Co-creating an agenda for education research in conflict-affected contexts of Myanmar

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Abstract

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises (ERICC) programme seeks to address power imbalances in research by co-creating research agendas with key stakeholders in conflict-affected and crisis contexts. Through a systematic approach combining a rigorous review of research evidence with stakeholder consultations - including workshops and interviews, and surveys - we identified four priority research themes and three cross-cutting themes for education research in Myanmar. The co-creation process fostered local ownership and established foundations for equitable research partnerships in ethnic, refugee and migrant educational settings. This study describes participatory approaches that were adopted at the outset of research design to enhance relevance, promote future uptake of findings and challenge North-South power dynamics. We argue that research practices that lead to inclusive, horizontal relationships can amplify local voices to ensure that planned research is contextually relevant and actionable for communities affected by conflict.

Key Words

education in emergencies research; North-South research partnerships; co-creation and participatory research; conflict-affected education

Introduction

Education research in conflict and crisis settings has historically followed a top-down approach, with studies primarily serving international actors' interests (Brun and Shuayb, 2023; Novelli and Kutan, 2023). Rather than being involved at the outset of research planning, local stakeholders are typically engaged only at the dissemination stage, as the audience or recipients of research knowledge. This often results in a misalignment between research foci and the needs and priorities of local education providers, which limits their ownership of research and their uptake of research evidence in programmes and policy (Shan *et al*., 2023 and 2024). Incoherence in research alignment hinders efforts to improve key drivers of learning: access to, quality in, and continuity of education.

This article engages with these concerns by presenting a study conducted under the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crises (ERICC) programme, through which a research agenda was co-created with stakeholders from diverse ethnic, refugee and migrant education systems in the conflict and crisis settings of Myanmar and its borderlands (Rinehart *et al*., 2024b). The research agenda co-creation process was informed by evidence gaps identified in a prior rigorous review (Rinehart *et al*., 2024a). While the existing research has extensively documented motivations of ethnic minority communities to sustain their education systems despite challenges around capacities and financing, how these parallel education provisions have developed in resource-scarce, marginalised contexts to reflect the ethnolinguistic backgrounds of their communities, critical gaps remain in terms of understanding about education policy, programming and experiences (Table 1).

Table 1. Major evidence gaps in education research in Myanmar (Rinehart et al., 2024a)

Education Policy Processes	Educational Experience Processes
• Framing, formulation and enactment of education policies • Alignment of education goals across diverse educational actors • Impact of conflict and protracted crises on systems coherence • Potential contributions of parallel education to reconciliation, social cohesion and peace with justice	• Impact of conflict and protracted crises on access, quality and continuity of education • Strategies of navigating disruption and ensuring access, quality and continuity of education • Implementation and effectiveness of education interventions • Academic, social and emotional, and wellbeing outcomes of students

Drawing upon the ERICC conceptual framework and research methods approach (Kim *et al*, 2024), this paper describes the collaborative approach that was employed to co-create the research agenda, and aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What thematic areas are valuable for research in ethnic, refugee and migrant contexts in Myanmar and its borderlands?
2. How, if at all, can a co-created research agenda assist the research process in conflict and crisis settings?

We present four key research themes, and three cross-cutting themes identified as the most urgent and relevant for ethnic, refugee and migrant education providers in Myanmar and along the Thai-Myanmar border. This prioritised agenda aims to guide research toward policy-relevant, actionable outcomes in education (Rinehart *et al*., 2024b). In this paper, we examine how co-creation might enhance research processes, outputs and outcomes in the education in emergencies (EiE) field. Ultimately, we argue that collaboration with the users of education evidence throughout the research process, from conceptualisation to implementation and uptake, adds value in addressing the pressing challenges faced by conflict-affected educational communities.

Research in contexts of conflict and protracted crisis

Conducting research in conflict and crisis settings involves methodological, operational and ethical challenges. The literature highlights the importance of adhering to ethical codes, guidelines and norms to ensure research is conducted safely and

sensitively to local contexts (Black, 2003; Falb *et al*., 2019; O'Mathúna, 2020; Karah and Khoo, 2022). Whether in acute or protracted settings, research participants often face vulnerabilities in terms of ongoing insecurity, social and political exclusion and, most importantly, the risk of exposure to authorities and armed groups that could jeopardise their safety. Their willingness to participate is often driven by hope for solutions to their daily adversities. Therefore, researchers have the duty to ensure ethical standards are met, diverse voices of affected communities are included and security and socio-political realities are acknowledged in a conflict-sensitive manner. This necessitates collaboration with local researchers and adoption of participatory methodologies (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003).

EiE research too often reinforces the hierarchical structures of the humanitarian system rather than critically examining power imbalances within them. Two key tensions limit opportunities for meaningful critical scholarship. First, humanitarianism typically prioritises short-term relief, while education focuses on long-term development (Brun and Shuayb, 2023). This divergence often sidelines reflections on the politics of education in favour of treating education as an unmitigated good. Second, research agendas and funding are usually controlled by Global North actors, with Global South researchers often positioned as subjects or beneficiaries rather than active participants in research design and execution (Trouwloon *et al*., 2024). Such power imbalances restrict local agency in research decision-making (Ibrahim, Kuppens and Nfundiko, 2023; Shah *et al*., 2023). Responding to these tensions, there are increasingly calls to challenge hierarchical and hegemonic structures of knowledge and its production and to construct genuine and equitable partnerships from the outset of research processes. These strategies are argued to mitigate the risk of epistemic violence through which local voices and endogenous knowledge are silenced or marginalised in favour of exogenous priorities, agendas and frameworks within research partnerships (Chilisa 2020; Santos 2012; Walker 2020).

EiE remains entangled with imperial histories, contemporary power struggles and power asymmetries between global and local actors (Menashy and Zakharia, 2023). Research shaped by Global North agendas limits critical perspectives, punctuating the need for locally-rooted, bottom-up

approaches and equitable, inclusive partnerships to challenge hegemonies and allow for epistemic diversity (Shah *et al*., 2024). Novelli and Kutan (2023) argue that EiE researchers must recognise themselves as 'implicated subjects' in systems of power and violence. Even with humanitarian intentions, researchers may be part of processes that contribute to violence, inequality and oppression, such as when research endeavours prioritise neo-imperial structures or Western interests. Rather than imposing guilt, researchers are encouraged to reflect on their positionality and commit to solidarity and social justice for communities affected by different forms of conflict and crisis.

For research to drive social impact, it must be accessible and applicable to policymakers and practitioners. This process of research uptake is dynamic, context-dependent and often non-linear. It is shaped by the perceived relevance of the research to the needs and priorities of the intended audience and the extent to which it credibly speaks to the socio-political and cultural realities of local contexts. A scoping review by Semahegn *et al*. (2023) highlights the importance of early stakeholder engagement, framed as meaningful interaction and trust-building between the producers and users of evidence during research inception and fieldwork. Similarly, Johnson and Vindrola-Padros (2017) identify three key behaviours to enhance uptake: (i) early designation of local leaders as points of contact; (ii) continuous sharing of findings; and (iii) co-developing actionable recommendations with local policymakers and practitioners. In sum, participatory approaches that engage local stakeholders as much as possible in all stages of knowledge production improve the likelihood of application of research findings.

ERICC conceptual framework and research methods approach

The ERICC programme is a multi-year, multi-country research consortium funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and co-led by the International Rescue Committee and the University College London. It is designed to expand and strengthen the evidence base for education in conflict-affected and crisis settings by establishing a global hub for rigorous, context-relevant and actionable research.

ERICC employs a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that examines how multi-level factors influence education access, quality, continuity and system coherence while also considering broader social impacts like cohesion and peace. The framework helps organise existing research, identify evidence gaps, facilitate discussions on potential interventions and build theories of change for education policy and programming (Kim *et al*., 2024).

Figure 1. ERICC conceptual framework (Kim et al., 2024)
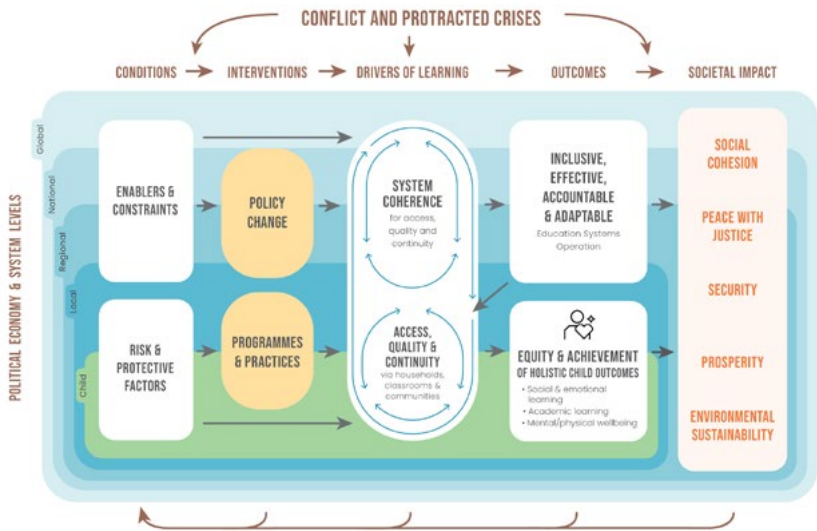
ERICC addresses the need for diverse evidence to inform donors, policymakers and practitioners tackling education challenges in crisis settings. Its systematic research methods approach (Figure 2) determines the appropriate study type based on the current state of the evidence.

**Figure 2. ERICC research methods approach**
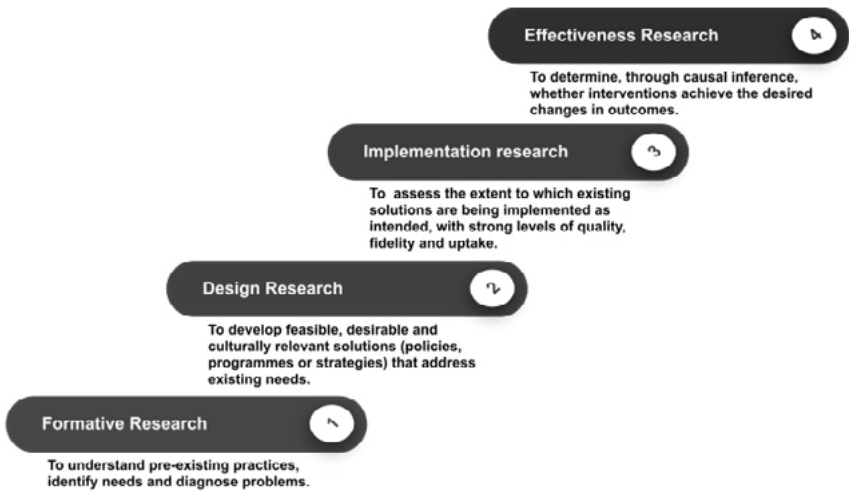
The conceptual framework and research methods approach are together used to build theoretically-informed and fit-for-purpose research evidence in the field of education in conflict-affected and crisis settings.

The co-creation process

To develop the research agenda, we combined a rigorous evidence review (Rinehart *et al*., 2024a) with collaborative consultations involving key stakeholders. This approach built upon methodologies used in other country contexts within the ERICC consortium. The evidence review applied the conceptual framework to analyse 114 studies and identify evidence gaps that could be addressed through the research methods approach. Findings were shared during consultations with representatives from ethnic, refugee and migrant education systems, as well as national and international organisations supporting these provisions. Through an iterative process of engagement, co-creation and validation, we present in Figure 3 the research themes that were prioritised by the Myanmar education stakeholders.

Figure 3. Co-creation of the research agenda
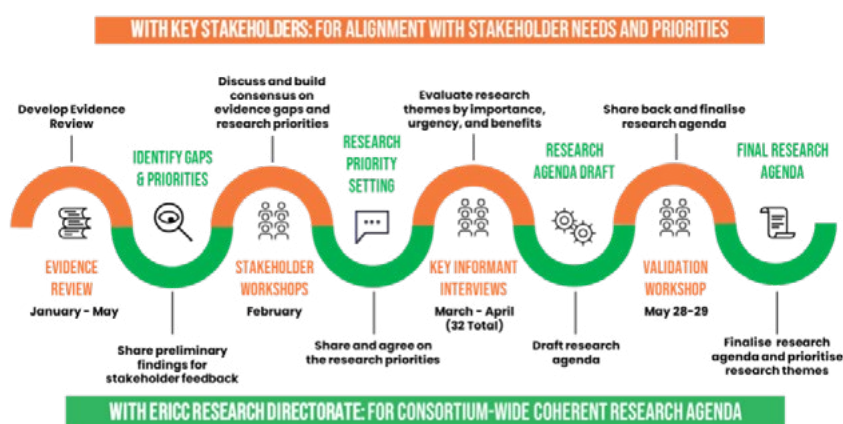
The first consultation, a three-day workshop in January 2024, engaged 35 education personnel from refugee and migrant organisations. Participants identified research areas relevant to their educational contexts. The event surfaced initial insights into research priorities along the Thai-Myanmar border and allowed us to pilot co-design activities for subsequent workshops. Subsequently, we organised two 90-minute workshops in February 2024 with over 40 participants from ethnic and refugee education providers, civil society organisations and international partners who were supporting education in conflict-affected settings in Myanmar. The first session explored key educational challenges, ongoing research and knowledge gaps in their diverse educational settings. Based on participant input, seven indicative research themes were developed and refined through group discussions in the second session.

Building on these workshops and our evidence review, we refined the indicative themes and corresponding research questions, which served as a discussion guide for 32 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted remotely in March and April 2024. Participants included representatives from organisations involved in ethnic, refugee and migrant education across Myanmar and the Thai-Myanmar border—18 from national and civil society organisations and 14 from international development partners and donors.

KIIs followed a semi-structured protocol, with transcripts coded for stakeholder insights. A digital survey (0-5 scale) assessed each theme on four criteria:

1. Urgency
2. Feasibility
3. Potential benefit to local systems (teachers, students, schools)
4. Potential benefit to policy systems (policymakers, decision-makers)

The four themes with the highest priority were identified based on discussion frequency, survey ratings and qualitative KII evaluations (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary-comparison of research themes

Research Themes	Local Actors		International Actors		Total # Times Discussed in KIIs	Sum Total of All Ratings
	Sum Total Rating	# Times Discussed in KIIs	Sum Total Rating	# Times Discussed in KIIs		
*Educational policy and systems strengthening	16.7	13	14.6	7	20	31.3
*Access to quality education	16.9	7	16.9	5	12	33.8
*Teacher wellbeing and professional development	16.4	10	16.8	4	14	33.2
*Community engagement and participation	15.3	5	17.3	2	7	32.6
Language and multilingual education	15.7	5	14.1	2	7	29.8
Inclusive education	15.6	2	15.9	2	4	31.5
Education leadership and management	15.4	1	16.1	2	3	31.5

Note: asterisks (*) denote four themes of highest priority

In May 2024, a two-day validation workshop with representatives from 14 organisations - including ethnic and refugee education providers, civil society actors, donors and development partners - finalised the research agenda. Participants reviewed KII findings and draft designs, providing critical feedback on clarity, relevance and feasibility.

The research agenda product

The co-creation process ensured an iterative research agenda design. The process resulted in four prioritised research themes and three cross-cutting themes (Table 3). The validation workshop further refined these themes and their research questions, culminating in broad participant endorsement of the final agenda.

Table 3. Research and cross-cutting themes

Theme	Description
Four prioritised research themes	
Teacher Management, Professional Development and Wellbeing	The policies and practices used to identify, recruit, hire, deploy, train, 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 their 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.

Theme	Description
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.
Three cross-cutting themes	
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.

The final research agenda is structured around the ERICC conceptual framework, integrating:

- Identification of evidence and knowledge gaps
- Cross-cutting themes that address broader concerns
- Aims and research methods aligned with the ERICC methods approach
- Overarching research questions and sub-questions tailored to address critical evidence gaps

Designed to ensure methodological rigour and contextual relevance, the agenda is intended to guide research in Myanmar by responding directly to the concerns and priorities of ethnic, refugee and migrant education stakeholders (Rinehart *et al*., 2024b).

Moving forward: towards co-production of research

Following the research agenda's release, we aim to advance a 'co-production approach' to research and its uptake (Trouwloon *et al*., 2024). This involves co-designing research projects with local actors and the communities they represent, ensuring they have decision-making roles not only at research initiation but also throughout its execution. We believe the agenda reflects the research aspirations of the organisations involved in its co-creation. We plan to co-conduct projects with local researchers who possess the necessary language skills, socio-political and cultural understandings and access to research populations. The relationships and trust built during

this process are expected to foster productive, authentic research partnerships that local actors find mutually valuable. As one validation workshop participant observed:

> There is a strong sense that local organisations possess some strong capacity to do research. If they can be supported to do a research project together [with external researchers], that would make research more feasible. (International organisation representative)

Participants also expressed a constructive view of research for designing interventions suitable for their conflict-affected settings. One remarked:

> We've been investing a lot in education, but we hardly assess the quality. As we all know, education can be good or bad. It can exacerbate the [conflict] situation or create harmony and peace. It can be different for different people. We need to understand what quality education means in our situation so we can design a new programme to promote more harmony and peace. (Ethnic and migrant education representative)

This highlights the crucial distinction between merely investing in education and ensuring its quality in fostering social cohesion, peace, and understanding. The participant underscores the need for context-specific approach in designing educational programmes, which requires collaboration with local researchers and stakeholders involved in those educational provisions.

Addressing challenges in research co-production

Validation workshop participants raised several concerns, such as the risk of not fulfilling the expectations of research, the generalisability of findings, the feasibility of research in highly disrupted settings and the political implications of education research. One participant warned:

> Communities might have expectations that things will change if research is conducted. There are concerns about what communities expect from research…we must have a clear message to communities…that the research does not immediately address the issues, or that research is a process for us to collectively learn and progress to solutions. (Civil society representative)

Participants emphasised that research conducted in one educational environment may not be applicable to other settings, actors and systems. Additionally, the feasibility of research activities would depend on safety and security factors and costs in accessing research sites. Some participants noted the risk of selection bias and gatekeeping by educational authorities, which could undermine inclusive and equitable representation of voices from hard-to-research areas. One participant cautioned:

> Research, especially effectiveness research, could be difficult because some [service providers] might not want to risk negative findings. They might not be willing to engage with this kind of research. (Ethnic education representative)

Transparent partnerships and careful site selection are crucial for managing these risks. However, participants acknowledged that all research carries some level of risk. As one shared:

> Any research in any area, even when paired with local organisations, will always have risks, and these risks are manageable [through] collaboration with local partners. (Ethnic education representative)

These insightful perspectives from the participants highlight the importance of equitable research action, ensuring inclusion throughout research stages—from design and fieldwork to analysis and uptake of findings. Our next steps involve addressing, to the extent possible, the operational and political challenges in co-designing projects while managing expectations and priorities between global stakeholders (donors, institutional partners) and local stakeholders (educational authorities, research participants).

Discussion and conclusion

By involving key stakeholders from the outset in agenda-setting and decision-making, we have attempted to:

- Incorporate local priorities and expectations for research;
- Encourage strategic interactions among stakeholders;
- Build relationships and mutual ownership; and
- Promote the future uptake of research evidence for policymaking and practice.

Early relationship-building has been particularly crucial in fostering co-ownership, which might otherwise be difficult to achieve in contexts frequently disrupted by conflict and crisis (Johnson and Vindrola-Padros, 2017; Karah and Khoo, 2022). The research partnerships we seek to build underpin the principles of equity, horizontality and 'decentering' (Rivenburgh and Manusov, 2010) that are committed to moving beyond tokenistic inclusions of Global South actors. In line with perspectives from Broothen and Metro (2014) and Metro (2023) within the field of Burma studies, we recognise that research projects with origins in Western scholarship and with - such as ERICC - must balance their exogenous frameworks with the inclusion of local voices and expertise (endogenous knowledge) towards shared knowledge production and reciprocity through meaningful collaboration.

In response to calls for greater critical reflection and context-sensitivity within international engagement in Myanmar (Décobert and Wells, 2020), co-creating the research agenda has deepened our understanding of local socio-political complexities faced by educational stakeholders. This has supported us, as researchers, to adopt a more nuanced and politically reflexive perspective, prompting us to more critically examine our positionality, privilege and the implications of our research undertakings (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli, 2021). This has laid a foundation for critical scholarship as we move forward, building on the existing body of educational research in Myanmar

(Lo Bianco, 2016; Lopes Cardozo and Maber, 2019; Lall, 2021; Wong, 2022).

We acknowledge that our conceptual framework originates from the knowledge accumulated through the decades of Eurocentric modernist ideology of education and international development , meaning we must be cognisant of the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemology and the risk of epistemic violence (Brunner, 2021). To address this, our validation workshop invited participants to evaluate the framework's relevance to their lived experiences. Together, we concluded that the framework is a valuable and non-prescriptive tool that allows research findings to critically engage with and, where necessary, its assumptions and hypotheses. This facilitates greater epistemic diversity by blending global and local perspectives (Ibrahim, Kuppens and Nfundiko, 2023; Shah *et al*., 2024), enabling the framework to potentially evolve in ways that more accurately capture the realities of education within the Myanmar context.

We contend that adopting a participatory, co-creative process to research agenda formation not only ensures the identification of the most valuable thematic areas for investigation but also enhances the agency of local actors. Consequently, this begins to address the power imbalances often observed in North-South research partnerships (Menashy and Zakharia, 2023) by re-orienting research away from externally driven agendas (Brun and Shuayb, 2023; Novelli and Kutan, 2023). Our consultative process has enabled us to build and strengthen alliances with local education providers from historically marginalised ethnic, refugee and migrant communities (Rinehart *et al*., 2024a), with the potential to advance justice and equity for these educational movements (Novelli and Kutan, 2023).

We ultimately aspire to influence research practices in conflict and crisis settings, ensuring studies are contextually relevant, valued and co-owned with local stakeholders. While it is too early to claim such outcomes, these intentions remain central to our research designs moving forward. To this end, we will continue to prioritise the collection of evidence that demonstrates research ownership, uptake by decision-makers and changes in practice resulting from the findings.

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