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## **Introduction**

During nearly 50 years of military rule, Myanmar<sup>1</sup> was frequently singled out for its bad human rights record. Although international attention focused primarily on violations of civil and political rights, Myanmar is also a developing country in which many economic, social and cultural rights remain unfulfilled. The importance of these rights and the interrelatedness with civil and political rights have been frequently emphasized in human rights theory and practice (Whelan, this volume). Education is one example of a right that is now considered universal and indispensable for a country's development.

In the international human rights framework, education is generally seen as a state responsibility (Rose 2010). Yet the military governments that ruled Myanmar between 1962 and 2010 have largely failed to fulfill the population's right to education.<sup>2</sup> This has created a situation in which various types of non-state actors have taken up responsibility for the provision of education to particular sections of society. The new 'nominally civilian' government established under President Thein Sein in 2011 has identified education as one of the areas in need of drastic reform, and international actors that are en masse entering the country have also sought to contribute to the development of the education sector.<sup>3</sup> In order to assess these changes, however, we must look at the legacy of previous governments' education policies.

In this chapter, I distinguish 'state education' from 'non-state education', based on who runs the schools and determines the curriculum. I further distinguish non-state education from non-formal education, which is provided outside the formal system (such as summer schools). In addition to literature review, information provided in this chapter is based on intermittent fieldwork in Myanmar and with the Burmese community in Thailand between 2010 and 2012. Interviews with young people who had recently completed their higher education provided valuable insights into daily experiences in Myanmar's education system. Additional information stems from participation in a British civil society project on teacher training standards in non-state education, which allowed for discussions with various non-state education providers on their perceived duties and responsibilities.

The chapter will start with a description of state responsibilities for the provision of education according to international human rights standards, and the extent to which the Myanmar government has been able to fulfill its obligations. It will then provide an overview of various non-state actors that have come to play a role in Myanmar's education system. These include Buddhist monks who have been providing education since before the existence of Burma as a state, as well as ethnic minority organizations that have set up their own schools in the various border areas. A final group of non-state actors involved in Myanmar's education system consists of international donors who, both through official development aid and through private initiatives, have sought to contribute to Myanmar's education sector in a variety of ways. It will be argued that the involvement of each type of actor brings about unique opportunities, but also carries risks in terms of content and continuity. Although the government carries primary responsibility for the provision of accessible and quality education to all, it should rely on the expertise that these non-state actors have built up in the past, and acknowledge the need for context-sensitive education, particularly with regard to ethnic and religious minorities.

## **Myanmar's state education system**

Prior to British rule, Burma prided itself on having one of the best education systems in the region. The country had very high literacy rates, largely the result of educational services provided in Buddhist monasteries. Under British colonial rule (1886-1948), this quality education was partly maintained. Nevertheless, during this period a segregation developed between those educated in English language schools, who could go to university and serve in the British administration, and those educated in Burmese language schools, who had to resort to poorly paid jobs, or no jobs at all (Cheesman 2003).

The post-independence government, which took on a central role in the provision of education, tried to address this segregation by making education free of charge and available to a wide group of people (Khin Maung Kyi et al. 2000). As a result, enrolment increased but quality worsened, a pattern that has continued since (Thein Lwin 2008). The quality further worsened under the rule of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which nationalized the whole education system, and prohibited Buddhist monks and other non-state actors from providing education services (Khin Maung Kyi et al. 2000). The BSPP and later military governments also profoundly affected the school curriculum, as will be discussed later.

Over the past decades, Myanmar's education sector has suffered from continuous governmental neglect. The state education system today consists of five years of primary school, four years of middle school and two years of high school, the completion of which gives access to higher education. Since children start school at the age of five, they can theoretically enter university as young as 16 years of age (Han Tin 2008). In practice, Myanmar high school graduates need to compensate for their short period of schooling by taking extra training, especially if they want to attend university abroad. Moreover, official enrollment figures underestimate the detrimental effects that government policies have had on the country's education system.

### *State obligations*

During the long period of military rule, Myanmar did not sign up to many human rights treaties. As one of only a few countries in the world, it has ratified neither the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, nor the Convention on Civil and Political Rights. It did, however, ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty, in 1991. Article 28 of the CRC recognizes the right to education, stating that primary education must be compulsory and free to all; secondary education must be available and accessible to every child; and higher education must be made accessible to all on the basis of capacity. It further calls for the progressive realization of these rights on the basis of equal opportunity, and calls for international cooperation in order to achieve this, particularly in relation to developing countries.

Over the past decades, Myanmar's education budget was somewhere around 1.3% of the official GDP (Steinberg 2010). This ranks it among the lowest spenders on education in the world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2007). In the 2008 Constitution (Article 28c), the Myanmar government commits itself to implementing a free, compulsory primary education system. According to the information the government has been providing to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and other relevant bodies, it aspires to make primary education free of charge and accessible to all. A wide range of enrolment figures for primary education is available, with some

estimating it to be as high as 97% (European Union 2012). Yet it is not always clear how much of these figures is based on first-day attendance, since it is known that children regularly drop out soon after they start attending primary school (Lall 2011). UNICEF (2010) estimates that less than 55% of the children in Myanmar complete primary school, and many of those who do so need more than double the designated number of years to finish (Kirkwood 2009).

### *Access to state education*

Myanmar expert David Steinberg (2010: 96) has argued that government statistics on the functioning of its education system 'are essentially inflated figures that mask the brutal reality of decay and neglect for most of the population.' Indeed, reliable information on population and budget has long been absent in Myanmar. Collignon (2001) describes how the Burmese government adjusted its estimated literacy rate from 60% to below 10% in 1987, in order to obtain 'least-developed country' status with the UN and receive the corresponding financial benefits. Moreover, estimates of the total population differ by several million (Scott Mathieson 2011), making it unlikely that the government would know exactly how many children live in its country. Children from certain minority groups such as the Rohingya are not counted as citizens at all (Steinberg 2010), while the status of the large number of children who are internally displaced or living abroad is also unclear.<sup>4</sup> This implies that official information regarding school attendance and literacy rates should be regarded as rough estimates only.

In practice, access to education is determined by children's place of residence, language and ethnicity, and the financial and citizenship status of their parents. Children in Myanmar's primary schools often drop out for economic reasons: because they are needed to supplement the family income, or because the family can no longer afford to send the child to school.<sup>5</sup> Children in poor families are needed to work on the land, or are sent to the cities to work in teashops and restaurants, often as bonded laborers. Transportation costs can be high, especially in rural areas, with some remote areas having only one primary school for up to 25 villages (Khin Maung Kyi et al. 2000). The number of high schools and higher education institutions is even lower (Child Rights Forum of Burma 2011).

The de facto absence of free, compulsory primary education for all is directly related to the government's economic policy, which leads to 'hidden' costs for the children's parents. In primary schools run by the government, parents are expected to contribute to the costs of the school building and supplies (Lall 2011). As government teachers' salaries are estimated to be as low as 50 US dollar per month (Child Rights Forum of Burma 2011), parents are often expected to supplement the teachers' meagre income by contributing to their costs for transportation and food (Thein Lwin 2008). My contacts estimated that access to the most popular schools can cost up to 1000 US dollar on 'informal' fees per year, which prevents most children from accessing these schools.

Another common practice to supplement teachers' income is offering 'tuition' classes: out-of-school lessons in which the school curriculum is taught on an individual basis (Fink 2009). This practice can hardly be avoided by parents who want their children to succeed in school. The government has announced at some occasions that it will target corruption in government schools (Mizzima News 2011), but such practices are likely to persist as long as teacher salaries remain low. In the meantime, children whose parents cannot afford to pay these hidden education costs sooner or later leave the formal education system. Consequently, children from poorer households are much less likely to complete their schooling or attend university (Fink 2009).

It is estimated that, taking into account drop-out rates in all levels of schooling, less than 2% of the children who enter primary school manage to finish high school by passing the matriculation exam, a requirement for access to university (Khin Maung Kyi et al. 2000). The results of this exam determine not only access, but also which subject one can study in university. Since socialist times, university subjects are valued based on a strict hierarchy, with social sciences and humanities being the least prestigious subjects, primarily chosen by those who fail to get into a more prestigious program. As a result, one may, for example, encounter a disproportionately large number of zoologists. Moreover, until recently, potentially ‘sensitive’ subjects such as political science were not taught at all.

### *Language, content, and quality of state education*

In addition to financial obstacles to attending school, other significant problems in Myanmar’s state education system relate to the language, content, and quality of the curriculum. The socialist government banned the use of minority languages in the state school system in the 1970s, even though a significant part of the population does not speak Burmese as their first language. The military government that ruled from 1988 onwards continued to discourage the development of ethnic minority schools and education in ethnic minority languages. Not only does this go against UNESCO recommendations that children receive primary education in their native language, but it also aggravates existing feelings of marginalization among ethnic minority groups. Moreover, some ethnic minorities are also religious minorities, whereas the state education system is strongly biased toward Buddhist teachings (Cheesman 2003). As discussed below, ethnic and religious minorities often set up their own (summer) schools in order to complement the formal curriculum.

Moreover, various actors from inside and outside the country have criticized the teaching style in Myanmar schools, which is very much focused on ‘rote learning’: memorization by repetition, without much attention for underlying understanding and learning processes (Lall 2011). Some argue that this is a deliberate strategy to ‘prevent children from learning how to think’ and create ‘obedient citizens’ (Thein Lwin 2008), thereby keeping the population submissive. Over the past decades, many Burmese have thus been taught not to question their elders, teachers, or parents (Fink 2009).

In addition to problems with language of instruction and teaching style, the government has had a pervasive influence on the content of the curriculum and the background of the teachers. From the socialist era onwards, any aspect of education that could possibly produce critical citizens has been censored by the military government, as it was determined to prevent student-initiated popular uprisings, which previously took place on numerous occasions (most notably in 1988). According to the 2008 Constitution (article 28d), ‘the union shall implement a modern education system that will promote all-around correct thinking and a good moral character contributing towards the building of the Nation.’ Naturally, the government has been determining the parameters of this ‘correct thinking.’ School curriculums that are still in use are not only outdated, but they deliberately exclude any information that the government disapproves of. The role of independence fighter General Aung San, for example, was marginalized in the history curriculum after he became associated with the struggle for democracy through the activities of his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, the main opposition leader from 1989 onwards (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012). Most references to the historical achievements or political demands of ethnic minority groups and the country’s long history of internal conflicts were also removed from textbooks during military rule (Fink 2009; Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012).

Under the previous military government, universities were closed several times for periods of up to three years in reaction to students' involvement in demonstrations against the government (Fink 2009; Steinberg 2010). When they reopened, campuses were moved out of the city center. The government also increased the number of regional education centers and actively promoted distance education, in order to prevent students from coming together and being able to form opposition groups (Fink 2009).<sup>6</sup> University teachers are often primarily selected based on their loyalty, rather than their qualifications. During an interview, one IT graduate described his frustration when he asked his teacher a simple technical question that she could not answer. He wanted to learn all about computers, but she was not able to explain anything other than what was written in the books. The student said he found it embarrassing that he had graduated in computer science without being able to solve even the simplest of computer issues. He therefore decided to switch to a non-state higher education institute to study additional topics that were not covered in university.

Many graduates from the state system conveyed similar stories. Even if the teachers are motivated, the absence (or poor quality) of supplies and laboratories limit students' opportunities to acquire skills and knowledge. Education available to military personnel and their families such as at the Defence Services Academy appears to be of somewhat better quality, but is obviously only accessible to political elites (Fink 2009). Given the limited opportunities for acquiring valuable knowledge in the state education system, many ambitious students eventually try to continue their studies abroad. Others have turned to various non-state education providers inside the country.

### **Non-state education providers**

In many developing countries, problems with access and quality of social services lead to the development of non-state initiatives to fill the gaps (Rose 2010). Although non-state actors often act parallel to the state system, their involvement does not usually originate from an externally imposed obligation. Rather, they act out of a sense of personal responsibility, duty to the community, or out of financial motivations (Macbean and Nesossi, this volume). This has also been the case in Myanmar's education system. Such situations raise questions about non-state actors' obligations, and the desirability of the existence of parallel systems. This chapter focuses on the role of non-commercial education providers, particularly (Buddhist) monastic schools and ethnic minority schools. It does not cover private schools that cater to the richer section of society, although these too might fulfill needs that are poorly addressed by the state.

#### *Monastic education*

The most prominent group of non-state education providers in Myanmar are Buddhist monks. It has been estimated that there are about 1,300-1,500 registered monastic schools throughout the country (Achilles in Lall 2011). This is hardly surprising, given the fact that Buddhist monks have been the first and foremost education providers since pre-colonial times. As mentioned, state education has only gained prominence since the colonial period, and gained a monopolized position during the socialist period which lasted until 1988. Since the 1990s, the government has officially allowed Buddhist monasteries to offer education up to the start of middle school (Cheesman 2003). This monastic education should be distinguished from religious education, which is also provided by Buddhist monks. While religious education prepares pupils for

monkhood (and sometimes nunhood), accredited monastic education follows the state curriculum, and pupils can take part in government examinations. This is important for children who want to continue to middle school and high school, sectors for which monasteries are not officially allowed to provide education (even though some monasteries appear to find ways around this).

Monastic education serves disadvantaged families by providing free education, including school supplies and sometimes even free meals. Unsurprisingly, this comes at a cost, and monastic schools struggle with several issues of their own. Most of them have a hard time securing funding to carry out their activities, and they often have trouble attracting or retaining qualified teachers. Teachers can earn a higher salary working in state schools, particularly since this allows them to offer private tuition, an option they do not have at monastic schools. Monastic schools often lack funding for teacher training, and inexperienced teachers might be faced with large class sizes of up to 100 pupils at a time (Lall 2011).

Government policy toward monastic schools has been ambivalent. While monasteries can officially register as primary education providers, this does not necessarily mean that they receive substantial financial assistance from the government (Lall and South 2014). This way the government benefits from the activities of non-state education providers without sharing in the costs. Nevertheless, certain monasteries stand out in terms of quality and accessibility. Such high profile non-state educators might attract jealousy from the side of local authorities, who fear competition with their state schools. Various local education providers mentioned that they were not allowed to open their facilities until after the nearby state school had opened, in order to reduce the risk of pupils switching from the state school to non-state schools. One non-state education provider described how he was approached by a local government representative who asked him to make a donation to a state school, which (like many other schools) had received insufficient funds from the government. Such examples show that the opportunities for non-state education providers often depend on personal relationships and other accidental factors.

Monastic schools offer truly free education by covering expenses that parents are otherwise required to pay, and taking away the hidden costs such as private tuition. From an international human rights perspective, it might appear as if these monasteries are taking over a role that should be fulfilled by the government. However, monastic education providers primarily engage in their activities out of a sense of duty to provide basic services for the poor, a role they have been fulfilling for centuries (Cheesman 2003). They do not necessarily see themselves as substitutes for state education. Nowadays, some refer to this as ‘socially engaged Buddhism,’ a shared sense of responsibility for their fellow human beings which they derive from their religion. In modern terminology, one monastic education provider explained that monks ‘are acting as a social security net.’ In order to secure enough donations to fulfill their role in society, they must motivate people to donate to monasteries ‘as a form of meditation.’ The monks might be used to their role of service providers, but they feel that they still need to convince the Buddhist communities that ‘you can serve yourself by serving others,’ according to the same monastic education provider.

In several ways, the monks’ ability to provide these services is directly related to societal developments and government policy: the more the country faces economic hardship, the more people will rely on monastic services, including education. However, the more the economic hardship, the less people will be able to donate to the monks. This was the situation that preceded the large-scale demonstrations in September 2007, in which Buddhist monks played a prominent role (Lorch 2008). Thus, although Buddhist monks are not explicit duty holders in the international human rights system and have no formal responsibilities according to this framework, they have for centuries played an important role in the provision of social services such as education.

Moreover, they are in many ways embedded in local communities. Community members rely on Buddhist monks for the provision of free education, while these monks in turn rely on donations from the community for their living costs. Despite their ability to contribute to the government's education targets, they have been subject to ambivalent and sometimes hostile governmental policies.

### *Schools run by ethnic minority organizations*

The other main group of non-state actors providing educational services in Myanmar can be found in the so-called 'ethnic' states in the border areas of Myanmar. These areas host a large section of the ethnic minority groups, which comprise about 30% of the population, as well as a sizeable part of the approximately 10% religious minorities. Schools in areas that have been influenced by Christian missionaries tend to be church-based, although they do not necessarily confine their services to Christian children (Lorch 2007). Although Christian churches provide important education services in various parts of the country, this section will focus on other types of education undertaken in ethnic minority areas.

Since Burma became independent from British colonialism, various ethnic minority groups have been involved in political and armed struggles for independence or autonomy from the central government, which is dominated by the Burman majority. The military government has been partially successful in its attempts to reach ceasefires with these armed groups. In some ethnic minority areas, armed groups and their political counterparts have created more or less autonomous regions, where they provide education to children of their own ethnicity (Lorch 2007; Lall and South 2014). Not only are these ethnic-based organizations able to provide education to pupils who might otherwise be left out due to financial or geographical constraints, but they also adapt their curriculum to provide more context sensitive education, for example by including instruction in their own ethnic language. Mon state is an example where local initiatives to run non-state schools have been particularly successful (Fink 2009). In some of the ceasefire areas, so-called 'mixed schools' have been set up: a cooperation between the government and the ethnic armed groups with which the government has reached a ceasefire (Lall and South 2014). Some of these schools have included instruction in their ethnic language as part of the regular curriculum. In other regions, ethnic minority groups organize 'summer schools' in the official school vacation (March-May), in order to teach their own language and other culturally specific topics.

Many of the ethnic areas have been the sites of decades of internal conflict, with ethnic minorities fighting for autonomy and equal rights (Smith 1999). Fighting in several ethnic states has caused many ethnic minority people to cross the border as refugees into Thailand, Bangladesh, and elsewhere. As a result, there is an intensive exchange between education provided in the ethnic states, and education provided in the refugee camps across the border. Salem-Gervais and Metro (2012) estimate that the curriculum developed by the Karen National Union (one of the larger armed ethnic groups) alone is used by at least 38,000 refugee children in Thailand, and in up to 2,000 schools in Myanmar's Karen state. Although schools in the refugee camps primarily target refugee children, some children living in Myanmar are sent to schools across the border, especially in Thai refugee camps, which are considered to be of better quality and in some cases more accessible. Schools run in autonomous regions and schools targeting refugee populations are often not included in official statistics about the country's education system.

Although ethnic minority organizations in some cases provide indispensable educational services for children who would otherwise be left out altogether, researchers have pointed to the



risk that these systems might contribute to the reinforcement of a ‘separatist identity’ (Lall and South 2014). Textbooks written for ethnic minority schools, including the ones used in cross-border refugee camps, tend to be ‘nationalistic’. They focus strongly on the plight of their specific group, which is depicted as overly homogenous (thereby ignoring important intra-ethnic differences, for example among the Karen), while the military government (often equated to the Burman majority) is depicted as the historical enemy (Thein Lwin 2008; Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012). Some of these ethnic minority groups, most notably the Karen, have also used English as a second language rather than Burmese (Fink 2009). This has contributed to the establishment of two different types of students: one Karen- and English-speaking group, qualified to work for internationally oriented organizations but unqualified to enter the state higher education system, and one Burmese-speaking group qualified to continue their education in the state system, but with few internationally recognized skills (Lall and South 2014). There is also a risk of brain drain, with those with a relatively good education and English language skills being most likely to resettle elsewhere. Lall and South contrast the ‘separatist’ Karen education system with the more accommodating system in Mon state, which combines a focus on Mon language and culture on the primary level with a shift to the state system in high school that facilitates the transition to the state higher education system.

While this is not the place to elaborate on the history of conflict between the government and ethnic minority groups, it is important to keep in mind that many of the ethnic tensions precede the formation of Burma as a state. The presence of schools run by ethnic minorities in the border areas can be seen both as an indication that government facilities do not reach the whole population, and as a way of contesting the power of the state to determine the type of education that ethnic minority children receive. As ethnic minority groups have been fighting for more rather than less autonomy from the state, they might see their role as education providers not (just) as the result of an undesirable gap left by the government, but rather (or also) as a matter of self-governance.

These examples show that various non-state actors in Myanmar have been of vital importance for the provision of accessible education to certain sectors of the population. However, non-state education is not only provided in order to fill a quantitative gap, but also to steer the content in a desired direction. This carries certain risks, such as increasing disparity and animosity between children educated in the state system and those educated in non-state systems. Rose (2010) also warns that expectations of the government might be lowered when non-state actors provide similar or even more adequate facilities. This might encourage the government to tolerate non-state education, without providing financial assistance or other forms of support that would be expected based on its international human rights obligations. However, given the historically tense relationship between non-state education providers and the state, it is questionable whether they would prefer to become reliant on the government for monitoring, coordination, and funding. In many cases, non-state education providers might prefer to rely on support from outside the country.

### **Foreign assistance for education in Myanmar**

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by nearly every country in the world, it is not only the government, but also the international community that has a responsibility in helping a country achieve its educational targets. Article 28(3) of the Convention calls on all states parties ‘to promote and encourage international cooperation in matters relating

to education,' in which 'particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.' In terms of assistance to Myanmar's education system, the international community has been somewhat ambivalent. Until recently, Canada, the United States, and the European Union imposed sanctions on Myanmar which prohibited or discouraged any funding that would be channeled through the government. However, the United Nations has never imposed sanctions on Myanmar, and some of the individual countries' sanctions (most notably the European ones) included exemptions for the education sector.

Despite the absence of internationally coordinated sanctions, locally based development workers suggest that the education sector has suffered negative consequences of these sanction policies. They feel that the sanctions have created a general sense that development aid should not be spent on Myanmar, because it would benefit the government and not the local population. For many years, international donor involvement in Myanmar's education system has been on a much smaller scale than in other countries with similar poverty levels. In fact, estimated per capita Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Myanmar in recent decades ranked among the lowest in the world (U Myint 2006). It must be noted that this is not only the result of donor wariness, but also of the government's distrust of foreign involvement in its education system (Lorch 2008). Nevertheless, over the years some international donor organizations (both governmental and non-governmental) have become involved in Myanmar's education sector, not only out of a sense of obligation, but also with the expectation that it would contribute to development and democratization of the country (cf. Tabulawa 2003).

### *Multilateral assistance*

Despite sanctions imposed on the Myanmar government by individual countries, UN agencies involved in education have been working predominantly with government schools. Western donors active in Myanmar joined forces in the Multi-Donor Education Fund, which is overseen by UNICEF. This fund, to which donors such as the European Union, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and Australia contribute, aims at 'increasing equitable access and outcome in quality early childhood development and basic education, with extended learning opportunities for all children, especially in disadvantaged and hard to reach communities' (European Union 2012). Together with organizations such as JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), UNICEF has tried to fulfill a broker role between the government and the international community. Due to its inter-governmental nature, it is uniquely positioned to work with both state and non-state schools. However, its efficacy is conditional on good relations with key government officials, which in some cases has caused significant mistrust among non-state actors.

Unlike non-state education providers that operate locally, UNICEF is very much restricted in terms of criticizing or challenging governmental policy, which in practice can create the impression of siding with the government. In 2011 a closed-door meeting took place in Yangon, where UNICEF invited non-state education providers to share experiences and provide input for UNICEF's future work in the country. In this meeting, UNICEF expressed its intention to expand its role in the non-state education system. During the meeting, local non-state education providers criticized UN officials for making use of government facilities and engaging primarily in high-level meetings, instead of supporting small-scale non-state initiatives, which they argued were more cost-effective. UNICEF representatives, on the other hand, responded that they could only work with one or two centralized education providers as local partners, in order to shorten communication channels and minimize overhead costs. In this case, it seemed that UNICEF's

intended political neutrality as well as the scale of its activities limited the organization's opportunity to establish relationships with non-state education providers on the local level.

While UNICEF faces some obstacles in expanding its assistance to non-state schools, individual (groups of) countries have had more freedom in supporting non-state education providers in Myanmar. For example, in 2012 the EU reported bilateral assistance to 400 monastic schools throughout the country to improve teaching quality by training 1,000 teachers in child-centered teaching and learning approaches (European Union 2012). Many non-state education institutions are not registered with the Ministry of Education, which means that they are not allowed to receive foreign funding. However, in recent years donors have found ways to engage with the non-state education sector. As mentioned, a number of Buddhist monasteries are registered as primary education providers. Some of the larger ones are led by well-known monks with broad personal networks, who are able to organize foreign visits or funding (Lorch 2007). In the ethnic minority areas, assistance has often been provided through cross-border activities, for example by donor agencies that are providing funding to refugees and internally displaced people on the border with Thailand.

### *Individual donor agendas*

A small number of foreign donors and NGOs have focused specifically on the higher education sector, thereby trying to counter a general donor tendency to dismiss higher education as a low priority. These donors are convinced that the limitations in Myanmar's higher education system form a serious obstacle to further development, peace-building and capacity building inside the country. A number of initiatives have sprung up in recent years that seek to prepare students for study abroad by providing post-high school education.<sup>7</sup> They also try to reach international higher education standards by focusing on social and political sciences, and bringing in foreign guest lecturers. Those with good relationships with the government have been able to do this rather publicly, while others choose to maintain a low profile. Although these types of trainings do not result in any formally acknowledged diploma, some programs have gained international recognition and receive substantial donor attention. Completion of these programs is acknowledged as educational achievement by international universities. In addition, donors provide scholarships for students from Myanmar to study abroad, preferably close to home, with the hope that they will return and contribute to the development of their country. Given the limited job opportunities at home, this does not always happen. As a result, donors might unintentionally contribute to the brain drain mentioned earlier.

Recent announcements of educational reforms by the new government have further added to international interest in supporting this sector. However, there are a number of risks associated with external involvement in the local education system. Apart from the risk of brain drain, donor involvement in the education sector might lead to dependency in terms of funding or agenda setting. Once non-state schools develop financial relationships with foreign donors, they may be less inclined to search after local funding sources. Donors on the other hand are known for their relatively short project cycles; they can shift priorities, or simply reduce their overall funding to a specific country or group of actors, based on developments inside or outside the target country.

In addition, most donors come with their own agendas, creating the risk of supply-driven rather than demand-driven activities. While in some cases supply and demand might be closely related, there are also instances when recipients of donor funding shape their activities based on the donor's agenda, instead of prioritizing the needs of their beneficiaries. When funding is limited,

for example, it might be difficult to balance the wish to accommodate all children with the aim to increase the quality of education, or reduce teachers' workload. Moreover, the focus of certain donors on specific ethnic minority groups can inadvertently contribute to the maintenance of differences and tensions between the various ethnic groups. To counter this, some donors have made deliberate efforts to promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue in education (which in itself might also be considered an externally imposed agenda by some).

In some cases, agendas of foreign donors clash with local traditions, reducing teachers' and parents' feelings of ownership over the education process of their children. Lall (2011) describes how the Child Centred Approach (CCA), a form of modernizing teacher-pupil relations which stems from Western thinking, was perceived as problematic by certain local actors in the Myanmar education system, even though it was in principle supported by both the government and monastic education providers. Lall also argues that donors and consultants who push for CCA to be implemented benefit financially by sending expensive staff to implement this approach. As a consequence, they present CCA as a desirable end-goal, rather than as a specific teaching style with its own advantages and disadvantages. Tabulawa (2003: 9-10) also warns against donors presenting learner-centered teaching styles 'in benign and apolitical terms,' as a 'universal pedagogy, one that works with equal effectiveness irrespective of the context.' In fact, he argues, 'it reflects the norms of a liberal Western subculture.'

Although these agendas might not be inherently problematic, this criticism reminds us that education styles as promoted by international donors are based on subjective norms that are not always received favorably on the local level. First of all, there is increasing consensus that donors must adhere to the 'do no harm principle' in their interventions (see various chapters in this volume). The question then is to what extent it would be desirable for the government to oversee foreign assistance, and to intervene if necessary. Rose (2010) warns that donor involvement in a country's education can lead to the emergence of parallel, fragmented systems, in which larger policies and oversight are absent and the capacity of the government to provide social services is undermined. Now that the new Myanmar government is showing increased interest in improving the education sector, it might be time to reassess such questions.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed how the former military governments of Myanmar have dealt with their international human rights responsibilities to provide accessible education to all. It has described the gaps in the state education system, and the role taken up by various non-state actors. Those actors get involved not only to fill these gaps, but also to provide the type of education that they consider suitable for their own communities. While these non-state education providers fulfill the educational needs of certain sections of the population, they have also been facing certain challenges. These include limitations in terms of resources and the ability to attract qualified personnel, as well as obstruction by and competition with certain state actors. Moreover, non-state education initiatives have developed largely parallel to the state education system, with little room for mutual coordination or oversight by the government. As a result, differences in teaching methods can create problems when students switch from one system to the other, while competing narratives in the curriculum might reinforce communal tensions.

According to international human rights standards, the government is primarily responsible for the ultimate accessibility, quality, and content of education for all children in the country. However, it also needs to be sensitive to differences in language, religion, geographical location, and economic position of the children that fall under its responsibility. Therefore, it should allow room for non-state actors to contribute to educational needs, as long as they meet certain basic criteria. This dual responsibility requires a lot of capacity and willingness to cooperate on the part of the government, and arguably also on the part of non-state actors. Decades of military rule have had a detrimental effect on the trust relationship between state and non-state actors, and it will take time to reverse this process. It must be kept in mind that the primary responsibility attributed to the state is a relatively new development, compared to the role that certain non-state education providers have been playing for centuries. Moreover, as with other economic, social, and cultural rights, the state's international obligations are mainly progressive, and immediate full realization of the right to education might be unrealistic (Bódig, this volume).

Since the end of 2011, the Myanmar government has announced a number of initiatives to improve the education sector. It has increased its education budget and has announced a raise in civil servant salaries, which will also affect teachers. In 2012, it launched a Comprehensive Education Sector Review in cooperation with several international development agencies (UNICEF 2012). Plans for reform include an expansion from 11 to 12 years of primary and secondary education (Sandar Lwin and Win Ko Ko Latt 2012). Meanwhile, ethnic minority representatives have raised the issue of minority languages in parliament, and have called for a better integration in the formal education system (Lall and South 2014). Now that the new Myanmar government is taking increasing responsibility for improvements in the education sector, there might be an opportunity to bring the state and non-state education systems more in line with each other.

The international community has reacted to the political liberalization in Myanmar by lifting sanctions and increasing engagement in the form of development assistance and capacity building on the ground. The government has also announced plans to improve the level of higher education with foreign assistance. Although investment in higher education is long overdue, local actors fear that the establishment of foreign-led universities will further increase the gap between rich and poor, and that these universities will draw valuable resources from the state system by competing with local salaries. In addition, the political liberalization in Myanmar has encouraged a shift in donor funding away from the migrant and refugee populations in the border areas. This decision has been criticized by many as premature, as it could have a negative impact on existing education systems that have been built up over many years and are benefiting significant numbers of people from Myanmar.

Given the consistent under-funding of the state education system over the past decades, the new Myanmar government will likely require external expertise and funding in order to successfully fulfill its responsibilities. As in other developing countries, foreign assistance can be an important contribution to the development of quality education in Myanmar. The international community has both a moral and a legal responsibility to help developing countries live up to their human rights responsibilities. However, foreign actors intervening in a country's education sector need to make sure that their contributions are coordinated with the needs and activities of existing education providers, rather than imposing their own priorities. As the new government takes on a coordinating role in developing its education system, it should incorporate the experience and expertise of non-state actors inside the country. It should also make use of foreign expertise, while maintaining a critical view of foreign interests that might influence their involvement. By taking

into account all relevant advice and experiences, the government can work toward the progressive realization of its responsibility to provide accessible quality education to its population on the basis of equal opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup> I use Myanmar to speak about the current situation, Burma to speak about the pre-1989 era, and Burmese to refer to the population and the official language, while acknowledging that none of these terms is uncontested.

<sup>2</sup> The country was ruled by the Burma Socialist Programme Party from 1962 to 1988, after which the State Law and Order Restoration Council (later State Peace and Development Council) took power, which changed the country's name to Myanmar.

<sup>3</sup> After national elections were held in 2010, a parliament was installed in 2011. The new government is often referred to as 'nominally civilian' due to the continuing influence of the army, which among other things automatically takes up 25% of the seats in parliament.

<sup>4</sup> The new government conducted a highly contested census in April 2014. The results of this census, which was the first since 1983, were unknown at the time of writing.

<sup>5</sup> In 2011, Myanmar ranked 149 on the UNDP Human Development Index. Steinberg (2010) estimates that up to half the population lives below the poverty line.

<sup>6</sup> Although distance education can be a cost-effective way of transferring knowledge, in Myanmar it is perceived primarily as a way to limit interaction among students.

<sup>7</sup> According to Thein Lwin (2008), Myanmar students lack at least one year of education compared to students in most other countries.