

Chapter 11

Challenges and Opportunities for Educational Reform: Under the New Myanmar Government



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Introduction

This article highlights current state of education in Myanmar in terms of management in education, school curriculum and quality of teaching and learning. It also analyses the National League for Democracy (NLD) party's education policy, included in the party's election manifesto, the 100-day plan of the Education Ministry of the NLD government, and National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), 2016–2021. It also examines the education policy of the Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center (ENAC), a think-tank for the ethnic armed groups. The paper includes recommendations for public education policy submitted by National Network for Education Reform (NNER) which is a coalition of civil society education groups comprising of student unions, teacher unions, faith-based schools, ethnic-based schools, etc. Due to differences between the government and non-state actors, this article gives the following suggestions for discussion in the process of Union Peace Conference.

1. To initiate education reform in the light of democratic federalism
2. To implement the Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 (SDG4) to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
3. To recognize the schools opened by ethnic armed revolutionary groups, schools in refugee and IDP camps, schools for migrant children, and self-help schools opened by local communities
4. To respect and practice the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP 2007).

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Current State of Education in Myanmar

In terms of right to education, the system does not meet human rights obligations. Regarding availability, hidden costs of education such as extra tuition fees prevent poor families from sending their children to schools. Besides, there is a lack of adequate infrastructure and qualified teachers. The education system is not accessible for marginalized children such as children with disability and children living in conflict areas. The contents of school textbooks are not culturally acceptable for ethnic minority children. In terms of adaptability, the education cannot meet the changing needs of society including skills needed for the world of work.

Poor quality of education is an impact of military rule since 1962. Since then, the regime has exercised centralized education system. There has been a lack of access to education and a high dropout rate due to years of neglect regarding compulsory basic education. There was no provision for inclusive education. Therefore, marginalized children such as children with disability, children of poor family background, children living in conflict areas, and language minorities have been facing difficulties to get schooling.

The education system exercises centralized curriculum and single textbooks for all schools throughout the country until today. Besides, the school curriculum fails to promote skills, which are needed for the world of work as well as social life. Indigenous languages and local wisdom are not allowed to teach at schools. The language policy applied by the regime has been to Burmanise at the expense of the language and culture of other indigenous nationalities. In other words, seeks to assimilate in the name of national unity (Thein Lwin 2007). Under the previous U Thein Sein's government, some ethnic languages were allowed to teach after school hours.

The system does not promote teaching profession. The quality of teaching and learning is very low in public schools. It focuses on rote learning and exam-based system. The educational spending is very low. According to the Myanmar EFA National Review 2014, educational expenditure has increased from 0.7% of GDP in 2010/2011 to 2.1% of GDP in 2013/2014. According to UNICEF the budget allocations to the Ministry of Education was 7.75% of the total government's expenditure in 2017/2018 which has doubled of the previous government. However, this allocation is still low compared to other countries of South-East Asian region.

In September 2014, the then parliament and government approved National Education Law. Since the education law still exercises centralization and does not include for students to form student unions, students protest against the National Education Law. As a result of the protest, the then government organized four-party dialogue among the student leaders, government, parliament and National Network for Education Reform, a civil society education coalition. Twenty representatives from each group participated in the dialogue. The students asked for 11 points to amend the National Education Law. These are:

1. CSOs participation in the process of education reform
2. Decentralization of education

3. Autonomy and school-based management
4. Independent student unions and teacher unions
5. Active learning and critical thinking
6. Formative assessment and self-determination for the university entrance
7. Mother-tongue based multilingual education
8. Equity, inclusive and quality education for all
9. Transitional justice for those students who got punishment for their participation in the democratic movement
10. 20% of national budget for education
11. At least nine years of compulsory education.

These points were agreed at the dialogue. However, the students were severely beaten and arrested by the police after the dialogue. Then the agreed students' proposals were turned down when the parliament approved the amendment of National Education Law.

The Education Policy in the NLD's Election Manifesto in 2015

The NLD party released its election manifesto before the 2015 November elections. It included an education policy along with policies in other sectors, such as politics and economics. Even though its slogan to win the elections was "Time to Change", the education policy did not involve any commitment to democratic education reforms. It only included policies that are in line with the framework of the 2008 Constitution and the 2014 National Education Law. Regarding educational management, the whole education sector is placed under the control of central management, even though it states that universities will be autonomous in the 2014 National Education Law. The manifesto generally states that it will carry out education that enhances languages and cultures of ethnic nationalities, but it does not mention the rights of respective ethnic nationalities or regions to have independent curriculums. Regarding learning the language and literature of indigenous people, there is no policy to set up a three-language system based on the mother tongue of indigenous people. It only states that primary students will be able to learn from mother-tongue speaking teachers, while Burmese language will be the main medium of instruction.

The policy states that it will implement a Free Basic Education system so that every child can finish primary school, as expressed in the 2008 constitution and 2014 National Education Law. There is no state policy to increase the education budget. Regarding the financial sector, it only states that educational expenses will have to be transparent. Thus, the main gist of the election manifesto is in accordance with the 2014 National Education Law.

100-Day Plan of the Ministry of Education at the Beginning of the NLD Government

After the NLD had been in power for 100 days, an authorized person from the Education Ministry announced that the ministry's 100-day plan had been successful. However, a closer review of their plan reveals that it included no significant education reforms, only routine tasks—such as improving school grades, carrying out student registration and cleaning the school environment. Although there is a statement for teachers and education staff getting full salaries and disbursing salaries through the bank, teachers still do not get the amount of salary they deserve for their work. There is only an instruction that action will be taken against teachers if they teach tuition classes. However, it is not fair to only take action against teachers without amending the grade-based pass-fail examination system—the root cause of the tuition culture. For the first time, senior lecturers are allowed to attend Ph.D. courses, after decades of being banned from their right to educational development and life long learning. However, there is no support for them to boost their skills to enable them to study for a Ph.D. degree. Anyone who is qualified to study for a Ph.D. degree should have the right to do so.

Even though the 100-day plan stated that projects would be set up after carrying out reviews and analysis of technical and vocational training, I have not heard of any such projects. On July 15, 2016, I saw a statement saying, “The State Counsellor has instructed that vocational education be enhanced so that it is prioritized as first-class education”. I am glad to see Daw Aung San Suu Kyi giving advice to promote the standard of vocational skills. Nevertheless, it is not appropriate to infer that other types of education are second-class or third-class, while vocational education is recognized as first-class. All educational fields should be valued equally. Even though vocational education is included in the objectives of education, it is not the first priority. It is only one component. Every component should be equal. In education, we should consider to balance the four pillars of education—learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together (UNESCO 2015).

Other plans like assessing the teaching ability of teachers are not something that can be carried out in the short-term. It will take a huge amount of energy and commitment to improve the quality of education over the long term. I overheard that a meeting to implement Alternative Education was held in Naypyitaw recently. I still do not know what will be implemented and in which ways.

The National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021)

The National Education Strategic Plan was published in early 2017 and was based on the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) done by the previous (2010–2015) government. It has nine categories to be implemented within 5 years. The categories include kindergarten education, basic education, higher education, vocational

education, alternative education, teacher education, management, assessment, and quality assurance. However, the national plan has various fundamental weaknesses in terms of addressing the needs of students, teachers and marginalized groups in the country, and the global initiative of Sustainable Development Goals No. 4 (SDG4).

There was no consultation with regard to the national education plan with civil society education groups, including the student unions, teacher unions and right-based education groups. It was not publicly known until it was published in 2017. It is found that there is little space for CSOs in drawing national education strategic plan. It has a lack of consideration on Indigenous Rights to Education such as recognizing schools established by indigenous groups, their local curriculum and mother tongue-based multilingual education system.

The paper therefore argues that the NESP (2016–2021) fails to meet the needs of democratic education reform in light of participatory decision-making, inclusive education, right to education, and academic freedom (Thein Lwin 2019).

The Education System Desired by Ethnic Armed Revolutionary Groups

The NLD's education policy and NLD government's performance are different from the education system that indigenous people want. The indigenous communities want an education system that accords with their desire for self-determination. They want to study their own culture, local wisdom and history with their own language, with the right of curriculum freedom. They want to advance their education with their own talent and creativity.

When the stakeholders discuss establishing a democratic federal union in order to achieve sustainable peace, I would like to present the following suggestions so that the education policies desired by indigenous communities can be discussed, whether in the main meeting of the union peace conference or in the national level consultations.

There is a possibility to reform the education system if the peace talks with ethnic armed revolutionary groups are successful. An education policy was drawn up after ethnic armed revolutionary groups collaboratively formed the Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center (ENAC) and drafted policies. ENAC's education policy is based on a democratic federal union. It is directed towards an education system whereby respective States and Regions have self-determination, and central control is reduced. The policy guarantees freedom of curriculum, freedom of language, and freedom of association. If a democratic federal union can be established when the peace talks are successful, a democratic education system, involving self-determination, can be established as well.

The second possibility for reform involves the schools which have developed outside of the central government's management. These include the schools opened by the Kachin education department of Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen

education department of the Karen National Union, the Mon National Education Committee of the New Mon State Party, and the Karenni education department of the Karenni National Progressive Party, the community schools at the Thai-Shan border, the schools opened by Christian churches, the schools in refugee and IDP camps, the Burmese migrant workers' schools in Thailand, etc. Totally, there are about 1000 schools and hundreds of thousands of students. These are schools run independently from successive central governments' management or support. These schools appoint native teachers and teach based on locally contextualized curriculums and languages of native indigenous children. They also provide quality education. The graduate students from those schools can be able to attend international universities. They are also leading in community work. By officially recognizing the existence of these schools, the schools will have the right to self-determination. Coordination between one school and another, and one region to another, regarding curriculum issues and student transfer issues, will enable a democratic education system to be implemented.

The third expectation is that education reform can become possible if the Myanmar government follows and implements the Education for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), decided at the World Education Forum held in Korea in May 2015. The decisions of the World Education Forum included: to implement a basic education system, with at least 9 academic years of compulsory education; to carry out inclusive education; to practice equity so that every child can access qualified education; to practice lifelong learning; to use from 15 to 20% of the national budget for education expenses. This is identical to the demands of NNER and students.

The fourth expectation is that if the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, 2008 can be implemented, the indigenous people who co-exist in Myanmar will have the rights to establish schools, to practice their local curriculum and to study in their mother tongue.

The Education System Suggested by Civil Society Education Groups

The National Network for Education Reform (NNER)¹ is a coalition of non-state education actors who initiated democratic education reform since October 2012. NNER is formed by three major networks—thematic education networks, states/divisions CBOs education networks and indigenous education organizations. Thematic networks include student unions, teacher unions, faith-based education groups, disable education groups, refugee/migrant education groups, and others. NNER connects community education groups in all states and divisions in Myanmar. It also connects indigenous education organizations such as Kachin Education Department, Karen Education Department, Karenni Education Department and Mon National Education Committee (see Fig. 11.1).

¹This author is one of the founders and chair of the NNER network.

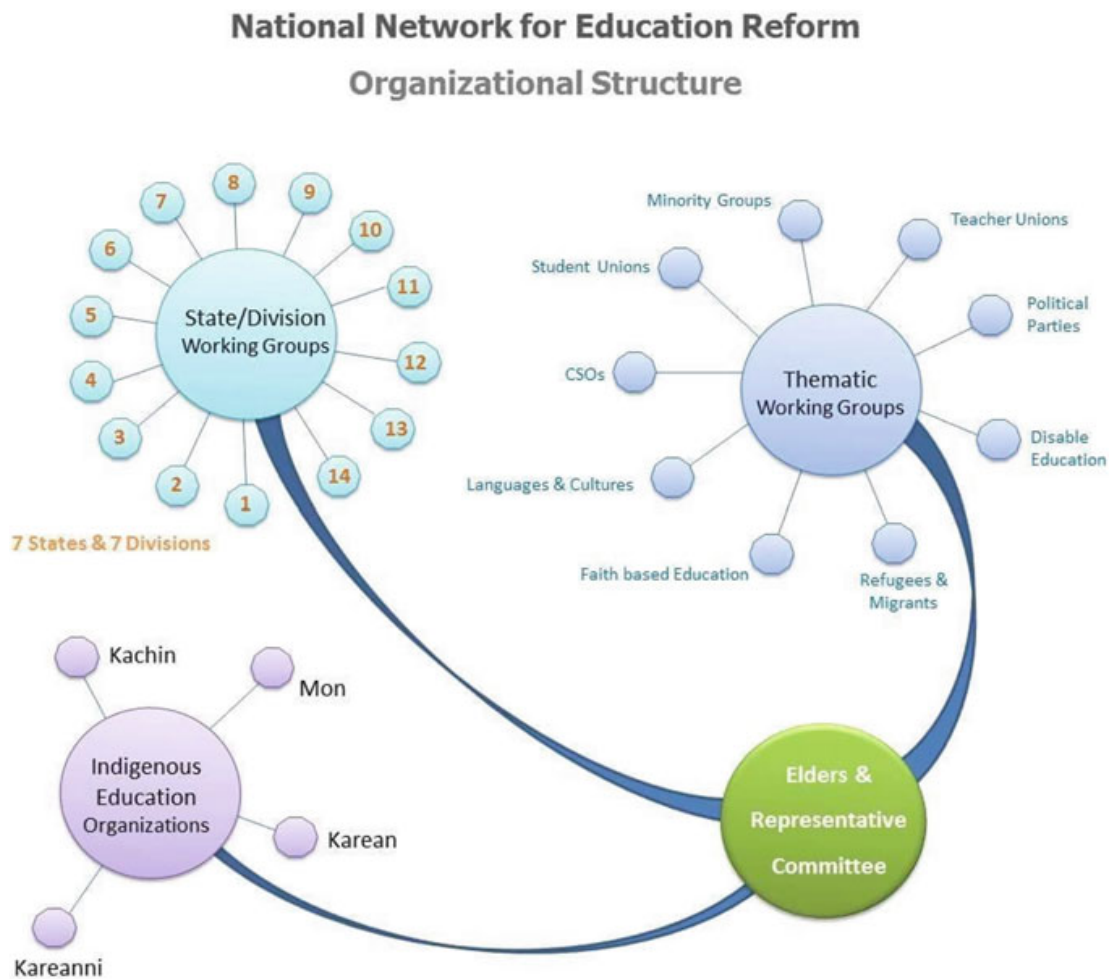


Fig. 11.1 NNER organizational structure

NNER organized 28 consultation meetings in all states and divisions in 2013 that collected public opinions for education reform. It held an education conference in June 2013 attended by over 1200 representatives from states and divisions education networks, scholars and experts in educational issues. As a result of the conference, recommendations for education policy reform could be submitted to the government and parliament. The recommendations cover thirteen areas in education from early childhood education to higher education. The priorities are citizen participation in education reform, academic freedom, promoting quality education, nine years of compulsory education and decentralization in educational management (i.e. school-based management such as curriculum development, deciding mother-tongue based education and recruiting teachers).

In 2013 and early 2014, NNER could present its policy recommendations at the parliament and meetings with officials from the ministry of education. Although they took some minor points but neglect major recommendations such as nine-year compulsory education, decentralization, mother-tongue based multilingual education and 20% of national budget for education spending.

Challenges and Opportunities

The major challenge is 2008 Constitution that allows army to take political roles in the parliament and three ministries (Defense, Home Affairs and Border) in the government. The Chief of the army declared to defend 2008 Constitution and to build stronger army. Army takes large amount of the national budget (over 20%) while education budget is less than half of the military budget. The National Education Law is centralized and the ministry of education is formed by people from previous military government. There is no evidence of policies and implementations for democratic education reform and right to education. They are exercising the same practice from the previous government.

Adult illiteracy remains a critical issue. Drop-out rate is still high and exclusion of the poor and marginalized sectors from accessing education makes worse. Hidden costs of education (i.e. extra tuition fees, compulsory donations and bribes) prevent poor families from sending their children to schools. Challenges in public funding for education have paved the way for anti-poor education financing arrangements. Regarding education quality, there are problems with quality and relevance skills for their adult life and for the world of work.

Current fighting in Rakhine, western part of the country and recent fighting at the north-east of the country make difficult for the children in the conflict areas to get schooling. According to the news released by the Shan State Education Office, 98 schools in Muse Township, where fighting took place were closed down. Children of Rohingya minority and Rakhine villages in the western part of Myanmar suffer severely. According to a senior United Nations official, Myanmar army is seeking ethnic cleansing of Rohingya by saying, “soldiers are killing Rohingya men, raping women and slaughtering children”. (BBC 2016)

Although challenges are still there, there are some opportunities. Civil society education groups including student unions are active advocating the government for changes in education. Indigenous nationalities and local communities are establishing schools to teach children to get quality education. These efforts are inline with UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP 2007). In the article 14 (1) of the Declaration, it is stated that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning”.

Another great opportunity is agreement among the member countries of United Nations on the implementation of education for sustainable development (SDG4) together with other Sustainable Development Goals led by United Nations to be fulfilled until 2030. SDG4 clearly stated to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Peace negotiation (Union Peace Conference: 21st Peng Long) is initiated on 31 August 2016 and it is in the process. There will be parallel CSO Forum for Peace and National Level Peace Conference in States and Divisions. It will be good opportunity for civil society education groups and indigenous people to advocate their desired education systems to discuss at the peace conference.

Conclusion

Facing massive challenges, it has little hope to ensure “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” under the current political situation in Myanmar. Civil society education groups have been advocating democratic education reform. But their voices were not heard. In October 2016, NNER, civil society education coalition, has sent a letter to the Ministry of Education to discuss for the implementation of SDG4 and to find ways to recognize schools run by indigenous organizations. But no response from the Ministry of Education.

Indigenous nationality groups are also preparing their education policies to implement in the democratic federal union. However, peace dialogue is not smooth with continued fighting between Myanmar army and indigenous groups. Children of Rakhine and Rohingya communities in the western part of Burma suffers and their education was interrupted by the act of Myanmar army.

However, there is a hope that peace negotiation organized by the government can be able to solve these problems. The paper therefore would like to suggest all stakeholders in education to consider the following:

- To sustain and enhance dignity, capacity and welfare of all people living in the country in relation to others and to nurture the fundamental purpose of education (UNESCO 2015).
- To promote four pillars of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together with humanistic vision of education (ibid.).
- To reform education inline with peace negotiation for a sustainable peace in the country.
- To enhance citizen engagement in education policymaking.
- To increase education budget.

This paper would like to propose international communities to mediate between the Myanmar government and civil societies including indigenous communities to create space for civil societies and to build coordination mechanism among government, civil societies and development partners to work on education as common good.

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