

# Mind the gaps:

## A case study of children with disabilities in war-torn northern Shan State



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### Abstract

In Myanmar's conflict-ridden northern Shan State, all children face significant structural barriers to education; however, for children with physical disabilities these obstacles are exacerbated. This case study explores these challenges within community-led schools, employing the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Drivers of Learning and Development Framework and the social model of (dis)ability. Through qualitative interviews and focus groups with 67 participants – including teachers, parents, and community leaders – the research identifies pre-existing conditions that impact learning: social stigma, a lack of disability-inclusive school infrastructure, inadequate teacher training to specifically support children with disabilities, and a disability policy-practice disconnect. Analysis using the social model of (dis)ability revealed that ongoing conflict has worsened these conditions thereby transforming impairment to disability and individualising responsibility to the most marginalised. The findings call for interventions that support greater awareness through coordinated and coherent interventions to foster disability-inclusive education in conflict-affected northern Shan State.

### Key Words

children with disabilities, inclusive education, northern Shan State, Myanmar, ERICC framework, social model of (dis)ability

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## Introduction

Education is a fundamental right and a critical driver of human development, yet for many children with disabilities in conflict-affected regions, it remains an elusive goal (cf. Jaafar *et al.*, 2023; UNICEF, 2024a). In Myanmar, political instability, conflict between state and non-state armed actors and economic hardship have severely disrupted formal education systems, leaving vulnerable populations—including children with disabilities—on the margins (Khai *et al.*, 2024). Northern Shan State exemplifies this crisis. It is a region marked by strife between non-state armed groups intertwined with a significant illicit economy. Shan State, which comprises Myanmar's portion of the 'Golden Triangle', represents 'the centre of opium production in Myanmar' and is the source of most of the world's opium (UNODC, 2024; UN News, 2023). In the breakdown of functioning government in northern Shan State following the 2021 military coup, community-led schools have seen increased enrollment (Main *et al.*, 2025); however, their capacity to serve children with disabilities is limited both by lack of resources and by societal attitudes.

The research is guided by two central questions in order to contribute to the fields of education in emergencies (EiE) and disability studies in Myanmar:

1. What are the key barriers to accessing education for children with physical disabilities in community-led schools in northern Shan State?
2. How do these barriers affect the quality, continuity, and coherence of education for these children?

Within this study physical disabilities refers both to congenital physical disabilities such as missing limbs or speech impediments; and preventable disabilities such as those caused by trauma and war – especially landmines: as of 2023, Myanmar leads the world in landmine casualties (HRW, 2024; ICBL, 2024).

## Education in emergencies and children with disabilities

Globally, conflict and crises exacerbate educational inequalities, disproportionately affecting children

with disabilities (INEE, 2023). The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) estimates that in emergency settings, these children are two to three times more likely to be out of school than their non-disabled peers. The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies Minimum Standards for Education emphasise that inclusive education in such contexts requires addressing attitudinal barriers (e.g., stigma), environmental barriers (e.g., inaccessible facilities), and institutional barriers (e.g., lack of policy support) (INEE, 2024). Classroom-level challenges are well documented: physical inaccessibility, untrained teachers, and discrimination consistently exclude children with disabilities in emergency settings (Lindsay and Hsu, 2023). While Myanmar has been taking steps towards greater inclusion for children with disabilities, much work remains 'in the current absence of government involvement' (UNICEF, 2024b, pp. 7).

## Disability in Myanmar

Approximately 12.8% of Myanmar's population lives with some form of disability, with Shan State reporting a prevalence of 9% (International IDEA, 2024). The 2021 military coup and subsequent escalation of conflict have likely increased these figures due to violence-related injuries (Khai *et al.*, 2024; BNI, 2023). Myanmar ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2011, committing, under Article 24, to inclusive education – 'the right of persons with disabilities to education...at all levels [including] lifelong learning' (UN 2024); and enacted its Rights of Persons with Disabilities Law in 2015. However, implementation remains weak, especially in conflict zones where governance is fragmented.

Yangon-based disability rights organisations – such as the Eden Centre for Disabled Children<sup>1</sup> (a special education centre in Yangon that also sponsors projects elsewhere in the country), the Myanmar Independent Living Initiative<sup>2</sup> (operating in ten states and regions across Myanmar), and the Myanmar Coordination Committee for Equal Rights of People with Disabilities (cf. Ebead and MCERP, 2024) – work in different ways to improve difficult situations for people with disabilities. Fernando *et al.* (2019)

1 [https://edencentre.org/about-us/?lang\\_ver=c4Lve4074](https://edencentre.org/about-us/?lang_ver=c4Lve4074)

2 <https://www.milimyanmar.org/en/how-we-set-up-this/about-mili/>

## Community-led education in northern Shan State

In northern Shan State, many rural community-led schools have become lifelines for education as the basic education schools under the Military Council become more stressed (BNI, 2023). Many non-governmental humanitarian and development organisations have ceased operations in the region due to the military's new regulatory laws (BNI, 2023). With the overwhelming humanitarian needs across the country, most donor funding is directed towards emergency aid—such as shelter, food, clothing, and water. The ongoing conflict inevitably disrupts education, with schools often forced to close when fighting intensifies in the region (Main *et al.*, 2025).

In response to the crisis in Shan State, a consortium composed of the Center for Rural Education and Development (CRED), the Shan Education Networking Group (SENG), and the Ta'ang Students and Youth Union (TSYU) with support from international donors – has been working to provide community schools for children aged 3 to 17 in conflict-affected areas where state provisions have become disrupted or have been non-existent. CRED aspires to provide ‘free accessible mother-tongue-based quality education in Shan state for all’<sup>3</sup> – including for children with disabilities. SENG was founded ‘to promote social justice by offering opportunities to underprivileged people of our society’<sup>4</sup>; the TSYU ‘to work for peace, justice, equality.... and to improve the lives of students.

The community-led schools these civil society organizations support face chronic challenges: funding shortages, teacher attrition, and interruptions due to conflict (Bhatta, 2023). While these schools often demonstrate resilience and adaptability, their capacity for education inclusive of those with physical or mental disabilities is limited by a lack of specialised training, adaptive resources, and impairment-friendly infrastructure. In Myanmar, cultural perceptions often frame disability as a result of misfortune or karmic retribution, fostering stigma and marginalisation (Fernando *et al.*, 2019). This may be particularly pronounced in rural and conflict-affected areas like northern Shan State, where awareness of disability rights and resources for inclusion are limited. This study builds on these observations, examining how such schools navigate the inclusion of children with physical disabilities.



3 <https://credshan.wordpress.com/>

4 <https://www.shananeducation.org/>

5 <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/tsyo/?location=myanmarandtheme>

## Analytical frameworks

This research integrates two frameworks that have emerged from the West – the Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) ‘Drivers of Learning and Development’ Framework (Kim, *et al.*, 2024) and the social model of (dis)ability (Oliver, 1990) – to analyse educational challenges for children with physical disabilities in northern Shan State. The Drivers of Learning and Development Framework begins by acknowledging the impact on learning of pre-existing conditions such as economic conditions, the environment, and social structures; and goes on to assess educational outcomes in conflict and protracted crisis settings via four drivers of learning:

- **Access:** The opportunities to enter and capacities to participate in education.
- **Quality:** The suitability of teaching and learning environments, quality of resources, relationships, norms and interactions within classrooms/ schools, households and communities.
- **Continuity:** Sustained exposure to education that allows progression in both learning and grade/ school transition despite disruptions due to conflict or displacement.
- **Coherence:** The alignment of educational practices with policy-making and educational system operations.

The social model of (dis)ability, developed by Mike Oliver (1990), defines disability as a condition imposed by societal barriers rather than an individual limitation. The model asserts that impairments only become disabilities due to barriers outside of a person’s control – inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and inadequate policies. This framework has reshaped global disability discourse, influencing instruments like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN, 2006; Oliver, 2013) and the INEE’s ‘Minimum Standards for Education’ (INEE, 2024). As a ground-breaking disability rights group, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, put it fifty years ago:

‘Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.’ (UPIAS, 1975)

With the guidance of these frameworks, this study analyses how pre-existing conditions – such as conflict, economic hardship, a lack of quality educational infrastructure, and cultural attitudes – affect the drivers of learning, and ultimately the wider societal barriers for children with disabilities.

## Research methods and analysis

This qualitative study was conducted between May and July 2023 in 20 community-led schools across seven townships in northern Shan State – Hsipaw, Kutkai, Kyaukme, Mantong, Mongmit, Muse, Namkham – all part of CRED’s local inclusive education programme. A total of 67 individuals (including teachers, parents, principals, monks, and local leaders) participated, selected via purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives on disability and education. Twenty key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with teachers to explore their experiences and challenges in educating children with disabilities. Seven focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs), averaging 6–8 participants per group, to gather community-level insights.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted in either Shan or Burmese languages and then translated into English for analysis. Interviews took place in safe locations and participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymisation of data. Thematic analysis was employed, with data coded and categorised according to the ERICC framework’s four drivers. Emergent themes, such as stigma and perceptions, were later coded in line with the social model of (dis)ability to deepen the analysis.

## Limitations

The study has limitations, including the absence of direct perspectives from children with disabilities; and its cross-sectional design, which offers a snapshot rather than examining long-term trends. To build on this work, future research should investigate longitudinal outcomes and include more participatory approaches that include the voices of children with disabilities, ensuring their agency in shaping educational solutions.

## Findings

Findings are organised by the Drivers of Learning and Development Framework (Kim, *et al.*, 2024), beginning with the pre-existing conditions and then examining drivers by impact severity, as perceived by the authors' analysis: access, quality, continuity, and coherence. Lastly, the implications of Oliver's social model of (dis)ability are described.

**Table 1. Pre-existing conditions impacting learning**

Pre-existing condition	Description
<b>Conflict and displacement</b>	Political and armed conflict and the illicit economy in northern Shan State has disrupted education, displacing families and straining community resources. Children with physical disabilities are particularly vulnerable, as displacement often separates them from caregivers or assistive devices.
<b>Societal stigma</b>	Cultural beliefs linking disability to misfortune or shame pervade the region. A parent confessed, 'We feel embarrassed to send them to school; people stare and whisper.' This stigma discourages enrolment and leads to isolation.
<b>Economic hardship</b>	Widespread poverty forces families to prioritise resources. A teacher explained, 'Parents cannot afford to send all their children [to school], so they choose the ones without disabilities,' sidelining those with impairments.
<b>Lack of quality educational infrastructure</b>	Schools lack disability-friendly features due to funding constraints and low awareness. Ramps are often absent; latrines, inaccessible; and terrain, uneven; rendering physical access a daily struggle. One teacher noted: 'In my school, children with disabilities have difficulties accessing the latrine because there are steps leading to it. There is no ramp at the school entrance or in the classrooms'.

Of all these pre-existing conditions, the one that surfaced most often within interviews and focus groups was stigma. Stigma around disability is a significant risk factor for children with disabilities that negatively affects their relationship with most of the ERICC 'four drivers of learning': stigma affects their access to education, the quality of resources teachers are provided, and their continuity through education. As will be explored in the following sections, this study identified that the pre-existing conditions limiting learning have all increased as a result of the coup d'état, which has further marginalized children with disabilities.

## Access

ERICC conceptual framework (Kim *et al.*, 2024) defines access 'as both awareness of, and the opportunity and capacity to participate in educational experiences.' Given the pre-existing conditions, such access to education is intrinsically difficult for any child in northern Shan State. A local leader (KII 1) of the consortium reported:

'The current military junta, which claims to be the government, is not prioritising education; as a result, community schools are the only option for children in northern Shan State'.

Almost all participants in the study noted that, aside from CRED and its consortium partners, no other organisations are supporting education in their areas, and there is little or no support for the specific needs of children with disabilities. Additionally, the region's rugged terrain and conflict-driven displacement have amplified infrastructure challenges—such as the lack of accessible learning spaces. In addition to the fact that many children are currently learning in temporary spaces, churches, and monasteries (Main *et al.*, 2025) – community schools are much less-resourced than their state counterparts which has acted to exacerbate access limitations for children with disabilities.

## Quality

A shortage of trained teachers and resources suitable for students with disabilities reduces the

quality of education, as many teachers reported. One teacher stressed that a specialised training programme was urgently needed to help them understand how to support students with disabilities and enable students to progress in education. In the absence of such a programme, teachers reported that they sometimes feel 'a lack of preparedness' or 'embarrassment' when teaching these students. Some of that 'embarrassment' is due to stigma, too, which affects some teachers. Others are more adaptive, as one teacher described:

'I tried using different ways to let [my students with disabilities] learn if one way does not work. For example, I gave time for individual teaching, used storytelling methods, a game for teaching mathematics, and [brought students to] nearby environments' (KII 10).

Another teacher reported:

'Children with disabilities need extra attention and time, so we sometimes use break time or out-of-school hours to support them' (KII 12).

Within a crowded classroom, during the main teaching time, however, the need for personalised attention is challenging. Some children with disabilities have benefited from supportive relationships with non-disabled peers who assist them with classroom tasks, promoting inclusion and encouraging continuous learning. As an example, a teacher observed:

'Their non-disabled peers help them with tasks like drawing pictures or understanding lessons. This behaviour has a positive effect, keeping children with disabilities motivated' (KII 13).

However, not all peer relationships are helpful. Interviewed teachers noted that some children with disabilities encounter bullying or name-calling, which discourages attendance and disrupts their continued education. One teacher commented: 'Children with disabilities are often teased by other students, which makes them feel isolated'.

## Continuity

Many teachers mentioned that children who drop out of school often come from poor families who cannot afford the educational expenses for their children. Interviews surfaced that children with disabilities are at additional risk of dropping out. Lack

of support from parents and teachers can deplete their motivation to attend school. One of the parents lamented that children with disabilities lacked confidence in their ability to succeed in education because of their disabilities. This feeling led to despair and low self-esteem, often resulting in drop out of education. A local leader expressed it this way:

'If these children fail to keep up academically, they are sometimes threatened with being removed from school. To cope with these challenges, some students with disabilities simply give up and drop out of school' (KII 3).

## Coherence

Participants repeatedly emphasised the absence of an inclusive education policy or any guidance regarding effective teaching practices for children with disabilities. Interviewed teachers and school leaders reported needing to develop school or community-based solutions in an attempt to support children with physical disabilities. While this represents a needed first step, it also highlights that system-wide interventions remain absent, resulting in a lack of system coherence.

## Individualising disability

Through the lens of Oliver's (1990) social model of (dis)ability, the challenges of possessing a physical disability in northern Shan State are heightened due to conditions imposed by wider societal barriers. Pre-existing stigma, the lack of both assistive devices and disability-inclusive school infrastructure, and under-supported teachers – all converge in individual people forced to navigate complex societal obstacles on their own. The lack of cohesive support mechanisms ultimately individualises disability, placing overwhelming pressure on teachers, parents, and most importantly the children themselves. The result, as witnessed by Oliver (2013) in multiple other contexts, is that physical impairments in northern Shan State are transformed into disabilities due to overwhelming external constraints: inaccessible schools, discriminatory attitudes, and inadequate and incoherent policies. As outlined by the drivers of learning, the coup d'état has increased external constraints which this study found pushes children with disabilities even further to the margins.

## Discussion

To take steps to ‘un-individualise’ disability in northern Shan State – to increase the social capacity to support children with physical impairments by removing the barriers that cause disability – a systemic approach must be implemented across the identified pre-existing conditions and four drivers of learning in the ERICC framework.

The concept of access, as understood by interviewed stakeholders, must be expanded – moving beyond physical entry to education to enabling ‘capacities’ to participate in education (Kim, *et al.*, 2024). This will require a multi-pronged strategy that addresses some of the identified pre-existing conditions limiting access: societal stigma, economic barriers, and infrastructural limitations. Building disability-inclusive school infrastructure, providing equitable financial support for families of children with disabilities, and creating community awareness programs will help more holistically address children’s ability to authentically participate.

Ensuring educational quality in any emergency setting is elusive (Jaafar *et al.*, 2023). In northern Shan State, providing quality education demands a transformation which includes targeted teacher training, intentional resource allocation, and the introduction of different pedagogical approaches. These interventions are likely to enhance the quality of educational experience for learners with disabilities as well as quality of relationships between teachers and students. Specialised training programmes must be developed to equip educators with the skills and confidence to effectively support students with physical disabilities and raise awareness in communities, as recommended by Ware and Schuelka (2019). This includes not only technical skills but also strategies to build on the positive peer interactions that were referenced during interviews.

Any future training should raise awareness of and build on existing policies, such as Myanmar’s commitments under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its Disability Rights Law. Interviewed teachers appear ready to take steps towards developing personalised learning approaches and creating classroom environments that more intentionally celebrate diversity, but to do so they require robust strategic plans for inclusive

education that can reduce the burdens brought on by the individualisation of disability.

Promoting *continuity* in education for children with disabilities requires specific interventions to prevent dropout and increase both student and parent engagement in education. This research identified the pre-existing economic burdens on families as a critical factor when determining if they can send children to school, and how many children. Cash assistance programmes could play a powerful role (Niño-Zarazúa and Tarp, 2021), in addition to providing needed assistance devices, home visits, and follow-up programmes.

*Coherence* demands a system-wide approach to support children with disabilities in future policy-making and programs. A comprehensive framework is needed for teachers which provides standardised actions, in their own languages, for supporting children with disabilities and their families. By shifting from individual-based, improvised solutions to more structured system-level approaches, steps can be taken to undo the individualisation of disability. Supporting children with physical disabilities can be a collective responsibility shared across communities – schools, families, teachers, and education authorities – rather than one placed solely on the individual child, their parents, or their immediate teachers.

## Conclusion

In northern Shan State, children with disabilities confront manifold, interconnected barriers to education—societal stigma, inadequate infrastructure, teachers without specific training, and incoherent policies—all deeply rooted in pre-existing conditions of conflict, poverty, and cultural norms. While community-led schools offer a resilient response by filling immediate gaps, their overstretched resources and lack of coordinated support force the burden of disability on individuals. These challenges, analysed through the ERICC Drivers of Learning and Development framework, reflect a systemic failure to ensure these children’s right to education, with profound consequences for their development and societal inclusion.

In some ways this is a case study in one of the hardest situations possible for children disabled by the world around them – living on rough,

inaccessible terrain, stigmatised and impoverished, surrounded by conflict within a wider illicit economy. But fostering inclusive attitudes seems to be a powerful first step in dismantling societal barriers. By bridging local efforts with global standards, stakeholders can uphold the rights and dignity of all children in northern Shan State and beyond.

## Author bios

**Zinghang Zetnan** is the Deputy Director of the Center for Rural Education and Development (CRED) supporting marginalized schools in Shan State while advocating for indigenous rights, mother-tongue education and inclusive policies.

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