspension of environmentally and socially destructive infrastructure projects); relaxations on censorship and increased freedom of expression and association. These changes were symbolised by the NLD's participation in by-elections on 1 April 2012, in which the opposition party won 43 out of the 44 seats they contested. These important reforms and actions notwithstanding, after half a century of military misrule there is much which needs fixing in Myanmar; it remains uncertain whether the military-backed government has the political will or technical capacity to implement needed reforms. In the meantime, vested interests remain powerful, particularly in the economic sector.

As a result of initiatives by the new government, in late 2011 most armed ethnic groups entered into ceasefire negotiations with state representatives. By August 2012, when the research was conducted, the main Karen and Mon armed ethnic groups had agreed preliminary ceasefires with the government, and were engaged in the difficult process of building a lasting peace.

The peace process currently underway represents the best opportunity in half a century to resolve ethnic conflicts in this troubled country. Non-state armed groups need to seize the opportunity to engage with the government on a range of issues which affect the communities they seek to represent. This includes education reform and issues relating to the use of ethnic mother tongues in schools. Through participation in the peace process, armed groups can re-engage with communities with whom they have lost touch, and reinvent themselves as mainstream political actors. However, after decades of armed conflict, trust in the government is very limited, particularly on the part of ethnic communities. In order to build confidence, the government needs to begin a process of substantive political dialogue in relation to the concerns of ethnic communities. Beginning political dialogue with opposition groups (including civil society actors and above-ground political parties), together with consolidation of existing ceasefire agreements, would demonstrate the government's seriousness in bringing peace to all parts of the country. As part of this confidence-building process, the government, and its international development partners, could do more to support "convergence" between state and non-state governance regimes and service delivery systems, demonstrating to ethnic nationality stakeholders that the peace process can create spaces to support local agency, and not just opportunities for the expansion of state authority into ethnic nationality populated areas. Support for local school systems would be a good place to start, given the important place of education in ethnic nationality political cultures.

Karen Education and Politics

The education regime in Karen-populated areas is highly diverse, reflecting the heterogeneity of this community, numbering approximately 5 to 7 million people in Myanmar (South 2011).[5] Karen communities are located across southeast Myanmar, and also in the Irrawaddy Delta in the southwest.

During the colonial period, Christian missionaries, and later government officials, encouraged a sense of national identity among this previously scattered community, leading to the emergence of Karen social and political movements in the late nineteenth century (Smith 1999). During the first half of the twentieth century, secular-political and religious Karen social groups engaged in adult and child literacy drives, publishing numerous texts in a variety of Karen scripts, and greatly expanding the literate proportion of the community.

Ethnic Burman nationalist sentiments turned against the Karen nationalist movement during and immediately after the Second World War, as the latter were perceived to be closely associated with the British colonial rulers. At the time of independence in 1948, the Karen nationalist movement was well organised, with Western-educated elites making various territorial and political demands on the new Union government. Unable to resolve such issues through political processes, the bulk of the well-armed Karen nationalist forces went underground in January 1949, starting an armed conflict that dragged on for decades (Smith 1999).

Through to the 1950s, Karen communities in Myanmar enjoyed uneven access to education services provided by the state (sometimes in local languages), as well as by a variety of mission schools, most of which were established during the colonial period. However, following the military takeover of 1962, Karen and other minority language

provision was suppressed. Nevertheless, some churches and monasteries continued informally to teach local languages (particularly Christian Sgaw, and Buddhist Pwo, dialects).

Today, Karen communities in the Delta and Yangon Region have access to some non-state education provision, in the form of monastic schools and after-school and holiday languages classes, which are provided by both faith-based (church and monastery) and secular groups. In addition, local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide various training courses. These include fairly well-resourced activities in some government-controlled towns, as well as more loosely structured activities implemented by civil society actors, including in remote, conflict-affected areas.

The Karen National Union (KNU), the main Karen armed opposition group, has organised the Karen free state of *Kawthoolei* into seven districts, each of which corresponds to a Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) brigade area. From the 1950s through to the 1980s, the KNU was one of the largest and most powerful of a number of armed ethnic groups controlling large swathes of territory, particularly in the inaccessible and underdeveloped borderlands. However, since the 1980s, government forces have taken control of most armed opposition strongholds. Since the fall of its long-standing Manerplaw headquarters in 1995, KNU territorial control has been reduced to a few areas of remote forests and mountains in Karen State, plus a few enclaves along the Thailand border. However, the organisation retained an ability to extend guerrilla operations into government-controlled areas, with many parts of southeast Myanmar actively contested between the KNU and regular government forces, plus a range of Karen armed factions which have split from the KNU since the 1990s. These include the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), elements of which were transformed into government-aligned Border Guard Force (BGF) units in August 2010.[6]

In October 2011 a new round of talks commenced between the KNU and the Thein Sein government. In late 2012, Karen-populated areas were still characterised by high degrees of militarisation and insecurity. Following an initial ceasefire agreed with the government in January 2012, and further substantial discussions in April, it seems probable that a KNU ceasefire will be consolidated, leading Karen society into a new period of social, political and economic development, with accompanying challenges.

Outside of the shrinking bastions of armed groups' control, most schooling is organised and owned by communities – with varying degrees of external support. Teachers, curricula and funding come from two main sources: the government and NSAGs (in Karen areas, primarily the KNU). Many schools and communities engage (often uneasily) with both sets of education actors.

In government-controlled parts of the southeast, as elsewhere in the country, most – but not all – children have access to state schools (Kyi et al. 2000). Dropout rates in the state system are generally high nationwide; in Karen-populated and other conflict-affected areas especially so, because of political insecurity and widespread poverty.

In some areas controlled or influenced by the DKBA-BGF and other Karen "ceasefire groups," such as the KNU/KNLA Peace Council in central Karen State, there is a degree of stability for civilian populations. Some schools have been built by the government and, in some cases, teachers and rudimentary teaching materials supplied. In such "mixed" schools, resources are sometimes supplemented by materials and teachers supplied by border-based community-based organisations (CBOs). Although government schools in Karen ceasefire areas follow the state curriculum, and thus teach only in Burmese, local Karen ceasefire group authorities usually allow summer literacy and culture activities to

be implemented, with some teaching of Karen languages undertaken outside of school hours.

The KNU instigated schools in areas under its control in the 1950s. In the 1970s an Education Department was established, based in the high school at the strategically important village of Wangka (Kaw Moo Rah), on the Thailand-Burma border (near the Thai town of Mae Sot).

In addition to state and non-state provision of formal education, a number of part-time and informal initiatives exist. As well as civil society programmes in Karen languages, these include a number of training initiatives implemented by international and national NGOs both inside government-controlled areas and in the opposition-orientated borderlands.

Education and Refugee Regimes

The main focus of this study is on education regimes "inside" Myanmar. In order to understand the Karen education context, however, it is necessary to briefly examine refugee education. In addition to the food security, livelihoods and health sectors, several international NGOs work on education in the nine Karen refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border (Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand 2011), which house some 150,000 displaced people. Other border-based NGOs and CBOs provide a wide range of educational activities, including primary, middle, high school and post-10th standard education, teaching materials development, and training and capacity-building for older children and adults.[7]

The approximately 70 refugee camp schools are administered by the Karen Refugee Committee's "Education Entity" (KRCEE). This body was established in 2008, in order to place some distance between refugee education initiatives and the KNU-affiliated Karen Education Department (KED). In 2012, it was in the process of developing a new curriculum for camp schools, which should in time percolate into the wider KED system. The beneficiaries of refugee education include camp residents (50,000 school-age children in 2011, of whom approximately 80% attended school). Non-camp-based programmes also help some of the children of the two million-plus migrant worker community in Thailand, many of whom are ethnic nationality people from Myanmar, who left the country for similar reasons to the refugees. Over the past decade, a network of schools has grown up in towns and villages along the border providing basic schooling to migrant children.[8]

Until recently, there was little distinction between the KNU-administered education regime "inside" Karen State and the schools in the camps. Students and teachers circulated between the two sets of establishments, which shared curricula, staff and materials. However, this began to change after 1997, when the Thai government allowed international NGOs (INGOs) to begin supporting education in the camps. With the advent of large-scale external support from the late 1990s, teaching standards and the quality of learning materials available in the camps improved significantly. A two-tier system emerged, with the larger, indigenous school system in the conflict-affected zones of southeast Myanmar increasingly seen as a "poor cousin" of the refugee camp regime. This period also saw a "brain drain" of Karen education personnel, away from the KNU and community (non-state) systems, towards employment by INGOs.

As a result of such developments, a Karen student cohort has emerged which enjoys little connection to the often poor quality education system in government-controlled areas. Although this may not have been the donors' intention, several informants noted that the development of a separate Karen education system, based in the refugee camps, has led to the production of school graduates qualified to work for aid agencies and/or opposition groups, or possibly to go into exile in third countries, but who are largely unable to matriculate, and thus enter the Myanmar higher education system. This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the limited Burmese language skills possessed by most graduates as a result of the Karen school system's emphasis on English and (Sgaw) Karen languages. This focus has led to Burmese being consigned to a subsidiary "foreign language" status. Karen high school graduates' limited mastery of Burmese makes it difficult for them to integrate in the future into government structures of higher education or administration (although this is not necessarily the intention of the Karen education authorities). The Karen education system has thus helped to reproduce a separatist identity among its students.

Mon Education and Politics

The Mon case illustrates Smith's (1988) contention that religious specialists play key roles in the maintenance of national cultures and languages, especially for ethnic communities without states.[9] Since the pre-colonial period, the Mon Buddhist monkhood has been involved in education. Monks were responsible for recording and reproducing elements of Mon national and religious history, and transmitting the Mon language in a context where many observers expected this to die out (South 2003, 20).

During the British period, elites from "hill-tribe" ethnic nationality communities, such as the Karen, were the objects of patronage from missionaries, and later state administrators, resulting in the promotion of indigenous language use and related processes of identity consolidation and, indeed, reification (Taylor 1982). For Mon society, however, the colonial period was one of benign neglect, during which a few wealthy merchants continued to make merit by sponsoring religious works (including translations of Buddhist scripture into and from Mon). The relationship between culture, language and national identity was reinforced in 1939 with the foundation of the All Ramanya Mon Association, the first modern social-political organisation, established specifically to promote the Mon language and culture (South 2003, 11). The outbreak of the Mon ethnic insurgency in 1948 (the year of Myanmar's independence) marked the start of a half-century of armed conflict. The insurgents' aims were not always clearly articulated, but included calls for secession from, and later autonomy within, the Union, including state recognition of and support for teaching of Mon language and history and of using Mon language as a medium of instruction.

Under the U Nu parliamentary government of the 1950s, schools in some areas were permitted to teach ethnic languages, particularly after the main Mon insurgent group agreed a ceasefire in 1958 (South 2003, 7). However, school curricula were centralised following General Ne Win's military coup in 1962, and regulations were passed that all subjects be taught only in the national Burmese language.

During the period of research from May 2011 to May 2012, most Mon-populated areas were subject to an uneasy ceasefire between the NMSP and government. Initially after the 1995 agreement, there had been some co-operation between the two sides – but, since the

late 1990s, relations between the NMSP and the government and military have been highly strained. Nevertheless, in February 2012, NMSP leaders re-confirmed a ceasefire with the Thein Sein government. Meanwhile, in parts of southern Mon State, small ex-NMSP factions continued to battle government forces, resulting in insecurity and human rights abuses, similar to those characterising many Karen-populated areas. Further discussions between the government and NMSP in April 2012 fostered expectations of genuine political dialogue, and a gradual transformation of the political and security context in Mon areas. One of the NMSP's main demands was that the government allow Mon language teaching in state schools during regular school hours, as part of the formal curriculum – an issue which is yet to be resolved.

The Mon national education system was developed in NMSP-controlled areas in the early 1970s, and spread to the rest of Mon State following the ceasefire in 1995. Originally the ceasefire did not allow for the Mon language to be taught during school hours in government schools. However, since the mid-1990s Mon has been taught unofficially as part of the curriculum in some "mixed schools." These institutions are government-run schools, where non-state education authorities provide (and usually support financially) one or more teachers, and also sometimes have input into the syllabus.

The relationships between state and non-state education regimes vary between township, districts and villages. In some areas, government schools have readily agreed to take on parts of the Mon national curriculum and turned themselves into "mixed" schools, whilst in other villages the schools have refused to do so. In most cases, co-operation between the Mon and the state education authorities is based on personal relationships in the local district, township or village settings. In this context, since the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, the Mon National School system has been thriving.

Mon National Schools

The NMSP Central Education Department was established in 1972. The fledgling school system was reformed in 1992, with the formation of the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC),[10] and foundation of the first Mon National High School. At the time of the 1995 NMSP-SLORC ceasefire, the Mon National School (MNS) system consisted of 76 schools (including one high school),[11] which were located in the NMSP "liberated zones" (most of which were transformed into "ceasefire zones" in June 1995) and in the three main Mon refugee camps, one of which was located in Thailand (South 2003, ch. 12).

Monastic Education

Monastic schools in Mon State do not generally provide minority language education. Therefore, they were not a primary focus of this research. However, some monastic schools are actually MNS, "ownership" of which has been transferred to the community and monastery, in order to promote sustainability and protect the schools in question from possible suppression.

In the 1990s, and particularly after the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, monastic education initiatives expanded considerably. These developments took two main forms. Before the ceasefire, Mon monks had for many years been conducting various forms of language and

culture teaching, particularly in the school summer holidays (March-May), but these activities were not systematically co-ordinated until after the ceasefire. In 1997, eighteen months after the ceasefire, members of the Mon Literature and Culture Society (MLCS, a long-established civil society organisation), including students and graduates of Mawlamyine University, together with some progressive monks, began to organise Mon Summer Literacy and Buddhist Culture (MSLBC) trainings in a number of monasteries. The number of students formally enrolled was 26,881.

Methodology

The research examined *who* is providing *what type of education, where* and *how* – focusing in particular on non-state actors, such as non-state armed and political groups, local communities and civil society. The research also examined, to the extent possible, who is providing resources for these schools – including in-kind contributions, and with what purposes.[12] The research explored several aspects of regulatory governance, in particular the socio-political space created by the NMSP ceasefire, and the implications of the on-going armed conflict for Karen education regimes.

The Karen and Mon case studies were selected because of the interesting balance of dependent and independent variables. Both ethnic communities, and respective NSAGs, share a similar history of armed conflict, and (well-founded) perceptions of suppression on the part of a centralised, military state. In the case of the Mon, an uneasy ceasefire has been in place for nearly two decades; in contrast, for decades and during the period of research, many Karen communities remained subject to on-going armed conflict. Our research sought to examine the difference a ceasefire has made to the provision of non-state ethnic language education in these two contexts. The research reported in this article focused primarily on structural and policy issues within the two education systems, rather than the teaching materials and methods used within the diverse Karen and Mon education regimes. Further research might focus on additional comparative cases – for example areas of northeastern Myanmar's Shan State populated by the PaO minority, where the main armed group enjoys a relatively cordial relationship with the government, or the Kachin case of northern Myanmar, where in 2011 a long-standing ceasefire broke down, plunging ethnic minority communities back into armed conflict.[13]

In addition to examining secondary and archival sources, the researchers undertook five field trips: three to Karen State in February, March and October 2011 and two trips to Mon State in May 2011 and April 2012. Schools and education officials were contacted through the research team's extensive network and, in Mon State, a local research assistant/translator arranged for the research team to either access schools, or arranged for teachers, parents and officials to meet the researchers at a mutually agreed place. Interviews were either conducted in English, or took place in Mon or Karen and were translated. Schools visited, and parents and teachers interviewed, were selected according to physical accessibility and people's willingness to meet foreigners.

Data collection took place in the following areas: Karen State – four different KNU-controlled areas along the Thailand border; one Peace Council-controlled area on the Thailand border; government-controlled areas around Pa'an; and Mon State – government-controlled areas between Mawlamyine and Thanbyuzayat, including areas of NMSP influence. The sample of interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Data collection in Karen and Mon States

	No.	Officials	Teachers	Parents	Students
Karen					
Karen Education Department schools	3	5	26	15	6
Non-KNU high-school (Peace Council)	1	1	1		a
KED/KTWG Teacher Training College	1	3	3		20
Monastic School	1	1	2		4
CBO/civil society training centre & church	2	4	2		
Mon					
Mon National Schools	4	6	13	6	b
Monastic Schools	4	5	4	2	b
Ex-MNS Monastic Schools	1	1	5		b
Mon Summer Literacy and Buddhist Culture Training	3	4			2
CBO/civil society training centre	1	5			b

[a]One researcher addressed a school assembly, and had the opportunity to ask several questions, but did not meet students individually
[b]Research conducted outside term time.

Karen State

The research covered three KNU/KED-administered primary schools in southern Karen State, and one KNU/KNLA Peace Council high school on the border, including interviews with teachers, students, parents and other community members, both Buddhist and Christian. The research also included one visit to the Karen Teacher Training College on the Thailand border, semi-structured interviews with Karen education officials, and visits to civil society venues, including a monastic school and a teaching centre, in and around government-controlled Pa'an, the Karen State capital. Focus group interviews were conducted at the Karen Teacher Training College and one primary school, and with civil society educators, including monks and pastors in Pa'an. In total, 35 teachers and 15 parents were interviewed, plus several students, although some of these consultations were quite brief. Interviews were also held with 12 education and CBO officials. A large group discussion was also held at the Peace Council high school assembly.

Mon State

The research covered MNS, "mixed schools" and monastic schools, in rural and urban settings in Mon State. In most cases there was no direct access to the schools, but teachers and parents were met at other locations. The focus was on primary schools, but a few teachers from post-primary schools were also interviewed. Whilst the research was conducted outside of the main school term, the schools were all active with summer programmes, most notably with the Mon literacy programme. The timing was agreed with Mon education officials, who preferred to have us visit outside of the school term due to increasing tensions between the government and the NMSP. Mon education officials and community development workers were consulted regularly throughout the research. Semi-

structured focus groups were held with parents and, separately, with teachers, and education officials. In total, 13 teachers and eight parents were interviewed. The high level of political sensitivity at the time of the research meant that not as many parents and teachers as anticipated could be accessed. Semi-structured interviews were also held with two education officials and two members of a Mon CBO (Mon Social Development Network), one Mon Women's Organisation representative. In monastic schools, interviews were conducted with four head monks. In April 2012 further discussions were held with Mon CBOs, including the Mon Literature and Culture Committee and the MNEC.

Research Findings

Karen Education

The network of more than 1,000 KED-administered, community-run, "mixed" and other schools in Karen-populated areas of southeast Myanmar attests to the communities' great commitment to education, 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, reproduces elements of the Karen culture, and valorises the Karen ethno-nationalist movement (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012). Particularly over the past decade, the Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG) and its 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 teaching materials and adequate school buildings, and limited training opportunities and income for teachers.

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 mostly 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 bent on forced assimilation.

Many Karen communities have little experience of engaging with the Burmese government or people, other than in the context of armed conflict and associated human rights abuses. Indeed, for many Karen villagers in the conflict zones, the only ethnic Burmans they meet are government soldiers, who may be trying to kill them. Therefore, it is not surprising that few parents expressed an interest in their children attending government schools (see below).

Karen language and culture teaching, roles of civil society.   Local education initiatives include Pwo Karen language teaching in some monasteries during the school summer holidays, as well as various culture and literacy teaching initiatives by churches. Karen churches in government-controlled areas of Burma support a number of local schools,

particularly among Baptists. These follow the government curriculum, with some schools having "mixed" characteristics, using some Karen language in the classroom and for teaching materials. Some of these Baptist schools are independently established, enjoying "associate status," in the form of relationships with local government counterpart schools, which allows the graduates to matriculate and enter the state higher education system.

The churches often support students from up-country who are studying in government schools, by providing them with accommodation in numerous hostels as "boarders" in rural towns and larger villages. These students are given after-school tuition, including in religious topics and civic education, as well as instruction in Karen language and culture.

A number of monasteries in Karen State operate monastic schools. As is common throughout the country, these mostly follow the government curriculum. Among the best-resourced of these is the monastic high school at the well-known Taungalae monastery on the outskirts of Pa'an, where the Abbot is a leading figure in Karen political and religious society (South 2011). The Taungalae monastic school has been registered with the government Departments of Education and Religion since 2000, but reportedly receives no support beyond the occasional provision of textbooks and other learning materials. It provides accommodation for 150 boarders (who have travelled from as far away as Ye and Dawei), out of a total of more than 500 students, nearly all of whom are Karen.

The Taungalae school programme is loosely co-ordinated with the Karen Literature and Culture Association (KLCA). The KLCA also conducts annual teacher training during the school summer holidays, following which, in 2011, some 280 voluntary teachers from the community (farmers, artisans, traders and some school teachers) go out to the villages, and spend 10 to 20 days teaching the Karen language and culture to some 10,000 youths. At the end of the summer literacy training, exams are held, with the best students coming into Pa'an for exams and to attend an annual Karen culture festival. Funding is provided almost entirely by the community, with a few donations from international well-wishers. When asked why the KLCA does not attempt to attract foreign funding, staff said they preferred to receive donations. They worried that if this became a "project," orientated primarily towards donor agendas and requirements, they might forget that this initiative comes from the Karen community. With its standardised exams and presence in many Karen communities, the KLCA functions as something of a "gatekeeper" for "authorised" Karen culture in government-controlled areas.

Informants were generally highly sceptical regarding the government's role in support- ing local education either at the central level, or the Karen State provincial administration. One elected Karen politician stated that the Karen State (government) authorities served only to suppress his community and its efforts to teach Karen languages and culture.

In the context of political changes in 2011-12, and the negotiation of a ceasefire between the government and KNU, it is necessary to reassess the basic aims of Karen non-state education regimes. Given the long history of armed conflict and social frag- mentation, it is understandable – and indeed admirable – that the Karen school system has developed with few linkages to the state education regime. However, if the peace process stays on-track, there will be increasing contacts between the two systems, and opportu- nities for "convergence" between the Karen and government education regimes. In this context, the Mon education experience may offer a useful model.

Mon Education

Since the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, the MNEC has expanded the Mon National School system to 156 schools in the 2010-11 school year, with an additional 116 "mixed" schools (shared with the government system). This figure constitutes a decrease from previous years, due to political tensions with the government (see below). The Mon National Schools reproduce and transmit Mon language and elements of the Mon historical tradition, which are activities of great importance to the NMSP's ethno-nationalist agenda (which are also highly valued by parents and communities).

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. This development should allow the Mon education authorities to focus on administrative reforms, and possibly expansion of the Mon education system.

The MNS offer full-time, non-state (or, in some cases, "mixed") schooling. A number of monastic schools also operate in Mon State, and in many other parts of Myanmar. In most cases these are not specifically Mon (or other minority language) schools, and tend to follow the government curriculum, although ethnic languages are sometimes used in the classroom, because – especially in remote areas – students often come from non-Burmese speaking backgrounds.

Summer literacy training. As noted above, in the years following the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, Mon monks and other civil society actors formalised a centuries-old tradition of monastic education within the Mon community. By 2010 the number of students in the MSLBC programme was 65,643, in 310 monasteries, across 16 Townships in Mon and Karen States, and Tanintharyi, Bago, Yangon and Mandalay Divisions.[14] Until 2010, the MSLBC trainings received some foreign NGO funding, covering an estimated 10% or less of overall costs.

While the extent of MSLBC training activities expanded as a direct result of the increased space created by the NMSP ceasefire, Mon armed groups were not directly involved in these initiatives. Although NMSP leaders have occasionally attended MSLBC closing ceremonies, and sometimes attempted to co-opt this movement into the Mon armed nationalist cause, the summer trainings remain largely independent. This characteristic is illustrated by the fact that, after foreign funding was withdrawn in 2010, the MSLBC trainings continued in nearly all of the monasteries which had previously been conducting these. Township-level examinations also continued, where prizes were

awarded for outstanding students. However, the withdrawal of external funding did undermine the Mon educators' ability to conduct all-Mon region examinations, or to provide incentives for outstanding students and teachers.

As described above, similar activities occur annually in many Karen (mostly government-controlled) areas. Ethnic language summer literacy programmes are highly resilient and sustainable, because strongly grounded in the community. However, there is a need for improved teacher-training and better teaching materials.

Mother-tongue Education, Ethnic Education and Rights

The issue of mother-tongue education in ethnic areas has made it back into mainstream politics after decades when the subject was taboo in official circles and highly politicised among armed opposition groups. The concepts and substance of rights and responsibilities after the 2010 elections are becoming increasingly more important, as a new form of citizenship develops in Myanmar (Lall and Win 2013). As ceasefires are agreed between the government and NSAGs, ethnic armed and civil society groups, and above-ground political parties, are beginning to demand mother-tongue education for their communities. For example, leaders of the All Mon Regions Democracy Party and Phalon-Sawaw [Pwo-Sgaw Karen] Democratic Party, which won 16 and nine seats respectively in the 2010 elections, have requested that the government allow the teaching of minority languages in government schools, at least at primary-school level in areas with significant ethnic populations. In partnership with three other parties in the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum, the All Mon Regions Democracy Party and Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party are seeking to promote the interests of their ethnic constituencies. The issue has been raised in Parliament, and the Ministry of Education is reportedly preparing to issue a directive, allowing minority languages to be taught in relevant areas (Mizzima, September 8, 2011; *Kaowao Newsgroup*, August 23, 2012). The issue being debated is not whether the government will allow the teaching of minority ethnic languages in state schools, for this seems to have been agreed in principle. Rather, the key question is whether minority languages will be taught during normal school hours. In 2012 the central government was continuing to resist such demands. Recent developments include a meeting on August 4, 2012 between the President of Myanmar and ethnic nationality political parties (including the All Mon Regions Democracy Party and the newly re-established Mon Democracy Party), during which ethnic politicians pressed the government to allow mother-tongue teaching in state schools, during school hours (*Kaowao News*, August 7, 2012). Another key issue is whether ethnic language materials used in state schools should be produced by minority communities (civil and political society groups), or should consist of translations of already existing state curriculum materials (*Shan Herald Agency for News*, July 30–August 5, 2012).

Regardless of the outcome of such debates, however, the state is unlikely to be able to provide significant extra teaching or other resources in this sector. Therefore, the provision of ethnic language teaching in schools will, for some time, likely be dependent on resources and organisation at the community level (for example, through Parent-Teacher Associations), and through donor support. As mentioned by Benson (2004), for education reforms in multi-cultural, linguistically diverse societies to be successful there needs to be state support, together with the involvement of all stakeholders and the provision of necessary resources. The challenge to the Myanmar government, civil and political society

groups, NSAGs and the donor community is how to respond to a changing political context in order to provide children with the education they have a right to receive.

In order to meet children's' educational needs, and satisfy the demands of ethnic nationalist communities and leaders, the government should allow mother-tongue teaching in state schools during school hours. For their part, ethnic minority educators and communities should engage more constructively with the state school system. International donors can play important supporting and facilitation roles, working with all stakeholders to produce an education system fit for twenty-first century Myanmar. The Mon National School system can be a model for the rest of the country, as it moves towards a more decentralised and federalising approach to education. Indeed, the MNEC school system may be seen as a type of "federalism from below."

In this context, it is appropriate to turn to Tomasevski (2006) and her rights framework, with regards to the two ethnic education regimes. We have expanded the interpretation of her "4 As," in some cases, adapting them for Myanmar.

> **Availability:** *There should be free, compulsory and high quality education available to all children. Additionally, parents should have the freedom to choose where their children are educated.*

Both the Karen and the Mon ethnic education regimes provide mother-tongue schooling to children from their respective ethnic groups. Schools are free and the quality seems reasonable, given the often very difficult circumstances under which teaching takes place and the very limited resources available. The 1995 ceasefire allowed the Mon system to spread into state-controlled areas, making Mon language schooling available to larger parts of the Mon-speaking community, allowing parents to choose the type of school they wanted for their child, no matter if they lived in NMSP- or state-controlled areas. The Karen education regime also provides free education to children. Given the recent and extensive experience of armed conflict in many Karen-populated areas, the quality provided is understandably variable, as is overall coverage. Furthermore, conflict and underdevelopment mean that resources provided to Karen education regimes, in particular, remain very limited. As mentioned above, the state is unlikely in the near future to have the means to subsidise this education. The government will, of course, maintain that state schools in ethnic and other areas are also free of charge. However, given that books and uniforms need to be purchased, government education (unlike monastic education) is not totally free; furthermore, students are also often asked to contribute financially for "extra tuition classes." Across the state and system, the quality of teaching is variable as classes are large, often with more than 100 children in a classroom. Therefore, the Mon and the Karen systems are good free alternatives with smaller classes and free materials.

> **Accessibility:** *The elimination of any form of discrimination prohibiting a student from receiving education.*

Government schools officially do not discriminate against children from minority ethnic groups. In practice, however, things can be very different. The primary problem has been the militarised government and Army suppressing ethnic communities in the context of armed conflict. In conflict areas government schools could not operate and, therefore, both the KNU and the NMSP developed education systems of their own. This was, in part, to

provide education to communities affected by the fighting, who could not access government schools, but also to overcome the discrimination they perceived in the context of being denied the right to mother-tongue schooling in government systems; non-state (insurgent-organised) education regimes also served to reproduce ethnic nationalist political cultures and values. The parents who were interviewed for this research clearly stated that they felt they had been discriminated against in the government system, and were now choosing schools for their children that taught their mother tongue, in order to avoid this discrimination. The Mon "mixed schools" have evolved as a non-discriminatory regime, as all children receive an education that allows them to continue their higher studies in the government system, yet without being discriminated against on a language basis.

Acceptability: *Receiving an acceptable level of quality education through teaching and learning and which correlates with the human rights of children.*

Both the Mon and Karen parents who were sending their children to non-state schools said that they felt their children were receiving an acceptable level of quality education. In Karen State, in particular, there is also the issue of minorities who do not speak the dominant ethnic language, such as speakers of Pwo and a dozen other non-Sgaw Karen dialects.[15] None of these parents were interviewed and, therefore, we cannot comment on whether they feel that accessing a KED school means that their rights are being respected. This is a key issue in the debate on ethnic mother-tongue teaching, especially in government schools. In most ethnic states there are many languages used, in addition to Burmese. In this context, there are complex questions regarding which languages should be taught, especially in mixed ethnic communities.

Tomasevski's rights framework can also be framed differently in this instance. When thinking about the on-going peace process, much depends on how "acceptability" is defined. With regard to minority communities, both the Karen and the Mon systems seem acceptable to varying elements of the respective group. With regard to local authorities, the bilingual Mon system(s) seems to have become increasingly acceptable, as MNS are compatible with the state system. However, the Karen education regime has been associated with armed opposition groups and education of a separatist cohort. Historically, the development of a distinct Karen education regime is understandable. In the context of reforms and the tentative peace process in Myanmar, however, the basics of Karen education need to be re-thought.

Adaptability: *Education should adapt to the best interests of the child.*

It remains unclear how far both ethnic education systems are adapted to the best interests of the child, or to local political system. With regard to learning in the mother tongue, both systems obviously favour the child, as do the smaller teacher student ratios. There have also been efforts to introduce child-centred teaching and learning methods into both systems, but with what impacts cannot be verified. The use of a highly politicised curriculum might not be in the best interests of the child. This is another instance in which the Mon regime seems to offer a more acceptable solution than the Karen system. Whilst both allow for alternative histories to be taught, the Mon system does allow for a reintegration of children into government schools, which will allow them, in turn, to study

and then get jobs in their country. Families have a choice that is denied to their Karen counterparts. As mentioned above, the Karen education system prepares the children for a life abroad. It is questionable if this is in the best interests of the child or, in fact, the country. This means that the Mon regime is the more "adaptable," especially in light of the current peace process.

Tomasevski's rights framework has allowed for an analysis of the Karen and Mon education regimes. This reveals that the Mon education system offers all four "As," while the Karen regime generally offers two or three, depending on one's political perspective.

Conclusion

In all their diversity, the Karen and Mon education regimes are great tributes to the resourcefulness and creativity of the respective communities – parents, civil society actors, teachers and parents, and the KNU and NMSP Education Departments. The development of the Karen education system, in particular, has been limited by the context of protracted armed conflict and chronic underfunding. Under such circumstances, the education regimes described in this article are huge achievements.

The Karen education regime nevertheless suffers from some problems, which – although understandable from a historical perspective – threaten to undermine some of these achievements. In particular, the development of an education regime which diverges significantly from the state school system helps to educate a cohort of students unable to speak the national language, who receive qualifications not recognised in Myanmar or any other country. Therefore, the options for Karen school-leavers are limited, with many having few choices but to join opposition movements, work for NGOs in the border areas, or seek education or exile overseas. During a protracted period of armed conflict, the development of such a separatist system has perhaps been inevitable. However, assuming that the current peace process remains on course, Karen education and political leaders will be challenged to re-think the basis of their school system in the context of social and political reforms. The changes currently underway, therefore, represent an opportunity for Karen educators and their supporters, including donors, to re-integrate their schools with the state system, as these undergo significant reforms.

To a significant degree, the separatist nature of the Karen education regime can be explained by the failure of the KNU to reach a ceasefire agreement with the government in the 1990s. Recent peace talks between the government and KNU offer the prospect of re-imagining and reforming the Karen education regime.

Unlike many Karen communities, most Mon-populated areas of Myanmar have been without significant armed conflict for nearly two decades. The Mon education system provides a model which the Karen might follow. Although still under-funded, and demonstrating sometimes less than ideal teaching practices, the Mon system nevertheless provides non-Burmese speaking children with access to education (particularly at primary level) in their mother tongue. In this respect the Mon and Karen systems are similar; however, unlike the Karen regime, the Mon national schools largely follow the government curriculum, allowing graduates to matriculate and enter the Union tertiary education system. The Mon education regime, therefore, combines the best of both worlds. The MNS provide a distinctive mother-tongue educational experience for children, which also reproduces elements of the historic Mon language and culture, meeting the demands of

ethnic nationalists; at the same time, the Mon regime allows for integration with and citizenship in the Union of Myanmar. This model of dual (or, including English, triple) language education could be replicated in other parts of Myanmar. In order to "scale up" from the Mon education system, it will be necessary for community leaders and educators from Myanmar's diverse minority communities to be involved in the development of curriculum materials, in addition to promoting the use of their languages in classrooms.

Both the Mon and Karen education regimes require continued support in terms of funding, teacher training, curriculum development and other technical assistance. The Karen system in particular is likely to face increasing challenges, as donors shift their attention from the refugee camps and border areas to supporting programmes "inside" Myanmar. Karen educators will need to adapt strategically and creatively in this shifting environment. The Mon education regime also faces challenges. Mon educators and political leaders should ensure the coherence of the MNS system, by minimising the disruption caused by the present dual administration (different schools under the MNEC and MLCC).

Throughout this article, we have focused on the strong support among Karen and Mon communities for their respective education regimes. Nowhere is this more so than in the summer language and literacy classes. That these activities proceed largely without external funding illustrates the resilience of these communities, and their commitment to education. While more could be done to enhance the quality of teaching provided during summer literacy programmes, their continued vitality demonstrates the strength of these cultures and communities, in a rapidly changing Myanmar.

Myanmar is experiencing a period of rapid transition, including implementation of substantial yet still contested reforms, and the first stages of a peace process between the government, Army and more than a dozen non-state armed groups. During this time of change, it is important that locally-owned initiatives in the fields of education (and beyond) are supported to engage with a reforming government system, in ways which build on and respect local agency, and the profound commitments of political actors, communities and parents to their children's education.

Notes

[1]   In 1989 the military government changed the name of the country from Burma to "Myanmar."
[2]   "Nation" is defined by one of its principal theorists, Walker Connor, as "a self-differentiating ethnic group … all nationalism is ethnically predicated." Connor defines "ethnicity" as "belief in a putative descent" (membership of a group defined by a common socio-cultural history), and "ethno-nationalism" as "loyalty to a nation deprived of its own state and loyalty to an ethnic group embodied in a specific state" (cited in Conversi 2004, 2–3). There are extensive literatures covering the history of the Mon nation, which first established city-states in mainland Southeast Asia in the first millennium CE (see Guillon 1999; South 2003). Numerous scholars testify to the diverse Karen community's national status and aspirations (see Gravers 1999; Smith 1999; South 2008).
[3]   "Formal education" is used to indicate regular schooling, whether implemented by government or non-state groups, or a mixture of these; "non-formal education" refers to extra-curricular (usually part-time) education activities, implemented by a range of (mostly non-state, community-based) agencies.
[4]   Private education has, until now, been regarded with suspicion by the government (see Lall 2009). President Thein Sein's indication that non-state education might become acceptable is a major change in policy and an indication of the direction of the reform process.
[5]   Karen dialects occupy the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan languages. There are some 12 Karen language dialects, of which the majority speak Sgaw (particularly in hill areas and among Christian

communities) and Pwo (especially in the lowlands and among Buddhist communities). The size of the Karen population is unknown, no reliable census having been undertaken since the colonial period. Many commentators emphasise the Christian identity of the Karen. However, not more than 20% of the Karen population are Christians. There are also some small populations of "Karen Muslims."

6   Those DKBA elements that rejected incorporation into the BGF (the majority) resumed armed conflict with the government. In November 2011 the DKBA leadership agreed a new ceasefire with the government. For an overview of Karen politics, see Thawnghmung (2011).

7   The bulk of funding comes from the EU, and is estimated at about €1.5 million per year (mid-2012 figures). However, in 2011-12 education agencies were facing budget cuts (as are most NGOs assisting refugees along the Thailand-Myanmar border), as donors increasingly shift their funding "inside" the country.

8   Migrant schools in Thailand often share teaching materials and curricula with those in the camps. However, they are administered separately.

9   The Mon-speaking population in Burma today is somewhere over 1 million people.

10   According to an internal policy document (undated), the MNEC aims "To create a society that ever continually makes learning for its capacity improvement so as to build a federal union state that is destined to provide its people at least with basic education and enables all ethnic groups of people to peacefully coexist." MNEC Objectives: "For all Mon children to access basic education; To maintain unity in diversity; To develop friendliness among the ethnic nationalities; To maintain and promote ethnic culture and literature; To develop technological knowledge; To produce good sons and daughters of the nation; To help the outstanding students attain scholarship awards for continuing their education up to the international universities."

11   In addition, in 1995 there were also 227 "mixed" schools, shared with the government system (see below): retired NMSP education official, personal communication.

12   In most cases, such information was provided in confidence, and cannot be reproduced here.

13   However, given the current level of violence at the time of research and writing, it was – and still is – impossible to conduct this kind of fieldwork-based research in Kachin state.

14   In June 2011, some 775 students sat Mon State-wide summer literacy examinations in Mawlamyine (*The Irrawaddy* June 2, 2011).

15   There are also Mon communities in Karen State, and many Karen in Mon State.

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