

POLICY BRIEF:

**Diversity and Fragmentation
of Myanmar Education:
Schooling Shaped by
Protracted Conflict and
Crisis**

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world – ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children – through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge – at local, national, regional and global levels – through co-construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

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Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

Disclaimer

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A. Background

Since gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar's history has been largely marked by political instability and violent internal conflicts involving ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and the Myanmar military. The situation has deteriorated further following the 2021 military coup:¹ It is estimated that 98% of children in Myanmar are affected by the ongoing crisis, including approximately 11.4 million school-aged children (Valenza and Stoff, 2023). Of these, over 3.5 million are out of school, and 6.5 million are attending school but experiencing learning deprivation (ibid.). Schools have been caught in the conflicts between armed resistance actors and the State Administration Council (SAC), the military junta. Moreover, educational processes have become heavily politicised and increasingly geared towards serving the ideologies and political visions of different armed groups. Education has therefore become a victim of political controversies as well as the ongoing violence.

For at least the past half-century, Myanmar has maintained a diverse range of educational provisions managed by different educational authorities and operating in parallel to the centralised state education system. Children and youth living within territories controlled by EAOs receive education services from a variety of ethnic education service providers (EEPs), many of which are the education departments of their respective EAOs. In some cases, EEPs have also provided services in areas of mixed control, where both an EAO and the SAC have an administrative presence. In 2019, it was estimated that some 300,000 children were attending schools operated by EEPs (Lall, 2020).

Since the 1980s, educational provisions for refugees and migrants of Myanmar origin have also existed in Thailand, largely managed by the refugees and migrants themselves. Nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border primarily house ethnic minorities who have fled conflict and persecution. Basic and higher education provisions for these refugees are overseen by ethnic refugee entities based in the camps. While the majority of migrant children and youth receive education from the Thai public education system, those who do not are often enrolled across a constellation of independently run migrant learning centres (MLCs). At the end of 2019, approximately 31,500 refugees (one-third of all verified refugees) were school-aged,² and an additional 16,350 migrant children were studying in MLCs across Thailand (UNTWGM, 2019). These educational provisions are not formally accredited, so the qualifications gained by the students are not easily transferable to formal institutions in Thailand and elsewhere, posing barriers to young people's educational progression and employability.

It is believed that the ethnic, refugee and migrant education contexts have experienced an influx of students following the coup. Exact figures, however, are not publicly available due to sensitivities around data sharing in both Myanmar and Thailand. Nonetheless, several indicators suggest that demand for parallel education provisions has increased. This surge is linked to the politicisation of education access, population displacement due to conflict and crisis, and the expansion of territories under EAO administration.

Firstly, the Civil Disobedience Movement continues to discourage participation in the public education system provided by the SAC. Official data indicates at least several million fewer enrollments in 2024 compared to the approximately nine million in 2019 (Salem-Gervais et al., 2024). Internal displacement due to conflict – affecting some 3.2 million people³ – is likely to have driven families away from

¹ Myanmar Conflict Map, International Institute for Strategic Studies, August 2024

² Refugee Camp Populations: December 2019, The Border Consortium, December 2019

³ Internally Displaced Persons Situation in Myanmar Dashboard, Myanmar Peace Monitor, August 2024

SAC-controlled areas, with many fleeing into territories controlled by EAOs and other resistance actors. Additionally, as EAOs have gained territories in Chin, Karenni and Karen areas, as well as in northern Shan State through military successes against the SAC, the reach of EEPs has expanded accordingly. In eastern Myanmar, ongoing armed conflict is also likely to have caused displacement into Thailand, with the population in the refugee camps having increased by over 23,000 since January 2021.⁴ Finally, Myanmar's worsening economic crisis has spurred increased labour migration to Thailand's western provinces.⁵ Conflict and crisis have contributed to a growing fragmentation of educational provisions in Myanmar, with a noticeable shift away from the government education system under the SAC towards an array of parallel providers.

This policy brief highlights key findings from a rigorous review of the existing body of research on education in Myanmar's conflict-affected context: **Diversity and Fragmentation of Myanmar Education: Schooling Shaped by Protracted Conflict and Crisis (Rinehart et al., 2024a)**; and provides an overview of a co-constructed research agenda for education in conflict-affected contexts of Myanmar, drawing on a comprehensive report: **Education Research Agenda in Conflict-Affected Contexts of Myanmar (Rinehart et al., 2024b)**.

B. Constraints and enablers to ethnic education in Myanmar

Exclusionary and hegemonic government education policies in education have contributed to the grievances of diverse ethnic minority communities. In response, they have formed their own education systems to counter the assimilative educational processes imposed by the state (Maber, 2019; Suante, 2022). The education offered by EEPs reflects the range of ethnolinguistic identities, with aspirations for political autonomy and cultural recognition of diverse ethnic groups. Ultimately, this contributes to alternative visions of nation-building by constructing ideological, symbolic, linguistic and cultural boundaries that maintain separation from, and opposition to, the monolithic and Burman-dominated nation-building project of the Myanmar state (Kubo, 2021; Oh et al., 2021).

But ethnic educational provisions are often marked by resource-scarcity and a precarity of funding, which undermines the quality of education. EEPs have faced significant challenges, including (i) difficulties in hiring, retaining and adequately compensating quality teachers, (ii) shortages of basic educational resources, and (iii) difficulties in maintaining some schools or supporting an adequate number of ethnic schools to meet the demand (Jolliffe and Speers Mears, 2016). Educational qualifications gained in schools operated by most EEPs are not recognised externally and teachers working in these schools are usually underqualified and undertrained (Speers Mears et al., 2015). Despite these challenges, EEPs demonstrate resourcefulness and adaptability in navigating disruptions caused by conflict and crisis in efforts to maintain access, quality, continuity and coherence of education (Rinehart and Tyrosvoutis, 2023).

Coordination and convergence between the central state and EEP systems have been limited due to a lack of coherence around the goals and incentives of different actors within the political economy of education. The absence of ethnic education voices within the education reform and peace processes of the 2010s reflected a disregard for education as a historical grievance (Higgins et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). This neglect of the historical presence and contributions of EEPs calls into question the recognition

⁴ Refugee Camp Population: July 2024, The Border Consortium, July 2024

⁵ [Mobility Tracking – Myanmar Migrants](#), International Organization for Migration, June 2024

of education's role in promoting diversity, equity, peace and justice (Zobrist and McCormick, 2017; Lall, 2020). Furthermore, elite-capture of the education system operations has undermined community needs and aspirations in educational planning and reconciliation efforts (Lall and South, 2018).

In the 2010s, the government education system made tentative strides toward decentralisation and the inclusion of local languages, cultures and histories in education. However, in practice, the process of de-decentralisation was more one of de-concentration (Zobrist and McCormick, 2017). In addition, limited engagement with civil society actors, and challenges around reaching consensus and compromising on the selection and inclusion of minority languages and histories (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020; Anui and Arphattananon, 2021) posed significant hurdles in these efforts. During this same period, EEP decision-makers prioritised language-in-education and investments in teacher development, with the aim of improving the quality of education while also contributing to peace and social justice outcomes (Lwin, 2019; Wong, 2019; Lall, 2020; Takeda, 2021). However, there is limited evidence on whether these initiatives were implemented as intended and had any positive effects towards inclusive, effective, accountable and adaptable education systems operation. Any future design of a national education system must learn from these lessons.

The 2021 coup has significantly affected all education systems in Myanmar, dramatically increasing the number of children affected by conflict, leading to an acute schooling crisis, and exacerbating a pre-existing learning crisis (Bhatta et al., 2022; Bhatta et al., 2023; Valenza and Stoff, 2023). Most EEP facilities remain at risk of attack, while many EEP systems are frequently disrupted by ongoing clashes and airstrikes. Most international aid and assistance for education is now channelled to non-state provisions, including in ethnic education, although security concerns have significantly encumbered coordination and data systems, making evidence-based decision-making more challenging for international aid organisations.

Education has become highly politicised. For example, parents who continue to send their children to government schools are seen by resistance supporters as endorsing the SAC, rather than as citizens exercising their right to education (Choo and Aye, 2022). Additionally, education is increasingly being used as a tool for positioning competing nation-building projects by the SAC, the National Unity Government (NUG) and various EAOs. Communities have to perform a difficult balancing act, caught between political loyalties and the need to survive within this politically divided environment.

Although many – but crucially not all – EAOs and ethnic minority communities have historically campaigned for a federal democratic political settlement (South, 2021), there are tentative conversations among key ethnic stakeholders regarding the Federal Democracy Education Policy proposed by the NUG. In many cases, EEPs may hold diverging views on the desirability and construction of a national education system for Myanmar. Nevertheless, bottom-up federalising practices may be emerging from EEPs, EAOs and newly formed ethnic coordination bodies (South 2022; South et al., 2024). A federal education system is often cited as one potential model for an inclusive national education for the future of the country.

C. Constraints and enablers to refugee and migrant education in Thailand

Since Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, it lacks a formal domestic legal framework for determining refugee status. This absence of legal recognition denies refugees essential rights, including access to education, mobility, healthcare and the right to work

(APRRN et al., 2023). Thai policy emphasises the temporary and minimal nature of its humanitarian commitment, maintaining a de facto stance of non-access to Thai public schooling for refugees, while adopting a laissez-faire approach to refugees organising and providing their own education (Oh, 2010). But the lack of educational and professional opportunities outside the camps has made it difficult to plan and provide relevant education within them (Carpeño and Feldman, 2015; Hill et al., 2023). Refugee education – managed by the refugees themselves – seeks to respond to these constraints, but reliance on limited donor funding undermines the sustainability of the programmes as well as the overall quality of education (Carpeño and Feldman, 2015; Shiohata, 2018).

The Thai government’s official policy is to isolate refugees, but MLCs, in particular, are allowed to operate within a ‘zone of exception,’ meaning that they are tolerated by the Thai state but do not receive governmental support (Nawarat, 2019). However, Thailand’s local policies are ambiguous and the treatment of MLCs by the authorities is inconsistent, resulting in significant differences in MLC administration across regions (Nawarat and Medley, 2018). MLCs often struggle to provide quality teaching and learning due to the lack of common standards and accreditation systems, and project-based humanitarian funding by multiple donors (Tuangratananon et al., 2019; Mowry, 2023). Despite these challenges, MLCs offer migrant households a choice in education, though significantly more migrant children enrol in Thai government schools than in MLCs, sometimes with the assistance of a transfer from an MLC (Lowe et al., 2022).

D. Proposing a research agenda to address evidence gaps

At present, there is limited evidence on the impact of conflict and crisis on educational access, quality and continuity and on systems coherence. It is unclear what policy, programmatic and practice interventions are underway within parallel educational provisions, and to what extent these may be helping children achieve desired outcomes related to academic learning, social and emotional learning, physical and mental health, and wellbeing. Additionally, it is unclear how parallel provisions are being financed and resourced during conflict and crisis, and the extent to which data systems and data sharing exist and contribute to evidence-based decision-making. Finally, more evidence is needed on the (mis)alignment of education goals among diverse actors and on the potential contributions of education to peace, justice and reconciliation.

Drawing upon the data generated from multiple consultations and key informant interviews with representatives from key educational stakeholders, the ERICC Myanmar team has produced a comprehensive and co-constructed research agenda for ethnic, refugee and migrant educational provisions (Rinehart et al., 2024b). Four overarching research themes (Table 1) and three cross-cutting themes (Table 2) were prioritised by the local stakeholders. ERICC recommends a systematic research methods approach to understand the type of study that is needed in a given setting, based on the state of the evidence (Table 3).

Table 1. Four Prioritised Research Themes

Research Theme	Description
Teacher Management,	The policies and practices used to identify, recruit, hire, deploy, train,

Professional Development and Wellbeing	retain and provide accreditation, career progression, and advancement opportunities for teachers.
Access to Quality Education	The households' and learners' awareness of, opportunity for and capacity to participate in relevant educational experiences that contribute to holistic development.
Community Engagement and Participation	The ways in which community members and groups become involved in education, and how this affects the access, quality, continuity and coherence of education.
Envisioning an Inclusive National Education System	The potential for designing and realising an inclusive national education system that aligns with the future political system that is still in formation in Myanmar.

Table 2. Three Cross-cutting Themes

Cross-cutting Theme	Description
Inclusion, Equity and Justice in Education	The values and practices aimed at ensuring fair access to opportunities in education regardless of background, identity or circumstance
Safety and Wellbeing in and through Schooling	The policies and practices that ensure that everyone involved in education feels safe, supported and healthy—both physically and emotionally.
Policy Framing, Formulation and Enactment towards Systems Strengthening	The processes of developing, adopting and implementing plans, strategies and proposals (including budgets and data systems) to address specific issues or achieve particular goals in education.

Table 3. Systematic Research Methods Approach

Research Method	Purpose
Formative Research	To understand pre-existing practices, identify needs and diagnose problems
Design Research	To develop solutions (policies, programmes or strategies) to address existing needs in ways that are feasible, desirable and culturally relevant
Implementation Research	To assess the degree to which existing solutions are being implemented as intended, with strong levels of quality, fidelity and uptake
Effectiveness Research	To determine through causal inference whether interventions achieve the desired changes in outcomes

Political Economy Analysis	To obtain a deep contextual understanding of education systems and their settings
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The research design of each of the four prioritised themes incorporates the three cross-cutting themes across the recommended research methods and encompasses relevant aims and indicative research questions. The agenda is intended to guide education research undertaken within the Myanmar context, ensuring that research is designed to address the concerns and priorities of actors within ethnic, refugee and migrant education systems. Research should be planned as a collaborative endeavour, contextually relevant, conflict-sensitive, and should leverage local resources where possible. Our research agenda has been developed as a resource for donors, civil society organisations and the broader community of researchers beyond the ERICC Myanmar research initiative. It also aims to encourage coordination, partnership and collaboration between different donors who fund research studies and to build a coherent body of educational evidence to inform policy and programming decisions within the Myanmar context, allowing us to enhance the quality of learning amidst ongoing violence, protracted crises and political instability.

E. Conclusion

Myanmar’s educational landscape has become increasingly fragmented, marked by a shift away from the centralised government system towards diverse parallel provisions. This fragmentation has significant implications for educational access, quality, continuity and coherence. Our evidence review underscores the importance of recognising and engaging with parallel educational provisions as distinct and diverse entities. To more fully understand these dynamics, it is essential to conduct robust and continuous political economy analyses. A deeper engagement with the political economy of education will enable researchers, donors and education providers to better appreciate political complexities and tensions around the creation of a new national education system, when the political conditions allow.

Conflict and protracted crises have exacerbated the precarity and instability in which parallel educational provisions operate. While some longstanding divisions persist, there is also emerging hope around diverse actors federalising education from the bottom-up. But there are lingering concerns that another wave of cultural homogenisation could occur if majority groups once again monopolise educational policies, programmes and practices.

The co-constructed research agenda serves as a critical reference document for commissioning research in ethnic, refugee and migrant settings affected by conflict and protracted crises. It serves as a valuable tool for researchers and organisations to plan studies that address existing evidence gaps and that reflect the expectations and realities of key educational stakeholders in these contexts. The co-construction process has fostered partnerships among diverse stakeholders for future collaborative research. These partnerships stand to promote dissemination and uptake of findings, de-colonise research practices, and raise expectations regarding the impact of research.

Moving forward, the ERICC programme plans to advance formative research under all four themes outlined in this agenda. In particular, we will undertake a comprehensive political economy analysis of education to reveal how education interacts with security, political, social and economic dynamics in

the post-coup context in Myanmar. This study will also investigate the political economy of education sector coordination, considering the (in)coherence of different international, national and local actors with regard to the planning and delivery of education.

We will examine the theme on access to quality education in terms of equity, social cohesion and peace with justice, specifically paying attention to policy-level debates around how to establish an inclusive national education system that accommodates cultural diversity. Additionally, we will investigate the role of mother tongue-based multilingual education in addressing grievances of multilingual communities and in promoting the wider agenda of peace, justice and reconciliation in Myanmar.

Finally, the ERICC programme will engage in implementation research on teacher professional development and wellbeing, focusing in particular on an intervention led by the Inclusive Education Foundation and University College London to address teacher crisis in the context of mass displacement. This study will likewise establish the context for effectiveness research on the intervention.

We encourage other actors working in educational contexts in ethnic, refugee and migrant settings in Myanmar to advance design research in all themes and implementation and effectiveness research on relevant interventions, as is appropriate.

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