

2011/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/27

Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011

The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education

Education in refugee camps in Thailand: policy, practice and paucity

Su-Ann Oh

2010

This paper was commissioned by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report as background information to assist in drafting the 2011 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the EFA Global Monitoring Report or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: "Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education" For further information, please contact efareport@unesco.org

Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011

Education in refugee camps in Thailand: policy, practice and paucity

Su-Ann Oh

Executive Summary

One of the notable features of education in the refugee camps in Thailand is that the system of schools and learning was set up, and is staffed and managed by the refugees residing in the camps, with help from external organisations. There are 70 schools in the seven predominantly Karen camps staffed by approximately 80 headteachers and 1 600 teachers. They support and foster the learning of more than 34 000 students. There are 11 schools in the two Karenni camps in the north.

The education in the camps is sanctioned by the Thai authorities, and implemented and supported by local and international NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs). Although the Royal Thai Government (RTG) is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, it does provide some form of sanctuary to the refugees and allows local and international organisations to operate in the camps. These organisations provide essential services in the areas of education, health, food and shelter.

However, there are broad and specific restrictions imposed by the Thai government on the movement, livelihoods and education of the refugees. This has significant implications on their opportunities for personal and social development as well as the development of their community. This paper examines the impact of these restrictions and funding on the quality of the learning experience, the cost of schooling and the relevance of education in the camps.

Introduction

There are nine official¹ refugee camps spread out along the Thai-Burmese border housing more than 140 000 refugees from Burma². The border runs for more than 2 000 km along the edges of the Karen, the Karenni and the Shan States on the Burmese side. These territories have been the sites of a strategic counterinsurgency assault, on the part of the Burmese military, against communist and ethnic insurrections since the 1960s, under the 'Four Cuts' strategy.

The seven refugee camps along the border between the Karen State and Thailand are composed predominantly of people from the Karen³ ethnic group. The other two camps, Site 1 and Site 2, are situated along the border between the Karenni State and Thailand.

Besides these dominant groups, the camps also house refugees from other ethnic groups who previously lived in the border areas or in other states. The states of origin of the registered refugee population are as follows: 61% Karen, 17% Karenni, 7% Tenasserim, 5% Mon, 6% Pegu, 1% Irrawaddy, 1% Rangoon and 2% Chin, Kachin, Magwe, Mandalay, Rakhine, Sagaing, Shan and unknown state origin (TBBC, 2010).

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At present, nursery, general education, post-secondary schooling, and vocational and adult learning are available in the camps. There is some progress towards certifying the learning in the camps. A Framework of Cooperation with the Office of the Vocational Education Commission (OVEC) under the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) was signed a few years ago with certification as one of the objectives. In addition, work is being done to obtain certification for some subjects in the general education curriculum.

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¹ Wieng Haeng camp in Chiangmai province is a Shan refugee resettlement site and is not counted as an official camp. There are also unofficial camps along the Thai border, and unofficial ones for IDPs on the Burmese side of the border.

² In 1989, the Burmese government re-named the country *Myanmar Naing-ngan*. In this article, the term 'Burma' will be used to refer to the country, and Myanmar will be used where quoted by that name.

³ 'Karen' is a term used for a number of related groups in eastern Burma and western Thailand. The major subgroups are the Skaw, Pwo, Kayah (also known as the Karenni) and White Karen. There is much linguistic and cultural variation among these subgroups (Levinson, 1998). In this paper, 'Karen' is used to refer to the Skaw and Pwo subgroups, as defined by the residents in the camps.

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Several parameters are delineated here to clarify the scope of the paper. First, while education encompasses a range of institutions, learners and content, this paper focuses on general education in the camps, namely kindergarten, primary and secondary education. Second, it looks only at the general education provided for the majority of the students in the camps. There is a small proportion of camp residents awaiting registration as refugees - colloquially referred to as PABs (Provincial Admissions Board) - whose children attend schools that are not within the fold of the 'mainstream' education system in the camps. This population is not included in the discussion. Finally, the paper only provides information on education in the seven predominantly Karen camps⁴, for which detailed data is available⁵.

The administration of education in the refugee camps

The Royal Thai Government has overall authority over the implementation of education services for refugees living in camps in Thailand. Thai policies on education provision permitted in the refugee camps are decided upon by the National Security Council (NSC), the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the Ministry of Education (MOE).

From 1984, when it became apparent that the Karen refugees would not be able to return to their villages in Burma, the Thai authorities allowed them to set up temporary camps with the understanding that once the situation permitted, they would return to Burma immediately (Lang, 2002). The Thai authorities have maintained the perspective that the inflow of refugees from Burma is a temporary affair. 'Thus, even while extending physical sanctuary,

⁴ These camps are Mae La, Umphiem-Mai, Nu Po, Mae Ra Ma Luang, Mae La Oon, Ban Don Yang and Tham Hin.

⁵ The author wishes to thank ZOA Refugee Care Thailand for the use of their statistical database.

official Thai policy has always stressed the temporary and minimal nature of its humanitarian commitment and has emphasised the imperative to "prevent these minorities from engaging in any activities which may affect Thai-Burmese relations" (Lang, 2002, p.86).

Thus, throughout, the Thai government has maintained a *de facto* policy of no-access to Thai public schooling and a *laissez-faire* approach to refugees setting up their own schools. Under Thai migration laws, refugees or 'displaced persons' occupy a particular administrative status, which only applies if they stay within the camps. Upon leaving, they automatically fall into the category of 'illegal migrants'. Illegal migrants are not officially permitted to enroll in Thai public schools. As a result, the majority of refugee children and young people's schooling opportunities are confined to those in the camps.

In addition, the RTG's approach to humanitarian aid for the refugees is shadowed by its high profile experience of providing sanctuary to Indochinese refugees in the 1970s. As a result, it has opted for 'a relatively low-key, low-publicity affair, managed and negotiated by local refugee committees and their NGO counterparts, in striking contrast to the highly institutionalised Indochinese camps teeming with expatriate relief personnel' (Lang, 2002, p.91). From the beginning, the refugees were allowed to set up and administer their own schools in the camps, and the RTG permitted some NGOs to provide minimal support. However, it was only in 1996, 12 years after the camps had been set up, that an official mandate for NGOs to provide support for education was granted (Bowles, 1998).

The management and administration of services to the refugee population was left to the NGOs. In 1984, the MOI invited the Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), a group of voluntary agencies working with the Indochinese refugees at the time, to oversee the relief effort for the Burmese refugee population. As a result, a small consortium of NGOs, the Burmese Border Consortium, now renamed the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), was formed under the CCSDPT (Lang, 2002). Thus, education services have always been coordinated and funded by NGOs in cooperation with the refugee community.

The Thai authorities, worried that the presence of the UNHCR along the border would act as a pull factor, as it did during the Indochinese relief effort, restricted the UNHCR's role to that of observer. It was only in 1998 that formal acceptance and a permanent role for the UNHCR on the Burmese border was given. At present, the CCSDPT and the TBBC continue to oversee the relief effort in coordination with the UNHCR. The UNHCR takes as its mandate the protection of refugees, not education⁶. In the realm of

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⁶ Interview with Duangporn Saussay, Manager External Relations of ZOA Refugee Care Thailand on 5 July 2010.

education, it only provides funding for adult English and Thai language lessons in the camps.

From the start, the refugees were proactive in setting up their own schools and the accompanying structures to administer them. All the teachers, principals, caretakers, teacher trainers, school committee members and camp education committee members are drawn from the community. This was the result of the refugees' belief in the importance of education as well as the Thai government's restrictions on foreigners living in the camps. As a result, there is a high level of community ownership over the education system.

Principals, teachers and caretakers ensure that schools function on a day-to-day basis. The school committee, made up of different members of the community, determine school policy. School policy is expected to be closely aligned with Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE) policy, but there is room for variation.

At the camp level, the management of general education and adult education programmes is coordinated by the KRCEE in collaboration with non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs) and other providers and funders. The KRCEE was established in 2009 to take over from the Karen Education Department (KED). Within the confines of the policies set by the Thai authorities, the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE) has jurisdiction over all education activities in the seven predominantly Karen refugee camps (Oh et al., 2010).

The funding of schools in the general education sector

The bulk of funding for primary and secondary schools in the seven predominantly Karen camps is provided by ZOA Refugee Care Thailand (ZOA), an international NGO. The rest of the funding is provided by other international NGOs, charitable organisations from other parts of the world (including faith-based institutions) and contributions from parents and the community. ZOA provides funds for building materials, staff salaries, teacher training, teaching materials and resources (including textbooks) and stationery⁷.

There are no available figures for the total amount of funding that goes into camp education. However, the figures for ZOA's funding, which forms the lion's share of all education funding in the seven camps, gives a rough indication of the total figure. In 2009, ZOA received roughly US\$1.5m for general education, slightly more than it had received in 2008 (US\$1.2m) and 2007 (US\$1.1m). The donors in 2009 were MFS/Prisma (a co-financing system of The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (54% of the general

⁷ Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) provides equivalent services to the two Karenni camps in the north.

education budget), the European Commission (34%), the Belgian Embassy in Thailand (5%), ZOA Netherlands (2%), World Education (2%) and other sources (3%) (ZOA, 2009).

Using the figure for total funding, it is possible to work out a crude estimate of the funding per (primary and secondary) student per year: US\$44. This is meagre compared to the US\$1 048 spent on a primary school student in Thailand in 1998 (OECD, 2001).

Private contributions to school funds come in the form of school and schoolrelated fees. School fees per year range from US\$0.15 to US\$9.00 for primary and US\$0.15 to US\$21.50 for secondary schools. Some parents also contribute to the maintenance of school buildings by donating bamboo leaves.

The funding of general education in the medium- to long-term future is of particular concern at present. ZOA Refugee Care Thailand is phasing out its operations in Thailand and will be handing its operations over to other NGOs and a newly formed body, Usakhanae Foundation. ZOA Refugee Care headquarters will continue to support the general education programme which will fall under the responsibility of the foundation⁸. However, this funding stream is not guaranteed. Moreover, the general education programme is the largest education programme requiring the most funds.

As the next section shows, the combination of low funding, limited resources and Thai government restrictions has an impact on the quality of education provided in the camps.

The impact of restrictions and limited funding on the quality of education

The MOI imposes two sets of restrictions on the camp refugee population. The first set consists of limitations on their movement and opportunities to earn a livelihood. Checkpoints at the main entry and exit points of the camps are guarded by MOI 'volunteers'9, and they monitor the movement of people and goods into and out of the camps. Refugees are not allowed to leave or enter the camps without a pass. Certain camps are located in remote mountainous areas, making it virtually impossible for residents to travel to the nearest town by foot. There are, however, certain camps that have more permeable perimeters and are close enough to transport links and towns to enable residents to leave and enter without being detected. In these camps,

⁸ Interview with Duangporn Saussay, Manager External Relations of ZOA Refugee Care Thailand on 5 July 2010.

This is actually a misnomer. This workforce is paid by the MOI but they are not permanent members of staff, and do not receive the other job benefits that permanent staff members are entitled to.

there is a tacit understanding between the MOI volunteers and the residents about flouting the official regulations.

By law, the refugees are not allowed to obtain employment in Thailand outside the camps. They do, however, find employment illegally. In a sample of more than 2400 respondents (this number excludes school personnel) in the seven predominantly Karen camps, 9.3% of the respondents reported 'day labour outside camp' as their main occupation. This was the second largest proportion, after 'unpaid housework' at slightly more than half the sample. The third highest proportion was 'work in an NGO or community-based organisation (CBO)' at 6.8%.

Income levels reflect the lack of jobs. In the same survey, more than half of the sample reported earning nothing and less than a fifth earned between US\$0.03 and US\$3 a month (Oh et al, 2010). This is the figure for the general population¹⁰. School and education staff, on the other hand, earn between US\$15 and US\$24 a month. Camp residents working for other NGOs earn similar or higher incomes.

In all, this means that the amount that can be allocated to education from the refugee community as a whole is low and the individual costs of education are high relative to income.

The second set of restrictions imposed by the Thai government has a direct bearing on the quality of education. In the 'Guidelines to ensure that the project implementation conforms with MOI regulations' issued by the MOI to NGOs¹¹, four considerations have been the mainstay of policy relating to the provision of education in the camps.

- 1. Staff: NGO personnel are allowed to work as advisors to teachers, but not as teachers.
- Buildings: no permanent school buildings may be constructed. This has been amended recently and it is now possible to construct semipermanent buildings. This means that iron poles, small wooden poles and steel roofs can be used instead of leaves and bamboo poles. Concrete cannot be used.
- 3. Space: the area designated for school buildings cannot be expanded.
- 4. Content of books: publications distributed cannot contain political ideas, attitudes or values.

¹⁰ Respondents were asked to choose a nominal category for the income they earned per month: 0 Baht, 1-100 Baht, 101-500 Baht, 501-1000 Baht, 1001-2000 Baht, more than 2000 Baht. Thus, an average income for the sample cannot be calculated.
¹¹ Interview with Duangporn Saussay, Manager External Relations of ZOA Refugee Care Thailand on 5 July 2010.

Poor infrastructure

In compliance with the guideline on semi-permanent structures, the school buildings are made of bamboo; tables and benches are also made of bamboo and are fixed into the ground. The classrooms are formed from bamboo partitions which are ineffective in keeping out the noise from other 'classrooms'. Thus, schools are crowded, noisy and hot. As in the rest of the camps, there is no electricity in the schools.

Moreover, limited resources mean that there are no tables or chairs for the teachers in the classroom and no science laboratories. The infrastructure of school compounds and buildings is not fully equipped to cater to the physical and learning needs of students with special education needs (ZOA, 2007).

Staff capacity limited

The Thai government insists that expatriate staff members¹² do not work as teachers in the camps. The unanticipated benefit of this policy is that there is a high degree of community ownership over the education system. However, this has meant that teacher training is not as extensive and effective as it could be. ZOA's external teacher trainers travel to all seven camps throughout the year to train teachers and camp-based teacher trainers. However, this is not enough, given the high rates of teacher turnover and the low subject and skill base of the newer teachers. Further, there are not enough qualified people in camp to work as camp-based teacher trainers.

Low community incomes and low donor funds for school staff salaries contribute to high teacher turnover. Teachers earn about US\$15.00 a month. Given the challenging conditions and long hours, many teachers are demoralised and tempted to take up more highly paid jobs offered by other NGOs (Oh et al, 2006; 2010).

Direct and opportunity costs of attending school

The majority (64%) of primary students pay between US\$1.20 and \$3.00 while their secondary counterparts pay between U\$2.15 and US\$3.70 per year. Almost all parents reported being able to pay school fees, irrespective of reported income levels, as Figure 1 shows.

The data shows how much parents earn per month on a regular basis. It is possible that some parents are able to obtain irregular employment of some kind either inside or outside the camps. In addition, widows and those considered most in need are given some financial support by the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR). In addition, some schools waive the school fees if the students are not able to pay for them.

¹² International NGOs hire staff Thai and Burmese Karen staff, as well as staff of other ethnic origins from Burma. Community NGOs, known as community-based organisations (CBOs) are run and staffed almost entirely by members of the refugee community.

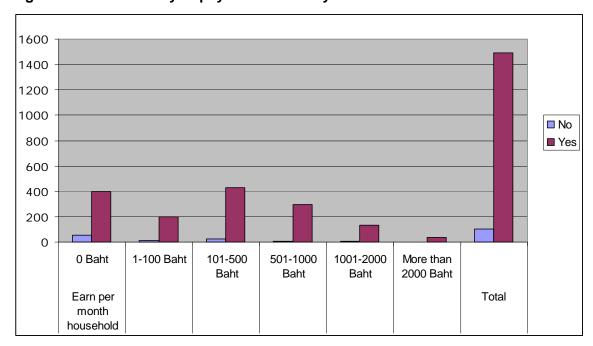


Figure 1 Parents' ability to pay school fees by income bracket

Almost all the students (96% of 731) who had been asked by their school to pay school fees reported being able to do so. However, 13.8% of the primary students and 15.6% of their secondary counterparts reported that they had siblings who were not going to school because their parents could not afford to pay school fees.

Out of 2130 parents, 27.4% responded that their children had dropped out of school. The number of children, as reported by these parents, was 583. The top four reasons that parents gave for their children leaving school were: marriage (30% of 583), lack of money (17.2%), family problems (9.3%), the children did not want to continue studying (9.1%), the children had to help their family by working (8%)¹³.

In fact, boys were more likely to drop out due to family finances rather than girls (Oh et al, 2006), and this tended to occur at the end of the primary cycle. Girls, on the other hand, tended to stay in school for longer periods of time, and their main reason for dropping out was due to early marriage and/or teenage pregnancy (Oh et al, 2005; forthcoming). This means that when they do dropout, they tend to do so at the secondary level.

¹³ For each child who dropped out of school, parents were given a list of reasons and asked to choose the one. The percentages for the responses here are an aggregate of the reasons given for all children, the total number of children being 583.

These figures are supported by the Gross Enrolment Rates¹⁴ (GER) for the academic year 2008-9 in Table 1. The GER for girls is higher in both primary and secondary levels, with the exception of Mae La camp secondary cycle (a difference of 0.12% in the secondary cycle) and the primary cycle in Mae La Oon camp. At present, there is no available data to account for these differences.

Overall, the GER is significantly higher in the primary than in the secondary cycle. It drops from 96% in the primary cycle to an average of about 16% in the secondary cycle. This reflects the trend in many other countries, where dropout tends to occur at the end of the primary and middle cycles.

¹⁴ GER is the total enrolment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a given school-year. It is widely used to show the general level of participation in a given level of education. It indicates the capacity of the education system to enroll students of a particular age-group. It is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in a given level of education regardless of age by the population of the age-group which officially corresponds to the given level of education, and multiplied by 100¹⁴.

This definition was taken from the World Bank, available at http://devdata.worldbank.org/edstats/RegionalIndicators/caribbean/definition.html

Calculating enrolment rates is not as straightforward as it seems. First, it is not possible to base the calculation on the school-age of the population because it is not always possible for students to attend the grade that corresponds to their age. The figures in Table 1 are an attempt to minimise errors: aggregate primary and secondary numbers are used instead of numbers for each grade level.

Second, the only up-to-date figures for the number of children in the camps comes from the feeding figures used by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). These are divided into three broad age categories: 0-5, 6-12, 12-17 years. They do not accurately reflect the total number of children and young people of school-going age because some students are not counted in these figures and some students who are older than 17 years old attend secondary school. This explains why the GER for some camps is greater than 100%. In addition, there is no information on the extent of over- or underage enrolment.

This also explains the lack of enrolment rates for kindergarten – an aggregate number of children between ages 0 and 5 is reported and there are no figures for those of kindergarten-going age.

Table 1 | Gross enrolment rate for end of academic year 2008-9

		Мае Lа	Umphiem- Mai	Nu Po	Mae Ra Ma Luang	Mae La Oon	Tham Hin	Ban Don Yang	Total
GER (standard for end of year >= 80%)									
GER	M	104.67%	89.26%	73.24%	91.03%	95.92%	107.01%	108.29%	94.93%
(Primary)	F	109.75%	95.14%	78.68%	91.22%	90.84%	110.34%	111.88%	97.62%
	Т	107.13%	92.05%	75.89%	91.12%	93.40%	108.58%	110.01%	96.23%
GER	М	14.86%	11.81%	13.46%	20.10%	20.42%	17.04%	17.91%	15.98%
(Secondary)	F	14.74%	12.14%	15.55%	20.87%	21.10%	25.37%	18.71%	16.88%
	Т	14.80%	11.97%	14.45%	20.48%	20.75%	21.29%	18.32%	16.43%

Source: ZOA 2008-9 March 2009 figures for enrolment and KRC May 2009 camp figures. Taken from ZOA Education Survey 2009 (Oh et al, 2010).

Relevance of schooling in the wider context of limited further education and employment opportunities

While students believe that schooling is important and valuable, they are realistic about their employment and further education opportunities (Oh, 2010). There are only 700 places in the post-secondary schools in the camps. Higher education is not currently available in or outside camp.

Further, given the restrictions on employment outside camp, the jobs currently available to them are limited. Only a quarter of the 2374 parents who responded were in paid employment. Of these a fifth reported working as day labourers outside camp. This was the option with the highest number of responses. Apart from that, the main paid jobs are in NGO and CBO work, camp security, the health sector, the education sector, the production of goods for sale and trading in camp. The education sector is one of the biggest 'employers' in the camps and it employs approximately 2000 people in all seven camps.

In summary, the two sets of restrictions imposed by the Thai government combined with low levels of external funding for education compromise the quality and relevance of education in the camps. Building infrastructure and staff capacity are inadequate, thereby affecting the quality of learning and teaching in schools. In addition, low levels of family income directly affect

student retention. Finally, the limited opportunities for further education and employment overshadow the relevance of schooling in the camps.

Towards better education provision

Thailand's political relationship with Burma and its security concerns set the parameters for how it deals with its refugee population. This situation is aggravated by funding limitations on the part of external donors. This is the crucible in which refugee and NGO efforts in education have been forged. Given these conditions, the refugees, school staff and the NGOs work hard to provide the best education possible.

The refugee community has a strong sense of ownership over its education system but its funding is dependent on the NGOs. This subtle balance is replicated in the relationship between NGOs and the Thai authorities. While the Thai government ministries have ultimate decision-making power over policies relating to education, the NGOs (which often act as intermediaries between the government and the refugees) play a role in informing that process. Fortunately, there continues to be space for NGOs to negotiate with the Thai authorities to enable them and the refugees to pursue avenues for better quality education provision.

However, changes are afoot. The future of funding for general education is uncertain, given that ZOA is phasing out its operations in the camps. While this is of concern, it may represent an opportunity. This may help to alert the Thai government to the precariousness of NGO funding and encourage it to reconsider its wider policies so that more sustainable forms of education provision may be established.

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