Inaccessible and Under-Resourced: Concerns Over Education in Rural Mon Communities

Report Brief

Women and Child Rights Project (WCRP), Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM)

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In *Inaccessible and Under-Resourced* the Women and Child Rights Project (WCRP), a project of the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), draws on interviews with 146 individuals, largely in 17 predominantly Mon villages of Ye Township (Mon State), Kyainnseikyi Township (Karen State), and Yebyu Township (Tenasserim Region), to present an exploration of education challenges in Burma/Myanmar's rural Mon communities.

I. Survey Demographics

WCRP's research covered a mixture of education structures, with surveyed villages containing 3 government-run Basic Education Schools, 10 predominantly government-led 'Mixed Schools', and 10 non-state Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) operated Mon National Schools.[i]

As shown by *Figure 1,* the majority of interviews were conducted with children who had dropped out from education, while wider data included interviews with parents, teachers and village leadership.

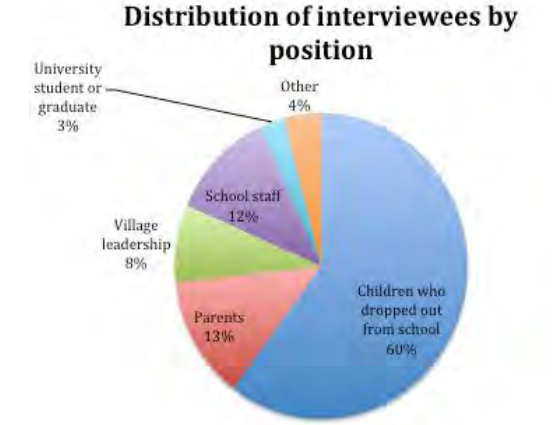

Figure 1: Distribution of interviewees by position (WCRP Interview Data).

II. Education Dropout

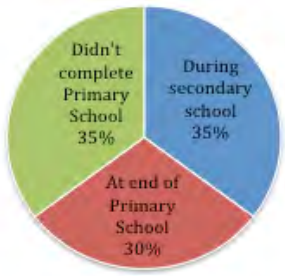

Figure 2: Stage of drop out among children who provided data (WCRP Interview data).

WCRP's first area of focus was a study of education dropout.

Stage of dropout:

51 children interviewed by WCRP stated the level at which they had dropped out from school. As *Figure 2* shows, **over a third of these children dropped out before the end of Primary School,** while just under a third dropped out directly after completing Primary School**,** failing to make the transition to Secondary Education. Statistics showing problems with Primary School completion suggest that the Burmese/Myanmar government's commitment to UN Millennium Development Goal No. 2 (Universal Completion of Primary Education) remains unfulfilled in the surveyed townships.

Livelihood concerns:

73 children interviewed by WCRP detailed their reasons for dropout. As *Figure 3* shows, family livelihood concerns were cited by over three quarters of these children as the predominant factor. WCRP's wider interviews with parents, teachers and village leadership supported this claim; of 135

total interviews, 87 discussed family livelihood concerns as a major cause of education dropout. For example, one teacher from Wae Thar Lee (East) village, Kyainnseikyi Township, detailed:

> "There are around 280 children who could attend [Wae Thar Lee (East)] school but only 235 go to school. The other children don't go to school because their parents face difficulties with livelihood problems."

Research suggested four main routes through which livelihood difficulties led to dropout:

1) **Poor families were unable to afford costs related to education**: unaffordable school fees were reported at both Primary and Secondary level. Meanwhile, an insufficient network of Middle and High Schools in rural regions meant that students often had to travel long distances to access Secondary Education, creating high costs to cover transport to other villages or fees for children to board at their school.

2) Children from poor families needed to work to supplement their family's income, with children leaving school to join the workforce.

3) Livelihood difficulties created a need for families to migrate, with parents taking children out from school in order to do so.

4) Poverty affected community perceptions of education's value: parents took their children out from school because education was considered an expensive luxury, unnecessary for survival.

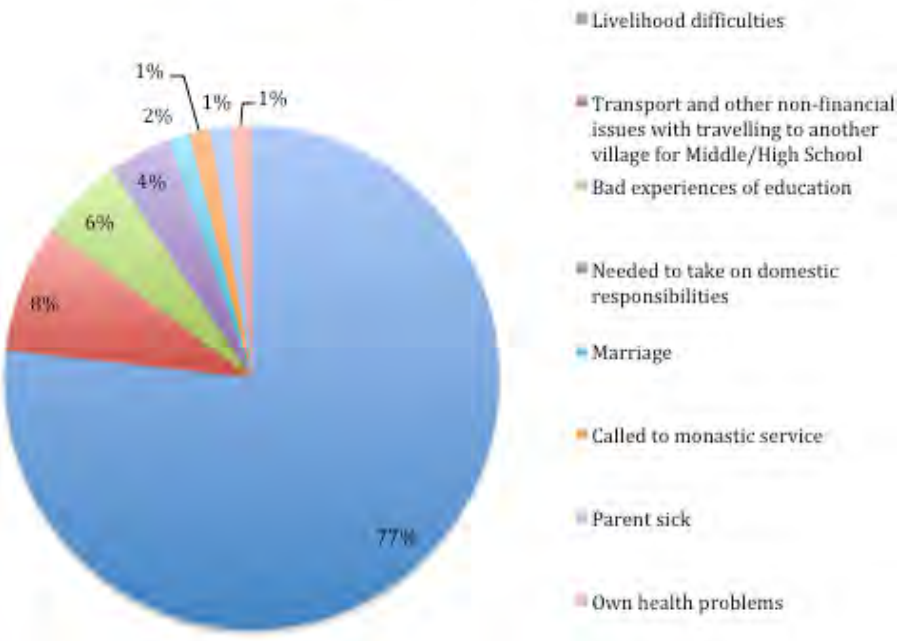

Figure 3: What was the main reason you left school? (As % of dropout interviewees who gave a reason) (WCRP Interview Data).

Other key factors behind dropout included:

- **Difficulties with transport to school**: respondents indicated problems with irregular public transport, rainy season flooding and security concerns regarding routes to school. Transport

difficulties were reportedly most acute at Secondary level, given the fact that many children had to travel far outside their village to access a Middle or High School.

- **Children needing to board at school** due to long distances between home villages and Secondary Education. Aside from financial concerns, this meant that some children didn't continue to Secondary Education due to worries about missing their families, while in other cases parents voiced concern about children living away from home.
- **Children being required to take on domestic responsibilities**, such as cooking and childcare. In these cases children left school to look after the household.
- **Bad experiences of education:** experiences detailed to WCRP ranged from children being bored in lessons and falling behind, to excessive use of disciplinary methods.

III. Resource Constraints in Rural Village Schools

School resource constraints consisted WCRP's second area of focus. Notably, resource problems were reported in 14 of 23 village schools surveyed.[ii] As *Figure 4* shows, the greatest number of resource complaints concerned MNEC Mon National Schools.

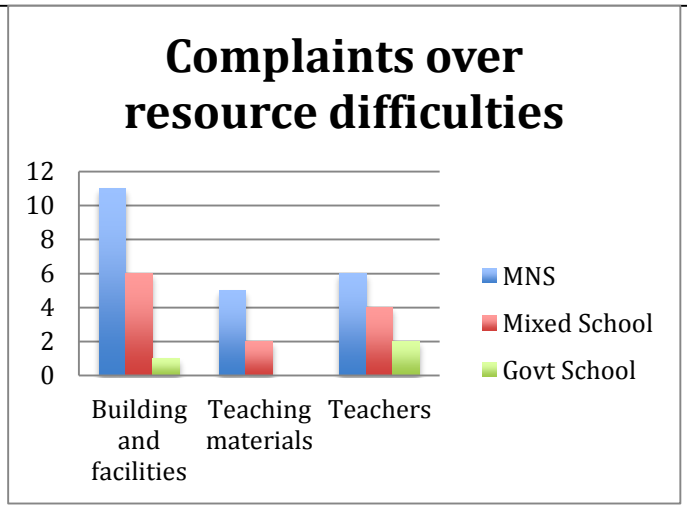

Figure 4: Number of complaints over resource difficulties, by type of complaint and type of school (WCRP Interview Data).

Types of resource constraints:

1) **School buildings and facilities:** concerns ranged from one Mon National Primary School that had no permanent school building, to schools where buildings were too small, in disrepair, or did not have private teaching rooms. Other key concerns included chair/desk shortages and poor water supply.

2) **Teaching materials**: schools were reported to lack stationery, school books and other teaching materials.

3) **Teachers:** concerns included insufficient numbers of teachers, teachers being taken away from the classroom by other commitments, high teacher turnover, insufficient teaching experience and low standards of qualification among teachers.

Government offers of support to MNEC schools:

In the context of severe resource shortages in MNEC schools, multiple interviewees told WCRP that the Burmese/Myanmar government had approached individual MNEC schools with offers of financial support. However, support was noted to come on the pre-condition of schools largely relinquishing their autonomy from government structures. In particular, in order to receive support the government reportedly required schools to limit teaching in Mon to just one hour per day, while also introducing government teachers into their school and enforcing the use of government school uniforms.

While some schools were reported to have accepted offers of government support, others vehemently rejected them, with one village administrator stating, "We would rather be poor than accept their support". While such claims may appear extreme, they must be understood within the context of ethnic conflict and entrenched mistrust of central government from which MNEC's autonomous school system was born. For the benefit of all children and teachers within MNEC schools, for whom additional support is urgently required, the Burmese/Myanmar government must consider that such strict pre-conditions for support may be asking for greater concessions from village and school leadership than they may reasonably be expected to make; a less 'all-or-nothing' approach may be more likely to engender cooperation.

IV. Recommendations

WCRP hopes that the above findings may be used as both a call to action, and as an evidence base for stepped-up engagement and further research. WCRP calls for all parties concerned with education in Mon regions, including the Burmese/Myanmar government, MNEC and international aid organisations to take the following immediate actions:

To consolidate education reform in the light of WCRP's findings:

1. For the Burmese/Myanmar government to increase education spending, targeting measures outlined below.
2. For the New Mon State Party (NMSP)/Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) to develop an education reform policy fitting the needs identified here.
3. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups to include discussions on education reform in the peace process, in particular regarding the concerns expressed here.

To minimise the effects of poverty on education prospects:

1. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and international aid agencies to collaborate on poverty reduction initiatives targeted towards rural Mon villages.
2. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and MNEC to implement a system to collaboratively track school attendance rates among school-age children in rural Mon communities, to allow comparisons with national trends and for the design of targeted interventions.
3. For the Burmese/Myanmar government, MNEC and international aid agencies to work to reduce costs attached to education in rural villages: ensuring that pre-existing policies of free Primary Education are fully implemented, widening legislation to extend free education to the end of Middle School and opening up scholarship opportunities for children attending Secondary School far from home.
4. For the Burmese/Myanmar government, MNEC and international aid agencies to provide possibilities for children to undertake further education and training while also in employment e.g. through non-formal and distance education programmes.
5. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and MNEC to facilitate easy transfer between schools to enhance access to education for children from migrant families.
6. For the Burmese/Myanmar government, MNEC, international agencies and Mon CBOs to renegotiate community attitudes to education, through capacity building, advocacy, and graduate employment opportunities.

To tackle other access concerns:

1. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and MNEC to initiate a collaborative mapping and strategic planning initiative, to map all schools in Mon regions and in doing so expand access to education by determining if and where new schools should be built.
2. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and NMSP to strengthen infrastructure and security on all routes to school.

To address resource deficiencies:

1. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and MNEC to undertake resource-focussed needs assessments in all schools within their respective authorities.
2. For the Burmese/Myanmar government and MNEC to take action to resolve human resource problems, by increasing teacher salaries and enhancing teacher training opportunities.
3. For MNEC to conduct a comprehensive review and analysis of current budget expenditures and deficits, in order to establish a strategic organizational development plan that outlines funding requirements and specific organizational development needs.
4. For the Burmese/Myanmar government to renegotiate its pre-conditions for support to MNEC schools, allowing government resources to be accessed without requiring MNEC schools to completely sacrifice their autonomy. International donors should maintain funding for non-state systems until such an arrangement can be guaranteed.

[i] Mixed Schools are government schools that teach courses on Mon language and culture, through cooperation with MNEC.

[ii] A village-by-village account of resource constraints can be found in *Appendix 1* of WCRP's full report.