



ED/GEMR/MRT/2018/P1/16/REV

Background paper prepared for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report

*Migration, displacement and education:*

*Building bridges, not walls*

## **EDUCATION FOR DISPLACED POPULATIONS IN KAREN STATE, MYANMAR**

*This paper was commissioned by the Global Education Monitoring Report as background information to assist in drafting the 2019 GEM Report, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the Global Education Monitoring Report or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: "Paper commissioned for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls". For further information, please contact [gemreport@unesco.org](mailto:gemreport@unesco.org).*

## Education for Displaced Populations in Karen State, Myanmar

### **ABSTRACT**<sup>1</sup>

This paper provides an account of the changing education environment for children in Karen ethnic communities in Myanmar, drawing on data collected through the implementation of a child protection project. Due to more than 60 years of armed conflict and displacement in Karen State, education services for children are seriously fragmented. There are various types of education services in ethnic armed group-controlled areas, including those run by the central government and also others run by the Karen National Union (KNU). A substantial number of children cross the border into Thailand where they attend schools in Karen refugee camps, Migrant Learning Centres, and even Thai state schools. Since the 2012 ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar central government and the KNU, the former's influence over education in Karen state has been increasing. Although a democratisation process is taking place in Myanmar, consensus about the provision of education for ethnic minority children has yet to emerge.


### **1. INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION AND DISPLACEMENT**

The world is now seeing a level of human displacement unprecedented since the end of the Second World War. UNHCR data show that nearly 66 million people across the globe have been forced to flee their homes in recent years. Of these about 23 million are categorised as refugees, the remaining 43 million as internally displaced people.

Ensuring education for refugee and displaced children is an enormous task. It is estimated that only about 60% of refugee children of primary school age have access to education (UNHCR 2017). The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which was signed in 2016 by 193 states, advocates to ensure right to receive education for refugee children:

---

<sup>1</sup> Views expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of Save the Children.



We are determined to provide quality primary and secondary education in safe learning environments for all refugee children, and to do so within a few months of the initial displacement. We commit to providing host countries with support in this regard. Access to quality education, including for host communities, gives fundamental protection to children and youth in displacement contexts, particularly in situations of conflict and crisis. (United Nations 2016)

The recognition of education as a critical component of the international response to the refugee crisis is perceived as a significant advance by many aid workers, because traditional interventions did not include education, but were oriented towards 'life-saving' activities such as provision of food, medicine, and shelter (UNHCR 2017).

Increasing access to education for displaced children is imperative, but improving the quality of education they receive is equally important. Issues such as curriculum, language of instruction, and teacher qualification are often difficult to resolve in an emergency setting. Furthermore, cross-border education poses complex challenges in terms of students' qualifications for further and higher education.

Educational provision for children who have crossed international borders can be divided into three main categories according to the provenance of the curriculum followed.

In the first category, refugee children use the host country's national curriculum. An example is seen with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda and Kenya who readily accepted the curricula of their host countries. In refugee camps in Kakuma, Kenya, for example, children and young people from South Sudan attend primary and secondary schools which are supervised by the Kenyan Government, and they take Kenya's national examinations. This is partly because the refugees' home country situation has been so unstable and also because Kenya's public education system is regarded highly among the refugee population<sup>2</sup>.

In the second category, refugee children follow the curriculum of their country of origin. During the early days of the current Syria Crisis, Syrian refugees brought their own country's curriculum into host countries, including Lebanon and Turkey among others. Some Syrian teachers and

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview with an NGO worker based in Kenya (September 2016).

parents opened temporary learning centres in the expectation that their stay in the host countries would be temporary. Language was a further barrier to the acceptance of the host country's curriculum, Turkish being a very different language from Arabic, the language of instruction in Syria (Watkins 2016). But the use of the Syrian national curriculum in Lebanon and Turkey has been increasingly proscribed by the host governments on the ground that there should be no parallel curricula in schools located in their jurisdiction (Save the Children 2017).

In the third category, the curriculum does not derive from either the refugees' country of origin or from the host country. Karen refugees in Thailand are an example. The refugees brought with them a curriculum which had been developed by the Karen community in Myanmar. The children in a population of about 100,000 mainly Karen ethnic refugees currently follow this curriculum in the camps in Thailand. Furthermore, a substantial number of children in the Karen State of Myanmar are taught in the same curriculum, primarily in areas which are controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU), the main Karen armed opposition group. Graduates of this education system are mostly unable to speak the Burmese language fluently, or to integrate with the Myanmar government's education system; they are oriented towards a Karen national identity, rather than Myanmar citizenship (Lall and South 2014). The Karen curriculum clearly helped to develop and reproduce a separate identity among its students.

## **2. CONTEXTUALISING DISPLACEMENT AND EDUCATION IN**

### **KAREN**

Myanmar is currently undergoing a political transition. In 2011, the country's military regime initiated a transfer of powers to the civilian government, which was formed by the military-backed party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). In the following few years, this government freed political prisoners, allowed Aung San Suu Kyi to carry out political visits to parts of the country, and agreed truces with anti-government ethnic armed forces in Kachin and Shan states, among other political reforms. General elections were held in November 2015, and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory.

Many people believed that this ended more than fifty years of military rule. But in reality, the military has not completely renounced its power. In the Parliament, 25 percent of its members are selected by the head of the army, who also has the authority to appoint key government

ministers, including the Defence Minister, Home Affairs Minister, and Border Affairs Minister. Some call the current regime a 'democracy on a leash' (Farmaner 2015). The army is outside the control of the new NLD government, defining its own budget requirements. It is estimated that military spending is currently far higher than that of the health and education sectors combined (UNICEF 2013)<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to the military, the NLD government has no control over the police, justice system and security services, and over ceasefire negotiations in ethnic minority states. Earlier truces in Kachin and Shan States were broken, and armed conflicts are occurring even today. The NLD government adopts the position that it engages in political dialogue with ethnic armed groups collectively, rather than individually. This means that even though the Karen groups signed a ceasefire agreement with the central government, they need to wait until the other armed groups agree to sign peace agreements to advance their political dialogue with the central government. But these negotiations are in the hands of the military.

The Karen people, the third largest ethnic group in Myanmar after the Burmese and the Shan, have been struggling for sovereignty since Myanmar's independence in 1948<sup>4</sup>. Conflicts arose over ethnic rights and identity, self-governance, and control of natural resources. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the Karen National Union (KNU) was one of the strongest among a number of armed ethnic groups in the country, controlling vast territories especially in inaccessible and

---

<sup>3</sup> According to a UNICEF report, Myanmar government spending as percentage of GDP in health and education in 2012/2013 were 0.7 and 1.8 respectively. These figures are far lower than those in Vietnam and Thailand. In Vietnam, the government spent 2.8% of GDP for the health sector, and nearly 5% for education (UNICEF 2013, 10).

<sup>4</sup> Ethnic minority communities make up about 30% of the total population in Myanmar. Karen communities are located in southeast Myanmar, and in the Irrawaddy Delta area in the southwest of the country. During the British period, elites from hill-tribe ethnic groups such as the Karen came under the patronage of missionaries and state administrators. Towards the end of and immediately after the Second World War, the ethnic majority Burman sentiment turned against the Karen, because the Karen were perceived to be tightly associated with the British colonial rulers (Lall 2016).

under-developed areas in Karen State. Due to the fighting, a large number of people were displaced, many of whom sought refuge in jungles. During the height of the fighting in the 1980s, an estimated 150,000 lived in the refugee camps on the Thailand-Myanmar border (Oh and Stouwe 2008). Since the 1990s, however, Karen's armed opposition groups have lost control of their "liberated zones" to the government forces. Nevertheless, struggle and fighting continued until 2012, when a ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and the Myanmar government<sup>5</sup>.

Currently, the most serious concern for many Karen children and their parents is that they are being kept uncertain about their futures. The Karen education system prepares children for a life outside of Myanmar and they are unable to shift to the national Myanmar system readily. Since the Myanmar democratisation process was launched in 2011, discussion between the KNU and the Myanmar government as to the "convergence" or "integration" between the two different education systems has made little progress.

The use of a minority language in public education is a sharply contested issue. The Karen curriculum by KNU uses the Karen language. On the other hand, Karen people are well aware that unless their children understand the Burmese language, they will not be able to integrate themselves into the State of Myanmar. Karen educators are entering the stage where they need to rethink their separatist agenda. But at the same time, the government needs to engage in political dialogue in relation to the concerns of ethnic minority communities.

In the 1950s, Karen communities had access to education services to varying degrees, sometimes in their own languages<sup>6</sup>. These services were provided by the state as well as by mission schools, most of which had been established during the colonial period. Following General Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962, however, the country saw a significant expansion of the military's influence on national life. The use of Karen and other minority languages in education

---

<sup>5</sup> A range of Karen armed factions split from the KNU since 1990, including the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA).

<sup>6</sup> The Karen people are divided into several sub-groups. The three major subgroups are Sgaw, Pwo, and Pa'o. Their languages are not entirely mutually intelligible.

was increasingly suppressed, and regulations were introduced requiring that all subjects be taught in the national Burmese language. This led to a long-lasting conflict, although throughout this extended period, informal teaching in local languages continued, sponsored mainly by churches and monasteries (Lall and South 2014).

In response to the military regime's suppression and "Burmanisation" of national culture, ethnic nationality groups sought to develop separate education systems to preserve and reproduce their identities and cultures (Lall 2016). Some of these ethnic education actors came from civil society, and in particular, from Christian and Buddhist associations. With an influx of external support after the 1988 democracy uprising in Myanmar, non-state education provision expanded, leading to an extensive ethno-nationalist-oriented school system running parallel to the official state system (Lall and South 2014).

Across the border in Thailand, those who fled Myanmar to escape the fighting in the 1980s started to set up and administer their own schools in the refugee camps with minimal support from some NGOs<sup>7</sup>. All the teachers, principals, teacher trainers, and school committee members were drawn from the local refugee communities (Oh 2010). The camp education regime was administered by the KNU; curricula, staff and materials were shared between the camps and KNU-controlled areas in Myanmar (Lall and South 2014).

Currently, the management of education programmes in the refugee camps is coordinated by the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), in collaboration with NGOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs). The KRCEE was created in 2009, with the aim of placing some distance between refugee education initiatives in the camps and the KNU-affiliated Karen Education Department (KED) (Oh 2010, Lall and South 2014). As of 2014, the majority of the 64 schools in seven Karen refugee camps were administered by the KRCEE (Ninne 2014).

---

<sup>7</sup> Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, but it does provide a limited form of sanctuary to refugees. It also allows local and international NGOs to operate in the camps. With the perspective that inflow of the Karen refugees would be temporary, the Thai government never allowed the Karen refugee children to attend government schools. As a result, Karen children's schooling was confined to the refugee camps (Oh 2010).

The main beneficiaries of camp education are children and young people residing in the camps, but a certain number of children from families living in Myanmar have been attending the schools in the refugee camps in Thailand as well. Some attend the schools as boarders, while others live with relatives who are camp residents. Large-scale external support for education in the camps became available after 1997, when the Thai government started to allow international NGOs to provide education services (Oh 2010). A variety of initiatives to improve teaching and learning materials and teaching standards were undertaken, with varying degrees of success. This led some Karen community members in Myanmar to send their children to the camp schools across the border, rather than enrolling them in the indigenous school system in conflict-affected areas of southeast Myanmar. This was motivated by the perception that the quality of education in the camps was higher than that in their local schools in Myanmar.

In the 2000s a network of alternative schools called Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) grew up in towns and villages in Thailand along the border with Myanmar. along the Thai-Myanmar border to provide education for some of the children of economic migrant workers from Myanmar. There are currently 1.5 million such workers in Thailand (IOM 2016), a large number of them being from Karen, Shan, and Mon States<sup>8</sup>. Most national data in Thailand exclude unregistered families and children, so the number of migrant workers' children who are out of school is difficult to estimate. Some of the children attend Thai government schools, but many others do not, partly because of perceived risks of deportation, but also because of the language barrier. MLCs were established as an alternative education option for migrant workers' children. Many of these MLCs were set up by migrant community members themselves, the majority of whom were former activists in Myanmar, favouring a liberal pluralist political system in that country (Nawarat 2014). Some of the MLCs adopted the Karen Education Department's curriculum, often in combination with Myanmar government textbooks.

---

<sup>8</sup> These are areas where ethnic-based armed movements have been rife, causing suffering in various forms including village displacement, land confiscation, and forced labour. People's lives and livelihoods were severely disrupted, causing many to seek migrant worker status in Thailand (Nawarat 2014).



### 3. EDUCATION STATUS AND TYPES OF SCHOOL OPTIONS FOR KAREN CHILDREN

A prominent feature of education services for Karen children on both sides of the border is that they are in a state of fragmentation. Various types of schooling coexist but few of them offer children and young people a real opportunity to fulfil their education needs. This is largely a consequence of more than 60 years of armed conflict and displacement. The divided nature of the Karen community also contributes, with different sub-groups speaking various dialects, and practising different religions. Furthermore, the influence of various external factors such as missionaries and aid agencies have contributed to further complication of the education systems (Lall and South 2014). But, at the same time, the variety of schooling also demonstrates these Karen communities' genuine aspiration for and commitment to education of their children, despite the very difficult political and economic circumstances.

In the Karen State of Myanmar<sup>9</sup>, outside the shrinking bastions of KNU control, the Myanmar government's presence in education has become increasingly strong especially after the ceasefire agreement in 2012. Schooling is often organised by communities, with varying degrees of external support. The type of school the child attends is determined by availability, perceived quality, and language of instruction. Education affordability for the parents is also an important factor.

According to the 2014 Myanmar census, the total population of the Karen State was roughly 1.5 million, of which children under the age of 14 were around 540,000 (Department of Population 2015). UNESCO data show that the primary completion rate in Karen in 2015 was 66%, while the national average was 79%. At the secondary level, the national completion rate for the same year was 42%, as against 31% in Karen<sup>10</sup>. Clearly, access to education in Karen is limited in

---

<sup>9</sup> The Karen National Union's administrative boundaries are not necessarily identical with those set by the central government.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.education-inequalities.org/countries/myanmar/#?dimension=all&group=all&year=latest>

comparison with other regions of the country. In Karen, it is often the case that those clusters selected for survey purposes are not visited by enumerators because they were considered inaccessible due to security concerns. This suggests that these access figures may be even lower than the official figures.

According to the Demographic and Health Survey Report from which UNESCO data are derived, among the sampled women aged between 15 and 49 in Karen, 22% had never been to school, while those who had completed primary education were only 11%. In the case of male participants, rates were even lower: as many as 32% had never been school and only 10% completed primary school (Ministry of Health and Sports and DHS Program 2017, 35-36).

Karen State is roughly divided into KNU-controlled areas, areas controlled by other non-state armed groups, and government-controlled areas, with a number of villages lacking clear affiliation. Boundaries among these areas are often difficult to delineate. Furthermore, villages with affiliation to different groups are spread in a divergent and mosaic-like way, except for Hpa Pun Township in the north, which is largely under KNU authority. These factors affect the types of education which is available for children.

In government-controlled areas, it appears that most children have access to state schools. In KNU-controlled areas and areas controlled by other groups, by contrast, there is much fragmentation. Table 1 shows six types of education available for children in Karen State.

The author has been visiting the border areas intermittently since 2015 to provide technical inputs for a child protection project within Karen State. Data presented in this paper are based on observations and interviews conducted between 2015 and 2018 in Mae Sot in Thailand near the border with Myanmar, as well as in two townships in Karen State, Myanmar. Township A is located at the centre of Karen State, with areas controlled by both the government and KNU. Township B is located along the border with Thailand, and KNU has a predominating control. Observations were conducted in schools and communities in both townships. Interviews were held with teachers working for both government schools and KED schools, pupils and their parents, community members supporting project activities with Save the Children, aid workers of international and national NGOs, and some KED staff members.

The first three types of education in the table are located inside Myanmar, while the following three are in Thailand. The various types of schooling are summarised as follows<sup>11</sup>.

**Table 1: Types of education available for Karen children in Karen State of Myanmar and in Thailand**

Location	Type of school and cycle	Curriculum and Language of instruction	Cost	Remarks
Myanmar:	1. Government schools (primary level G1-5, middle level G6-9, high school level G10-11)	Myanmar government curriculum, Burmese language.	No fees. Textbooks, uniforms, stationary are free at primary level. Textbooks are free at all levels.	In government school areas, parents do not have to make any contribution, financial or in kind. In some areas villagers may voluntarily support teachers by providing a room and/or food.
	2. Karen Education Department (KED) schools, or Community Schools (Kindergarten, primary level G1-6, middle level	KED curriculum, Karen language (Sgaw Karen), some schools have adopted the government curriculum, hence are affiliated with government schools and are	Registration fee 100 Bhat (=USD 3) for primary, 200 Bhat for middle-level, 300 B for high schools.	All households in some KED villages are required to contribute 100 to 500 Bhat a year, plus in kind contribution. The amount varies.

<sup>11</sup> There are several other types of schools, including private schools and monastic schools. A number of Buddhist monasteries operate schools in Karen, as is common throughout the country.

	G7-9, high school level (G10-12)	teaching in Burmese.		
	3. Faith-based Schools owned by communities (Primary Grade 1-5 only)	In Township B, KED curriculum is used (taught in Karen). In Township A, government curriculum is used (but taught in Karen).	In Township B, registration fee is required. In Township A, fee costs USD1 to 2 plus rice for teachers.	Teacher salaries paid by KED and churches.
<b>Thailand:</b>	4. KED schools up to Grade 12  In total there are 64 Karen schools in 7 Karen camps.	KED curriculum, Karen (in Sgaw Karen)	Registration fee 1,000 Bhat (only once). Textbooks and stationary are free. In some schools, uniforms are free.	Many NGOs provide education support. Some foreign volunteer come to teach English. This is a pull factor.
	5. Migrant Learning Centres (primary, middle, up to Grade 12), after grade 12, plus 2	Each MLC has its own curriculum (Burmese national, Karen, various), Burmese languages mainly. Some large MLCs offer post-grade-10 classes, and also vocational training and night classes.	Usually around 1,000 Bhat per year for day students, fee varies from school to school. There is a substantial number of boarding students (exact data not available).	As of March 2015, there were 66 MLCs with 14,000 students and 800 teachers in five districts in Tak Province in Thailand.

	<p>6. Thai public schools (there are only primary schools along the border with Myanmar)</p>	<p>Thai government curriculum, Thai language.</p>	<p>Registration fee and event fee (various activities throughout the year, Royal family's birthday, Mother's Day etc.). Textbooks and stationary are free.</p>	<p>Thai language is a pull factor, as some parents believe that comprehension of Thai helps children to find jobs.</p>
--	--	---	--	--

## GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

There are currently 1,738 primary, middle, and high schools operated by the Myanmar government in Karen State<sup>12</sup>. Most of them are located in government-controlled areas. In such schools, the national curriculum is followed, and students are taught in the Burmese language. In recent years, in KNU and other armed-group-controlled areas, there is an increasing number of schools which were previously under authority of the KED (Karen Education Department) but now function as government schools. Some communities have decided to opt for the Myanmar government system not only because education becomes free, but also because they feel that learning the Myanmar language is important and necessary for their children. They perceive that studying at a government school enables their children to continue to higher education, and perhaps, gain better access to employment opportunities in Myanmar.

## KED SCHOOLS OR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

KED schools, often referred to as Community Schools, are currently estimated to number around 1,000 in Karen State. The KED has been receiving aid and support from various external donors<sup>13</sup>. The Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG) was established in 1997 as a KED-affiliated organisation to provide support for teacher training in the refugee camps in Thailand, and later in Karen areas on the Myanmar side. However, KED now faces serious challenges such as a lack of teaching and learning materials and financial resources needed to pay teachers (Lall and South 2014). KED school students need to pay a registration fee at the time of entry, but further fees are not charged.

In many impoverished villages where the fighting was continuing until recently, KED schools do not offer the full primary cycle. In one such village in Township B, the school stopped at Grade 4. To continue to Grade 5, students must travel to the nearest high school, which takes about 30 minutes by motorbike. This is a huge burden for most parents in the villages; the majority do not own motorbikes. Alternatively, they can go to a Migrant Learning Centre in Thailand. In either case, financial burdens on families are substantial.

In another village in Township B, the KED high school used both KED and government curricula during the fighting in 2010, before the ceasefire agreement was signed. This was because it was too risky for the school to be seen as pro-KNU by the Myanmar government. After the fighting ended, the school used the KED curriculum only. From Grade 10 to 12, the language of instruction is English. The Burmese language is taught as a subject, using the curriculum developed by KED. The headmaster says, 'If the students are taught [in the Burmese language] following the Burmese curriculum, they won't understand' (Interview June 2016).

The main reason why English is used in KED schools is thought to be that many influential people in KNU, especially during the early period of the struggle, were Christians. During the colonial time, many Karen people were hired as teachers and deployed across the country. Karen people have a pride in this heritage, as being better educated than other ethnic groups in the country. Another reason may derive from the resettlement programme which was implemented from 2005 to 2014. About 80,000 Karen refugees living in the camps in Thailand were resettled in the US, Canada, and Australia, all of them Anglophone countries.

---

<sup>12</sup> This number is based on the data given by the Department of Education of the Karen State.

<sup>13</sup> Until the democratization process started in 2011, many bilateral aid agencies were financially supporting KED.

In practice, there is an increasing number of 'mixed' schools especially in Township A, which are partially run and supported by the KED and partially by the government. In these schools, either the government or KED curriculum is used, supplemented in most cases with materials of the other agency. Similarly, the KED provides some teachers for government schools, while KED schools receive some government teachers.

### **FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS**

Christianity plays an important role among some sections of Karen society, so most faith-based schools are administered by churches. Some use the government curriculum, whereas others use the KED curriculum, or in a few cases, curricula from other countries, depending on mission affiliation. Usually this type of school is limited to the primary cycle.

### **SCHOOLS IN REFUGEE CAMPS**

As already noted, there are currently 64 KRCEE-managed schools in seven Karen refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Many of these schools are financially supported by aid agencies and NGOs, and students and parents do not need to pay any fee. In these schools, Sgaw Karen is used as the language of instruction. Most students can study their mother tongue as a subject, but there is a substantial minority who use Pwo Karen or Burmese as their mother tongue (Oh and Stouwe 2008).

According to the interviewees, while the fighting was taking place in the 1990s and 2000s in Karen in Myanmar, schools were open only irregularly. Many children left for the camps in Thailand after they completed primary education. Some of those who received KED secondary education in the camps were recruited as volunteer teachers and sent to schools in Karen. They received little, if any, pre-training.

A substantial number of children were sent to the schools in the refugee camps because they were seen as providing higher quality education than the local, indigenous schools. This perception resulted largely as a consequence of the support provided to these camp schools by aid agencies and NGOs. A study conducted in 2014 by some of these NGOs, however, points to problems in the curriculum followed in the camp schools. The textbooks and other learning materials were not produced in a systematic way; they were developed when funds and personnel were available, and curricula content was not always presented in a logical sequence (Ninnes 2014b). Most of the textbooks currently used in the camp schools were developed between 2003 and 2008; the accuracy of content and effectiveness of pedagogical approaches are, in many cases, open to question (Ninnes 2014b).

### **MIGRANT LEARNING CENTRES (MLCs)**

The Thai government determines that immigrant children's access to state schools is free and non-discriminatory<sup>14</sup>. However, MLCs tend to provide teaching better suited to the children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds (World Education & Save the Children 2014). These centres are 'unofficially listed' by the Thai Ministry of Education, but receive no financial support.

---

<sup>14</sup> The 1999 Education Acts guarantees the right of all children, without discrimination, to a quality education. A Cabinet declaration in 2005 reaffirmed the right of all children, including non-Thai children living in Thailand, to receive education.

Prior to 2011, when the democratisation process started in Myanmar, these Migration Learning Centres along the Thai-Myanmar border received financial support from various aid agencies and NGOs. With the donors' interest shifting to inside Myanmar, the financial aid to these MLCs has dwindled. In March 2015, in five districts in Tak Province in Thailand, there were 66 MLCs, with 14,000 students and 800 teachers<sup>15</sup>. The majority of students are children of migrant workers many of whom engage in agricultural labour in Tak Province, but a substantial number are sent by families living in Myanmar as well.

In the early years of the MLCs, most of these alternative schools used the Myanmar national curriculum, because this was the one volunteer teachers knew well. According to Nawarat (2014, 874), however, the curriculum was not adopted uncritically, but was often 'modified, removing parts, which promoted or justified ethnocentric and authoritarian attitudes' of the Myanmar's military regime. The Thai government later promoted the alignment of MLC curricula to the Thai national curriculum in key subjects such as maths, science, and English. With some external support, it produced some pragmatic teaching and learning materials, mediating MLC teachers' previous knowledge and skills and the standards which were expected by the Thai Ministry of Education (Nawarat 2014).

However, many MLC teachers take the view that the future of many children learning in their centres is linked more strongly with Myanmar than with Thailand and want to provide education which would help them to reintegrate there (Nawarat 2014).

#### **THAI PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

According to the government education office in the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand, nearly 30% of students studying in 124 public schools in five districts in its jurisdiction were non-Thai nationals in 2015. The overwhelming majority of them are from Myanmar (interview June 2015).

Receiving education in Thai public schools is possible only for Karen children living close to the border. In one such school the majority of one thousand students are from Myanmar. Some children attend Thai schools because their parents think that if their command of the Thai language is strong, they are more likely to be able to find well-paid jobs in Thailand. However, only primary schooling is available along the border. If the children seek to move to the secondary level in Thailand, they need to travel further and the financial burden becomes prohibitive.

Even in some impoverished Karen villages in Township B near the border with Thailand, it was observed that some children, whose parents could pay modest costs, were sent to a nearby school in Thailand, rather than to a local KED school. Government schools in Thailand do not charge fees and provide textbooks free, although parents need to make contributions towards various school events. Parents who could not afford even the modest cost sent their children to the local KED school. But there were no textbooks in this school.

---

<sup>15</sup> Interview at the Migrant Education Coordination Centre, Tak Province Education Service Area Office 2Tak Province, June 2015.



## 4. QUALIFICATION ISSUES

As noted above, over the last few years, the Myanmar central government has increasingly extended its influence over education in Karen State, leading more schools to disaffiliate from KED. Once the affiliation is switched from KED, so is the language of instruction, from Karen to Burmese. Nevertheless KED still has a strong presence in many communities in Karen State. Some fear that the increasing number of schools which shift affiliation from KED to the government will lead to the loss of Karen identity and heritage. One KED senior official said, 'If the government curriculum replaces the Karen one, children will learn only in Burmese and the government influence will expand. We would be traumatised by this. We are not competing with the government. We just want to protect our own language culture, and heritage' (interview June 2016).

But on the other hand, there is an increasing awareness among Karen community members of the importance of the Burmese language for their children's future opportunities. Anecdotal stories of tensions between community members and the KNU over school affiliation are often heard.

Currently there are no clear guidelines for government primary and secondary schools as to the admission of students previously educated in KED schools. Nevertheless, a number of government schools in Karen State have started to admit ex-KED students. Some government officials require such students to take a test, especially when the students are entering around the time when a public examination is administered. But, in most cases, decisions on student admission are made at the principal's discretion. The KED insists that all children should be allowed to enter government schools without first passing a test.

As to higher education, those students who complete the secondary level at KED schools cannot enter university in Myanmar. However, more recently some candidates have been accepted by Myanmar higher education institutions after passing a matriculation examination.

Admission to Myanmar state schools is difficult for many children who initially went to Thai state schools. The Thai language is vastly different from Burmese or Karen, so many Karen children struggle in their classrooms to follow teachers' instructions. It is likely that they often cannot acquire basic knowledge and skills in literacy and numeracy even after attending a Thai school for six years of primary education. Hence government secondary school teachers in Myanmar are hesitant about admitting such students. These children often end up working as agricultural labourers after completing primary education. Within Thailand, few secondary schools are located near the Myanmar border. Whereas Thai national children from these areas are admitted to secondary schools as boarders free of any charge, Myanmar national children are not entitled to such support.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In areas under KNU control in the Karen State of Myanmar, the Karen Education Department (KED) has been substituting for government services for decades. Across the border in Thailand, in the enclave of the Karen refugee camps, education contributing to the maintenance and development of Karen identity has been provided by the KED and aid agencies. By contrast, however, in areas surrounding the refugee camps along the border, Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) offer education which encourage children to re-enter the Myanmar state education system. Largely because of the poor quality of education in local areas, a

substantial number of Karen children living along the border attend Thai state schools daily, even though their opportunities to continue beyond basic education are limited.

In Myanmar, the issue of education is very closely linked with ethnic peace. When the democratisation process started in 2011, education was made a priority in the reform agenda, alongside national reconciliation<sup>16</sup>, economic reforms, and peace building in ethnic minority areas (Lall 2016). Traditionally the education sector has been highly centralised; top-down, but upwardly accountable. In the reform process, a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CSER) was embarked on in 2012, sponsored by UNCEF, the World Bank and some other aid agencies. In the following year, the Education Promotion Implementation Committee (EPIC) was created by the President's Office, with the mandate to take the lead in the education sector reform. The EPIC drafted the National Education Bill in 2014, and it was enacted within the same year. The Bill has a clause which reads: 'If there is a need, an ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar as a language of instruction at the basic education level (Chapter 7 Clause 43).' This is a significant shift in policy. Nevertheless, systematic introduction of ethnic languages into government schools has not materialised to date. The future relationship between the KED and government education systems has not been addressed in the formal nationwide ceasefire negotiations and peace building process, led by Aung San Suu Kyi (Lall 2016).

The political and economic changes have led the KNU and KED to re-think the purpose of their ethno-nationalist education system. Contacts between the two systems have been increasing as described above. Because the KED maintains its primal aim to be the provision of education which preserves Karen identity, its alignment with the Myanmar national education system remains an issue. As the nation's democratisation process has proceeded, expectations for educational progress have heightened. Political and educational leaders of both the KED and the Myanmar government are being challenged to re-consider the purpose of their school systems in the context of massive social and political change.

In Karen State, the legacy of armed conflict and consequent large-scale and long-term displacement will powerfully influence the education sector for the foreseeable future. The development of an overarching policy to implement multi-lingual education in Karen and in other ethnic states is a key issue. Allowing the various ethnic groups to use their minority languages in state schools would address one of their long-standing aspirations, and might thus help promote peace and national reconciliation.

---

<sup>16</sup> National reconciliation refers to the reintegration of National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi into the national political spectrum.

## REFERENCES

- Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population (2015) *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, The Union Report*
- Farmaner, M. (2015) Think Burma Is a Democracy Now? Think Again. 11 November 2015, Available from <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/2015/>
- Hardman, F., C. Stoff, W. Aung, and L. Elliott (2014) Developing pedagogical practices in Myanmar primary schools: possibilities and constraints, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*
- IOM (2016) *Migrants from Myanmar and Risks Faced Abroad: A desk study*. 3 May 2018, Available from [http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrants\\_from\\_myanmar\\_and\\_risk\\_faced\\_abroad.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrants_from_myanmar_and_risk_faced_abroad.pdf)
- Lall, M. (2016) *Understanding Reform in Myanmar: People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule*. London: Hurst & Company
- Lall, M. and A. South (2014) Comparing Models of Non-state Ethnic Education in Myanmar: The Mon and Karen National Education Regimes, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44 (2) p.298-321
- Ministry of Health and Sports and DHS Program (2017) *Myanmar Health and Demographic Survey 2015-16*, 3 May 2018, Available from <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR324/FR324.pdf>
- Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health, and UNICEF (2011) *Myanmar Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2009-2010*
- Nawarat, N. (2014) Negotiating curricula for Burma migrant schooling in Thailand, *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 143, p. 872-878.
- Ninnes, P. (2014a) *A review of the education systems in refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar Border*, report commissioned from ADRA Thailand, JRS, Save the Children, Right to Play, Australian Aid, and EU.
- Ninnes, P. (2014b) *A review of the basic education curricula used in refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border*, report commissioned from ADRA Thailand, JRS, Save the Children, Right to Play, Australian Aid, and EU.
- Oh, S-A. (2010) *Education in refugee camps in Thailand: policy, practice and paucity*, Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011
- Oh, S-A. and M. V. D. Stouwe (2008) Education, Diversity, and Inclusion in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand, *Comparative Education Review*, 52 (4) p. 589-617
- Save the Children (2017) *Losing out on learning: Providing refugee children the education they were promised*. London: Save the Children UK
- United Nations (2016) Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 19 September 2016 71/1 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, available from <http://www.unhcr.org/57e39d987>, accessed on 2 May 2018
- UNHCR (2017) *Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis*, available from <http://www.unhcr.org/left-behind/>

UNICEF (2013) *Towards More Child-Focused Social Investments: Snapshot of Social Sector Public Budget Allocations and Spending in Myanmar*, available from [https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/Final\\_Budget\\_Allocations\\_and\\_Spending\\_in\\_Myanmar.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/Final_Budget_Allocations_and_Spending_in_Myanmar.pdf)

Watkins, K. (2016) *No lost generation – holding to the promise of education for all Syrian refugees*, ODI, Theirworld, Safe Schools, available from <http://theirworld.org/resources/detail/no-lost-generation-holding-to-the-promise-of-education-for-all-syrian-refugees>

World Education & Save the Children (2014) *Pathways to a better future: A review of education for migrant children in Thailand*, available from <http://theirworld.org/resources/detail/no-lost-generation-holding-to-the-promise-of-education-for-all-syrian-refugees>