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Certifying Refugee Education **Problems faced by Burmese refugees in Thailand**

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About ZOA issue papers

The ZOA issue papers are a series of short papers focusing on current significant educational issues and strategies within the refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border. They are meant to provide brief, organised and coherent information, to generate questions and interest, and to add to public understanding of the challenges and positive outcomes of education in the refugee camps. They are written by researchers and practitioners and edited by an independent editor. The views expressed in the papers do not necessarily represent the views of ZOA Refugee Care Thailand.

About the author

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Introduction

In January 2008, a group of practitioners working on refugee education gathered at the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning and asserted that “[t]he right to certification is an essential part of the right to quality education” (UNESCO/IIEP, 2008). This is a concept that seems basic enough. However, thousands of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrants from around the world hold certificates that are not recognised by their host countries, preventing them from gaining access to further education and work opportunities.

“I feel like I got an education, so no problem, but I would like if my certificate was legal”, explained one 19-year-old graduate in Umpiem Mai refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Burma. Her plea is shared by thousands of youth, parents and educators along the border where, every year, students from Burma living in refugee camps and migrant communities in Thailand receive educational certificates that are not recognised by the Thai government or by Burma’s military government.

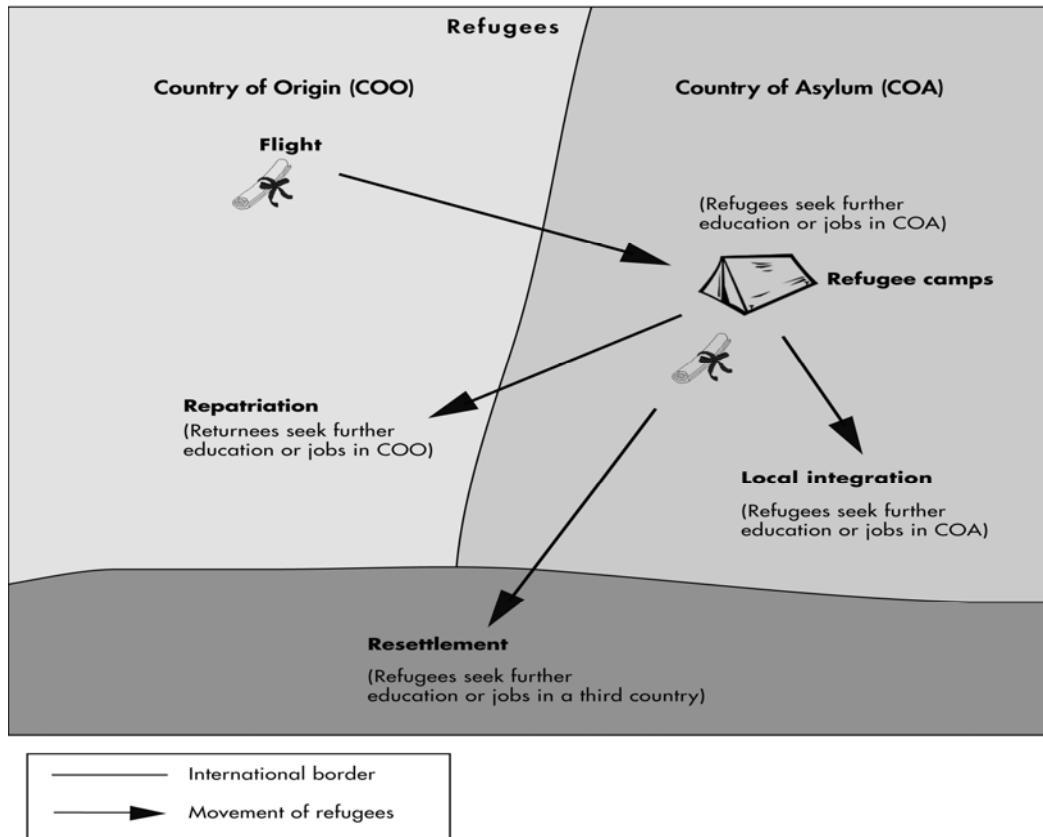
This paper will look at the concept of educational certificates for refugees, IDPs and migrants, the background of education certificates along the Thai-Burmese border; the political and social issues surrounding educational certification, and the strengths and limitations of current (unrecognised) certificates, as reported by refugees and migrants.

The information for this article was collected between March and May 2007, through semi-formal interviews with staff from NGOs, UN agencies as well as Thai government personnel, and refugees and migrants living in Thailand. From the interviews, it was discovered that although current educational certificates are valued in the community, there needs to be an educational certificate that can be used in all paths that the refugees have available to them. This certificate would allow the refugees to keep the education that they value, yet allow refugee youth to seek the university education and jobs they desire outside the refugee community (if possible under Thai law).

Education certificates and refugees

The importance of refugee education has been recognised by both the Thai government and the international community. However, the issue of who should certify the education that students receive in the camps has not been resolved. The realities of educational certification are that if it does not have the approval of a nation state, the educational certificates received are less likely to be recognised internationally (Talbot, 2006: 4).

Figure 1 outlines the issues faced by refugees with regards to certification. It shows that the very nature of being a refugee requires mobility. A refugee who arrives at a refugee settlement and has the opportunity of pursuing education activities has to consider the purpose of that education vis-à-vis repatriation, local integration, resettlement or extended stay. In each of these cases, in order to gain access to certain work and education opportunities, refugees need to show proof of the education they obtained prior to their arrival in the refugee settlement. Some refugees will have no certificates at all, having left them behind or lost them during their flight from danger. For those with certificates, showing that they have achieved certain standards of formal education is extremely difficult if their certificates are not recognised. In many such cases, the years of formal education received do not count.

Figure 1 | Certification Scenarios from Talbot (2006)

There is little written about certification and what has been documented does not give clear guidance to practitioners. The Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crisis and Early Reconstruction, outlined the following with regards to certification:

In refugee situations, certification typically involves substantial negotiations with both the asylum and home countries. Ideally, in longer-term refugee situations, the curricula need to 'face both ways' and be acceptable in both the country of origin and the host country. This requires significant regional and inter-agency coordination to harmonise educational activities and refugee caseloads in different countries (INEE, 2004: 54).

Currently, work is being done to elaborate on the issues of certification and to outline some best case scenarios. A research collaboration between the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Amsterdam Institute for Metropolitan and International Development Studies (AMIDSt) of the University of Amsterdam and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands examined the issues of educational certification for refugee and displaced students around the world, using a range of case studies. These have highlighted the strategies that different displaced populations, governmental and nongovernmental actors have used to address certification challenges. For example, the Burundian Education Department developed policies for the certification of the education for returning refugees/IDPs and for local integration (Kirk, 2008).

Certification along the Thai-Burmese border

Education is highly valued among the people of Burma and especially amongst the Karen (an ethnic group from Burma's eastern border). Therefore, when refugees from the Karen state were forced to flee to Thailand starting around 1984, education was continued in the refugee communities. However, it was not until 1994 that the Royal Thai Government allowed international NGOs to assist these communities in the provision and administration of their education. It was believed that allowing NGOs to provide educational assistance to refugees would be too much of a draw for more people from Burma to flee to Thailand (Representative from Thailand's Ministry of Interior, speech at education along the border conference at Chulalongkorn University, 11 May 2007). Therefore, before 1994, locally based organisations, such as the Karen Education Department, were responsible for organising and certifying the education that was administered.

In recent years, considerable progress has been made in the discussions between the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) and education NGOs regarding refugee and migrant education. However, the work by the MOE can sometimes be at odds with that of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) which is concerned with security and the (il)legal status of the refugees and migrants. Although this is being worked on and progress is being made, it is still a long political process.

Figure 2 outlines the educational opportunities that refugees in the seven predominantly Karen camps have available to them. The boxes that are not connected by arrows are choices that are available without formal education. At each level of education, students receive certificates that allow them to attend the next level. The blue boxes represent formal education and the green boxes represent work opportunities where education is a requirement. The brown and red boxes represent migration from the border areas. University education is listed as one of the options. However, it must be emphasised that this is only available to a very select few who are able to obtain Burmese or Thai passports/ID cards and who manage to receive extensive training beyond the secondary schooling that is offered in the camps and migrant schools.

Security Council (NSC) urged the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) to become more involved in the administration and curriculum of these schools so that they could regulate them. Before these events, it seemed that the MOE had wanted to assist migrant schools under the international 'Education for All' goals but could not do so as these schools were considered illegal (Director of World Education, interview, 19 April 2007). Now that the NSC has officially invited the MOE to become involved in these schools, discussions relating to the Royal Thai government's involvement in assisting and facilitating the certification of the education of Burmese refugees and migrants are being held for the first time.

At present, the solution being discussed between the Royal Thai government and international NGOs is for the Thai Ministry of Education to certify refugee and migrant education. The proposed plan is that 70 percent of the curriculum in refugee and migrant schools will consist of the subjects and content in the Thai curriculum, specifically mathematics, science, Thai and English. The remaining 30 percent would contain local content, allowing the refugee and migrant community to teach their own history, language and culture.

Although receiving Thai certificates would assist refugees in obtaining a recognised education, there is also the issue of ensuring that the education they receive is relevant to them. Currently, the Thai government does not want refugees to leave the camps and settle in Thailand. That begs the question: should refugees be receiving an education that is focused on a country that does not want to integrate them?

The issues of certification in the refugee camps

The following section will outline some of the positive aspects of the certificates currently being awarded by the KED and highlights the inherent limitations.

Community ownership

There is a great deal of pride over the current education system. The head teacher of a middle school in Nu Po camp explained that he is proud of his school as the "teachers are clever and good and the students are hard working" (interview, 15 May 2007).

There is also a strong nationalistic component to this feeling of ownership – that it is a Karen education system. But what makes it Karen? What does it mean for community ownership when there are other ethnic groups going through the system who are not Karen? One history teacher in the Karen education system who is of Mon ethnicity explains that he was interested in learning Karen history. However, he took it upon himself to learn about Mon history in the library as it was not part of the curriculum.

Value and relevance of the camp education

The research findings show that the education system does assist people who remain in the community. Chin, for example, is 22 years old and has worked for an NGO for the past two years. She came to Thailand before completing Standard 8 after her father had been blacklisted in Burma and her family began to be harassed by the Burmese government. During the interview, she explained that since her arrival in Thailand, she has attained her certificate for Standard 10 and has attended two Post-10 programmes where she learnt English and management skills. Now she has a good job with an NGO. She reported that she has friends who went to school in Burma and went on to university and who now work as house maids. She feels that the value of the certificates in the community has risen now that people who obtained these certificates are being hired as camp-based staff by international NGOs (interview, 18 April 2007). So, although the certificates have no currency in most of Thailand, Burma and the rest of the world, they do have some within this community, which includes the camps and the NGOs.

One Burmese medic along the border understands that the certificates received on the border are not recognised. However, he felt that the education is far superior to what is available in Burma. He believed that the final year secondary students in the camps have more advanced English skills than university students studying English in Burma (interview, 21 May 2007).

Therefore, for many, the certificate is not their ultimate concern. Instead, the skills acquired are more important. However, as the next section shows, the use-value of the current certificates is limited.

Limitations of the current certificates

While education and certificates provided in the camps are of value within the context of the camp environment, this is not the case throughout Thailand. Even if the situation regarding freedom of movement within Thailand can be resolved, the certificates received in the camps cannot be used to enter university programmes. This is a major concern for the majority of youth along the border.

Furthermore, a refugee community, by its very nature, is transient and this community has received no guarantee of being able to remain in Thailand. Since 2004, 26,112 refugees have been repatriated from the Thai-Burmese border to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the United States, Norway, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (IOM, 2007). How useful are the educational certificates received along the border in the countries of resettlement? Further studies need to be conducted on the experiences of refugees who have already been resettled. Moreover, of what value are their certificates if they are not recognised by other nation states? Even if Thai accreditation can be achieved, is there any guarantee that other countries will recognise Thai certificates? Finally, whilst accreditation is extremely valuable, it should not happen at the expense of relevance to the current and future needs of the refugees, especially those who are likely to return (eventually) to Burma.

Conclusion

Educational certification for refugees from Burma living in Thailand is more complicated than in other refugee situations because the conflict in Burma has lasted so long. This is further complicated by the fact that most of the curriculum being taught is neither from Burma nor from Thailand, but from a community-based organisation (the KED) that considers itself the Ministry of Education of a government in exile. There is value placed on the certificates because the education provided is successful in developing the skill set that refugees need to obtain jobs and to further their learning within the community. However, what needs to be emphasised is that this group of people cannot stay in this community in the long-term. They are in a country that will eventually want them to either go back to Burma or to be resettled abroad.

The discussions in this paper have highlighted that there are difficulties and even tensions between the felt and voiced needs of the community and the development of a curriculum that can be accredited against a set of national standards. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the relationship of any recognised, accredited education to the potential future scenarios that the refugees will encounter. It is crucial to take these dilemmas into account when negotiating for the accreditation of the curriculum and to try, as much as possible, to strike a balance between the different actors and their needs.

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ZOA Refugee Care is a Netherlands-based NGO established in 1973. It provides support to refugees, displaced people and victims of natural disasters. ZOA works in various countries in Asia and Africa. At the moment, it implements projects in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Thailand and Uganda. Since 1984, ZOA has been working with Burmese refugees living in camp settlements in Thailand. Currently, ZOA implements projects in seven refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border in the areas of general education, vocational training, and food and shelter.

Since 1997, ZOA has been providing support to Burmese refugees in Thailand to enable them to manage and improve their own community education system. This support is provided through the Karen Education Project (KEP), the fourth phase of which started in January 2006. The main intervention areas of KEP are in-service teacher training and support, curriculum and textbook development, institutional capacity building, community development, and the provision of operational services, such as school construction, payment of teacher subsidies and the provision of school supplies. The challenge for the future will be to assist the further improvement of the quality of education and to ensure sustainability of project interventions in a protracted refugee situation, with a considerable degree of uncertainty about future scenarios for the refugees.

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