

Community teachers in ethnic education systems: A struggle for fair compensation



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Abstract

Supporting community teachers in conflict and crisis settings is a significant challenge to maintaining quality education services. This paper draws on a review of literature on humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus configurations and discourse to contextualise current debates. It derives insights from two qualitative studies that investigate the challenges and opportunities in sustaining the community teacher workforce in Myanmar. Employing a mixed methods approach, the study explored whether a shift in the configuration of HDP nexus programming could provide a meaningful way forward to achieving fair compensation for community teachers. This paper identifies that while siloed and bridging configurations have been instrumental in improving collaboration between humanitarian and development actors, they have done little to resolve the pressing issue of equitable salaries for community teachers in Myanmar, thus requiring an intentional, contextually aware configuration.

Key Words

community teachers, equitable compensation, conflict and crisis settings, ethnic education systems

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Introduction

The plight of community teachers in Myanmar

In Myanmar, community teachers and the ethnic education providers who support them face immense challenges amid the ongoing political crisis. Recruited by their communities, these teachers work in rural, remote, and conflict-affected areas—often in schools established by ethnic education providers where government services are absent. They receive no state recognition or funding.

Since the coup, ethnic education services have expanded rapidly due to families increasingly choosing non-state schools (Bhatta *et al.*, 2023). Enrolment in ethnic education-supported schools has surged to an estimated 1,000,000 children (South *et al.*, 2024), up from 300,000+ before the coup (Mohinga Matters, 2024). However, the more than 30,000 community teachers teaching in these schools struggle to survive, often leaving after just two years of service (Johnston *et al.*, 2021). Economic instability has worsened the situation, as their salaries fail to keep pace with inflation and currency depreciation. Previously, many supplemented their income through community contributions or secondary jobs (Johnston *et al.*, 2021), but now eroded livelihood opportunities and deepened poverty, particularly in conflict-affected areas (Roy, 2023; World Bank, 2023), means that many community teachers are unable to meet their basic needs.

Despite these challenges, ethnic education providers remain committed to long-term goals—actively working to establish a federal democratic education system that recognises, integrates, and strengthens the ethnic education systems they administer.

Conceptual framework

The Humanitarian-Development and Peace (HDP) nexus is a dynamic and multifaceted concept that has garnered increasing donor commitment in recent years. In 2019, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) issued a recommendation on the HDP nexus, outlining its core principles and rationale. This recommendation was endorsed by 31 OECD DAC members and seven UN agencies, reinforcing existing efforts to enhance outcomes

for affected populations through improved cross-organisational and intra-organisational coordination. The concept gained momentum following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which called for a greater diversity of stakeholders working toward collective outcomes over multiple years (UNGA, 2016:9). It was further advanced by the United Nations' *2017 New Way of Working*, which urged humanitarian and development actors to collaborate based on their respective comparative advantages (United Nations, 2018) to achieve 'collective outcomes'—a notion closely linked to the HDP nexus. Collective outcomes aim to build a bridge between short-term assistance, medium-term outcomes and long-term development programming and financing and is focused on the point (or nexus) where humanitarian, development and peace actions meet (OCHA, 2018).

Due to unique conflict dynamics, Myanmar has been an early adopter of HDP nexus programming. In December 2019, the European Union (EU) launched the Nexus Response Mechanism (NRM) (UNOPS, 2024) to support conflict-affected populations, displaced communities, host communities, and returnees (Capacity4Dev, 2020). More recently, the Myanmar Joint Response Framework (JRF) for the education sector has emerged as a key coordination tool, bringing together national and international stakeholders to strengthen education support (GPE, 2024). The JRF aims to enhance coordination and alignment between humanitarian and development actors in the education sector (UNESCO, 2022), reflecting broader efforts to advance HDP nexus programming in Myanmar.

Locating community teachers within current HPD nexus discourse

Within the HDP nexus discourse, a critical question for community teachers and the ethnic education providers that support them is: *How can a sustainable system be established to ensure equitable salaries for community teachers?*

Global guidance (ILO, 2016) stresses the importance of equitable teacher salary systems that meet basic living needs and prevent disparities among teachers in the same context. Yet community teachers, who often work alongside government and IDP teachers or those hired through humanitarian and

development projects, receive significantly lower salaries. If community teachers were classified under humanitarian action—similar to ‘refugee’ or ‘IDP’ teachers—salary payments might be less contentious. In Myanmar, providing stipends to volunteer teachers in humanitarian settings, such as IDP camps in Rakhine and Kachin states, is well established. The Myanmar Education Cluster has successfully standardised volunteer teacher payments, and despite funding constraints, donors remain committed to meeting these benchmarks. In contrast, community teachers lack a formal classification or framework for salary support, making financial support for their salary payments more precarious. If categorised under development action, community teachers would ideally be funded through sustainable state revenue streams. However, ethnic education systems, many of which originated during Myanmar’s military rule, have never received state recognition or public funding. As a result, they continue to rely on external funding alongside community contributions to sustain children’s education.

In seeking a pathway forward, this paper explores the issue of equitable salaries for community teachers within current debates about the need to broaden the conceptualisation of nexus programming. Current debate on nexus programming recognises that a simplified ‘one size fits all’ blueprint has failed to account for the diversity and complexity of contexts like Myanmar.

Weishaupt (2020) contends that challenges in operationalising the HDP nexus within protracted crisis contexts arise partly from its overly generic conceptualisation (Weishaupt, 2020). He identifies four potential nexus configurations, distinguishing those that mirror current practices from those with the potential to enhance the effectiveness of nexus programming. Weishaupt (2020) argues that, to achieve impactful outcomes, nexus programming requires context-specific, substantively focused, and oriented approaches. Table 1 provides a summary of Weishaupt’s (2020) conceptual framework.

Table 1: Weishaupt’s four proposed nexus configurations

Nexus configurations	Description
Silos	This prevailing view holds that humanitarian aid, development, and peace operate as distinct silos, each defined by sector-specific ideological differences, yet with overlapping objectives, activities, and outcomes.
Bridging	This view is particularly evident in nexus coordination efforts, which recognise two complementary perspectives: (1) an inter-organisational approach aimed at bridging sectoral gaps, and (2) an intra-organisational approach that encourages a re-evaluation of the scope and impact of activities across all three sectors.
Context	Nexus conceptualisations have often neglected contextual particularities, underscoring the urgent need for a deeper exploration of the conditions that enable or hinder effective nexus programming within a specific context.
Substance	Current nexus configurations have paid limited attention to the substance of HDP actions. There is a critical need to focus on specific activities and outcomes that will demonstrate and substantiate the effectiveness of nexus programming.

Research design

This paper maps the issue of *‘how can a sustainable system be established to ensure equitable salaries for community teachers?’* against Weishaupt’s (2020) four HDP nexus configurations in order to assess whether one or more of these configurations can help resolve the current impasse. By applying these conceptual frameworks, we illuminate strategies and approaches for achieving a sustainable and equitable solution to the community teacher salary dilemma.

The paper seeks to answer two key research questions by exploring which of the four conceptual configurations of HDP nexus programming 1) has current prominence in Myanmar, and 2) is best suited to resolve issues of community teacher salary payments in the current context.

Using Weishaupt’s four nexus configurations, this paper presents a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Dixon-Woods, *et al.*, 2005), drawing extensively on the two earlier studies related to

community teacher salaries (Johnston, *et al.*, 2021; Johnston and Costa, 2023) and the state of the education sector since the coup (South, *et al.*, 2024; World Bank, 2023). The discussion is organised into three categories used in HDP nexus discourse: coordination, programming, and financing; and is then assigned to the relevant nexus configuration according to Weishaupt's theory. The financial model for estimating the required budget for community teachers in Myanmar's ethnic education systems has been developed using a demographic-based projection approach combined with student-teacher ratio calculations and salary cost modelling. Thus, the financial model provides an evidence-based framework for projecting community teacher salary funding requirements in Myanmar.

Findings

The following section examines the HDP nexus in the context of ethnic education provision in pre- and post-coup Myanmar and presents key evidence related to HDP coordination, programming, and financing against Weishaupt's four conceptual configurations.

Siloed configuration

Siloed ideology has prevailed in Myanmar with mixed consequences for community teachers. In Rakhine State, as early as 2013/14, efforts were underway to progressively align volunteer teacher salaries with MoE teacher salary standards in IDP camps and host communities. By 2018, the EiE cluster had successfully advocated for the MoE to take over the payment of salaries for an increased number of volunteer teachers in IDP camps in Rakhine (UNICEF, 2019) and by 2019, parity between MoE and EiE sector salaries was achieved (Johnston *et al.*, 2022). Unfortunately, the payment of volunteer teacher salaries by the MoE was short-lived. By June 2020, the MoE stopped paying the salaries of volunteer teachers working in Rakhine state (Rohingya Khobor, 2020) due to the impacts on widespread COVID-19 school closures. Despite this, the EiE cluster policy position regarding standardised volunteer teacher salaries has been maintained.

By contrast, the MoE has never formally recognised ethnic education services, preventing state funding from reaching these schools or their teachers (South

et al., 2024). However, in the years preceding the coup, there were signs of a potential shift. Donors grew increasingly confident in the MoE, leading to substantial budget support for state-led education reforms. In 2019, the EU launched its first budget support programme in Myanmar, committing EUR 221 million to education reforms (EU, 2019). By 2020, the World Bank approved a \$100 million IDA loan, with 70% allocated to Myanmar's most disadvantaged townships, prioritising underperforming schools and teachers (World Bank, 2020). These investments encouraged limited collaboration between the government and selected ethnic education providers. Notably, the MoE was working with the Karen National Union (KNU) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) to finalise a framework for recognising mother-tongue-based curricula. However, this initiative—and broader donor-backed efforts to forge collaborations between the MoE and ethnic education providers—were abruptly halted by the military coup on February 1, 2021 (South *et al.*, 2020).

Gradually, donors have become responsive to the plight of ethnic education providers, despite earlier questioning their legitimacy and the relevance of ethnic education services (Mears, *et al.*, 2015). The Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC) was established in 2013 as the first multi-donor facility to directly support ethnic education systems in the country, and the EU began funding the RISE network, supporting 16 individual ethnic education providers across the country. All this activity, however, did not resolve the funding shortfalls facing ethnic education providers in paying their community teachers. Fluctuations in available funding and uncertainty year on year continued to leave ethnic education providers vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities.

In the context of HDP configurations and discourse, the siloed approach has hindered development actors from recognising the critical role of supporting community teachers within nexus programming. The stark disparity between support for volunteer teachers in humanitarian settings and community teachers in a development context exemplifies the HDP nexus's failure in Myanmar, where actors have overlooked the significant overlap between humanitarian and development contexts, particularly in the post-coup landscape.

Bridging configurations

Weishaupt (2020) argues that operating in silos reinforces divisions, implying that humanitarian aid, development, and peace are disconnected spheres of intervention. As a result, communication or collaboration across these silos requires deliberate and often structural facilitation. Bridging, as Weishaupt (2020) contends, is different from its siloed relative and has manifested in calls for stronger collaboration across the respective mandates of humanitarian, development and peace actors (OECD, 2023).

Before the coup, nascent bridging structures aimed at improving coordination between humanitarian, development, and peace actors in the education sector had begun to take shape. For instance, the Education in Ethnic States and Regions (EESR) Forum brought together humanitarian and development donors, implementing agencies, and ethnic education providers to coordinate support to ethnic education systems. Within the EESR Forum, a Teacher Taskforce was established to advocate for the recognition of community teachers as a key National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) policy priority. While the EESR Forum has remained active post-coup and continues to serve as a relevant coordination platform, the Teacher Taskforce—critical to advancing the issue of community teacher salaries—collapsed (Johnston and Costa, 2023).

The strongest example of Weishaupt's bridging theory in Myanmar is the education sector's JRF. The JRF acknowledges ethnic education providers' concerns over community teacher supply, retention, and salaries (UNESCO, 2022), as well as the growing challenges in securing funds through community contributions and private donations. However, it offers no solutions. While the JRF recognises the absence of sustainable funding pathways for community and volunteer teachers and urges donors to continue providing incentives for those teachers outside the MoE system (UNESCO, 2022), it fails to outline how this can be achieved or propose a clear strategy for establishing an equitable salary system.

Context and substance configurations

Thus far, siloed or bridging configurations of the HDP nexus in Myanmar have not produced any solutions to the dilemma facing community teachers.

We argue that the contextual particularities of Myanmar—in particular the importance of ethnic education systems in meeting the education needs of a growing number of Myanmar's children—are of central importance to the conceptualisation of nexus configurations and implementation. Based on extensive lessons from HDP nexus pilots (Liam, 2019; Anan and Stolk, 2018) a focus on local circumstance and capacities in addition to expert knowledge (Autesserre, 2014) are promising entry points to assess which nexus configuration might be the most appropriate in a specific context. Additionally, Weishaupt (2020) argues that the 'substance' of HDP nexus actions have held a marginal position within current nexus debates (Schusterman, 2021). Weishaupt (2020) argues it is not only important to answer how the HDP nexus can be facilitated but also identify the specific activities and outcomes that can substantiate it.

These two configurations are highly relevant in Myanmar's context. We argue that a stronger focus on context and substance in ethnic education service delivery would drive deeper commitment to localisation, embedding investment in national and local capacities (Singh and Mosselmans, 2019). The OECD (2024) highlights that a key enabler of locally led development is the provision of high-quality funding to local actors. Such an approach would not only shift power dynamics and foster more genuine partnerships between local and international stakeholders but would also ensure predictable, flexible, multi-year funding—critical for achieving sustainable, transformational outcomes. This shift could offer a pathway toward resolving the challenge of ensuring fair compensation for community teachers. The substance configuration asks the important question of what HDP nexus programming seeks to achieve within the specificity of the context. For ethnic education providers, the long-term objective for strengthening ethnic education systems is clear. They seek to strengthen and harmonise ethnic education systems across the country in order to lay the foundations for a federal democratic education system (Johnston and Costa, 2023).

Seen through this lens, supporting the salary payment of community teachers is an investment in Myanmar's future federal education system. This may help elevate donor concerns of aid dependency as funding for community teacher salaries under a federal education model would (when a legitimate

government is restored) fall to the state. Thus, funding for community teacher salaries falls naturally within current and future state-based system-strengthening efforts.

What would a reimagined HDP nexus approach look like if it truly integrated context and substance—fully embracing localisation and investing in Myanmar's future federal education system? And critically, what would it cost? Johnston and Costa (2023) offer an early roadmap for establishing a harmonised community teacher salary system—one that unites ethnic education providers, international actors, and donors in a collective effort to address salary disparities today while laying the foundation for a future federal education system. Key features of the roadmap include:

- Ethnic Education Providers leading the development of a standardised salary model, strengthening teacher management systems, and advocating for aligned funding.
- International Intermediaries providing technical support, reviewing existing stipend programs, and facilitating the gradual alignment of payments to the new model.
- Donors providing predictable, multi-year funding, coordinating contributions, and establishing and contributing to pooled financing mechanisms to sustain equitable teacher salaries.

Financing remains a critical challenge in the HDP nexus discourse (OECD, 2024), making the question of cost essential to resolve. Building on Johnston *et al.*'s (2021) initial costing model, we have developed a new post-coup financial framework designed to function during this interim period.

Based on Myanmar's current population estimate of 54.57 million (World Bank, 2024) and census data indicating that 30.6% of the population is of school-going age (Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2018), approximately 16.7 million children in Myanmar require educational services. Post-coup, 28% of this school-age population is out of school (Bhatta *et al.*, 2023), with a steep decline in student enrolments in government schools.

Community-based and schools supported by ethnic education providers have absorbed an estimated 8%

of the in-school population (Bhatta *et al.*, 2023). This projection translates to around 962,000 students, aligning with recent independent calculations (South *et al.*, 2024). To support this increased enrolment and maintain a 25:1 student teacher ratio, which is consistent with Myanmar's current educational statistics (Statista Research Department, 2024), ethnic schools urgently require stable funding for 38,500 community teachers.

Achieving salary parity with government teachers is essential for teacher retention and service quality (World Bank, 2023). At \$187 per teacher per month, our model projects an annual recurrent cost of USD86.3 million. Such an investment would provide about one million children with stable, quality education. Beyond helping to address Myanmar's current education crisis, this support would help lay the groundwork for a federal education system that formally recognises and integrates ethnic education providers. This in turn would strengthen national recovery and social cohesion when a democratic government is restored.

Conclusion

Weishaupt's theory highlights gaps in current nexus programming, cautioning against a rigid nexus blueprint that has shaped HDP actions in Myanmar. Instead, Weishaupt (2020) proposes a more nuanced configuration that grounds HDP actors in the substance and context of their work. This perspective strengthens the link between ongoing community teacher salary payments and the broader goal of building a federal democratic education system in Myanmar, offering key entry points to recalibrate HDP nexus programming in the country.

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