

Building a National Language Policy for Myanmar

A Brief Progress Report



An investment in national development, peace, social progress and improved education

Joseph Lo Bianco

The Activity

Since 2014 all across Myanmar discussion has been underway on language policy. Sponsored by the Language and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative of UNICEF under the Programme for Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA), in close cooperation with the Myanmar Ministry of Education, 16 “Facilitated Dialogues”, several research projects, a large number of direct consultations and site visits, interviews, observations and professional training activities have been implemented. At state level there have also been writing teams, information gathering, discussion groups, learning circles and other activities addressing co-ordination issues, multilingual program delivery, curriculum, textbooks, teacher support, and the role of policy and how citizens can participate in policy debates. Working in close cooperation with civil society partners, ethnic language and culture groups, teachers, civil servants and parents this process has been designed and guided by Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne and has involved many hundreds of people, both professionals and community representatives. Through this process a wealth of ideas has been generated about the best ways for Myanmar to make the most of its rich linguistic resources. This brief progress report discusses some of the key achievements and steps so far, and sets out the remainder of the process.



The activities of the Myanmar National Language Policy are led by Professor Joseph Lo Bianco (University of Melbourne), under the supervision of Dr Cliff Meyers, Chief of Education, UNICEF. A 'core team' comprising Ms. Malar San from UNICEF, Ms. Aye Aye Tun and Ms. Zin Zin Win from Pyoe Pin programme, Mr. Harry San from the Nyein (Shalom) Foundation, and colleagues from the Thabyay Education Foundation at the national level. At state and township level the project is working with state parliamentarians, Ministry of Education officials and dozens of language and culture committees, civil society organizations and individuals.

Context

Alongside its main language, Myanmar, formerly known as Burmese, Myanmar counts some 135 spoken languages along with at least two main sign languages, many dialects and foreign languages, making it one of the most multilingual societies on earth. The country is geographically located in one of the most linguistically diverse parts of the world bordering the vast language communities of China and India. The linguistic profile of the country is complemented by English, which has a secure presence in commerce, higher education and more widely in society. As part of a general national reform agenda to raise economic and social development Myanmar has embarked on a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) to transform its education system (Myint Thein, 2014; MoE, 2013) and has recently passed a new National Education Law (2014) and a new Ethnic Rights Law (2015). The national language policy process relates to reforms in education and society, as well as economy and the law, to support the development aims of the country.



What are the critical questions that the national language policy is addressing? Some of these are: How can language policy contribute to peace? How can the country guarantee the language rights of all groups? How can Myanmar develop and promote Myanmar, its common language? How to link the writing systems of Myanmar languages to the Internet? How can Myanmar overcome problems of communication and national cohesion? How can Myanmar guarantee access of all its population to their mother tongues, to the Union language, and to key international languages? How can deaf children and adults with communication disabilities receive the best education possible? How can Myanmar overcome decades of conflict linked to language and culture differences? How can Myanmar achieve higher education standards for all? How can all people become literate and improve their chances of gaining employment and improving their life chances? What is the best way to raise the standard of general education for all children in this rapidly changing society?



Language questions are often neglected by policy makers, yet communication, literacy and language ability are fundamental to society as well as to the opportunities of individuals to achieve their aims in life and improve their circumstances. From early childhood to tertiary education, in delivering services in hospitals, government administration, international trade and diplomacy, in domestic law and human rights, as Myanmar develops into a stronger democracy a national language policy will support, strengthen and develop all aspects of life.

All of Myanmar's people will benefit from a shared language policy to guarantee national unity, ethnic rights and social cohesion. The guiding idea of the Myanmar language planning process is that language is a resource that should be valued and cultivated to benefit the entire population. Just as forests, water, air and natural materials are resources that benefit the development and prosperity of a nation, language abilities are a resource of great importance to social and political life, to education and social cohesion.

Background to the Project

The project is going forward in stages, eventually integrating policies at Union (national) with state, region and township levels. Statements have already been agreed and drafted in Mon and Kayin and work has commenced in Kachin and planning work is underway for Chin, Kayah and Shan states, and eventually all territories, regions and districts of the country, through 2016.

At the national level useful input and influence was offered to legislators, and in research projects, program design as well as policy debates and public understanding of what a language policy entails and how it can benefit the whole society. The key methods used in this process are research, consultations and collective decision making through ‘facilitated dialogues’.

These facilitated dialogues include three groups of people: i) officials, representing government; ii) community representatives, who bring the voices of ordinary people, and iii) experts, who contribute the findings of research. The dialogues are mediated by a guide who helps participants discuss language problems and challenges, identifies research relevant to the topics being discussed and explores alternative responses and best practices (from other countries or from other parts of Myanmar).

At these dialogues participants resolve misunderstandings and disagreements, discuss research evidence and explore viable alternatives. Topics include multilingualism in society, literacy learning, equal access to schooling, how to raise education standards, mother tongue teaching, endangered languages, acquisition of Myanmar language, the role of English, inclusive education, the special needs of disadvantaged groups, as well as communication needs in health, law, diplomacy, trade and commerce.

Initially four Facilitated Dialogues were held (Mae Sot, Thailand, 12-14 February 2014, Mawlamyine 27-28 May and 6-7 November, 2014 and Naypyitaw, 29-30 July 2014). These proved so successful the LESC Initiative was expanded in late 2014 and December 2015, at the request of the Naypyitaw dialogue partners, and UNICEF-Myanmar and the Ministry of Education have requested the preparation of a ‘peace promoting national language policy’. To date 16 facilitated dialogues have been held across the country, along with several research projects, many direct consultations and site visits, interviews, observations and professional training activities.

The basic philosophy guiding the approach is that language is a key and valuable resource that every society should value in the same way it values its natural resources.

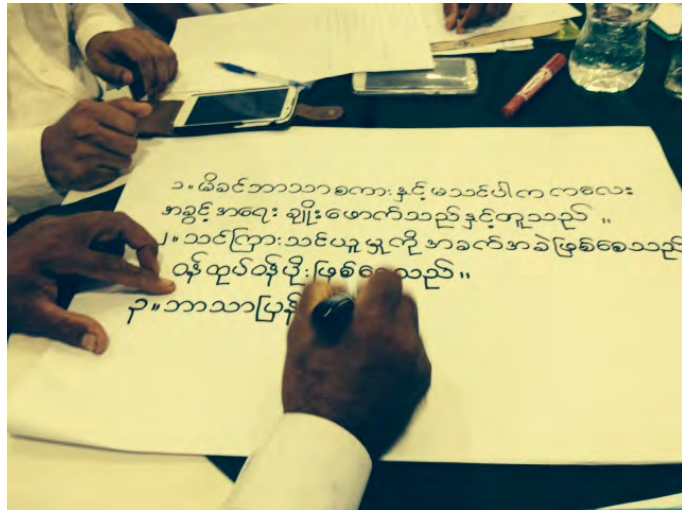
The Mandalay Conference is the first of its kind in Myanmar. It is an important step in the process of discussing options for a national language policy. At the conference national and international delegates will debate a variety of language issues, compare multilingual education practices across countries and reflect on what has been achieved so far and what still needs to be done.

Writing a Peace Promoting National Language Policy

Building on the initial success of the LESC Initiative, the new phase of work to produce a 'peace promoting national language policy' has commenced.

It will include:

- a draft Union (national) language policy based on shared national principles, to be proposed to government mid-late in 2016;
- coordinated policy statements at state/district levels;
- involvement of all stakeholders to exchange information about how to write shared policy statements;
- a focus on the specific needs of special groups such as remote populations and disadvantaged groups;
- attention to language questions in health, law and other areas;
- a 'model' language policy for townships to consider;
- integrated implementation plans at all levels;
- research on language questions in the economy, education, health and legal sections.



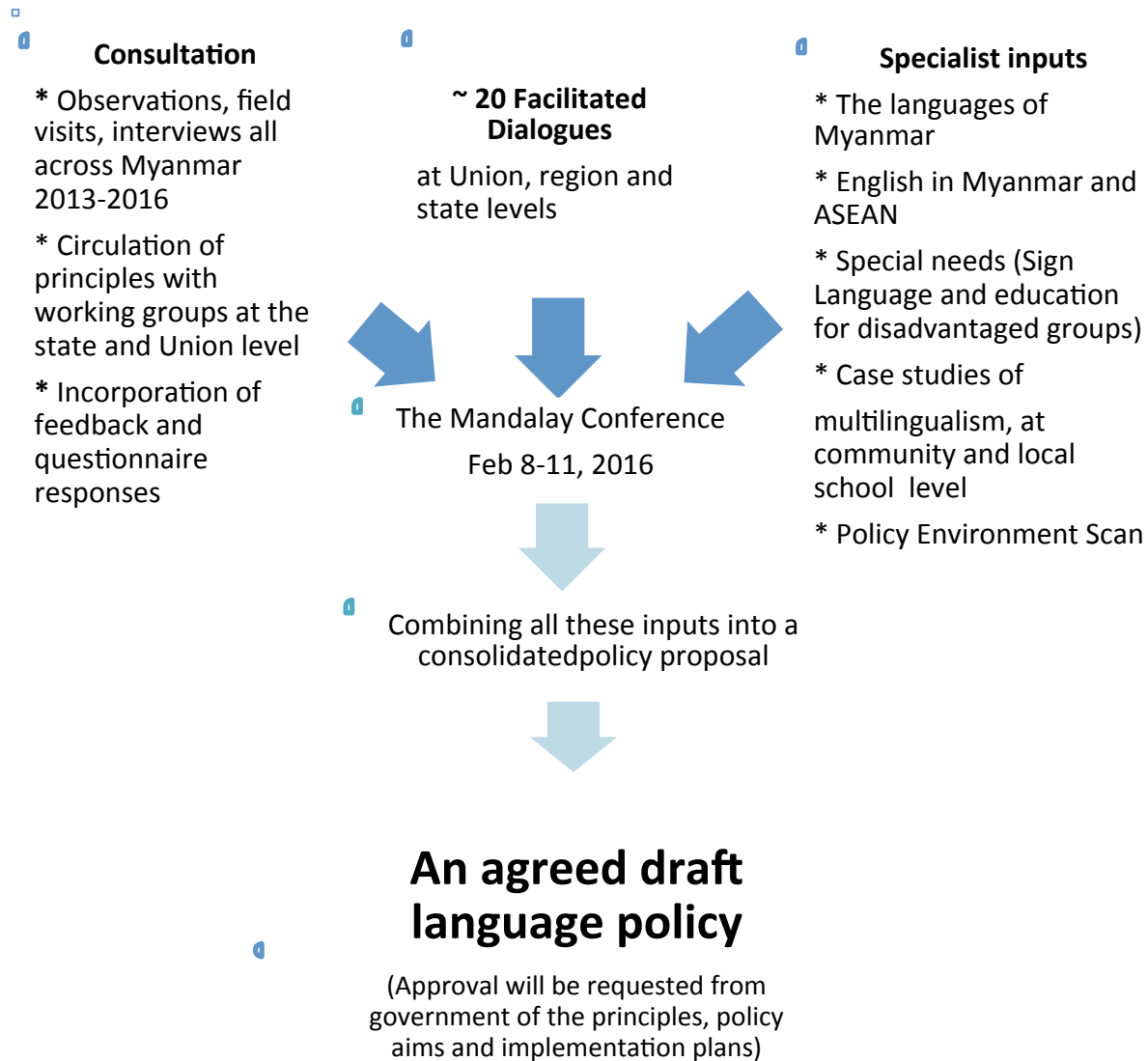
Facilitated Dialogue, Mawlamyine, May 2014



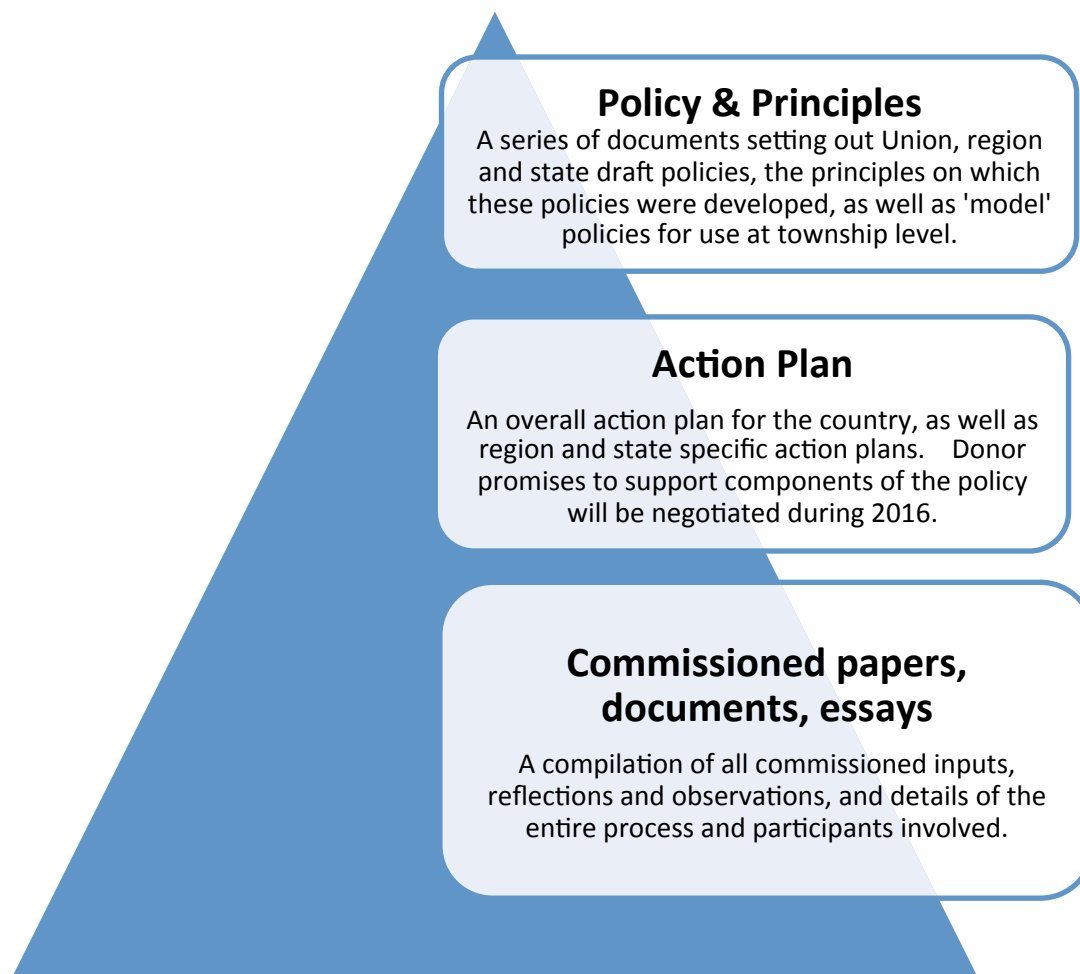
Padauk – The national flower of Myanmar

Language Policy Process

The following diagram shows the various steps that are contributing to the discussion and drafting of ideas for government to consider on national language policy, as well as the intended final outcome.



Publication of Outcomes



It is anticipated that the entire documentation will be published in late 2016. During 2016 the states and regions which have not participated so far will be included so that a local policy development process will be underway all across the country.

These documents will assist local communities, public officials researchers and state and Union parliaments to refine thinking and practice on language in education and beyond.

The Languages of Myanmar

Administratively, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar is divided into seven states, seven regions, one Union territory, five self-administered zones and one self-administered division. Although there is significant overlap between them, Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan states are all largely populated by corresponding ethnic identities. By contrast, the regions of Ayeyarwady, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintharyi, and Yangon are populated predominantly by ethnic Burman. The major ethnicities in Myanmar are Burman, Chinese, Indian, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, and, based on a 1988 ruling, Myanmar officially recognizes 135 official 'national races'.

The languages of Myanmar belong to several distinct families. Around 78% of people speak Tibeto-Burman languages, 10% speak Tai-Kadai languages and 7% speak Mon-Khmer languages. While there are 135 distinct languages these are normally grouped together into seven main 'ethnic' language clusters. These are Chin, Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Kayin (Karen), Mon, Rakhine and Shan, spoken by a combined number more than 23 million people (Bradley, 2015).

These ethno-linguistic groups are predominantly based in, but not limited to, their correspondingly-named State administrations. Other important immigrant languages in Myanmar include Chinese, Malay, Bengali and Sylheti, Hindu/Urdu, Tamil, Bisu, Eastern Tamang, and Iu Mien (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2015). Another group of about 11 languages can be identified with speaker populations exceeding 100,000 each. Within this great diversity exists a large number of nested dialects.

The national language, Myanmar (also known as Burmese) is represented across the national territory, claiming 32 million speakers (Watkins, 2007). A very similar script is used to write Myanmar language, Karen languages and Mon, which is a member of the Mon-Khmer group of Austroasiatic languages spoken in Myanmar and Thailand.



Map of the Administrative Regions of Myanmar.

Education

Myanmar is the sole language of government administration and the mass media and the main language of instruction for education. Exceptions do exist for medium of instruction for schooling including the use of English and Chinese in private schools and the use of mother tongues in certain local contexts.

The Myanmar Language Commission, a department of the Ministry of Education, is responsible for the development of the Myanmar language. Ethnic Burmans situated in the central areas of Myanmar are largely monolingual, while the ethnically diverse peoples in the border areas also know Myanmar language (Bradley, 2015).

Although English became the official language during British rule, indigenous groups continued to speak and learn their languages. After some years of being discouraged, English is again popular, mostly in urban areas and among more educated populations (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

During the colonial period, writing systems for many languages such as Chin, Kachin and Lahu were developed by missionaries. The first constitution of the Union of Burma (1947) guaranteed that all citizens could practice their own cultures and religions. Public schools taught in some of the major ethnic languages such as Chin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, and Shan, and some Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches taught in some of the smaller ethnic languages (Hlaing, 2007).

In 1962, the language then called Burmese became the only language of instruction for university and pre-university classes (except for English language classes). Some allowance for the teaching of minority languages at the early primary level in a small number of areas continued, with the Ministry of Education publishing textbooks in some minority languages until the early 1980s.

Over time increasing restrictions applied and by the mid 1980s many schools had stopped teaching in minority languages (Aye and Sercombe, 2014). In 1989 the government changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar and the name of the main national language from Burmese to Myanmar. Many other place names were also changed from the British equivalents in use since the time of the establishment of the British colony in 1886. These are examples of language status planning which set up the roles of different languages in society, discussed below.

Education is important in alleviating and preventing poverty, increasing health, political participation and social tolerance. Universal quality education is a key goal of creating a fair, healthy and socially inclusive world. UNESCO has argued, *'education enables people to escape from the trap of chronic poverty and prevents the transmission of poverty between generations'* (UNESCO, 2014, p.144).

There is a strong link between education and healthier populations due to a range of factors including the willingness to seek professional help in health issues, including vaccinations, and awareness of basic health standards in relation to the transmission of, and protection from diseases (UNESCO, 2014; Lo Bianco, 2016). Languages can pass into disuse and die, or they can be killed, but languages can also be revived and restored to health. The most famous example of this is Hebrew during the nineteenth

century, but today there are many examples of this, and even the case of Hebrew offers lessons to small indigenous languages (Zuckermann and Walsh, 2011). Even when languages appear strong they can be weak. When speakers of one language begin to regularly use a different and more powerful language for some part of their communication, the original language can lose its ability to express key ideas. Most of Myanmar's languages are not endangered but it is estimated that some 20 are "in trouble" and 3 are "dying" (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig, 2015).

Language rights are being increasingly asserted in international law, but the road to linguistic health is mostly through community action and education.

In addition to state education coordinated centrally a variety of other actors extend education provision, including in border zones, so that a range of fully integrated, semi-integrated and non-integrated community based and non-state ethnic group controlled school systems co-exist (Lall and South, 2014).

Large scale research studies and case studies have shown that mother-tongue learning programs that support transition to national language acquisition can lead to significantly better educational outcomes for minority children (e.g. Chumbow, 2013; UNESCO, 2007; Kosonen, Young and Malone, 2006).

Mother tongue education increases the participation rate of the most vulnerable children, whether their disadvantages are because of remoteness, alienation from schooling, cultural, gender, language reasons or poverty (UNESCO, 2014). A strong basis in initial literacy in the mother tongue also helps children in moving to higher order learning. Minority children can gain the literacy skills, academic concepts and study practices expected in schooling to proceed to upper levels of education, that is to 'learn deeply' (Tochon, 2014, see also Premasirirat, 2015 for powerful evidence of the benefit of mother tongue education in Thailand).

For several decades experiments in language education provision have shown that mother tongue education is not only a viable possibility for multiethnic countries but that it is the strongest basis and a wise investment in educational improvement (SEAMEO and The World Bank, 2009; MEWG, 2013).

Movement towards a consensus around multilingual education is a complex process in any nation, and is an issue that forms an important focus on the LESC Initiative in Myanmar and its current phase of supporting language policy discussions.



**Facilitated Dialogue,
Mawlamyine, November 2014**

Language Planning

The process of producing language policy is called language planning. There are many aspects to language planning but mostly it is a response to language problems, with three main activities language.

Status language planning: the constitutions and laws of different societies vary a great deal with respect to language recognition. Different languages can have different social, economic and legal roles. There are eleven official languages in South Africa: Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu. Canada has English and French across all its national territory but differing arrangements in some provinces. Switzerland has three official languages (French, German and Italian) and four 'national languages', the official languages plus Romansch. Some cities have official languages recognizing districts or areas according to language. The status of a language is also influenced by the strength economies where that language is used, or its spread across the world, or its strength in science, technology, research or other fields.

Corpus language planning: Unlike status language planning which is work mostly done by legislators, or which recognizes social power of different languages, another kind of language planning is done by professional linguists working directly with a community of speakers. This work is technical in nature but it must always be done in close collaboration the speakers of the language being developed. Corpus planning means finding new words for a language, to extend the topics that can be discussed, or to introduce that language into education, or to expand its role in education. Other kinds of corpus planning are when speakers and expert supporters produce a writing system for a language that is only spoken, or when an existing writing system is reformed or changed.

Language-in-education planning: This kind of language planning happens mostly in schools, colleges and universities, but not exclusively. It involves literacy and language study. When people make language in education planning decisions they are deciding which languages will be taught in school, whether they will be taught as a subject or used to teach concepts and material in the school, as a medium of instruction and examination, which languages literacy will be taught in, what language will be used in higher education lectures or tutorials or for reading and research. There are many kinds of language in education planning

Myanmar has a very rich language situation, and at any time all of these kinds of language planning are occurring. When the outcome of language planning is decided that becomes a language policy. The most effective policies are those that are constantly evaluated and reviewed to make sure they meet the needs of the society and its people. The most effective language planning is that which combines 'bottom up' processes, in which ordinary people along with technical experts, work with public officials to make decisions about language choices. Top-down language policy is when authorities decide language questions without consultation and impose these on the community. The most effective language planning and policy combines bottom up processes with clear decisions by the national authorities.

Comprehensive Language Planning

Because language and communication are part of all social, personal, and economic life, the ideal approach to language policies is to integrate action at local, regional and national levels and to address all the language questions of a community. In this way, all action can be coordinated.

This is the approach we are taking in Myanmar that is discussed in this brief report and at the Mandalay conference. One way to think about this is set out below:

Sub-National

This involves the 'ethnic races' in Myanmar discussing their ethnic languages and their place in the education of their children, but also in the delivery of services and in the local economy. This has been done so far in the Facilitated Dialogues across Myanmar. Part of this discussion is the relationship of local languages with the Myanmar language for national participation and with English. The state and township level is a suitable level to discuss language policy. The language planning can be related to language in education, language status and also corpus development. To be most effective this should link to the Union level.

National

This refers to access to the official language for all citizens, literacy for all and English for the mainstream education system. Through Facilitated Dialogues held in the national capital, Naypyitaw, the project has been coordinating national and state level policy discussion. The scope of the planning work extends beyond education to health, law and the economy.

Extra-National

This refers to the role of English and other languages of opportunities for international relations, development, diplomacy and trade. The world beyond any nation today is a source of influence on the choices that individuals and nations make about language. Whether it is through social media or other communication technologies, through travel, study, and work abroad, the 'extra' national links to the language choices a country makes domestically,

In summary, and guided by the Naypyitaw Principles, we are aiming for a policy of shared knowledge of Myanmar, widespread knowledge of English, strong support for mother tongues, and ethnic education rights and high standards of literacy for all learners in Myanmar education, as well as a wider culture of appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity and language rights.

Legal Framework

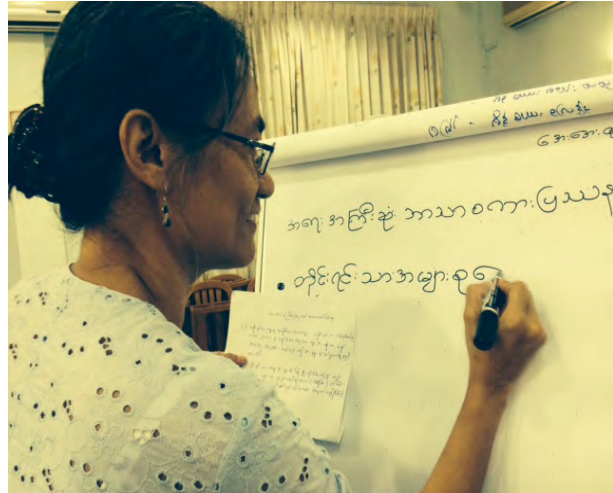
Since independence in early 1948, national Constitutions have recognised rights for “national races”, including the indigenous ethnic minority groups; (Appendix 1 1948 Constitution, Appendix 2 1974 Constitution, and Appendix 3 2008 Constitution).

In the 1974 Constitution, specific provisions for mutual respect and development and use of ethnic languages, traditions and customs were included and the 2008 Constitution, this was extended to language, literature, fine arts and culture (Bradley, 2015).

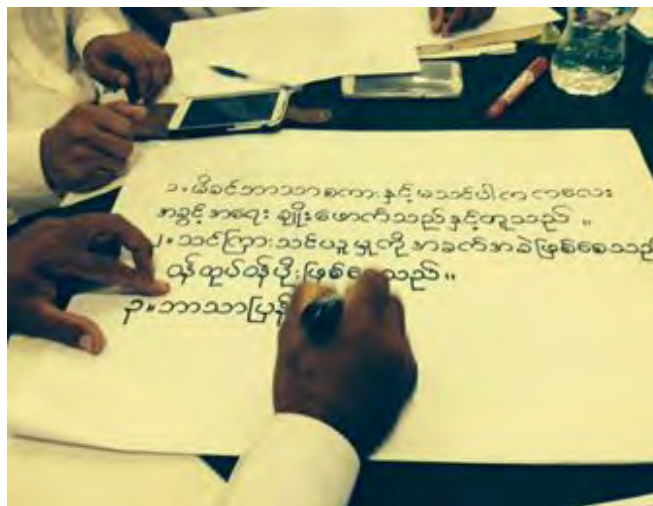
In the 2014 National Education Law and the 2015 Ethnic Rights Law, use and development of ethnic groups’ languages, literature, culture, art, traditions and historical heritage are supported.

Myanmar (in its original name of Burmese) has always been the official language and the main medium of education, government and the justice system (1948 Constitution Article 216, 1974 Constitution Article 102 and 152(b) and 2008 Constitution Article 450). English was co-official from 1948 but was dislodged in 1974.

In 1974 and 2008 the use of ethnic minority languages as a supplement to Myanmar in the justice system and education was permitted reinforced by the 2014 Education Law.



Facilitated Dialogue, Mawlamyine, May 2014



Writing Policy Statements, Facilitated Dialogue, Mawlamyine, May 2014

Facilitated Dialogues

The key method for developing the national language policy has been through facilitated dialogues. To date 16 such dialogues have taken place. Some recent examples are:

1. Mae Sot, February 2014

Many significant achievements emerged from the Mae Sot Facilitated Dialogue. A *Declaration of Ethnic Language and Education* was drafted during the gathering and a press release issued declaring the launch of the Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education (MINE). The press release introduces MINE as a group coordinating the work of Indigenous communities (Michaels, 2014).



Facilitated Dialogue, Mae Sot, February 2014

2. Mawlamyine, May 2014

The aims of the first of the Mawlamyine Facilitated Dialogues were to discuss the possibility of a state-based language policy. The political representatives and the community both agreed that new administration arrangements and political openness in the country made state initiatives feasible. More discussions led to agreement on a comprehensive language planning and policy framework for Mon state covering the main four languages involved, Karen language, Mon, Myanmar and Pa'o.



Facilitated Dialogue, Mawlamyine, November 2014

Critical questions including what should the policy for Mon State achieve for the Mon language, for Mon speaking children, for non-Mon speaking children in Mon state. Challenges included teacher availability, levels of continuation of Mon and Myanmar languages, English and, other languages; special needs and inclusive education, and an initiative to support the multilingual education delivery including a central language school.

Facilitated Dialogues

3. Naypyitaw, July 2014

Initial and later dialogues in Naypyitaw, were organized in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and other government agencies. The key focus was what benefits the country would gain by devoting time to preparing a national language policy. Discussion centered on questions of national cohesion and peaceful co-existence of all groups. Often



Facilitated Dialogue, Naypyitaw, July 2014

priorities for a language policy were improving children's literacy skills and higher education standards, the most effective way to improve employment in trades and professions. Eventually the Naypyitaw dialogues produced the Naypyitaw principles intended to guide and focus the discussions on language policy taking place across the country.

4. Hpa'an, 2015

A series of Facilitated Dialogues in Kayin state has also achieved a high level of consensus on school language teaching, on writing shared state based language aims, a preamble and priority actions for state policy, research and curriculum improvements, and produced a roadmap for continued development.

Other Dialogues

Since the initial meetings, further facilitated dialogues have been held in Naypyitaw, Yangon, Kayin state and in Myitkyina, Kachin state. A schedule of expanding these actions to all parts of the country is underway planned in 2016. Below is a list of facilitated dialogues:

- Indigenous and Ethnic Rights in Education. Yangon, 27-29 June, 2013
- Language Policy Forum, Eastern Burma Community Schools. Mae Sot, 12-14 February, 2014
- Education and Social Cohesion. Mawlamyine, 27-28 May, 2014
- Language Policy and Peacebuilding, Naypyitaw, 29-30 July, 2014
- Language Policy and Peacebuilding, Mawlamyine, 6-7 November, 2014
- Collective Policy Writing, Mawlamyine, 11-12 February, 2015
- National Coordination, Naypyitaw, March, 2015
- Deaf and Sign Language, Yangon, June, 2015

- Kayin State Policy, Hpa'an, June 2015
- Kachin State Language Policy, Myitkyina, June 2, 2015
- Deaf and Sign Language, Yangon, 27 October, 2015
- Kayin State Policy, Hpa'an, 23-24 October, 2015.
- Language Policy and Peacebuilding, mawlamyine, 22 October, 2015
- Kachin State Language Policy, Myitkyina, December 2-3, 2015
- Kayin State Language Policy, Hpa'an, December, 2015.
- Kayin State Language Policy, Hpa'an, January, 2016
- Mon State Language Policy, Mawlamyine, January 2016

Chin State, Shan State, Kayah State and townships, districts and other areas across Myanmar will be the priority focus for the remainder of 2016.

The Facilitated Dialogues have involved hundreds of participants from all walks of life. In their evaluations, participants were enthusiastic about the process. The most common evaluation statements were that the structured dialogues:

- *allowed for constructive and positive relationships between stakeholders (for example, by linking senior policy officials to indigenous community representatives to find concrete solutions to the problem of educating minority language children);*
- *established a space where multilingual education was discussed openly informed by best practice models from around the world;*
- *created a sense of ownership around languages and education (this is clear from the enthusiasm of participants to continue discussion, their active engagement with follow up activities, their flow on discussions within their own communities;*
- *stimulated a demand for policy development on the part of government at all levels including in townships;*
- *moved past acrimonious debates and entrenched positions and towards constructive and deliberated common ground around education, law reform, and multilingual provision in education;*
- *Expanded people's understanding of what is involved in language policy, especially its relevance to sectors beyond education such as health, law, foreign relations and trade;*
- *Promoted optimism and confidence that by working together public officials, community members and academic experts can jointly develop feasible solutions to practical problems.*



Facilitated Dialogue, Mae Sot, February 2014

Naypyitaw Principles

A major breakthrough in working towards a comprehensive multilingual language policy was achieved at the Facilitated Dialogues in Naypyitaw in 2014 and 2015. Participants agreed that if language policy discussions were to take place across the country they should be coordinated and guided by a common focus, while still allowing for local variation. As a result they adopted the Naypyitaw Principles, recommending that State level Facilitated Dialogues adapt these to suit local conditions. Finally, they called for a policy draft to be prepared in a collaborative way by mid to late 2016.



Facilitated Dialogue, Naypyitaw, July 2014

The Naypyitaw discussions concluded that the whole process offered significant national benefits in promoting national peace and reconciliation, supporting the education of minority children, improving social cohesion. These benefits are not only hoped for from the final result, but emerge from collaborative process of meeting together, discussing common problems guided by a facilitator, forging personal relationships, coming to understand each other's perspective and thinking about the role of communication across all sectors of society. The following are the Naypyitaw Principles, intended to guide the process of state and region language policies and also at the Union level.

Unity: by supporting all to learn Myanmar language and literacy, for common and equal citizenship

Diversity: by supporting ethnic and indigenous communities to maintain, enjoy and transmit their languages to their children

Cohesion: by promoting inclusion and participation for ethnic and indigenous minorities

Education: by improving equitable access and participation, literacy, vocational and life skills, and academic standards

Employment: by raising standards in Myanmar, English and mother tongues, where relevant, to help young people enter the competitive labour market including in trades and professions

Service delivery: by supporting communication planning to make sure that public administrations communicating effectively with all citizens especially interpreting and translation in health, legal contexts and social services

International relations: in order to support trade, diplomacy and travel through widespread knowledge of English, and labour migration in the context of ASEAN mobility, and learning of strategic foreign languages

Inclusive communication: by integrating support for visually and hearing impaired persons, and other citizens with communication difficulties

Ethnic rights: by recognizing the unique cultures and traditions of Myanmar's indigenous people.

Discussions on Language Policy at State Level

The language policy work includes top-down and bottom-up processes, from the centre to regions and states and from the regions and states back to the centre. In this process the aims and actions of the policy are being refined and better understood, creative solutions emerge from participants themselves, giving rise to new perspectives and original ideas. Work commenced in Mon state, then moved to Kayin and Kachin states. After the Mandalay conference Chin, Kayah, Shan and eventually all states will be fully included throughout the remainder of the life of the project.

Mon State

The outstanding achievement resulting from the dialogues in Mon state has been the full agreement on a balanced state policy. Many stakeholders, including state parliamentarians from different political parties and factions, moved from observer roles to ownership and commitment, leading the emergence of a singular group of government officials and civil society partners, drafting a preamble and a declaration of policy.

The policy includes action on behalf of all the languages within the state, such as Pa'o, Karen and Mon, as well as Myanmar, the official national language. Key components of the bilingual draft preamble for the policy are as follows.

“All ethnic groups should endeavor together to develop their states and regions. Therefore, it is essential to support the development of all indigenous mother tongues by all indigenous people. Mon, Kayin, Pao, Myanmar and other indigenous people are staying together in Mon state.



Facilitated Dialogue, Mawlamyine, May 2014

We believe that if mother tongue is used as Medium of Instruction in classroom or education sector, it will support children to get better learning achievement and to learn the things which are really relevant to their daily lives. Therefore, while developing national or state/regional policies, authority should consider developing mother tongue based policies which also encourage learning national and international languages. By doing so, it will reinforce unity which will encourage all indigenous people to get peace, well-being and happiness. Accordingly, we prepare and propose mother tongue based education policy which will promote the improvement of education quality, unity and upgrading cultural and traditional heritage for indigenous people in Mon state.”

Special and Inclusive Education

In this brief overview the situation of special and inclusive education should also be mentioned. There are four deaf schools and schools for the visually impaired in Myanmar. It is not often recognised that these children, and adults, have communication and language needs and rights. They are able to learn and work and should receive an education that allows them to achieve their highest individual abilities. One aim of the project is to support the efforts of practitioners, researchers, parents and schools currently meeting the needs of these learners, in and beyond school, and into adulthood.

Data regarding disabilities in Myanmar is limited (Foote, 2015). The World Health Organisation estimates the global rate of deafness to be 5.3% (WHO, 2012) but the estimate for Myanmar is only 1.3% (MoE, 2014), a figure widely believed to be a large underestimate of the real figure.

Field visits to deaf schools, blind schools and other institutions of special education have led to two very successful Facilitated Dialogues, both held in Yangon, on inclusive education (15 June, 2015 and 27 October, 2015).



Mary Chapman School for the Deaf – photo: Ellen Foote

The dialogue groups have begun the process of adopting the nine Naypyitaw Principles. This is a brief excerpt of the work they are doing, which is taken from the records of the Facilitated Dialogues.

The nation recognizes all forms of communication in all aspects of our daily life to ensure the full participation and inclusion of all citizens of Myanmar at all levels of Society.

All stakeholders living with disability should be part of the decision making process and long-term development of our nation.

Unity: *by supporting all to learn Myanmar language and literacy through all communication means, example sign language, braille, makatan, etc. for common and equal citizenship;*

Diversity: *by supporting ethnic and indigenous communities to maintain, enjoy and transmit their languages to their children including access to early year education to mother tongue*

Cohesion: *by promoting inclusion and participation for ethnic, people with disability and indigenous minorities;*

Education: *by improving equitable access for children whose language is not mother tongue, children with disability etc. and participation, literacy, vocational and life skills, and academic standards;*



Mary Chapman School for the Deaf – photo: Ellen Foote

Service delivery: by supporting communication planning to make sure that public administration including emergency situation are communicating effectively using all communication means with all citizens especially interpreting and translation in health, legal contexts and social services;



Mary Chapman School for the Deaf – photo: Ellen Foote

This brief report outlines only a small number of the many developments underway in discussing and influencing language policy. The International Conference was planned to play a key role in this overall process. We hope that Myanmar and international colleagues from diverse academic, community and official capacities will contribute to the process of improving education for the children of Myanmar, by supporting a widespread language policy that meets the needs of 21st century citizens.

We will be circulating a brief questionnaire to participants. Volunteers will be circulating to interview you about your experiences in language education and language policy and what you would recommend we include in our future work. Please take the time to fill it in and return it to the address below. Thank you very much for your interest in our project and in this Conference. We wish you a productive and enjoyable time in Mandalay!

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Mandalay Conference

This flyer announces the Conference, an important step in the “peace promoting national language policy” for Myanmar. Over 300 delegates, many from abroad, will discuss options, research and principles and contribute to language policy for the children and community of Myanmar, and all its peoples.



The International Conference on Language Policy in Multicultural and Multilingual Settings Mandalay, Myanmar February 8-11, 2016

As part of the UNICEF/University of Melbourne Language, Education and Social Cohesion project, a major International conference on language policy in multilingual and multicultural settings is being held at the University of Mandalay, Myanmar on February 8-11, 2016. The organisers invite scholars, practitioners, language and cultural groups, school and university planners to submit abstracts on multilingual education, language policy, social cohesion, and peacebuilding themes to participate in this inaugural conference. The organisers look forward to your participation in this exciting opportunity to deepen understanding, share experiences and discuss progress in language policy and multilingual education. Distinguished international and local speakers will present papers on critical issues and developments. Official representatives from across Southeast Asia will report on the state of multilingual education and language policy in diverse countries. In addition to the plenary speakers, the conference invites local actors including advocacy representatives, government officials, teachers, community members, and academics to present on any aspect of multilingual language policy and its implications in Southeast Asia and more widely. For more information visit our website:

www.myanmarlp-conference.com

Convened by Professor Joseph Lo Bianco

Supporting Partners



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