

Comments on the National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021) of the Ministry of Education, Myanmar

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National Network for Education Reform (NNER) had not been invited to participate in the process of drafting "National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021)" launched by the Ministry of Education. NNER is a network comprised of the several Non-Governmental Civil Society Organizations and the experts committed to people-based education. NNER's partner organizations and members were not privileged to contribute their ideas and recommendations for National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). The above mentioned NSEP (2016-2021) came to the knowledge of NNER only when Mr. Mathias Rwehere, consultant to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) arrived at Yangon and met NNER members on 22nd of January 2017. This was brought to light as the GPE consultant came and interacted with NGOs and CSOs about the USD 70 million proposal for National Education Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education, Myanmar, submitted to GPE.

As part of GPE requirements, GPE has proposed two representatives from people-based organizations for education in the formation of Education Sector Coordination Committee (ESCC) so as to implement the National Education Strategic Plan. However, it is learned that the Ministry of Education has restricted the participation of NNER on the ground that it has not been registered.

Since NNER was not privileged to participate and coordinate in the process to recommend the Ministry of Education, the comments and recommendations on National Education Strategic Plan are presented as follow:

1. Shrinking space for CSOs

The first critique is made that there is very little space for CSOs to participate in the process of government's education programs. NNER sought to permission to meet the Ministry of Education in October 2016 in order to discuss regarding the UN-led Sustainable Development Goals for Education (SDG-4) and the matters of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights to Education. But no response has been made until date.

Moreover, the efforts for educational reform made by CSOs are not recognized. The paragraph 4.2 of page 12 of the summary of National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021) states, "Amendment Act for National Education Law has been passed in 2015 in order to strengthen National Education Law (2014). Amendment Act for National Education Law (2015) was made as a result of the meeting between the Government, Parliament, Boycott Committee for Democratic Education and NNER. The parliament amended the bill

upon the resolution made and submitted by the above mentioned four stakeholder groups. The four-stakeholder group meeting happened because of the request made by the students who took the issue to the street for the Amendment of National Education Law. Since these events mark the historic movements in the history of Myanmar education system, the Ministry of Education should not ignore or overlook these historical events whether it likes or not.

2. Lack of Indigenous Peoples' Rights to Self-Determination

The second critique is made that there is no aspect of educational reform in National Education Strategic Plan that will pave a way to federal democratic system. While the State Counselor is heading the 21st Century Panglong Peace Dialogue in order to establish federal democratic union, the educational reform should also lead to Right to Self-determination of the indigenous peoples. The Ethnic Arms Organizations, that are currently in peace talks with the government, have been setting up the schools and providing education in their respective controlled areas for many years. There are also a number of students who have completed the basic education levels in their schools and gone to abroad for higher education; a number of students are also found serving for the development of their respective regions. However, there is no space in the National Education Strategic Plan to recognize the indigenous education.

It is learned that Myanmar is one of the signatories to UNDRIP 2007. As per the Declaration, it is prerogative to recognize the schools established by the Indigenous Peoples, their local school curriculums, teachers and students. Since there is no recognition from the government, the students of the indigenous schools face difficulty to study in the government's schools and national universities.

3. The need to recognize local curriculum

Regarding the curriculum, National Education Strategic Plan states to give importance on the skills for 21st Century, improve the capacity of curriculum developers and to provide training to teachers so that they are familiar with the curriculum and reader text. It means that the curriculum and reader texts will be made by the central government. In this way, the reader texts for KG level and Grade One have already been made by the central government alone. Though the Ministry of Education says that the new curriculum to be made is aimed at improving the skills and abilities of the students, history of Myanmar education has proved it that the curriculum made by the central government has failed to meet the needs of the respective regions.

Since the curriculum used in all the regions of Myanmar is made and produced by the central government alone, it is found that the curriculum is influenced with the culture

and values of the curriculum developers. As a result of the curriculum produced by the central government, many students in the ethnic regions are not happy in the schools and leave the schools before they complete the primary levels.

Since Myanmar is inhabited by the peoples of different cultures, customs and language diversity, it is prerequisite to allow local curriculums produced in their own contexts so as to fulfill the requirements of the ethnic diversity. Further, core curriculum should be also made with the participation of the concerned stakeholders so that the difficulties for those students who transfer from one region to another may be reduced. If the local curriculums, based on the core curriculums and in accordance with the needs of the respective regions and by incorporating local wisdom, are allowed, the standard of education in ethnic states will be improved.

4. Mother Tongue-Based Tri-lingual Education System should be encouraged

In basic education, National Education Strategic Plan states, "ethnic languages and culture will be allowed in learning and ethnic languages will be allowed to use as classroom language. Though this seems to provide the room for the ethnic languages to be taught, there are a number of difficulties while the Ministry of Education implements it in practice. The difficulties are that ethnic languages are taught only in evening class, not in the school hour; Myanmar reader texts are translated into ethnic languages for teaching; and lack of teachers for ethnic languages. Students are less interested in the evening class as they are exhausted in regular classroom hour of the day, needed to help the family duties and required to attend extra tuition classes. Since the subjects and lessons taught are also translated from the Myanmar text, they are not related to the cultures of the ethnic peoples and local context, whereby they are bound to face difficulties in learning. Furthermore, teachers are directly appointed by the Ministry of Education without the space for the local communities to choose and as a result, the teachers posted in ethnic states fail to understand the language and culture of local people.

If Myanmar, a country with diverse ethnic groups, implements Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education System and allows the local communities to recommend in appointment of teachers, students in ethnic states will have more opportunities in learning. The experts and researchers have found several benefits in Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education System as it makes the students happy in the school, and enables them to learn different subjects, and better in learning second and third languages as they are equipped with the nature of mother tongue.

For those that fear "which language to choose out of 135 in teaching", there are ways and means to overcome it. In rural areas and hill regions, people of the same language live together in the village mostly. The language familiar with children and used

in the village can be used as Mother Tongue, thereby Mother Tongue, Myanmar and English may be used as the medium of teaching in the school. Since children in the cities are familiar with Myanmar language, they may be taught in Myanmar language as Mother Tongue. For instance, if there are Karen and Burmese in one of the wards of Insein Township, Children in their primary school can be taught in tri-lingual education system in which Myanmar as Mother Tongue, Karen as second language and English as third language may be made in teaching.

Teachers, students' parents and community stakeholders for education of the concerned village should have the right to coordinate and manage in deciding the mother tongue for their school. The system that the central government appoints the teachers should be replaced with the system in which the concerned teachers and local communities have the right to participate in choosing the school teachers. Indeed, Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education System enables the students for better learning. It is believed that such a system will provide the space for the local communities to participate in education sector and, respecting the language and culture is helpful for building peace in the country.

5. Summative Examination System still focused

The session on assessment and examination in the National Education Strategic Plan says that the examination system that focuses on memorizing the lessons will be replaced with the system that focuses on the skills and education development indicators. However, the process of assessment is still focused on the examinations conducted at the end of the lesson learning. On assessment, one of the authorized persons of the Ministry of Education clarified recently that a student who obtains 80 marks and above from tutorials and the final examination would be graded as A Grade, 60 to 80 marks for B Grade, below 60 marks for C Grade etc. This type of assessment is none other than summative assessment. Summative assessment is to know how much a student has obtained (remembered), which is simply 'assessment of learning'. This type of system should be replaced with 'assessment for learning' that encourages students learning and 'assessment as learning' that helps students to take more responsibility for their own learning and monitoring future directions.

In order to change the system of assessment, it is essential to change the curriculum and the method of teaching and learning. The existing curriculum which is 'content based' needs to be replaced with 'competence based' which focuses on providing competency and skills of the students. The current teaching/learning system that is focused on taking notes, memorizing and appearing examinations by heart should be replaced with the system that enables 'active learning and critical thinking', community

based learning, community service learning, enquiry based learning and project based learning, only then the assessment system that supports learning can be applied.

Moreover, the university entrance system that based on 10th Standard examination marks should be replaced. Because each university should have its entrance system through which students may be able to choose on their own to apply for the subject they are interested in.

6. Teachers' autonomy still neglected

The session on teachers in National Education Strategic Plan says the existing system that teachers are promoted level by level from primary school level to middle school to high school based on time promotion will be replaced with the system that teachers are promoted or transferred according to their performance. Regarding this, Union Minister of the Ministry of Education also had recently said in his speech that the teachers with poor performance would be transferred to the remote regions. Since this statement means that the remote regions and ethnic states deserve only the bad ones, a lot of criticisms have emerged recently.

The procedures mentioned in NESP and the attitude of the minister clearly show that only the Center will decide on the matters related to the teachers. It certainly robs the freedom of teachers. A teacher should have the right to decide the region and school where he/she prefers to work. Also, the concerned region and school should have the right to choose to appoint teachers in accordance with their needs. The Center should not control the teacher's choice on posting.

Moreover, teachers should be allowed to choose their convenient level (primary / middle / high school) and specialization of subject by the time they are admitted to their respective colleges. Teachers of different educational levels should be equally respected and treated.

7. Formation of student unions is not allowed freely yet

NESP of the Ministry of Education does not include the provision on formation of student unions. The Higher Education chapter of NESP mentions about university charter as a process only. National Education Law (2014) and Amendment Act (2015) have included formation of student unions in accordance with the respective university charter. However, university charters have not been drawn yet. It states that this is to be drafted as a process only in 5-year planning period.

Before any clear law is enacted on official formation of student unions, Government of Yangon Region and some Central Executive Committee members of NLD have tried to

construct a Students' Union building at the former location of Yangon Students' Union in the month of February 2017. The military led by General Ne Win exploded the Students' Union Building with dynamites after the military power coup in 1962, which led to death and arrest of many students. Students have stood against the military rule throughout the military regime. Many students who have boycotted were arrested, jailed and expelled from the schools and universities.

The role and contribution of students' union that has boycotted the colonial rule, struggled for independence, asked for democracy, and fought for the end of military rule cannot be ignored and sidelined. The ruling party and government should not decide promptly on the construction of the Students' Union building before a proper consultation is made with the generations of students who have fought for justice. The right to freely establish student's union as demanded consistently by the students whose lives are lost and destroyed should be prioritized so as to respect and honor their sacrifice.

8. The children with disability do not still have the equal right to education

It is essential to enact the law that provides equitable opportunities for the children with disability to study in any school. It is learned that National Education Law, Amendment Act and NESP prioritize only for the special schools. The children with disability living in the area where special school is not available have difficulty in having the opportunities to study. According to the findings of the organizations for the education of children with disability, there are several cases where these children have been denied to admit in the schools in several places last year.

It is learned that NESP includes construction of piloting schools with roads for the disabled students, training for the teachers and subject on children with disability in the teacher training colleges as a process. However, it shows that there is no provision so far in accordance with education policy and law for the children with disability who have the right to study in any school. As a result of no such law, many disabled children have been easily denied to school admission or it can be that there is no trained teacher for the disabled children yet. At least, one teacher each from each school township wise should be provided training and opportunities should be created so that the children with disability will be able to attend any school in the next academic year.

9. The quality set by the central government cannot meet the local context

'Quality Assurance System of the Ministry of Education' is mentioned in NESP as the major driving force. The quality set by the Center is not in line with the needs of local context, people and individuals. The indicator of the current system for quality education is

determined based on how good a student scores the mark in the examination and pass rate of the school. But such an assessment system that encourages students to memorize the lessons, appear examinations by heart and cheat so the system cannot determine the quality of teachers and students.

If the quality criteria are set by only an individual or a group, the criteria are influenced by that individual or group alone so it does not represent the values and principles of other stakeholders. Therefore, it is essential to include all the concerned stakeholders on board. Consensus needs to be taken from the students, teachers and parents and views of experts. Culture, customs, beliefs and different values of the diverse opinion should also be incorporated.

In general, the quality should be viewed from several aspects. The quality based on a child's IQ alone is not complete. Overall aspects of a child such as physical, attitude, moral, thinking and performance should be taken into account in assessing the quality. The four pillars of education known as learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together should be the base for quality education.

Furthermore, quality assurance for education should be assessed by the independent experts. The assessment should also be done impartially by incorporating the quality criteria set as comprehensive as possible. Assessment for quality should be done effectively at all the levels, all the regions and all the schools. The expenditure for assessment of quality education should be taken care with the government's budget.

10. Recommendations

In order for education reform in Myanmar to be successful, these recommendations have been produced as follows:

- In drafting education policy and law, CSOs working for education should have the right to participate. Education department of the government and CSOs should also coordinate in implementing the process. The CSOs can take part in the areas unreached by the government so that they can share needs and concerns of the local communities with the government.
- Education Policy of Myanmar should pave a way to federal political system that guarantees freedom of education. As the country is inhabited by the diverse ethnic groups, different ethnic groups and regions should have the right to self-determination as convenient to their own contexts. Moreover, the process to officially recognize the schools established by the indigenous communities and CSOs should be carried out by

the government's education department in consultation with the concerned stakeholders.

- Local curriculums should be allowed. Only then, local wisdom of the different ethnic communities that is born of cultures, customs, values and historical legacy of the local communities. However, there should also be a core curriculum in order for the students who migrate from one region to another so that they can study easily.
- As Myanmar is inhabited by the diverse ethnic groups, Mother Tongue Based Tri-lingual Education system should be practiced so that children will be happy in the schools. Because this system is the one that will further enable them to learn mother tongue, Myanmar and English efficiently and fluently.
- The education system should 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (i.e. SDG-4) in all the regions of Myanmar. The rote learning and pass-fail examination system should be changed. Learning strategies that empower students to promote active learning and critical thinking should be encouraged. The assessment system that improves students' learning should be practiced instead of memorizing facts and appearing examinations by heart. University Entrance system should also be changed.
- Capacity of the teachers should be improved and they should be paid sufficient salary, not less than other professions. Teachers should also have the right to choose their role in education, subject of interest and place of posting.
- The enormous contribution and role of students in the history of Myanmar should be respected in word and in deed, and there should be the right to freedom of establishing the students' unions.
- The education of children with disability should not only be viewed from health aspect but also other aspects such as social, cultural, human rights aspects etc. so that they will have the equal opportunities to study any subject, in any school and in any region. Equity-based funding and assistance should be provided for the education of children with disability to get quality education together with all other children.
- Instead of using the system in which the central government sets the criteria to assess quality assurance, it should be the system in which all the concerned stakeholders of education and from all the regions set the criteria to assess the quality education. The quality should not just focus on economic development but also on the human development.

Epilogue

Myanmar education system should focus on common goal of all citizens and ethnic groups. Especially, the goal and objectives of all the diverse ethnic groups who inhabit Myanmar should be incorporated.

The leader or the government that lets all the citizens and ethnic groups to follow his/her own goal of education cannot be in line with the needs of all the citizens and ethnic communities. The activities of a leader or a government cannot be in line with all (though it may be done for the love of citizens). For instance, even if a parent in the family scolds his/her child out of love to go to school without the will and desire of the child, it still means that he/she wanted to prioritize his/her own wish. The reason why the child does not want to go to the school should be enquired whether the child is abused or discriminated or has difficulty in language. Only after knowing the factors involved, the parent should assist the child to go to the school happily.

Also in education, policies and laws should be implemented only after knowing the insights and will of the citizens and ethnic peoples. A National Education Strategic Plan should also be drafted after a proper consultation with all the citizens and ethnic groups. Therefore, it is recommended to produce the kind of education policy that leads to common goal for education of the government, citizens and all the ethnic groups.

Sincerely,

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