

# **Education, Conflict and Identity: Non-state ethnic education regimes in Burma**

**Marie Lall and Ashley South**

## **CONTENTS**

### **Executive Summary**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Background - the Karen and Mon education regimes**
- 3. Methodology**
- 4. Findings - Karen case study**
- 5. Findings - Mon case study**
- 6. Conclusions**

### **Bibliography**

## **Executive summary**

This paper is the product of a research project conducted between May and November 2011. It addresses the research question *‘How has the agreement of a ceasefire between an armed ethno-nationalist group and the military government affected the provision of non-state education for the Mon community, and how does this compare to the situation in Mon and Karen-populated areas not affected by a ceasefire?’* The research examined the provision, funding and regulation of non-state ethnic minority education regimes in Burma/Myanmar, and analysed the roles of various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, domestic and international donors.

Despite facing many difficulties, Karen and Mon communities demonstrate great commitment to education, under often very difficult circumstances. During the period of research and writing, most Mon-populated areas of southeast Burma were relatively stable, following a 1995 ceasefire between the military government and the main Mon armed ethno-nationalist group (the New Mon State Party: NMSP). Nevertheless, significant tensions remained between the government and the NMSP, in a context where state security forces were implicated in widespread human rights abuses and political suppression. Notwithstanding these problems, the research found that the Mon ceasefire had created the space within which the Mon national education system expanded and improved. Administered by the 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 matriculation 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-state actors). These 'mixed schools' teach the government curriculum, with extra modules on Mon language and history.

During the period of research, the Mon National Schools were under threat, due to administrative problems, and political tensions with the government. However, with the re-confirmation of an NMSP ceasefire in early 2012, threats to the Mon National Schools decreased. By this time however, in order to safeguard the future of the Mon schools, the NMSP had transferred administration of 30 Mon National schools and 30 'mixed' schools to the newly re-established Mon Literature and Culture Committee (MLCC). In the MLCC schools, a Mon CBO has introduced community-based income-generating projects, which may help to deliver a more sustainable funding model in the middle-to-long-term. In the meantime, the Mon education regime continues to face administrative and funding challenges (including now a dual-administration education system). Nevertheless, this is a successful non-state education regime which offers a model for dual-

language schooling in a multi-ethnic country such as Burma - a prototype 'federal' education system.

The Mon context offers another successful case study. Particularly since the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, Mon Buddhist monks and civil society groups have developed an impressive network of summer literacy trainings, providing native language and history-culture education to Mon communities across southeast Burma. These trainings are sustainable and resilient, due to strong community support, despite extremely limited assistance from international donors. Similarly (but apparently with no communication between the two initiatives), Karen community groups working out of government-controlled areas implement summer literacy campaigns in a number of areas, again with limited external support. Some Mon and Karen monastic schools (organised by monks, linked to the state education system) also provide indigenous language education, as do a number of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and local Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), as well as individual community members.

Karen education regimes are complex and fragmented, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of this ethnic community - which is larger, with more linguistic and religious diversity than the Mon. Many Karen-populated areas are affected by an armed conflict which has persisted for more than half-a-century. While some Karen armed factions have agreed uneasy truces with the government, during the period of research the main Karen insurgent organisation (the Karen National Union: KNU) remained at war. This insecure and militarised context has had profound impacts on education provision in Karen areas.

Different Karen armed groups undertake education initiatives in areas under their control or influence. The most significant of these is the KNU's Karen Education Department (KED), which administers a school system accessible to many conflict-affected communities, including Karen refugees in Thailand. Both the NMSP and KNU education systems receive limited donor support. In the Karen context in particular, local NGOs and CBOs working cross-border from neighbouring Thailand provide teacher stipends, curriculum support and training (in-service and at a college on the border). These local NGOs support over 1000 Karen schools, in KNU controlled and influenced areas, as well as in government-controlled zones ('mixed schools'), and in communities under the authority of non-KNU armed groups. This is an important initiative, based on strong community support for education.

The research raises questions about the relationship between education and national identity, in a context of on-going armed and ethnic conflict. By developing curricula and teaching materials in the refugee camps, international donors have supported the development of a Karen nationalist education regime very different to that in government schools. Many Karen schools produce a cohort educated into a separatist identity; able to work for aid agencies or resettle overseas, but not qualified to integrate with the Union education system. Karen school graduates often speak little Burmese

language. In part, this is due to unresolved armed and political conflicts, and the desire among Karen educators to reproduce their language and culture; it is also an unintended consequence of developing a refugee camp-based curriculum, without taking account of the wider political context. There are also questions regarding the position of speakers of non-dominant Karen dialects (and indeed non-Karen students) within Karen education regimes.

The research asks how Karen and Mon education regimes are positioned in relation to political transition and national reconciliation in Burma. How will non-state education systems be affected by political changes under the semi-civilian government which came to power in early 2011? What is the role of indigenous language and non-state education regimes within a multi-ethnic Union?

## **1. Introduction**

This paper describes and analyses non-state education regimes in Karen-populated areas of Burma, which during the period of research and writing were affected by armed conflict (Part 4). It contrasts this with the situation in Mon-populated areas, where a ceasefire holds between the government and non-state armed group (Part 5). The findings are preceded by an overview of the Karen and Mon education regimes (Part 2), and description of the methodology adopted (Part 3). The Conclusion (Part 6) draws together these themes, and sketches some questions for future research agenda.

After half-a-century of military rule, economic and development stagnation and poor governance, education systems in Burma/Myanmar<sup>1</sup> are in a state of serious decline. 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 providers. 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, ch.3).<sup>2</sup>

The research explores education systems administered by community groups and non-state authorities among two ethnic communities in Burma: the Mon and Karen. Both have developed extensive ethno-nationalist orientated school systems running parallel to those of the official state system - which has effectively banned ethnic language education, since the 1960s. Mon and Karen civil society groups, including secular and religious agencies, have also been active in the education sector. Neither of these education regimes has previously been examined by rigorous, comparative research methods.

The research specifically examines how the agreement of a ceasefire between an armed ethno-nationalist group and the military government (the 1995 NMSP truce) has affected the provision of non-state education for the Mon community, and how this compares to the situation in Karen-populated areas not affected by a ceasefire. The research explores *who* is providing *what type of education*, *where* and *how*.

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1989 the military government changed the name of the country to 'Myanmar'. In retaining 'Burma', this paper follows the preference of most ethnic nationality informants. However, other place names follow the new designations (except for 'Karen').

<sup>2</sup> 'Nation' is defined by one of its principle theorists, Walker Connor (in Conversi 2004: 3), as "a self-differentiating ethnic group... all nationalism is ethnically predicated". Connor defines 'ethnicity' (2) 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." There are extensive literatures covering the history of the Mon nation, which first establish city-states in mainland Southeast Asia in the first millennium CE (e.g. Guillon 1999, South 2003). Numerous scholars testify to the diverse Karen community's national status and aspirations (e.g. Gravers 1999, Smith 1999, South 2008).

Ethnic language education is important in the preservation and reproduction of minority language and cultures. Furthermore, children accessing education in their mother tongue are likely to get a better start in school - an issue which has been promoted by international organisations such as UNESCO (UNESCO 2003).<sup>3</sup>

The recent legalisation of private schools in Burma, and the President's call for the expansion of non-state education provision, places these issues high on the national agenda in Burma. This study is also topical because of recent debates in the Ministry of Education and Parliament on allowing the use of minority language education in ethnic states.<sup>4</sup>

### 2011-12 - years of change in Burma

Following elections in November 2010, a new government took office in late March 2011. In his inaugural speech, President Thein Sein talked about the need for widespread changes in the country, and for national reconciliation between the state and Burma's diverse social and ethnic groups. Over the following months, the government implemented a series of reforms, including the functioning of parliaments; release of most political prisoners; understandings reached with opposition groups (e.g. Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy); government responses to social action (e.g. suspension of environmentally and socially-destructive infrastructure projects); relaxations on censorship and 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 all but two of the seats contested. However, the question remains whether the pace and scope of reforms are sustainable, and can be translated into real changes in policies and outcomes which affect people's lives.

Such concerns come into particular focus in relation to ethnic issues. For more than half-a-century, a range of armed ethnic groups have been fighting for autonomy, against the militarised central government (Smith, 1999). After decades of 'low intensity' conflict, most armed ethnic groups are severely weakened. Nevertheless, they still enjoy varying degrees of legitimacy among the communities they seek to represent (South, 2011). As a result of initiatives by the new government, in late 2011 most armed ethnic groups entered into ceasefire negotiations with state representatives. At the time of writing (April 2012), the main Karen and Mon armed ethnic groups had agreed preliminary ceasefires with the government, and were engaged in the long and difficult process of building a genuine peace (see below).

---

<sup>3</sup> Also see the work by Freire and Macedo (1987) about dominant and subordinate languages, and Banda (2003) on literary practices and power relations as well as Brock Utne (2007) about learning in a foreign language

<sup>4</sup> Also, although such concerns are beyond the scope of this report, 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 Burma.

**Figure 1**

*MAP - showing field sites*



## **2. Background - the Karen and Mon education regimes**

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 underlying more than half-a-century of armed ethnic conflict in Burma.<sup>5</sup> 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 education systems in order to preserve and reproduced minority languages and cultures. Some

---

<sup>5</sup> Although, as this report demonstrates, various types of school in ethnic minority-populated areas have found ways to teach local languages.

of these alternative education actors have come from the civil society sector, and in particular faith-based (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 1950-60s), 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 Burma, non-state education regimes have been expanded - at least in the case of Karen, Mon and some other ethnic nationalist groups (e.g. Kachin). In the meantime, a wide range of civil society actors have remained active in the field of non-state education provision among minority communities, including through implementing non-formal and part-time programmes.<sup>6</sup>

### **2.1 Karen education**

The education regime in Karen-populated areas is highly diverse, reflecting the heterogeneity of this community, numbering approximately 5-7 million people in Burma (South, 2011).<sup>7</sup> Karen communities are located across southeast Burma, and also in the Irrawaddy Delta in the southwest (see Map).

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 19<sup>th</sup> century (Smith, 1999). During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 (January 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 has dragged on ever since (Smith, 1999).

---

<sup>6</sup> '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.

<sup>7</sup> "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'.



Through to 1950s, Karen communities in Burma 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 Burma 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-Government 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.

Under the 2008 constitution, the country is demarcated into seven predominantly ethnic nationality-populated States and seven Burman-majority Regions. The government divides the Karen State (officially known as Kayin State) into seven townships. Only a minority of the Karen population live within the borders of the official Karen State (established in 1952), with large Karen speaking populations living in Yangon, Ayeyarwady and Tanintharyi Regions, eastern Bago Region and Mon State.

The Karen National Union (KNU - the main Karen armed opposition group) has organized 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. As a result of such military setbacks, and under pressure from neighbouring Thailand and China, most armed ethnic groups agreed ceasefires with the military government in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

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 retains an ability to extend guerrilla operations into government-controlled areas, with many parts of southeast Burma 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

---

<sup>8</sup> In mid-2011 one major armed ethnic group (the Kachin Independence Organisation) resumed armed conflict, after a 17 year ceasefire with the government broke down.

of which were transformed into government-aligned Border Guard Force (BGF) units in August 2010.<sup>9</sup>

In October 2011 a new round of talks commenced between the KNU and the Thein Sein government. During the research period, and at the time of writing, 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 likely that a KNU ceasefire will be consolidated, leading Karen society into a new period of social, political and economic development, with accompanying challenges.

This report focuses primarily on Karen and Mon communities in the armed conflict-affected southeast. Despite limited resources, under-development and poor governance in Burma, and the disruptions and suffering associated with an on-going - if 'low-intensity' - civil war, the research has mapped a diverse set of non-state education initiatives. This report focuses primarily on formal education initiatives (particularly schools and other structured training activities). It should however be noted that, for hill-dwelling Karen and other minority communities, the field of education includes various informal community and family-based activities, including the preservation and reproduction of indigenous cultures and knowledge in non-formal settings.

#### *Karen community and non-state schooling in southeast Burma*

For generations, communities in conflict-affected southeast Burma have struggled to provide education to their children, often under incredibly difficult circumstances. Education has been repeatedly disrupted by the armed conflict, with teachers and schools sometimes being targeted by government armed forces.<sup>10</sup> 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 non-state armed groups (in Karen areas, primarily the KNU). Many schools and communities engage (often uneasily) with both sets of education actors.

In government-controlled parts of southeast Burma, as elsewhere in the country, most - but not all - children have access to state schools (Kyi, et al., 2000). Description of the state school system is beyond the scope of this report, which focuses on private/non-state education. Dropout rates in the state system are generally high nationwide<sup>11</sup>; in Karen-populated and other conflict-affected areas especially so, because of political insecurity and widespread poverty.

---

<sup>9</sup> Those DKBA elements which rejected incorporation into the BGF (the majority) resumed armed conflict with government. In November 2011 the DKBA leadership agreed a new ceasefire with the government. For an overview of Karen politics, see South (2011).

<sup>10</sup> As documented in the Karen Human Rights Group report, *Attacks on Health and Education: trends and incidents from eastern Burma, 2010-2011* (KHRG 2011-05 11-12-2011).

<sup>11</sup> Only a quarter of children in Burma complete primary school.

In areas controlled or influenced by the DKBA-BGF and other Karen 'ceasefire groups' (e.g. 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<sup>12</sup>, resources are sometimes supplemented by materials and teachers supplied by border-based CBOs. Although government schools in Karen ceasefire areas follow the state curriculum, and thus teach only Burmese, local Karen ceasefire group authorities usually allow summer literacy and culture activities to be implemented.

The KNU instigated schools in areas under its control in the 1950s. In the 1970s an Education Department was established, based on the high school at the strategically important village of Wangka (Kaw Moo Rah), halfway up the Thailand-Burma border (near the Thai town of Mae Sot). In recent years, the KNU Education Department has been referred to as Karen Education and Culture Department, and more recently the KED.

In addition to state and non-state provision of formal education, a number of part-time and informal initiatives exist. In addition to civil society programs 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.

## **2.2 Mon education**

Since the pre-colonial period, the Mon Buddhist monkhood has been involved in education (Smith, 1988).<sup>13</sup> 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 on the eve of the Second World War (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) Under the U Nu parliamentary government of the 1950s, schools in some

---

<sup>12</sup> 'Mixed' schools are establishments jointly administered by government and non-state actors (civil society organisations or non-state armed groups).

<sup>13</sup> This finding illustrates Anthony Smith's (1988) contention that religious specialists play key roles in the maintenance of national cultures and languages, especially for ethnic communities without states.

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 centralized following Gen Ne Win's military coup in 1962, and regulations were passed that all subjects be taught only in the national language (Burmese).

Since 1974, the government has divided Mon State into 9 Townships (in two of which research was conducted: Mawlamyine and Thanbyuzayat). Following negotiation of a truce with the government in June 1995, the NMSP controls a 'ceasefire zone' in the Ye River area of Mon State bordering Thailand (and Karen State), plus two smaller zones further to the north (see Map). The NMSP, and its military wing, the Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), also exert varying degrees of military and administrative influence in Mon-populated areas of Mon and Karen States.

During the period of research and writing therefore, most Mon-populated areas were subject to an uneasy ceasefire between the NMSP and government. Initially, after the 1995 agreement, there had been some cooperation between the two - but, since the late 1990s, relations between the NMSP and the Burmese government and military have been highly strained. Nevertheless, in February 2012 NMSP leaders re-confirmed a ceasefire with the new government. Meanwhile, in parts of southern Mon State, small ex-NMSP factions (many with significant local economic agendas) continued to battle government forces, with resulting in insecurity and widespread 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.

The Mon national education system was developed in the NMSP-controlled areas in the early 1970s, and spread from the NMSP controlled areas to the rest of Mon State following the ceasefire in 1995. Originally the ceasefire did not allow for Mon language to be taught during school hours in government schools. However, since the mid-1990s Mon has been taught as part of the curriculum in 'mixed schools'. These institutions are government-run schools, where non-state education authorities provide (and usually support financially) one or more teachers, and also have some 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, cooperation between the Mon and the state education authorities is based on personal relationships in the local (District/Township or village) setting.

#### *Mon National Schools*

The outbreak of Mon ethnic insurgency in 1948 (the year of Burma'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 of Burma, including state recognition of and support for teaching of Mon language and history. However, it was not until 1972 that the NMSP Central Education Department was established. The fledgling school system was reformed in 1992, with the formation of the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC)<sup>14</sup>, 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<sup>15</sup>), 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 (only one of which was actually located in Thailand - South, 2003, ch.12). With donor assistance, the MNEC also supports students in a series of hostels (dormitories) attached to MNS (especially the three high schools).

### Monastic education

As noted above, for centuries Mon monks have been at the forefront of education. During the 'parliamentary period' (1948-62) monastic education initiatives were put on a more systematic footing. However, as with most other expressions of ethnic national identity, Mon language teaching went largely underground during the state-socialist period (1962-88). Nevertheless, many Mon monasteries continued to teach elements of the language and culture during this time.

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 coordinated until after the ceasefire. In 1997, a year-and-a-half after the ceasefire, Mon Literature and Culture Society members, including students and graduates of Mawlamyine University, in partnership 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. By 2010 the number of students was 65,643, in 310 monasteries, across 16 Townships (in Mon and Karen States, and Tanintharyi, Bago, Yangon and Mandalay Divisions).<sup>16</sup> Until 2010,

---

<sup>14</sup> MNEC Aim: "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."

<sup>15</sup> In 1995 there were also 227 'mixed' schools (see below): personal communication from retired NMSP education official.

<sup>16</sup> Data from Mon education CBOs. In June 2011, some 775 students sat Mon State-wide summer literacy examinations in Mawlamyine: *The Irrawaddy* 2-6-2011.

the MSLBC trainings received some foreign NGO funding, covering an estimated 10% or less of overall (including in-kind) costs (see below).

While the extent of MSLBC training activities has 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. They are based in and 'owned' by the monastic and lay communities, and are therefore less susceptible to suppression should the NMSP ceasefire break down. 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 Mon educators' ability to conduct all-Mon region examinations, or to provide incentives for outstanding students and teachers.

In parallel to the MSLBC trainings, there are monastic schools that follow the government curriculum. Although monastic schools in Burma receive no state funding, in recent years the government has been more accommodating of the monastic school system nationwide - in part out of a desire to reach targets set in the Millennium Development Goals, to which the government has subscribed. State recognition of the monastic schools allows the monastic schools to access teacher training opportunities (e.g. those provided by UNICEF, and the government's other partners in education development) as well as enabling their students to take national exams in government schools so as to be able to move into the state system or progress into higher education (Lall, 2011).

Monastic schools in Mon State (as elsewhere) do not generally provide minority language education. Therefore, this aspect of non-state education provision is not a primary focus of the current research. However, some monastic schools are actually MNS (as described above), 'ownership' of which has been transferred to the community/monastery, in order to promote sustainability and protect the schools in question from possible suppression.

Monasteries in Mon State (particularly the state capital, Mawlamyine) also play host to various informal, low-profile education activities. Several host summer English language, computer and other training activities, organised by monks and supported by elements of the diverse and dynamic Mon civil society. Some monastic schools have recently started to offer preparatory classes in the summer for students who are about to enter Grade 10.<sup>17</sup>

### **2.3 Policy and politics**

---

<sup>17</sup> This has created some issues as students attending these classes are unable to take part in the Mon literacy summer programme, which is held at the same time.

Leaders of the All Mon Regions Democracy Party (AMDP) and Phalon-Sawaw [Pwo-Sgaw Karen] Democratic Party (PSDP), which won 16 and 9 seats respectively in the November 2010 elections, have requested that the government allow minority language teaching 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 AMRDP and PSDP are seeking to promote the interests of their ethnic constituencies, while not directly challenging the government in the political arena. The issues being raised in Parliament, and the Ministry of Education is reportedly preparing to issue a directive, allowing minority languages to be taught in relevant areas.<sup>18</sup> However, the state is unlikely to provide teaching or other resources in this area. Therefore, the provision of ethnic language teaching in state schools will likely be dependent on resources and organisation at the community level (for example, through Parent-Teacher Associations). In this case, future conflict regarding language use and teaching in Burma may be characterised by struggles over resources, rather than principles. In this context, non-state/private education actors are likely to have considerable influence over teaching in the state sector for some time to come. Should government schools adopt local language curricula, this would have significant impacts on non-state ethnic education regimes in Burma.

### **3. Methodology**

The guiding research question was to examine how the agreement of a ceasefire between an armed ethno-nationalist group and the military government (the 1995 NMSP truce) has affected the provision of non-state (private) education for the Mon community, and how this compares to the situation in Mon and Karen-populated areas not affected by a ceasefire. 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. The research also explored several aspects of regulatory governance, in particular the socio-political space created by the NMSP ceasefire, and the implications of on-going armed conflict for Karen education regimes.

The researchers surveyed secondary and archival sources (cited in the footnotes). 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 either in Mon or Karen and were translated. Schools visited, and

---

<sup>18</sup> At the time of writing, a joint session of the Upper and Lower Houses was due to debate this bill, the former having rejected the draft legislation after it was passed by the latter.

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 (see Map):

- Karen State - four different KNU-controlled areas along the Thailand border; one Peace Council (PC)-controlled area on the Thailand border; government-controlled areas around Pa'an.
- Mon State - government-controlled areas between Mawlamyine and Thanbyuzayat, including areas of NMSP influence.

**Table 1**

***Data Collection in Karen and Mon States***

<b>Karen</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Officials</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Students</b>
Karen Education Department schools	3	5	26 [brief meeting]	15	6
Non-KNU high-school [Peace Council]	1	1	1		<sup>(19)</sup>
KED/KTWG Karen Teacher Training College	1	3	3		20
Monastic School	1	1	2		4
CBO/civil society	2 (training centre & church)	4	2		

**Karen State**

The research covered three KNU (KED) administered primary schools in southern Karen State, and one Peace Council high school on the border, including interviews with teachers, students, parents and other community members (Buddhist and Christian). The research also included one visit to the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC) on the Thailand border, 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). Semi-structured interviews were based on the questionnaire included in the Appendix. Focus group activities were conducted at the KTTC 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

---

<sup>19</sup> Researcher (AS) addressed school assembly, and had the opportunity to ask several questions, but did not meet student individually.



held with 12 education and Community-Based Organisation (CBO) officials. A large group discussion was also held at the PC high school assembly.

Mon	No	Officials	Teachers	Parents	Students <sup>20</sup>
Mon National Schools	4	8	13	6	
Monastic Schools	4	5	4	2	
Ex-MNS Monastic Schools	1	1	5		
Mon Summer literacy and Buddhist Culture Training	3	4			2
CBO/civil society	1 (training centre)	10			

### Mon State

The research covered a mix of Mon National Schools (MNS), mixed schools and monastic schools, in rural and urban settings in Mon State. In some 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.<sup>21</sup> Mon education officials and community development workers were consulted regularly throughout the research. Semi-structured focus groups were held with parents and (separately) teachers, and education officials. In total 13 teachers and 8 parents were interviewed. In one case four of the fathers were on the school management committee, one of them being a former teacher. Given the high level of political sensitivity at the time the research was undertaken, not as many parents and teachers as anticipated could be accessed. Interviews were also held with 2 education officials and 2 members of a Mon CBO (Mon Social Development Network: MSDN), 1 Mon Womens Organisation (MWO) representative. In monastic schools interviews were conducted with 4 head monks. In April 2012, further discussions were held with Mon CBOs (including Mon Literature and Culture Committee) and the NMSP's Mon National Education Committee.

<sup>20</sup> Research conducted out of term-time.

<sup>21</sup> 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. However, this did not impede access to teachers and parents.

#### 4. Findings - Karen case study

The Karen research focused on two types of education (which are described below): formal schools working independently, or semi-independently, of the state system and using Karen language/s in the classroom, plus a wide range of civil society actors involved in Karen language education. The former includes schools associated with non-state armed groups, as well as community-run schools and 'mixed' establishments; the latter includes the activities of groups and networks working in government-controlled and KNU-controlled and/or influenced areas, and zones contested between the state and non-state armed groups.

##### Formal schooling

During the 2011-12 school year, two local NGOs, the Karen Teachers Working Group and Karen State Education Assistant Group (KTWG and KSEAG - see below), supported 1130 schools in Karen-populated areas. These included 66 'high schools'<sup>22</sup> (of which 39 were government schools, 3 were supported by the Seventh Day Adventist mission and 24 were under KED authority), with 4752 teachers and 103,064 students.<sup>23</sup> About half of these schools were located in Karen State, with the rest and adjacent areas.<sup>24</sup> Most of these schools are owned and supervised by local communities, with approximately half enjoying some form of administration by the KNU/KED. Many of the remainder are 'mixed' schools, recognised by the government, with one or more official state teachers, as well as some staff and/or teaching materials provided by the KED. Others are more independent community schools, which nevertheless receive support from KTWG and its partners. Some schools designate themselves as community-owned, in order to distance the institution from the KNU, and avoid problems with the Burma Army or other authorities (e.g. retaliation by government forces, to punish villagers perceived as supporting opposition groups). As noted above, many schools are located in areas controlled by non-KNU armed groups. For example, there is a government high school at the Peace Council (PC) headquarters at To Kaw Ko, and another high school at a PC village on the border, which uses a combination of government, KED and missionary curricula and teaching materials.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 2**

##### ***Karen State School Statistics - 2011-12***<sup>26</sup>

*(statistics for the 2010-11 in brackets)*

DISTRICT	SCHOOLS	TEACHERS	STUDENTS
Taungoo	50(35)	128(115)	2537(1775)

<sup>22</sup> The KSEAG designates schools from 8 Standard upwards as 'high schools'.

<sup>23</sup> KTWG data sourced 2-11-2011: <http://ktwg.org/home.html>.

<sup>24</sup> In this designation, 'Karen State' refers to areas claimed or administered by the KNU, including territory demarcated by the government as adjacent States/Regions.

<sup>25</sup> The PC administers about 20 (mostly primary) schools, which generally follow the government curriculum but teach Karen after-school and in the summer holidays.

<sup>26</sup> KTWG 2-11-2011: <http://ktwg.org/home.html>.

Kler Lwee Htoo	60(60)	248(248)	3495(3535)
Mutraw	323(311)	1155(1054)	19349(16641)
Doo Tha Htoo	134(137)	741(677)	16523(15405)
Pa.an	100(99)	368(318)	9769(7899)
Dooplaya	402(386)	1854(1680)	46509(42970)
Mergui-Tavoy	61(53)	258(245)	5782(5617)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1130(1081)</b>	<b>4752(4337)</b>	<b>103964(93842)</b>

The KTWG (established 1997) is a member of the KSEAG (established 2005), together with the KED and an international NGO - Partners Relief and Development.<sup>27</sup> The KSEAG consortium provides teacher training and financial support to nearly all of the above schools. For teachers who receive no other financial support, KSEAG pays an annual stipend of 3-4000 Thai Baht<sup>28</sup>, with local communities contributing (where possible) rice and basic accommodation. For those teachers who do receive some support from elsewhere (e.g. government servants in 'mixed' schools), the KSEAG reduces the amount of financial support provided. The consortium also provides basic teaching materials for schools, and pens and pencils etc to students. In 2001-11, KSEAG provided salaries to 3650 teachers, in all seven KNU districts, and distributed 94,000 KG of materials to 65,000-plus students. Transport of materials to often very remote and conflict-affected villages is undertaken by volunteers from these communities.

The KTWG publishes a regular newsletter (in Sgaw Karen and English), and undertakes extensive teacher-training activities. The KTWG also provides in-service (on-the-job) teacher training during the school year, implemented by small mobile teams, trained on the border at the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC - visited as part of the research: see Map).<sup>29</sup> In 2010-11, KTWG mobile teacher trainers provided instruction in five KNU districts, including month-long intensive teacher training sessions during the school summer holidays. The KTTC meanwhile offers a two-year teacher training

<sup>27</sup> "The aims of KSEAG were (and are) to pool funds for Karen State education assistance and ensure that this assistance is provided equally amongst all schools": *Phru Pwgo*, Karen Teachers Newsletter (October 2011: 13).

<sup>28</sup> The currency of Burma/Myanmar is the Kyat. In border areas adjacent to Thailand, many communities (and particularly opposition-orientated groups) use the Thai Baht (signifying the penetration of - mostly informal - Thai economic networks into the Burmese borderlands).

<sup>29</sup> The KTTC was established at Pwe Baw Lu in Thailand (opposite the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw) in 1991. It closed down in January 1995, when the KNU headquarters was overrun, and was re-established in KNU/KNLA 6 Brigade (southern Karen State) in 1996, before closing down again in the context of a further Myanmar Army offensive the following year. The KTTC was re-established on the Salween River, in one of the last KNU/KNLA enclaves (5 Brigade) in 2004, and celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2011. One of the authors (AS) taught at the KTTC, between 1992-94.

course at its campus on the Salween River, focusing on CCA approaches.<sup>30</sup> As a condition of their enrolment in the KTTC, students commit to work for at least four years in the Karen school system after graduation.

According to the KTWG website (op. cit.), these activities constitute the most comprehensive education support program in a conflict zone in the world. According to KSEAG, “support is integrated into existing community structures for supporting schools: helping communities help their own schools.” Thus one of the most significant characteristics of the Karen non-state school system is that, although it receives considerable external support, most schools are owned and run by communities - despite the great difficulties of doing so in remote areas which are often affected by armed conflict and widespread poverty.

Over the past decade-plus, a large number of agencies have been established in the Thailand-Burma borderlands, providing services to displaced and other civilian populations in conflict zones. The majority of cross-border aid agencies working in the southeast (none of which work in the school sector) can mostly reach only those populations accessible to the KNU and other armed opposition groups (South, 2011). However - notwithstanding its close working relationship with the KED and KNU - the KTWG and KSEAG assist many communities not associated with the KNU. About 17% of schools assisted by KTWG are in DKBA/BGF-controlled areas, with many more located in areas contested between the KNU and different groups; a small number of schools assisted by KTWG are located in zones more-or-less directly controlled by the government, indicating that local education NGOs can work beyond the KNU's zone of direct control. These include some schools far from the border, in the lowlands beyond Karen State. Thus, the role of the KTWG and its partners extends well beyond the frontiers of KNU-administered areas.

A number of other, generally quite small, organisations support schools in Karen areas. These include various Christian missionary groups, some of which have a strong focus on proselytization. Often, such activities are not well-coordinated. They do nevertheless provide useful resources, and demonstrate solidarity.

In DKBA areas, support for schools is very sporadic, often depending on the largesse and attitude of individual military commanders. Thus, some DKBA villages have schools, which may be characterised as independent, government, 'mixed' or KED- orientated, depending on local circumstances and preferences.

### *Education on the border; refugee regimes*

The main focus of this study is on education regimes 'inside' Burma. In order to understand the Karen education context however, it is necessary to

---

<sup>30</sup> The Child Centred Approach (CCA) is a catch-all phrase for child-centred teaching and learning, of which there are many different methods, which focus on making the teaching process student-centric, as opposed to rote learning or teachers giving lectures.

briefly examine refugee education. Two main International NGOs work on education in the nine Karen refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border.<sup>31</sup> Other border-based NGOs and CBOs provide a wide range of educational activities, including primary, middle, high school and post-10<sup>th</sup> standard education, teaching materials development, and training and capacity-building for older children and adults.<sup>32</sup> The bulk of funding comes from the EU, and is estimated at about 1.5 million Euros per year. However, in 2011-12 education agencies are facing budget cuts, as is the case for most INGOs assisting refugees along the Thailand-Burma border. In the education sector, one of the main impacts of budget cuts has been to reduce the stipends paid to teachers, which were already considerably lower than those provided to medics and other community service workers. Another major problem facing the refugee camp schools is resettlement. About 70,000 Karen refugees have left the camps since 2005<sup>33</sup>, many leaving for the USA. This population included many of the better-educated and more active members of the refugee community, including large numbers of medics and teachers.

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 KED.<sup>34</sup> The KRCEE is in the process of developing a new curriculum for the camp schools, which should 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 programs also help some of the children of the 2 million-plus migrant worker community in Thailand, many of whom are ethnic nationality people from Burma, 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. Migrant schools in Thailand often share teaching materials and curricula with those in the camps.<sup>35</sup> However, they are administered separately.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> *CCSDPT Directory* (Bangkok 2011).

<sup>32</sup> For example, Drum Publications promotes education and the preservation of indigenous cultures through an extensive publications programme. Several other border-based INGOs work on refugee education.

<sup>33</sup> TBBC 2011.

<sup>34</sup> The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP armed ethnic group) has a Karenni Education Department, which administers education in two Karenni camps on the northern stretch of the border.

<sup>35</sup> INGOs working on the border are attempting to standardise curricula between refugee camp and migrant worker schools. There has been some discussion (and a pilot project) with the Thai authorities regarding allowing refugee camp children to attend local Thai schools.

<sup>36</sup> Education services to migrant children in Thailand were the subject of some controversy in 2011, with the main CBO working in this sector having broken apart amid accusations of financial mismanagement.

The system in the refugee camps has profound impacts on the education regime across the border. Many school-age Karen children from the conflict-affected southeast across the border enter the camps, in order to gain access to education. The border-based education system also influences notions of citizenship and identity among Karen youth.

Until about 10 years ago, 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 Royal Thai Government allowed 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 Burma 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 for INGOs.

The refugee camps in Thailand may provide high-quality education. New materials, curricula and methodologies developed in the camps are introduced into the school system across the border, where they are distributed far and wide. Thanks to external funding, the KED has been able to extend the benefits of a reformed education system to many communities in conflict-affected areas of Burma. However, as a result of such developments, a Karen student cohort has emerged which enjoys little connection to the (admittedly, often poor quality) education system in government-controlled areas. Although this may not have been 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 government 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. Karen education officials find it difficult to articulate a vision for the future of the KED system, within a (democratic, federal) union of Burma. Rather, they conceive of their school system as a separate undertaking.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> The revised KRCEE curricula may address some of these issues.

Many Karen communities have little experience of engaging with the Burmese government or Burman 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).

#### *Curricula, languages and identity*

As noted above, the schooling situation in Karen-populated areas is complex, reflecting the fragmented nature of social and political communities, in the context of more than half-a-century of armed conflict. The KED schools use a curriculum developed by the KNU, and later refined by the KED and a group of international NGOs active in the refugee camps in Thailand. 'Mixed' schools generally follow the government curriculum, with additional materials sometimes provided by the KED and its partners. Adapting to local circumstances, community schools use a combination of government and KNU curricula and teaching materials, together with various resources produced locally, and/or provided by various external agencies, including Christian and Buddhist missionary organisations. This is the case also for several schools situated in areas controlled by non-KNU factions.

The KED curriculum has undergone considerable revision over the past decade-plus, in the context of reforming the Karen education system in the refugee camps, under INGO tutelage. However, as is common among nationalist movements worldwide, aspects of the KED curriculum reproduce rather strident and sometimes simplistic notions of national identity and struggle.<sup>38</sup> However, it would be unfair to implicate the KNU/KED education system as solely responsible for the reproduction of a Karen separatist identity. The question of what it means to be a Karen in modern Burma is one which affects the broader nationalist community, and lies at the heart of Burma's complex and contested ethnic politics.

Security, time and other access constraints made it difficult to research the situation of non-Karen people living in areas serviced by Karen schools. It was also difficult to gauge levels of access and satisfaction on the part of members of non-dominant Karen dialects-speaking groups (e.g. the predominantly Buddhist Pwo). The great majority of Karen schools and KED examinations reproduce the dominant Sgaw dialect (spoken by Christian elites and most KNU leaders). This disadvantages Pwo-speakers who are as numerous as the Sgaw, but less well-represented in the KNU leadership (Gravers, 2007 & South, 2011).

One respondent was keen to point out that "Pwo Karen are recently given more chance [by the KNU/KED] to express themselves by practicing their traditional dances as a part of school activities." Indeed, over the past few years KNU calendars and other materials have started to include Pwo as well

---

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, the KED textbook: 'Grade Four: Curricula for Teaching about Karen People Issues' (dating from the early 1970s, revised in the 1980s and still in use).

as Sgaw Karen scripts, indicating the organisation's attempts to more inclusive, and reach out to marginalised Karen sub-groups. In 2010 Pwo Karen educators attempted to open their own school on the border. However, this effort was not successful, as it received only limited support from KNU leaders and education INGOs.

In addition to formal schooling materials, Karen educators in the border areas have produced a range of non-formal and pre-school resources.<sup>39</sup> As with other border-produced materials, many of these are circulated widely 'inside' the country.

### Teachers and officials

Standards of education and training among Karen teachers vary considerably. Particularly at primary school level, many teachers are not high school (and sometimes not middle school) graduates. In recent years, the KTWG has done much to improve basic standards of teaching practice through its mobile teacher training teams, which provide on-the-job training during term time. Some teachers also undergo training activities during the summer holidays, with a small number of committed younger teachers being able to access the KTTC. Other teacher training activities are conducted on a more ad hoc basis, including by a variety of NGOs, including faith-based organisations, which provide short-term skills support.

Teachers spoke about their patriotic duty to help the community by teaching, and also referred to the importance of preserving and reproducing Karen languages and cultures. Several mentioned that they felt pity for their students, particularly those children living in conflict areas, with very few life choices. Some teachers were attached to missionary organisations (including Baptist outreach programs, based in government-controlled areas: see below).

Many teachers had only very limited Burmese language skills. Several teachers, officials and parents said that teachers needed more and better quality training.

According to a District-level KNU official, "my generation is oppressed by the Burmese. I hope my children can be free, in their own country... In order to have freedom, we need education." Such sentiments were expressed by a wide range of respondents, including most education officials interviewed.<sup>40</sup> Karen teachers in and around Pa'an (including Buddhist monks and pastors, as well as laypeople) also stated that it was important to teach the Karen language, in order to preserve national identity and traditions.

---

<sup>39</sup> E.g. *Pre-School Practice Workbook (2) Karen: Shapes and Sizes*, produced by KED, Karen Womens Organization, Burmese Migrant Worker Education Committee and Taipei Overseas Peace Service.

<sup>40</sup> Low-level corruption was reported on the part of KNU District and Township level education authorities in some areas.



The head of the KED (also a member of the KNU Central Executive Committee) said that most Karen high school graduates would continue their education, or work for the community, including in various CBO jobs (and internships). He acknowledged that most KED graduates cannot speak good Burmese, but did not consider this a major concern. On the subject of non-Sgaw dialect teaching, he noted that while "we have no Pwo language teaching in the schools, we allow them [the Pwo community] to teach if they want to, but they have no resources."

#### *Family and community*

Few of the (limited number) of Karen parents interviewed expressed any interest in their children entering government schools, or entering the higher education system. Upon finishing 4<sup>th</sup> Standard, children have limited options. Therefore many parents want to expand the schooling available in the villages, beyond primary level. The alternative is for children to travel long distances, under often very dangerous conditions, in order to access the small number of post-primary schools available (including in refugee camps, across the border). Lacking opportunities to continue their education, upon finishing school (often primary level) many children work with their parents in the fields, or find employment as labourers further away from the village.

When asked why they send their children to school, parents responded: "We want to get education... So that we can have knowledge... So that our children can become nurses, doctors, teachers etc... To be literate and help their people... So they can understand what people say to them, and think critically and not just be passive." Several parents said they wanted their children to have better life chances than they themselves had experienced. Two mothers said that they wanted their children to learn English and Thai, so that they could study or work in a foreign country. Some parents expressed concern that their school system was not recognised by either the government or the international community.

When asked how education can help the Karen nation, parents responded: "if we have knowledge of how to read and write, and understand law and politics, we can help ourselves to better understand the situation vis-à-vis the Burmese [government], and to understand the world... If our children do brainwork, this is better than working in the fields like us."

In some villages, school committees are quite active, maintaining school buildings and supporting teachers. In others, less so.

#### *Karen language and culture teaching, roles of civil society*

Under the umbrella of the refugee regime, a large number of NGOs operate along the Thailand-Burma border, including several major international aid agencies and many Burma-focused organisations. The latter include various opposition-oriented CBOs and political groups, most of which receive international funding and some of which have expatriate staff members. National and international agencies along the border are involved in a variety of education and training initiatives, many of which use Karen and

other local languages. Local initiatives include Pwo Karen language teaching in some monasteries during the school summer holidays, as well as various culture and literacy teaching initiatives on the part of churches.

Karen churches in government-controlled areas of Burma support a number of local schools, particularly among the Baptist community.<sup>41</sup> These follow the government curriculum, with some schools having 'mixed' characteristics (i.e. 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.<sup>42</sup>

The churches often support students from up-country who are studying in government schools, by providing them with accommodation in numerous hostels ('boarders') in rural towns in 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. Across Burma, many Karen churches (again particularly the Baptists, but also Anglicans and Catholics) teach Karen as part of Sunday-school classes, and sometimes also in the school holidays. While most Christian language teaching focuses on the Sgaw dialect, some also teach Pwo and other dialects.

A number of monasteries in Karen State operate monastic schools. As is common throughout the country (for the Mon context, see below), these mostly follow the government curriculum.<sup>43</sup> Among the best-resourced of these is the monastic high school at the well-known Taungalae monastery on the outskirts of Pa'an, the Abbot of which is a leading figure in Karen political and religious society (South, 2011). The Taungalae monastic school 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.<sup>44</sup> There are 33 teachers, one of whom is a monk, with the others being laypeople. As well as the main school, there are six associated satellite schools in nearby Karen villages - illustrating the far-reaching influence of the Taungalae *sayadaw* (chief monk). The Taungalae monastic school provides Pwo language teaching after hours, and in the summer holidays (and sometimes in lieu of PE lessons!). The latter programme is co-ordinated with the Karen Literature and Culture Association (KLCA).

---

<sup>41</sup> Unlike other denominations, the Baptist church in Burma has specifically Karen ethnic Associations.

<sup>42</sup> Many associate schools in the conflict-affected southeast are part of the Pathein-Maungmya Baptist Association's '21st-Century Mission' outreach project, which places volunteer teachers from the Irrawaddy Delta in schools in rural Karen State. The smaller Anglican Church has a similar program.

<sup>43</sup> 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.

<sup>44</sup> Students were reported as 90% Pwo, 5% Sgaw and 5% non-Karen.

Established in the 1950s, with its main headquarters in Yangon, the KLCA is active in many Karen-populated areas. The Association's Karen Student Centre in Pa'an provides lodging to over 200 mostly very poor Karen students, many of whom come from conflict-affected areas, and are in town to attend high school.<sup>45</sup> The Student Centre feeds and houses out-of-town students, provides extra tuition, and also runs classes in civics and IT, as well as Karen language and culture. The students are a mixture of Christian and Buddhist (mostly the latter), Sgaw and Pwo dialect speakers (mostly the latter). The Student Centre charges fees (400,000 Kyat per year - \$500), but provides a discount or waiver for many poor students.

The KLCA also conducts an annual teacher training during the school summer holidays, following which some 280 (in 2011) voluntary teachers from the community (farmers, artisans, traders, and some school teachers) go out to the villages, and spend 10-20 days teaching Karen language and culture to some 10,000 youth. 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. Pa'an-based INGOs occasionally implement training at the Student Centre, the main building of which was partly funded by the Japanese embassy. 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. Other providers of Karen language and culture teaching in the Pa'an area include private tutors, many of whom pass on their knowledge and skills free of charge. For example, one leading member of the community (a well-respected professional and prolific author) regularly teaches both Pwo and Sgaw to an informal group of 30 or 40 students. Other local teaching activities are conducted by the Karen Writers Association in Pa'an.

Informants were generally highly sceptical regarding the government's role in supporting local education (either at the central level, or the Karen State provincial administration). One elected Karen politician stated that the Karen State authorities served only to suppress his community and its efforts to teach Karen languages and culture. He indicated that the best that could be expected from the government was benign neglect.

### *Funding and fees*

---

<sup>45</sup> The Karen Student Centre was established in 1971, as a large bamboo building for boys only. The present structure dates from 2003.

The KED and other Karen education organisations are reluctant to share information regarding their funding situation.<sup>46</sup> Particularly in more remote areas, teachers do not always receive salaries regularly. This is especially the case in the many Karen schools which have local arrangements with private sponsors - including missionary organisations, members of the Karen diaspora or other patrons.<sup>47</sup> Teachers in DKBA areas are reportedly paid very sporadically (if at all). All the teachers interviewed mentioned financial difficulties, and said they were not paid enough.

Parents at KED and community schools generally have to pay small amounts of money for school entrance fees. The highest fee reported was not more than 300 Thai Baht (c.\$10).<sup>48</sup> Beyond this, school attendance is generally provided free of charge - although in many cases parents have to provide uniforms and books, pens etc for their children. Also, in many villages parents are expected to contribute food (typically one tin of rice per year) towards teachers' support.

As noted, Karen language teaching in government-controlled areas is often undertaken by churches and monasteries. In most cases, funding comes from local congregations, with occasional relatively larger donations from patrons. The Taungalae monastic school does not charge fees, but does encourage donations from the community.

Many Karen schools are dependent on cross-border support. Border-based CBOs are often aligned with groups opposing the Burmese military government by political and military means.

### Needs

There are substantial needs throughout the overlapping Karen education systems. Many schools lack even the most rudimentary teaching materials and other resources, including suitable buildings. Teachers and education officials<sup>49</sup> lack training and adequate salaries. More fundamentally, there is a need for peace and development in Karen areas, which must include support for appropriate education. Revising elements of the KED curriculum, and supporting non-Sgaw language teaching, should also be priorities.

According to KSEAG:

"The political, social and economic hardship endured by Karen State communities severely limits their capacity to support their teachers, students and schools. Poor

---

<sup>46</sup> Education and other Thailand border-based aid programs faced increasing financial difficulties in 2012, as some donors withdrew support (and in some cases, in order to fund activities 'inside' the country).

<sup>47</sup> Such schools generally receive reduced support from KTWG.

<sup>48</sup> Many school authorities fine parents (approximately 500 Thai Baht) if their children drop out of school.

<sup>49</sup> According to KSEAG, "we learned that local education leaders tried their best to take on responsibilities such as data collection, teacher subsidy distribution and school materials delivery. However ... some leaders are still weak in cooperation, strategic planning, communication, cooperation and struggle to anticipate issues before they arise": *Phru Pwgo*, Karen Teachers Newsletter (October 2011: 13).

health, lack of food, security issues, and general poverty all contribute to poor student performance in and absence from school. Teachers who have no time for food production due to their teaching responsibilities', depend on their communities for food or money. Where communities cannot support teachers' basic needs, it becomes extremely difficult for teachers to remain in their positions" (KESAG Report, June 2009).

**Summary: Karen case study**

The network of more than 1000 KED-administered, community-run, 'mixed' and other schools in Karen-populated areas of southeast Burma attests to communities' great commitment to the education of their children, 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, and reproduces elements of the Karen culture. Particularly over the past decade, the KTWG and its partners in the KESAG 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 school and teaching materials.

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 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 perceived as having an agenda of forced assimilation in relation to ethnic communities. In the context of political changes in Burma in 2011-12, and the negotiation of a ceasefire between the government and KNU, it is necessary to re-assess the basic aims of Karen non-state education regimes. The Mon education experience may offer a useful model.

**5. Findings - Mon case study**

In order to get a broad view of education in Mon State, four types of schools were included in the research: Mon National Schools (MNS), 'mixed' schools, the Mon summer literacy programme, and monastic schools (which teach the government curriculum, rather than the Mon national curriculum). As described below, the different types of schools are administered by different organisations.

The government divides Mon State into 9 Townships (in two of which research was conducted: Mawlamyine and Thanbyuzayat). Following its 1995

ceasefire with the government (which was renewed in February 2012), the NMSP controls a 'ceasefire zone' in the Ye River area of southern Mon State bordering Thailand (and Karen State), plus two smaller zones further to the north (see Map). Following its re-negotiation of a ceasefire with the government in early 2012, the NMSP was given control over some additional small areas adjacent to the original ceasefire zone. In addition to these demarcated areas, the NMSP (and its military wing, the MNLA) exerts varying degrees of military and administrative influence in Mon-populated areas of Mon and Karen States.

The Mon national education system was developed in the NMSP-controlled areas in the early 1970s, and spread from NMSP-controlled areas to the rest of Mon State following the ceasefire in 1995. Originally the ceasefire did not allow for Mon language to be taught during school hours in government schools. However, since the mid-1990s Mon has been taught as part of the curriculum in 'mixed schools'.

The relationships between state and non-state education regimes vary between township, districts and villages. In some areas, government schools have 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. Usually the cooperation between the Mon and the state education authorities is based on personal relationships in the local (district/Township or village) setting.

#### *The ceasefire and since*

Assessments of the NMSP and other ceasefires are contested (South, 2008, ch.5). One of the main achievements of the truce (together with an associated expansion of civil society networks within and between the Mon and other ethnic communities) was the expansion of the MNS system. Before the ceasefire, the MNS had been located only in areas controlled or influenced by the NMSP's armed wing (the MNLA); the truce allowed the MNEC to expand its activities into areas which before had been accessible only to underground agents of the Mon armed nationalist movement. By 2000, some 70% of students attending MNS were living in government-controlled areas. Thus, the ceasefire allowed both an overall expansion in the number of MNS, and also a considerable extension of the NMSP's reach, at least in the field of education, beyond the ceasefire zones into government-controlled areas across Mon State, and in parts of Karen State, and Bago, Yangon and even Mandalay Divisions. Furthermore, in the context of the ceasefire, the MNEC was able to place teachers in, and introduce elements of the Mon national curriculum into, a large number of government schools. Thus, in addition to the MNS, the MNEC laid claim to an approximately equal number of 'mixed' schools. The MNEC provides these schools with a Mon language and history teacher, and are as such under a form of dual administration (some of which were operational before the 1995 NMSP ceasefire).<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> For example, in Mudon and Thanbyuzayat Townships.

Within a few years of the ceasefire agreement, the relationship between the NMSP and government had deteriorated, particularly following the former's withdrawal from the National Convention and the late 2007 purge of former Prime Minister (and architect the ceasefires), Khin Nyunt. As a result, between 2005-11, teaching of Mon language was banned by local government and military authorities in several 'mixed' and MNS.<sup>51</sup> However, this suppression was mostly conducted on an ad hoc basis, in several new schools were re-opening during the same period. Thus the total number of Mon schools did not decline dramatically during this period.

During the 2010-11 school year, the MNEC administered 156 MNS and 116 'mixed' schools, with 808 teachers and 36,227 pupils. Although the funding situation remained difficult, the MNEC paid teacher salaries of 20,000 Kyat per month (\$25 - considerably more than is earned by Karen teachers, although the cases are not readily comparable, as Mon teachers live mostly in the lowlands, in similar circumstances to better-paid government teachers). In addition, local communities provided varying amounts of support. Basic teaching materials and some other equipment were provided by a consortium of international donors, and the MNEC continued to provide teaching materials and various forms of training to its staff (some 700 MNS teachers have received CCA training). The MNEC also organises a two-year post-10 standard course for high school graduates, many of whom go on to become MNS teachers. The MNEC delegates day-to-day running of the Mon National Schools to the Mon National Education Department (MNED), which operates largely independently of the NMSP administration.

**Table 3**

*Mon National School Statistics - 2010-11<sup>52</sup>*

No	District	Township	National	Mixed	Total	Teacher	Student
		Taik Bu	8	0	8	20	505
1.	Tavoy	Ye (South)	29	7	36	122	5180
		Ye (North)	34	5	39	180	5319

<sup>51</sup> In 2002-03 the authorities closed down a number of MNS in Yebyu, Kyaikmayaw and Mawlamyine Townships.

<sup>52</sup> Data supplied by MNEC and MNED.

		Thanbyuzayat	17	0	17	57	1219
2.	Moulmein	Mudon	16	0	16	54	1203
		Hlardakot	18	18	36	85	3962
		Moulmein	0	32	32	43	5398
3.	Sa-ton	Kawkarate	1	39	40	86	7780
		Kyaikmaraw	5	15	20	47	2426
4.	Resettlement Sites	Bee Ree, Tavoy Hockhane,	28	0	28	114	3135
	Sub Total		156	116	272	808	36227

The MNS provided students and parents with a 'three language' education system. At the Primary level, most classes were conducted in Mon, allowing non-Burmese speakers to access basic education without the barrier of having to do so in an alien language; at the Middle level the language of instruction shifted to Burmese, with extra modules on Mon language and culture-history, and English; at the High School level, the curriculum was identical with that of the state, again with extra Mon and English modules. As a result of the 1995 ceasefire agreement, combined with the maintenance of good local relationships with state Township education officials, 10<sup>th</sup> Standard MNS students were able to sit government High School exams, and matriculate into the state higher education system.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the MNS system provided the benefits of an indigenous language education, preserving and reproducing Mon language and culture-history,

<sup>53</sup> Since 2008, government Township education authorities have insisted that MNS students pass both 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Standard government examinations, before matriculating. Reports indicate that this arrangement will be allowed to continue provisionally in the 2011-12 school year.



while simultaneously allowing its graduates to integrate with the nationwide (government) tertiary education system.

However, 15 years after the NMSP ceasefire, at the time this research was undertaken, the MNS system was under serious threat. Particularly following the purge of ex-Prime Minister and Military Intelligence chief (and architect of the NMSP ceasefire), Khin Nyunt, in late 2007, relations between the NMSP and government deteriorated. Mon educators feared that, as a consequence, a breakdown in the ceasefire was imminent, with serious implications for the MNS. As the Mon school system was so closely associated with the NMSP, there was widespread concern that if the latter resumed armed conflict, the government would move to close down MNS, with those schools in areas directly affected by armed conflict likely to be most immediately and severely affected. The other main problems identified by the MNEC are the need to develop a more sustainable system, and to provide salaries to teachers which are competitive with state system, thus addressing the high annual turnover of MNS teachers.

Whilst the ceasefire allowed for the MNS to spread, these schools are sometimes looked down upon by villagers, as many of the MNS teachers have not had any formal training (Lall, 2010).<sup>54</sup> In contrast, teachers who work in government schools are seen to be more educated. Despite the limited resources available to the MNEC and MNED, some teachers from the MNS system have had access to training by local NGOs which focus on education provision in ethnic states.<sup>55</sup> Some have been provided by the Mon authorities with training across the border in Thailand. Furthermore, many parents considered the MNS to provide a good standard of education, despite teachers' limited training (see below).

### Education and identity

The nexus between education, politics and the retention of a Mon identity is a key driver in the development of a parallel Mon National education system. The picture is complicated by the fact that different school systems teach a different mix of subjects. In the government-controlled areas no school seems to operate in quite the same way as another, and it is difficult to offer any kind of generalization.

The spread of a Mon national education system is based on both a political and social/developmental drive by ethnic Mon speakers to define and maintain a Mon identity across the state, both in government and NMSP-controlled areas. This is done largely through schools and educating the younger generation, either during the regular school year or through the summer literacy programme. The relationship between education and the

---

<sup>54</sup> Teacher training in the state sector is also quite basic. However, since the late 1990s there have been increasing amounts of teacher training provided both in the state and in the non-state sector by international aid agencies, including UNICEF and JICA. Teacher training across the board is driven by the unilateral provision of a Child Centric Approach (CCA) methodology.

<sup>55</sup> Shalom, a national NGO based in Yangon provides most of the CCA training for Mon National Schools.

self-articulation of (ethno-national) identity is particularly important for the Mon as they see their history reaching back centuries to before the Bagan era, when Mon-speaking elites ruled most of lower Burma (and large parts of neighbouring Thailand). The development of a separate and independent curriculum is part of the reproduction of national identity, allowing Mon educators to differentiate their community from the *Bamar* majority. This can also be interpreted as a form of self-determination in an environment often characterised by political violence and repression (South 2003, & South, 2008).

### The curriculum

In the Mon National system the language at primary school level is Mon; at middle school level Geography and History are taught in Burmese, but explained in Mon; and at high school level all subjects are taught in Burmese but explained in Mon. Thus, at least from the middle school level, the MNS curriculum is basically the same as the government curriculum, with extra modules for Mon language and covering Mon history.

### The teachers

According to MNEC data, there are around 800 teachers in the MNS system. Of these, over 700 have received CCA training, 150 have undertaken RWCT<sup>56</sup> training, and 150 were trained as CCA and 25 as RWCT trainers.<sup>57</sup> In addition, some teachers have benefitted from other trainings and workshops, such as leadership training or courses on human rights, child rights, gender and anti-child-trafficking.

The teachers interviewed had different levels of experience, some having taught in the system for over 10 years. A number were young women who had only recently embarked on a teaching career. Most of these had attended MNS themselves and wanted to 'give back' to the community they lived in. All teachers interviewed were teaching a wide variety of subjects at primary school level across various grades - which respondents stated was because there were not enough teachers.

Teachers interviewed defined the aim of education as creating a space for knowledge and to learn how to communicate. Many elaborated that the knowledge of Mon history was particularly important, as well as being able to use one's mother tongue. Asked why they chose to teach in the non-government sector, many interviewees stated that they wanted to contribute towards 'preserving Mon literature and culture'. However, many mentioned that in focusing on Mon identity, history and language it was nevertheless important not to 'dominate' and to learn the 'wisdom and skills to work with other people'.

---

<sup>56</sup> RWCT stands for Reading, Writing for Critical Thinking - a method devised to train educators to help students think reflectively. This approach is developed and implemented by the Open Society Institute.

<sup>57</sup> According to the MNEC, CCA training is focused on primary school teachers, while RWCT training is available for middle and high school teachers.

Some teachers mentioned that there were instances when people looked down on MNS, as the teachers were not as well-qualified as those in the government system. Teachers acknowledged that their greatest need was for more training and to become 'skilful teachers'. Many spoke of the usefulness of the training they had received through local NGOs and how this had helped improve the teaching in their schools.

*The families and the wider community*

Most of the families interviewed (but not all) used Mon as a language at home. Many families were keen to communicate the importance of being able to communicate in Burmese, so as to be able to speak to non-Mon members of the community and a few explained in similar words to the teachers that: 'We do not wish to dominate - we just want to preserve our heritage.' However, choice of language differed from village to village, and was largely dependent on the ethnic make-up of the neighbourhoods. The decision to use Mon as a language seemed driven by personal and local considerations rather than political ones. Nevertheless, the issue of maintaining a Mon identity at home was mentioned on a regular basis even by parents who did not have a very high level of education.

When asked about their reasons for sending their children to school most spoke about giving their children a better life through education. However, parental choice of school was rarely based on proximity or ease of access. In addition to the desire to maintain and promote ethnic identity, some parents chose the Mon National system because they felt they could not afford the government schools, given that the registration fee is high and there are often other 'unofficial' costs.<sup>58</sup> The Mon National system allowed them to study beyond 10<sup>th</sup> standard, and students did not need to pay a registration fee or pay the teachers extra for tuition.<sup>59</sup> Also, teaching materials are generally provided free of charge.<sup>60</sup>

A number of families mentioned that at first their children would have preferred to attend government schools, so as to be with their friends or not to be seen as 'different'. However, most children ended up enjoying the MNS they went to, and once children were settled in the MNS, parents said that their children understood the importance of preserving their heritage.

A number of parents mentioned how they felt that the teachers at the MNS were dedicated and well trained. Parents generally were confident that their children received a good education in comparison with government schools - although the latter generally have better-trained staff. In some

---

<sup>58</sup> State schools are supposed to be free at the point of access, with parents only paying for books and uniforms. However, in practice, this is often not the case, with schools demanding a registration fee, and in some cases even asking for donations or insisting that parents contribute to teachers' salaries.

<sup>59</sup> Teachers use tuition fees as a major way of supplementing their income. In Myanmar state schools, tuition fees are often imposed upon parents, if they want their children to do well in class. According to opposition media, students in Mon State had to pay between 3000 and 8500 Kyat in unofficial school fees in 2011: *The Irrawaddy* 7-6-2011.

<sup>60</sup> Effectively subsidised by MNEC/MNED donors (see Appendix).

cases, the parents believed the MNS were of better standard than government ones, as student-teacher ratios were lower. Dropouts related primarily to the economic situation of the family, rather than perceptions regarding the quality of education. The availability of a post-10<sup>th</sup> standard education, both within the Mon education system as well as by switching to the state system (provided appropriate exams had been passed), also seemed to inspire confidence among parents.

Parents mentioned that they hoped their children would use their educational achievements to work within the community - for example either as teachers or doctors. In one focus group in particular, the parents clearly saw Mon national education as instrumental in educating future leaders for the community, so that the work they had started could be continued.<sup>61</sup>

When reflecting on the wider community, teachers mentioned that those students who finished their education in MNS had the option to 'give back' or engage with the community, but that a sizable number of young people left to get jobs outside of Burma (primarily in neighbouring Thailand, and Singapore). This depended largely on the economic situation of the individual families, or communities.

#### *Mon National education officials*

Interviews were held with two non-state education officials (MNEC staff), two members of a Mon CBO (Mon Social Development Network: MSDN) and one Mon Women's Organisation (MWO) representative. Further interviews with these organisations were held in April 2012, and also with the Mon Literature and Culture Society (MLCS).

MNEC officials and CBO staff felt that their main achievement had been to establish a successful network of schools, even in the most remote areas, and stated that they were working hard for these schools not to be threatened by the government. The MNS were serving the whole Mon community, including particularly those who were members of the poorest sections of society: by being free at the point of access the schools were making education available to all.

Most of the community-level work was being done by CBOs, such as the MSDN, MWO, MSLBC, Sethana Foundation, Community Development Training Centre and Mon Literature and Culture Society. These organisations work close to the ground, interacting with the local community at the village level. Their work has expanded considerably in the social-political space provided by the 1995 NMSP ceasefire (South, 2003; South, 2008).

---

<sup>61</sup> These fathers described themselves as community leaders and said they wanted their children to carry on their work.

The main concern raised by education officials was the low retention rate of Mon teaching staff, due to the low salaries offered.<sup>62</sup> This means that every year 40 to 50 new teachers have to be recruited and trained. Given the very basic conditions offered, most of the teachers recruited have only completed the 10<sup>th</sup> standard; only 20% of MNS teachers have attended some form of higher education, mostly through 'distance university'.<sup>63</sup> Another issue repeatedly raised was the lack of adequate school infrastructure.

The education officials provided the most holistic picture of the education system, and its place in Mon society, explaining that community support both for the teachers and the whole system was essential. Parents have to take part in fundraising, or help develop income generating schemes in order to maintain the schools and help the teachers.<sup>64</sup>

Mon CBOs (primarily MSDN and Sethana) have recently established income generating schemes as 'model projects' for some villages that have a MNS, in order to make education sustainable and less dependent on external funding. These projects are based on an understanding that the current funding regime cannot continue, and that the more independent the schools are from the NMSP the easier it will be for them to survive both economic changes and political upheavals. The MSDN has developed a community-based income-generating approach to supporting the 60 schools (30 MNS and 30 'mixed') which were transferred from the NMSP's MNEC to the MLCC in early 2012 (see below). Staff of these organisations interviewed in April 2012 expressed a strong commitment to developing a sustainable, community-based approach to education support. However, at the time of writing, this approach had yet to generate a profit. In the short term, the main impact of this alternative funding mechanism has been to facilitate the transfer of MNS from the MNEC to the MLCC.

### *The head monks*

Five monasteries were visited, all of which offered education to the local population - particularly poorest members of the community. One of these had recently converted formally to monastic school status, having previously been a Mon National School. This was done in order to shield the school from possible repercussions as a result of the deteriorating relationship between the NMSP in government. None of the other monasteries offered Mon language or Mon history teaching, but endeavoured to deliver the national curriculum (and should therefore be regarded as state schools, albeit with only semi-official status). In the summer they did not offer the Mon summer school literacy programme, but provided English classes

---

<sup>62</sup> A teacher at a MNS receives around K25,000 per month, while the community provides rice (and often the charcoal). A state school teacher receives around K 40,000 and supplements this with tuition fees.

<sup>63</sup> Large number of students in Myanmar study via correspondence, at one of the two Universities of Distance Education (based in Yangon and Mandalay). Although the quality of education thus provided is deemed to be very poor, this system does allow students to live at home and to work, in order to support themselves and their families.

<sup>64</sup> It remains unclear to what extent such parental contributions are entirely voluntary.

instead. Unlike the foreign-funded MNS (see below), they were funded by local donations.

Monastic school students (although not those of the recently converted ex-MNS) included children from other states, and also orphans who had been sent from as far away as the Shan states or the Delta, resulting in a much more ethnically and socially mixed student body. It would seem less relevant for such non-Mon students to receive Mon language education. Like the teachers in the Mon National system, most of the monastic school teachers had not benefitted from any formal teacher training, but relied on local NGOs for CCA and other in service training. Some teacher training was also funded by international organisations (such as the British Council branch-office in Mawlamyine). It is clear that these schools were less 'political' than those belonging to the MNS network, as they do not promote a particular identity, culture or political orientation.

A key element in determining whether monasteries are interested in providing summer literacy training, or hosting monastic schools, is the character of the leading monks (particularly *sayadaws* - abbots). More progressive (generally younger) monks, especially those who have been exposed to community development and critical thinking skills, often take the lead in such activities. It is noteworthy that in monasteries providing education, lay members of the community play significant roles (often through membership of pagoda trustee committees).

Monastic and summer literacy teachers require better training, in order to move away from rote-learning methods. The curricula in these institutions also require development.

#### *The Mon summer literacy programme*

The Mon summer literacy programme is administered by the local community and remains independent of either the state or NMSP administration.<sup>65</sup> Until 2010, small amounts of funding for this programme were provided by international aid agencies, supplementing communities' in-kind and financial contributions. The reduction in international aid since 2010 has meant that exams across the whole of Mon State have not been held in the same way as previous years. The paucity of funds affects all types of schools and is reflected in the lack of books and other curricular material.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, it is striking that the withdrawal of external funding has not fundamentally affected the implementation of summer literacy trainings, which continue to be supported by the community and monkhood.

#### *Identity, language and literature, and a separate curriculum*

---

<sup>65</sup> Although NMSP officials have at times wanted to show support for (or even co-opt) the summer literacy programme, this has largely been resisted by the local ministries and communities.

<sup>66</sup> As witnessed in schools visited during the fieldwork.

Parents' choice of a MNS was invariably linked to preserving the Mon culture and literature. In one case it was pointed out that other languages used historically in Burma, such as Pyu, had been allowed to die out. This was not to happen to the Mon language and culture. 'If no one uses it, it will disappear. There are no more Pyu people. I am worried this could happen to us.' Some parents also admitted that when they were young they had not had the chance to study Mon properly, as this was not allowed by the government of the time. They believed that it was best if their children could have the opportunity to be proficient in their mother tongue and also understand the culture.

The importance of identity, language and literature were reiterated in all the teacher focus groups. Many teachers said they had chosen the Mon National system in order to preserve Mon culture and identity, even if this presented personal hardship for them. However, this was nuanced by a number of teachers explaining that they understood that they lived in Burma and that communication with the other ethnicities was important. The role of education was to balance these issues and not to create a dominant Mon culture and identity. MNEC officials were more adamant both about sole Mon language use and a separate curriculum, indicating a politicisation of the issues when it came to the role of the NMSP, which like other nationalist movements (e.g. the KNU) demonstrates a strong commitment to reproducing ethno-nationalist rhetoric, in support of its course.

#### *Needs/threats*

Teachers as well as parents spoke of a large number of physical needs, starting with school premises and materials. The levels of NGO support for the Mon National system was considered inadequate, and whilst classes remain relatively small, there are few if any teaching aids and sometimes schools have to move, as they do not have their own building. Other needs expressed included for more teacher training and higher teacher salaries.

More important than such material difficulties was the issue of legal recognition - or at least de facto acceptance - by the government and military authorities. During the period of research, this threat was seen by many as the most urgent concern - with the attendant danger that a deteriorating relationship between the NMSP and the government could undermine the security of MNS schools, and thus threaten communities' access to education (an issue addressed below).

#### *The two/three language formula*

UNICEF has been promoting the use of the mother tongue in primary schools in multi-ethnic areas in Burma. Amongst those interviewed there was a debate about which language should be taught at what level. Academic research has consistently pointed to the fact that children learn best in their mother tongue, but also that young children are able to absorb several languages in an educational setting at a very young age. Most of those interviewed agreed that children at primary school level needed to study in their mother tongue - in this case Mon - but many also maintained that

Burmese should be taught as well, so that children could operate in society. However, when Burmese language training should be introduced (early on, or only at secondary level) was the subject of much discussion. The issue of language was often framed in terms of equal rights and opportunities for the Mon minority. English language skills were frequently mentioned as essential if the Mon students were to engage with the wider world. However, the MNS focus on Mon first, whilst it is expected that in government schools some level of English is being offered.

#### *Funding and support*

The research explored the different roles that foreign expertise and funding has played in the development in these education systems. The Mon school system (MNEC and MNED) is supported mainly by international agencies (see Appendix), with both cash and in-kind donations, as well as by community contributions (primarily in-kind). Some foreign donors may regard the educational support they give as a proxy for promoting political change in Burma. For some donors, supporting the MNS is related to ongoing support for the Mon refugee population, which was repatriated from Thailand (mostly on a non-voluntary basis), following the 1995 NMSP ceasefire (South, 2003). By supporting the Mon National system international aid agencies are not only expressing solidarity with the political aims of the NMSP, but also actively trying to promote social justice and self-determination. Like Karen schools, the Mon National School system receives significant support from local communities, but is financially dependent on international donors.

#### *Politics, the ceasefire and education provision*

When asked about the effects of the ceasefire, parents, teachers and officials all spoke about the socio-political space that was created by the 1995 NMSP-SLORC truce, which allowed increased numbers of schools to be established and accessed. Parents spoke about how they were now able to travel freely, their children were able to take exams in government schools, and students from the MNS were able to access higher education in Burma. Officials spoke of their fear that the ceasefire could break down and that this could mean the closure of some or all MNS, as these became political pawns in a conflict between the government and the NMSP. Nevertheless, all interviewees regarded the NMSP as responsible for establishing and expanding the Mon education system - an achievement regarded highly by all interviewees, notwithstanding the stand-off with the government regarding the Border Guard Force issue (which became less of a concern in late 2011, as the NMSP entered new negotiations with the government). Despite very real political difficulties and human rights concerns, the ceasefire was still providing significant space within which education initiatives were flourishing. In the light of these findings and perceptions, political and military actors should be aware of the negative consequences for education provision (and civil society more generally), should the ceasefire break down.

In response to the possibility the NMSP ceasefire breaking down, various solutions were suggested. The preferred alternative among Mon educators was to de-link the MNS from the NMSP, and transfer ownership of the



schools to communities, and Mon CBOs operating inside the country, who operate independently of the NMSP. For similar reasons, the Mon National Education Department (MNED) has positioned itself as operationally independent from the NMSP education section (the MNEC), and able to administer the MNS without interference from the party.

In February 2012 administration of approximately 30 Mon National Schools and 30 'mixed' schools in government-controlled areas (Pa'an, Kawkareik, Mudon, Thanbyuzayat and Kyaikmaraw) was transferred from the MNEC to the Mawlamyine-based Mon Literature and Culture Committee (MLCC).<sup>67</sup> This was done in order that Mon schools in government-controlled areas would be less vulnerable to state suppression. As part of the new administrative arrangements, a Mon CBO (MSDN: see above) began implementation of a community-based livelihoods-generation program, in order to provide alternative financial support to these schools. Although this program has yet to generate a profit, it did serve to facilitate the transfer of schools from the MNEC to the MLCC.

As of April 2012, the MNEC and MLCC were discussing how best to continue administering these schools. Effectively, the Mon school system remains a single entity in terms of curriculum, staff, teacher-training (and funding, at least until community-based approaches bear fruit). However, it is now saddled with a dual-administration system. Distancing some of the Mon schools from the NMSP may have some advantage in terms of appealing to donors, especially those reluctant to deal directly with armed non-state groups. It might also help to build relations with non-politicized elements of the Mon community, who may be uncomfortable educating their children in institutions under direct NMSP authority. The challenge to MLCC and its partners CBOs is to develop capacity quickly, in order to administer a large number of schools.

Since 2010, a few other MNS have quietly left the NMSP/MNEC administration, and established themselves as local monastic schools (one of which was visited during the research). This strategy may allow these MNS to escape suppression, should the ceasefire break down. In the meantime, these newly-independent ex-MNS remain closely linked to the MNEC and MNED.<sup>68</sup>

#### Summary: Mon case study

Since the 1995 NMSP ceasefire, the MNEC has expanded the Mon National School system to 156 schools in 2010-11 (plus 116 'mixed' schools - a decrease from previous years, due to political tensions with the government). These schools reproduce and transmit Mon language and

---

<sup>67</sup> The MLCC (originally established in the 1950s) was re-formed by community and political leaders in Mawlamyine in July 2011. Key members include Mon National Democratic Front (MNDF) MPs elected in 1990 (but never allowed to take office, and not participating in the 2010 elections: Independent Mon News Agency (27-7-2011). The new MLCC is likely to be perceived as quite political, .

<sup>68</sup> Mon political and civil society organisations plan to hold a Mon National Education seminar/conference in 2012.

elements of the Mon historical tradition - activities of great importance to the NMSP's ethno-nationalist agenda.

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 between the two sides. This development should allow the Mon education authorities to focus on administrative reforms. The situation is complicated by the transfer in early 2012 of 60 schools from the NMSP's MNEC to the MLCC. The MLCC and its CBO partners are attempting to implement a community-based income-generating approach to school support, which in the middle-to-longer term offers a more sustainable funding model, as well as enhanced community participation in education. In the short-term, Mon communities and educators must learn to live with a dual-administration of the Mon school system.

The MNS offer full-time, non-state (or in some cases, 'mixed') schooling. A number of monastic schools also operate in Mon and other parts of Burma - although in most cases these follow the government curriculum, and do not use ethnic languages in the classroom. Another important initiative is the Mon Summer Buddhist Literature and Culture trainings (and similar programs in Karen areas). These provide language and literacy training to ethnic minority students (mostly from government schools) during the summer holidays. The MSBLC is a sustainable initiative, strongly grounded in the community - as demonstrated by the continuation of these trainings, when donor funding was withdrawn in 2010. However, there is a need for improved teacher-training and teaching materials.

As with the Karen case study, the Mon findings raise questions regarding the role of indigenous language and non-state education regimes within a multi-ethnic Union of Burma/Myanmar. These issues are particularly relevant, in the context of substantial social and political changes of 2011-2012.

## **6. Conclusion**

The analysis of the information collected from families, teachers, non-state educational officials and teaching and administrative staff depicts how important education is for both Mon and Karen communities. While there is much room for improvement in terms of infrastructure, teacher training, better funding and support, and most importantly physical security, local NGOs (KTWG and KSEAG in Karen State), education committees (MNEC and MNED - and also MLCC - in Mon State), the monasteries, and other small organisations (such as Christian missionary groups) are using the available resources to educate children and better the future of their respective communities. Despite the political difficulties, parents have a positive attitude towards education and want their children to have the knowledge so that they can help their community, be better prepared for the larger world, and have a better life.

As a result of the ceasefire in Mon State, the MNEC has been able to expand its activities into the government-controlled areas that were previously inaccessible to the Mon nationalist movement. Moreover, the MNS system has been able to grow and successfully provide secondary and higher education (keeping Burmese as the language of instruction, plus additional Mon studies), with the students now being able to matriculate, and enter the state higher education system. In comparison, the students in conflict-affected Karen State villages have limited options upon finishing 4<sup>th</sup> standard. The number of post-primary schools is small and access to them is often difficult due to dangerous conditions.

The MNS system follows the Mon national curriculum, which is the same as the government curriculum with additional focus on Mon language, history and culture. The understanding and teaching of ethno-national identity is of great importance to the Mon community. For Karen educators and communities also, teaching national identities and languages are important. In contrast to the Mon system, the KED curriculum is different from the government system, and reproduces notions of identity which may have played some part in the prevalence of a separatist national identity among students. The refugee camp schools have been able to provide secondary education, and thus teach skills to their graduates, who find work in aid agencies or opposition groups. However, due to their limited knowledge of the Burmese language, Karen school graduates are unable to access the government higher education system.

Karen schools' education of a cohort of students unable to integrate with the national education system raises questions regarding the role and status of parallel ethnic education regimes in a Burmese political context undergoing great changes. Ethnic national education regimes have developed in Burma in a context of armed and state-society conflicts. As the larger political context undergoes significant changes, , questions regarding the position of ethnic national education regimes within the Union of Burma need to be addressed.

It is important to note that the Mon ceasefire has provided a wider and safer area for educational initiatives to be carried out, than was the case during

the period of armed conflict. Despite the difficulties faced by the families, their eagerness to promote education and help these initiatives shows the commitment that they have towards improving their future. If administrative difficulties can be resolved, the Mon education regime offers a model for a dual-language ('federal') approach to schooling in Burma/Myanmar.

### **Bibliography**

**Banda, F. (2003).** 'A Survey of Literary Practices in Black and Coloured Communities in South Africa: towards a Pedagogy of Multiliteracies.' *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 16(2), 106-129.

**Brock-Utne, B. (2007).** 'learning through a familiar language versus learning through a foreign language – A look into secondary school classrooms in Tanzania'. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27, 487-498.

**Conversi, D. (ed.) (2004).** *Ethnonationalism in the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the study of nationalism* (London, Routledge).

**CCSDPT Directory for 2011.** Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (Bangkok).

**Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987).** *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul)

**Gravers, M. (1999).** *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: an essay on the historical practice of power* (London, Curzon).

**Gravers, M. (ed.) (2007).** *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Copenhagen, NIAS Press).

**Guillon, E. (1999).** *The Mons: a civilization of Southeast Asia* (Bangkok, The Siam Society).

**Houtman, G. (1999).** *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League For Democracy* (Monograph 33, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).

**Independent Mon News Agency (27-7-2011)**

<http://monnews.org/>

**Karen Human Rights Group report, (KHRG 2011-05 11-12-2011).** *Attacks on Health and Education: trends and incidents from eastern Burma, 2010-2011.*

**KED textbook:** 'Grade Four: Curricula for Teaching about Karen People Issues' (dating from the early 1970s, revised in the 1980s and still in use).

**KESAG Report. (June 2009).** *Karen State Education Assistance Group Report.*

**Kyi, K.M., Findlay, R., Sundrum, R.M., Maung, M., Nyunt, M., & Oo, Z., et al. (2000).** *Economic Development of Burma; a vision and a strategy* (Olof Palme International Centre: 147).

**Lall, M. (2010).** *Child centred learning and teaching approaches in Myanmar* (British Council, Yangon).

**Lall, M. (2011).** 'Pushing the child centred approach in Myanmar – the role of cross national policy networks and the effects in the classroom', *Critical Studies in Education* 52(3), 219-233.

**Smith, A. (1988).** *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford and Massachusetts, Blackwell).

**Smith, M. (1999).** *Burma: insurgency and the politics of ethnicity* (London, Zed Books; second edition).

**South, A. (2003).** *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake* (London, Routledge Curzon; re-print edition 2005).

**South, A. (2008).** *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict* (London, Routledge; re-print edition 2010).

**South, A., Perhult, M., & Carstensen, N. (2010).** *Conflict and Survival: Self-protection in southeast Burma* (London, Chatham House).

**South, A. (2011).** *Burma's Longest War: anatomy of the Karen conflict* (Amsterdam, Transnational Institute/Burma Centre Netherlands).

**Thailand-Burma Border Consortium. (2011).** *Displacement and Poverty in South East Burma/Myanmar* (Bangkok).

**UNESCO. (2003).** EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4: Gender and Education for All, the leap to Equality (Paris, UNESCO)