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Disrupted Education System and Ongoing Conflict in Myanmar: An Analysis of the Education Situation in Pekon Township

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ABSTRACT

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Despite being a fundamental right, access to education is compromised in conflict settings. Pekon Township in Myanmar became a conflict zone following the coup in May 2021. Since then, frequent clashes have occurred between the military and armed resistance groups. The ongoing conflict disrupts the education system and adversely affects children's formal and informal education. The prolonged state-run conflict that disrupts the national education system forced local civil society, monastic schools and community-sponsored schools in Pekon Township, to initiate alternative education where state schools are unavailable. With qualitative data, this research collected data through 20 semi-structured interviews with parents, education providers and educators, and a literature review. This paper explores education dynamics in Pekon Township, shedding light on how education becomes a conditional right in a conflict setting. Using the 4As tool, this study analyzes the following: The first A (Availability) (the state has ignored resuming education), the second A (Accessibility) (the conflict has disrupted school operations and made learning inaccessible), the third A (Acceptability), and the fourth A (Adaptability) (with school closure, community-based education by communities and religious organizations without accreditation and recognition) or no acceptability and adaptability. This study found that prolonged conflict, including targeted attacks on schools, universities, teachers, and students, and continued state neglect of

education services have turned education into a conditional right in Myanmar. The study recommends immediate state action to resume safe education services for all in Myanmar and to stop targeted attacks on educational institutions, academics and pupils.

Introduction

Conflict affects children in several ways, ranging from direct killing and injury to disruption of education, health care, and the food supply, demolition of shelter, separation from families and communities, and the complete breakdown of the structure of physical and social well-being. In this list, education often ranks as the lowest priority, with minimal provision during conflict and post-conflict rebuilding (Karim, 2023). Thus, children's educational needs are often compromised by exposure to conflict. In 2021, around 60 million children of primary school age around the globe were out of school, and the major reasons indicated were conflict and war, with poverty and other structural barriers listed among other reasons (Roser, 2021). This trend continues even today. According to the UN, over 400 million children are living in conflict zones (United Nations Children's Fund, 2023a). The education of over 240 million children is disrupted by war and conflict (Egeland, 2023). The impact of conflict on children can be very detrimental and prolonged. Conflicts may also send children into exile, which may jeopardize access to education. Disruption of educational institutions or attacks on schools, students, and teachers limit access to education during conflicts. Female community leaders, religious groups, and teachers are completely prevented from accessing education due to conflicts. Forced displacement, both internally and externally, caused by conflicts can also hinder access to education. A World Bank analysis suggests that although the average length of exile is between 10 and 15 years, decades-long prolonged conflicts like Afghanistan and Myanmar have increased this average. This analysis indicates that children in zones of prolonged conflict and exile are less likely to return to school. Moreover, 86 percent of the world's out-of-school children are in low-income countries; thus, rebuilding the educational system post-conflict remains difficult (Devictor, 2019; Mlaba, 2023; Concern Worldwide, 2023). State neglect, poverty, and fear of attack leave children to rely on informal literacy training. In internal or communal conflict, the community often takes over the responsibility of providing basic services to the people, including education, shelter, and even food supply. However, these community-based initiatives arrange informal education, which is often unofficial, poor in quality, and inadequate in ensuring access to all children in need (Crawford, 2023).

The current situation in Myanmar is one such example, where the state education system has been seriously affected since the military coup in 2021 by the ongoing internal conflict. Where the state neglects to provide access to education, and people are fearful, conflict and poverty jeopardize access to education as a public service. This study analyzes how the current conflict violence has affected access to education in Myanmar with a specific context analysis of Pekon Township. Pekon Township, located in the southern region of Shan State Myanmar, shares borders with Pinlaung Township to the north, Nyuangshwe and Hsihseng Townships to the south, Loikaw and Demoso townships to the east and other townships to the west. Pekon Township comprises 211 villages and a total population of 103,590, with the majority being Kayah, Burman, Shan, Pa-Oh, Kayan, and Inn (Department of Population, 2017). The primary livelihoods for Pekon Township residents are agriculture, forestry, and fishing (Myanmar Statistical Yearbook 2019, 2019)

Despite historically maintaining a peaceful environment, Pekon Township has become a conflict zone alongside Karenni State, which emerged as a hub for active armed resistance following the coup in 2021. Since May 2021, frequent clashes have occurred between the military and armed resistance groups in Pekon Township. Due to the ongoing armed conflict and instability in Pekon Township, many schools have remained closed since the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Only three state schools and a few monastic schools in some parts of the Pekon area managed to reopen in 2023 with restricted hours.

The community has set up schools, some affiliated with the National Unity Government (NUG), in areas where state schools remain closed. Despite these efforts, frequent clashes, including artillery shelling, airstrikes, bombing, and attacks on schools, continue to impede the full resumption of educational activities in Pekon Township. Although the ongoing armed conflicts in Pekon Township have drawn significant attention, there is no assessment of the educational landscape amid political turmoil in the Pekon region.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section one provides a brief overview of basic education during the political turmoil in 2021. Section two presents a literature review of the effect of armed conflict on education, followed by a conceptual framework and methodology. Section three discusses the key findings, explaining the implications of armed conflict for education in Pekon Township. Finally, the paper analyses the conditional nature of the right to education in a conflict setting, drawing on empirical evidence from Pekon Township.

Research Questions

1. How does armed conflict impact access to education?

2. What are the key challenges faced by community-based initiatives to ensure education for the community in Pekon Township, Myanmar?
3. How has 'education as a human right' been neglected by the state?

Objective

This research aims to unpack the critical impact of continuous armed conflict on the education system in Myanmar with a case analysis of Pekon Township by investigating the total state neglect of education as a fundamental human right.

Overview of Basic Education in Myanmar

Myanmar's basic education system is divided into primary, secondary, and high school education. Primary education is compulsory and consists of five years. Secondary education comprises four years, while high school education comprises three. The country had 47,363 primary education schools in 2015-2016, with approximately 9.26 million students (Yamada & Matsushima, 2020). The Myanmar education system has sixteen types of state and non-state schools. State schools include primary schools, branch primary schools, post-primary schools, middle schools, branch middle schools, high schools, and branch high schools. Non-state schools include private schools, monastic and religious schools, other schools, home learning with a teacher guide, NGO-run schools, community schools, and non-state/ethnic schools (World Bank, 2023).

State schools are predominant across the country. However, the education system faces challenges in rural areas, such as a lack of schools, limited numbers of teachers, and a lack of teaching materials. As a result, there is a growing reliance on self-help approaches to education, with numerous community and civil society initiatives working to address gaps in the education sector. In rural areas and regions under ethnic control, community-based schools and religious education institutions play significant roles in providing education in Myanmar (Lorch, 2008).

Community-based schools (CBS) are vital in educating children in rural areas without state schools. CBS exhibits various organizational structures. When a village possesses a state school building but lacks funds for a teacher, local communities often pool resources to hire a village teacher independently. In cases where no qualified teacher is available, community-based organizations appoint respected individuals with some education and skills, albeit without formal teacher training. Additionally, if the nearest government school is inaccessible, communities construct their school buildings and either share teachers with nearby government schools or

recruit and pay teachers themselves. Despite being labeled as extensions of government schools, these CBSs are typically established and managed solely by local communities, with some operating under religious affiliations, such as churches in Christian communities and monasteries in Buddhist communities, which are often established and funded by local communities, who sometimes even construct the buildings, and recruit teachers from within the community (Insight Myanmar, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

Buddhist monastic education has a long tradition in Myanmar, with monasteries serving as crucial educational institutions, especially in rural areas without state schools. Monastic schools provide free education, often catering to poor children, and offer religious teachings and basic literacy skills. While some monastic schools adhere strictly to Buddhist teachings, others incorporate government curricula and provide formal education, with government recognition allowing students to acquire officially recognized degrees. Christian education, introduced by missionaries, also plays a significant role, with church-run schools and community-based initiatives providing education and support in government-controlled and ethnic areas. In ethnic regions, there are some federal autonomous schools (Insight Myanmar, 2024; Lorch, 2008).

The majority of children still attend state schools in Myanmar despite political changes in 2021. In 2018/19, the basic education system comprised 26,293 primary schools, 15,531 middle schools, and 5,648 high schools, serving 9,138,507 students. In addition, almost 315,944 children attended approximately 1,530 monastic education schools and 1,094 other private schools (UNICEF, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and then the coup in 2021, Myanmar faced prolonged school closures. The reopening of schools in late 2021 was delayed by continued attacks on educational institutions and most academics joining the civil disobedience movement (CDM) (Reuters, 2021). According to the World Bank, in 2023, enrollment of 6- to 22-year-olds in educational institutions in Myanmar showed no improvement since 2019, and enrollment in tertiary education declined from 69.2 percent in 2017 to 56.8 percent in 2023. High school-age children were the most numerous school dropouts in the post-coup years. These reports noted that people are frightened to discuss education-related topics, citing the anticipated risk of surveillance targeting this sector in the ongoing conflict (Roy et al., 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Literature Review

While barriers to access to education may already exist, conflict exacerbates the situation. The detrimental impact of conflict on children's education in affected areas is pervasive. Conflicts have detrimental effects on education, such as deaths or displacement of teachers and students; dangers at school and on the way to schools; school closures; military recruitment of child

soldiers; a decline in mental well-being and impoverishment caused by conflicts (Mlaba, 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Baird et al., 2021).

Conflict destroys schools and educational facilities and disrupts school schedules (Rai, 2020). Schools often face direct attacks from the armed forces or become unintended casualties in armed conflicts, bombings, or airstrikes. Violence and instability in conflict areas pose significant obstacles to schooling, with educators, students, and families vulnerable to targeted violence by armed factions (Burgos et al., 2021; Swee, 2015; Diwakar, 2015). Threats of harm, abduction, coercion, or extortion discourage school attendance (GCPEA, 2022a; GCPEA, 2022b; Jones & Naylor, 2014).

The core challenge faced by schools in conflict settings is the constant threat of violence. Schools are vulnerable to attacks such as artillery shelling and airstrikes, which not only pose a risk to the physical safety of students and teachers but may also lead to the destruction of school infrastructure. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA, 2024a), there were over 6,000 attacks on education facilities in 2022 and 2023, which is a 20 percent increase from the previous two years. The report indicates that military use of schools increased in 2022-2023, with 500 examples identified, and over 10,000 students and educators were killed, injured, abducted, arrested or harmed by these conflicts, with constant increases each year. Thus, it is evident that the conflict does not just disrupt education but makes it a target of attack and an object of the state's neglect of rebuilding and restoring access to education. Myanmar remains one of the key highlights of the GCPEA reports.

Table 1: Attacks on education in Myanmar (2021-2023) (cases)

	2020-2021	2022-2023	
Attacks on school	200	245	Explosive devices detonated in front of schools; airstrikes against schools; burning of school buildings;
Attacks on students, teachers and education personnel	12 (2 in 2020; 10 in 2021)	40	Deaths by explosives and shooting, arrests, injuries, disappearances;
Military use of education premises	176	190	(University premises occupied from which to fire artillery shells; schools used as drone stations and military bases; 300 people abducted, as reported by

	2020-2021	2022-2023	
			local media- Democratic Voice of Burma (2022)
Attacks on higher education infrastructure, students, and personnel	20	43 (2022 only)	attacks with explosive devices on university premises

Source: Extracted from GCPEA 2024b, Myanmar Country Profile

Disruption of education is also compounded by the displacement of communities, including students and teachers, due to fear of violent attack. Families fleeing conflict areas struggle to find stable schooling for their children. Families often flee to other villages repeatedly due to artillery shelling and the frequent clashes between the military and resistance groups (Insecurity Insight, 2021). During displacement, children may temporarily attend community schools. In some instances, access to schooling is limited, so some children, unfortunately, cannot attend any school in the areas to which their parents flee (ISP Data Matters, 2023; Htut et al., 2022; Insight Myanmar, 2024).

The economic constraints stemming from the conflict also exacerbate educational disparities and affect children's education. Families grappling with financial hardship due to the conflict struggle to afford schooling expenses. While education itself may be nominally free, the reality is that parents need to provide basic stationary materials (Htut et al., 2022). When the state education system breaks down and alternative education becomes the only option during conflict, protection and finance can be the most critical constraints in accessing education, as is the case in Myanmar. Communities provide materials and supplies at community or monastic schools, including teachers' remuneration (Roy et al., 2023; World Bank, 2023). Consequently, communities collect school fees from parents. While some organizations partially assist community schools, the financial burden of providing education still falls significantly on parents.

Although families with some income can afford school fees, individuals experiencing poverty and the displaced population are far from being able to support their children's education during political turmoil. The combination of high commodity prices and limited job opportunities exacerbates the financial strain on families. Despite some support from local organizations, parents bear the primary responsibility for funding their children's education, often at the expense of meeting basic needs.

In addition to fear of attack, children in conflict areas are also at risk of recruitment by armed groups. This situation is sometimes considered as the reason to close schools during the conflict in order to secure a supply of child soldiers. Fear of child recruitment is a direct threat to education. In conflicts, communities often flee this risk, or children who have already been recruited are unlikely to return to school (Swee, 2015). Children can be forced to join the armed conflict in various ways. Children are recruited as soldiers, messengers, helpers, providers of sexual services, cooks, and porters, thus forcing children to stay away from school. Studies estimate that around 105,000 children are recruited by armed forces around the world, and 300,000 grave violations against children occurred due to conflicts between 2005-2022 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2023b).

Constant violence and fear cause trauma and other adverse health impacts that can jeopardize the community's desire to resume education for their children. Studies show that children who witness violence and lose family members struggle to return to school during and after conflict. Studies also found that children exposed to violence have adverse health and nutrition deficits, which cause lower height-for-age outcomes, which is an indicator of the long-term nutrition deficit effect (Guerrero-Serdan, 2009). This fact ultimately affects child development, especially educational attainment, as malnourished children are most likely to either miss or drop out of school (Kadir et al., 2019).

The situation in Pekon Township following the 2021 coup reflects all the trends discussed above. The 2021 coup triggered violence and armed resistance in Pekon Township. Frequent clashes and security threats prolong the closure of state schools and have other detrimental effects on children's education. The prolonged closure of education leaves hundreds of children without access to learning opportunities. Due to the ongoing conflicts, some high school children drop out, opt for early marriage, seek employment abroad, or even participate in armed resistance. Moreover, the physical and psychological impact of armed conflict, including artillery shelling and constant instability, adversely affects children's well-being. Parents participating in the study recounted the effects of armed conflicts on their children's mental, emotional, and physical health.

Research Methods

The study used primary and secondary sources to investigate the dynamics of education in Pekon Township after the 2021 coup. The study focuses on covering the types of schools that provide basic education in Pekon Township. This qualitative research design was approved by the Institutional Review Board, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University

(IPSR-IRB), COA No. 2023/09-203. The data was collected in two forms.

Firstly, the researcher reviewed secondary sources such as reports, articles and online databases to analyze the armed conflicts in Pekon township. This analysis explores the broader political context of educational disruption in Pekon Township.

Secondly, the study used semi-structured key informant interviews. The researchers interviewed 20 different groups of people in Pekon Township in 2023. Given ongoing conflicts in several areas of the region, interviews were primarily carried out with participants in areas with fewer clashes, utilizing online and offline platforms. The study applied a purposive sampling method to select participants, with educators, parents, and education providers serving as participants. The interviews explored individuals' perspectives and experiences when accessing/providing education during political turmoil.

Table 2: Key informant interview participant profile

Profile	Rationale for selection	Number of interviews
Parents (PA)	To understand how education is disrupted by the ongoing conflict	5
Community/Religious leaders/educators (CO)	To understand how the community has interacted with education services during the ongoing conflict, challenges, and constraints	5
School Teachers (ST)	To understand how public education services institutions and academics are attacked and damaged/injured	5
NGOs (specializing in education and community services) (NO)	To collect views on whether education as a human right is compromised under ongoing conflict;	5
Total		20

Research Ethics Protocol

The study obtained written and verbal consent before conducting the interviews. The study did not use identical participant information in written and recorded interviews and reports. Rules on confidentiality and anonymity were strictly followed throughout this study and were conveyed to all participants.

Conceptual Framework: The Concept of Ignorance and Mistrust, and the 4As Framework

Concept of ignorance and mistrust: This study is built upon two sets of concepts. First, ignorance and mistrust, and second, the 4As Framework. The term 'ignorance' is explained by DeNicola as "an unknown information become known – and still be the unknown" (2018, p. 10). Indeed, scholars argue that no matter how much knowledge we acquire, human beings are constantly surrounded by ignorance. There is no universal metaphor for ignorance. Scholars have identified the term ignorance in various ways, which are limit and horizon. DeNicola (2018) argues that ignorance varies in terms of place boundaries. McGoey addresses ignorance as a commodity, emancipation, and pedagogy (2014). This study follows the definition provided by Jalonen (2023), who argues that ignorance is a situation that helps understand the challenges and opportunities of maintaining knowledge. Ignorance is often intentional, which is connected to power and mistrust. Ignorance in organizations is defined as the system of coordinated action in a group where individual preferences, information, interests, and knowledge differ. However, a denial of specific aspects can still be agreed upon, such as a denial of benefits to certain members within an organization or a denial of certain rules. In this context, interest performs organizational ignorance (Jiang et al., 2019).

Ignorance has a close connection with mistrust. Trust refers to conscious awareness or something more than general faith. The process of breaching trust may start breaking the faith of certain communities in a multi-ethnic nation. Social, political, or cultural exclusion, oppression, or power coercion can create mistrust between the state and specific communities. Wilkesmann argued that prolonged oppression creates suspicion, which is culturally valued (Wilkesmann, 2016). During oppression, people are deprived of rights due to ignorance of their well-being. It happens when people lose trust in the people with whom they live. People started mistrusting the authorities, thinking that leaders have the legitimate power to rule them and act to fulfill their interests.

During prolonged conflict, a state may constantly ignore people's needs, safety, and well-being in the name of state interest. This generates mistrust between people and the state. The state uses the conflict to protect bigger interests, but people do not trust the state as they are deprived of basic needs (Yamada & Matsushima, 2020). In the case of the current conflict in Myanmar, the conflict has jeopardized most public service structures, while the education system is affected the most. State ignorance in reviving the state education system has produced a lack of trust and confidence among people to take community ownership.

4As Framework: This paper examines the education dynamics in Pekon Township

between 2021- 2023 and how education becomes conditional in a conflict setting. Using the 4As Framework, the study analyzes the educational landscape from a human rights perspective. General Comment 13 of the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) outlines the 4As framework essential for realizing the right to education: Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Adaptability. The 4As framework aims to analyze various barriers to attaining education.

Availability pertains to the presence of educational institutions and resources, such as trained teachers, in sufficient quantity required to meet education rights. It also refers to the freedom to establish a school and the freedom to run educational activities (Tomasevski, 2001, p. 19). Accessibility addresses physical, economic, and cultural barriers to education, including proximity, affordability, and support for marginalized groups. Accessibility also sheds light on eliminating government and other institutional policy barriers that hinder education provision for certain communities (Tomasevski, 2001). Acceptability focuses on educational quality, relevance, and cultural appropriateness, ensuring it meets the population's needs. The authorities should ensure access to an education system they value and follow sustainable development. Adaptability refers to the flexibility of education systems to respond to changing circumstances and diverse socio-economic conditions. It requires a flexible education system that helps ensure quality education, which may include accreditation, recognition, curriculum, and syllabus modification appropriate to the society.

In any conflict situation, the provision of education can be analyzed through the 4As framework, as conflict may destroy school infrastructure, displacement may cause people to be unable to access school, and people may need to seek alternative education, which may require modification in curricula and also may lack official accreditation and recognition.

Research Results: Access to education disrupted by conflict and political turmoil since 2021

Prolonged school closures: The intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and political turmoil in 2021 has significantly impacted Myanmar's education system. In line with the closure of schools around the world in early 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education (MOE) closed all educational institutions in March 2020. The Ministry of Education attempted to reopen primary schools in June 2021 when the pandemic seemed to have subsided. However, schools were closed again in August 2021 due to a severe third wave of COVID-19 and remained shut throughout the subsequent academic year, from June 2020 to May 2022 (Htut et al., 2022). The closure of schools resulted in significant learning gaps at both basic and higher

education levels (World Bank, 2023).

The 2021 coup d'état worsened the educational crisis and prolonged the closure of educational institutions. Hundreds of teachers participated in strikes and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The Myanmar Teachers Federation (MTF) reported that 19,500 higher education staff and 125,900 basic education teachers were suspended from their duties after going on strike and joining the CDM (estimated to be 55 percent of higher education staff and 31 percent of basic education teachers (Reuters, 2021; Frontier, 2022).

Despite staff shortages, the State Administration Council (SAC) reopened universities and basic education schools, with the MOE announcing that school enrollment would begin on May 26, 2022 with plans to reopen basic education on June 1, 2022. While some cities and regions less affected by the conflict were able to reopen schools, those in areas with ongoing armed conflicts remained closed and have been unable to resume educational activities until now.

School attacks instill public fear: In conflict areas, schools become contested spaces where armed groups vie for influence and control. Schools often become targets during armed clashes, instilling fear and insecurity among families and discouraging them from sending their children to school. Many families keep their children at home due to armed violence (Irrawaddy, 2023). Reports indicate that safety issues, compounded by a general mistrust of government institutions in the post-coup period, have contributed to a detrimental impact on student attendance (Insecurity Insight, 2021; Frontier, 2023; World Bank, 2023). The ongoing armed clashes forced state schools to shut down in conflict-ridden areas.

In areas where state schools are closed, and regions are under the control of resistance groups, community-based schools have emerged and provided independent education. At the basic education level, multiple programs, with the support of the NUG, have been established to provide 'interim education' in 'people's schools' in regions where the military-controlled state administration has collapsed (Salem-Gervais et al., 2023). Despite these educational alternatives, the availability and accessibility of education continue to be compromised in conflict-affected areas. Pekon Township is one such example.

Despite its historically peaceful environment, Pekon Township has become a conflict zone since the coup in May 2021. Over the past three years, frequent clashes have occurred between the military and armed resistance groups. The military has attacked resistance groups, often by airstrikes and artillery shelling (Reuters, 2021; Aung et al., 2023). The ongoing armed conflict, including occasional airstrikes, bombings and artillery shelling, disrupts schools. Many state schools in Pekon Township have not been able to resume due to armed conflict and security threats. Monastic and community-based schools are operational in areas where state schools

remain closed.

State schools face disruptions due to attacks as the conflict escalates, as exemplified by the No. 1 Basic Education High School in Pekon Township, which experienced a violent attack just two days after reopening on June 1, 2023, which destroyed the school building, measuring 210 feet in length, 30 feet in width, and 22 feet in height (Eleven Media Group, 2023a). Such attacks cause fear and concern among parents. Parents become hesitant to send their children to school. Following the attack, the No.1 Basic Education High School remained closed for a week. Upon reopening, initial attendance was low due to lingering fears, taking almost a month to reach normal levels. In response to these security challenges, an Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) and military forces have assumed responsibility for school security. The EAO manages security from 12.00 to 6.00 PM, while the SAC oversees security during the morning and at night. The school has also relaxed its previous dress code for teachers and students to mitigate risks.

Similarly, community and monastic schools grapple with the constant threat of artillery shelling and airstrikes. The precarious situation often forces community-based schools to shut down temporarily when conflicts escalate nearby. The testimonies of village leaders and teachers provide insights into the daily struggles faced by schools in conflict zones. The head of a village articulated:

"The school remains closed due to the fighting in our region. It is unpredictable when schools will resume. Still, we will keep running schools and providing education if everything is calm. However, if things are not peaceful in our region, we must halt. Security is our biggest challenge" (CO, 2023).

A teacher teaching at a monastic school recounted:

"Our main challenge is heavy weapons. If the fighting continues and we hear the sounds of heavy weapons or airplanes, we have prepared a place for the children to hide under the monastery next to the school. We have made strong shelters under the monastery by the school building. Children are called to quickly run and shelter under the temple when the alarm bell rings" (ST, 2023).

The quotations reveal that the security challenges plaguing schools in conflict zones disrupt educational routines and pose a significant threat to the safety and well-being of students and educators.

‘Ignored Education’: shifting responsibility from state to community

Before the coup, the Pekon region had 210 state schools, three private schools, and three monastic schools (Myanmar Statistical Yearbook 2018, 2018). However, following the coup, only a handful of state and monastic schools could reopen for the 2023-2024 academic year. Communities have started schools in areas where state schools are unavailable. These community-based schools include those initiated by the local community, some by the Kayan National Education Committee, and others affiliated with the NUG. A notable initiative is a school named the Cherry Myae Education Center, established by a priest and a teacher in 2022/23.

Several local civil society organizations (CSOs) such as Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS), Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY), the Kayan Women’s Organization, and the Support Essential Education Group (SEE) support these schools by providing stationery supplies and volunteer teachers. The following section analyzes how education services are currently operating in Pekon township based on the data collected from key informant interviews:

(1) State Schools

As mentioned earlier, there are 210 state schools, including primary schools and middle and high schools, in Pekon Township, according to the 2018 statistics of the General Administration Department. However, only three state schools (two primary and one high school) reopened in Pekon in the 2023/24 academic year. In specific areas with intensified conflict, schools have remained closed since 2020. Resistance groups within Pekon Township oppose the SAC education system and have prohibited reopening schools under their control. Monastic and community-based schools are operational in regions under the control of resistance groups.

Despite some concerns, the local community supports state schools in areas where they are accessible. Parents engage in cleaning and repairing school facilities during monthly visits. Community members and soldiers take turns guarding the school premises in the evening for security. However, attendance has declined due to the security threat and school building destruction. For instance, the No. 1 Basic Education High School in Pekon Township, which typically has around 80 teachers and over 3,000 students, reopened for the 2023-2024 academic year with only 40 teachers and 1,058 students (Eleven Media Group, 2023b). This school, and two primary schools, have been closed again due to the escalation and persistence of the conflicts since November 2023.

(2) Monastic Schools

There are three monastic schools in the Pekon region. Monastic schools, which operated before the coup and were closed during COVID-19, resumed in 2022 and have continued since.

They cater exclusively to students at the 5th-grade of primary school. Interviews were conducted with one teacher and parents at one of the monastic schools, which incorporates government curricula and provides formal education with government recognition allowing students to acquire officially recognized qualifications. The school has experienced a significant increase in its student population, growing from 300 to approximately 330 students in the 2022/23 academic year. The teaching staff comprises 11 teachers who have undergone teaching training. KNGY also provides a volunteer teacher. Although the government provides some financial assistance to the school, it also depends on the support of the local community. Financial support for teachers and textbook purchases relies on collecting MMK 10,000 per month from students.

(3) Community-Based Schools

Despite grappling with political turmoil, in Pekon Township communities have restored schooling, viewing it as vital for their children's future. Communities take the initiative, establishing makeshift classrooms and employing formal/non-formal teaching methods when government support is lacking. A community leader says,

"During the Covid outbreak, schools in our village were closed completely due to COVID-19. Since then, we have had to take charge of our children's education without government assistance. We have established a committee to ensure education is self-sufficient." (CO, 2023).

As recounted in interviews, communities held meetings, formed school committees, and recruited teachers to provide education where state schools remained closed.

The community schools, most affiliated with the NUG Education Board in Pekon Township, have operated in some parts of the Pekon region since 2022. This study interviewed some teachers and parents who are teaching or sending their children to the community-based schools. One of the community-based schools' staff interviewed for this study, had 350 students and 23 teachers in 2023 academic year. The teaching staff comprised CDM teachers, volunteer teachers from civil society organizations, and village teachers. While NUG had provided minimal support (stationery) in the previous year (2022), the school received a small amount of support (MMK 20 million) in 2023. The school also relies on monthly student fees. The primary support for education comes from parents and the local community. Local communities also provide financial aid, rice, and oil for teachers. Civil society organizations such as KNGY and SEE contribute some financial assistance and school supplies, as well as volunteer teachers.

(4) Cherry Myae Education Center

Cherry Myae Education Center, established in 2022, is a school that adopts a holistic approach to education. The school has a dedicated team of 43 teachers, including volunteer teachers and CDM teachers. There are around 1200 students from grade 1 to grade 12. The school's distinctive teaching and learning methods draw in numerous students. The school prioritizes talent and skills over traditional class structures. Departing from conventional teaching methods, the school relies on textbooks for only 40 percent of its curriculum and prioritizes students' diverse learning styles and interests, such as computers, music, and arts, during and outside regular class hours. The school also invites guest speakers three times a month on Sundays to broaden students' exposure to diverse perspectives.

According to the school's founder, the primary contributors to the school's funding are Child Dream and expatriates. The local community supports the school by providing land. Local CSOs, like KMSS, are involved on a smaller scale. The school also relies on collecting money from students to support teachers financially. A portion of this money serves as an honorarium fee for teachers, while the remainder is allocated to reopening the school, purchasing textbooks, and establishing a scholarship fund for IDP (internally displaced person) children and those who cannot afford it. The school committee and parents actively contribute financial support and other resources. The school faces constraints in accepting additional students due to security concerns and limited space and resources.

During the conflict the monastic and community-based education remain the most reliable source for the people within Pekon Township. While in some locations when some state schools reopened families prefer state-accredited schools, as they offer government-recognized certificates. Some families with the means to do so choose to relocate to safer cities for their children's education or send them to other cities where state schools are available. When forced to flee, some parents have no other option but enroll their children in community schools at their new location. However, upon returning to their hometown, such as Pekon, they prioritize sending their children to the available state schools. In areas where state schools have yet to reopen, monastic schools have a longstanding presence predating the coup and have become the preferred choice. However, monastic schools typically only offer education up to Grade 5. Consequently, most enroll their children in community schools affiliated with the NUG, which provide education up to Grade 12. Although these institutions provide children's education, the opening and closure of schools are contingent upon the prevailing security conditions. Frequent clashes, including artillery shelling, airstrikes, bombings, and attacks on schools, continue disrupting the learning process.

Discussion: Education as a Conditional Right in Conflict Setting by State Neglect

Education is a human right enshrined in numerous human rights treaties: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Section 366(a) of the 2008 Myanmar Constitution also recognizes the right to education. The Basic Education Law of 2019 and the Child Rights Law of 2019 also underscore the accessibility of primary education for all, regardless of disabilities or barriers, aligning with international conventions.

Availability ignored: States must provide free and compulsory primary education and access to secondary and higher education in all circumstances, even during civil unrest, war, and emergencies (Khan & Bhuian, 2019). In conflict-ridden areas, severe human rights violations may be widespread, and education often takes a backseat amidst the chaos. Despite its fundamental importance and role in enabling access to other rights, the protection of education is seldom prioritized in conflict settings. In Myanmar, while the state is obligated to provide free and compulsory primary education, the state tends to ignore this obligation. The state produced public fear through state-initiated conflict by attacking students, teachers and education staff. Educational institutions remained closed for extended periods; thus, education services became unavailable. Therefore, the state neglects to make education available for millions of civilians.

Accessibility disrupted: Conflict has led to the destruction of school infrastructure, closure of schools, and mass displacement, which have severely impacted access to education. The ongoing armed conflict in Pekon has led to the closure of many state-run educational institutions. Parents have instead resorted to community or monastic schools established in the region. However, community-based schools also close when conflict intensifies in nearby areas. The closure of schools, whether temporary or permanent, reduces accessibility to education. For instance, despite efforts to establish community-based schools, their capacity is insufficient to meet the population's educational needs, exacerbating the accessibility issue.

Security concerns and economic constraints impede access to education. In Pekon Township, the constant threat of violence, including artillery shelling, airstrikes, and attacks on schools, creates an unsafe learning environment. Parents are hesitant to send their children to

school. The fear of bombing, airstrikes, and attacks on schools also create barriers to operating schools safely, thereby conditioning access to education on the ability to navigate these security risks. Likewise, economic constraints impact access to education. As ongoing conflicts often lead to breakdowns in the state education system, communities take initiatives to sustain schools. While some parents may have the financial means to afford school fees, economic limitations still pose significant barriers to accessibility. Families struggle to meet essential schooling expenses such as fees, uniforms, and supplies. Some families prioritize basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare over education, consequently limiting access to education.

Displacement further complicates the accessibility of education as families are compelled to flee their homes. In Pekon, participants in the study reported relocating up to 2-3 times, which disrupts employment opportunities and financial stability. Consequently, parents are unable to afford school fees. More prevalently, displaced families grappling with the exigencies of displacement often confront the dilemma of prioritizing security and sustenance over educational pursuits. Consequently, the right to education becomes conditional. This conditionality undermines children's right to education. A displaced parent with five children strives to support the two high school students with computer and English lessons, incurring a monthly cost of approximately MMK 100,000 for the siblings. The two youngest children require an honorarium of MMK 30,000 a month, totaling MMK 60,000 for both. Unfortunately, the middle child is not enrolled in school due to financial constraints. Another displaced parent said:

"We cannot afford the fees despite our desire to support our children's education and have them attend school" (PA, 2023)

These narratives highlight the obstacles displaced families face in supporting their children's education. Despite some willingness, financial constraints often limit their ability to provide educational opportunities for all their children. Economic pressure sometimes compels children to forego education in favor of contributing to household income through labor. One of the parents stated:

"No jobs are available anymore. If someone needs help with farming, I ask my son, even a 10-year-old who is told to pretend to be 15, to work in the fields."

Such testimony reflects the harsh reality many families face. This situation not only deprives children of their right to education but also reinforces socio-economic inequalities.

Acceptability and Adaptability Constrained: The issue of acceptability and adaptability

remains complicated. Communities in conflict-affected regions valiantly endeavor to sustain continued education through alternative education setup. However, Community struggle to adapt the community-based education since it mostly unofficial and not accredited by state system. Communities set up makeshift classrooms and deploy formal and non-formal teaching methods (Khan & Bhuian, 2019). While these efforts partially mitigate the impact of conflicts on education, realizing the right to education becomes intricately entwined with communities' capacity to navigate challenges. Education often becomes a conditional right, implying that access to education is subject to various conditions and challenges the conflict poses. Access to education is contingent upon various factors such as financial ability, safety, and availability of educational infrastructure.

General Comment #13 of the ICESCR underscores the imperatives of ensuring the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of educational provisions to safeguard the fundamental right to education. Availability and accessibility are likely to be most impacted. The repercussions of the conflict reverberate across various facets of the educational landscape. Communities and civil society organizations provide some education, but limited resources and ongoing security risks continue to disrupt education in Pekon Township. Prolonged closure of hundreds of state schools due to conflict reduce the acceptability and adaptability of education. While monastic schools provide an alternative, their exclusivity to specific grade levels (Grade 5) and reliance on community support limit adaptability for some students. Community initiatives have established self-supported schools but face limitations in resources and sustainability. The Cherry Myae Education Center offers a unique educational approach but faces constraints in accepting additional students due to security concerns and resource limitations. Since community-run education is seen as 'informal' without official recognition, parents are reluctant to adopt this alternative educational arrangement.

Conclusion

Education is currently under severe threat in Myanmar. When this article was drafted, it had been almost three years since the military coup. Conflicts continue in Myanmar, and in such a situation, the education system in the country stalls. Instead of taking action to resume education services, the government uses educational premises for military purposes. The military use of schools and universities has created additional fear among the community about coming forward and taking the lead in restoring the education system. This study analyzes the situation in Pekon Township, where the widespread attacks targeted schools and universities, the arrests of students, and the destruction of school infrastructure have created a hostile educational

context. Communities, therefore, found it challenging to return children to school and operate education services safely. According to the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack report (GCPEA, 2024b), severe interruptions in learning will create adverse short-term and long-term consequences on Myanmar's teaching and learning systems.

Education is a fundamental human right, necessitating states to provide free and compulsory primary education and access to higher education in all circumstances. States must ensure the availability of educational resources and institutions, eliminate barriers to education, and promote quality, culturally relevant learning that can adapt to changing conditions. While education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right, its realization in conflict settings is marred by challenges and conditions that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to prioritize protecting and promoting the right to education in such contexts, ensuring that all children have equitable access to education, regardless of circumstances. In keeping access to education open, this study recommends that schools and universities should be protected and that any attacks and threats to schools, universities, teachers, educational staff and education facilities should cease. Non-state armed groups should also commit to the protection of children from the effects of armed conflict and enable them to return to school. States and international justice mechanisms should support holding the perpetrators of attacks on the educational system accountable. This study provides a snap analysis of the education situation in Pekon Township while education throughout Myanmar is currently in danger. Further research is required to understand broadly what policy measures are required and how the international community can support reviving educational provision in Myanmar.

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