The Children of the ‘have-nots’ in Burma and the Community-based Phon-Gyi-Kyaung Education System: A Case from Tanyin Town

Makiko Takeda
Asst. Professor, Department of Policy Studies, Aichi Gakuin University

Abstract

Today, Myanmar is characterized as a country in transition from an authoritarian regime to a more democratic political regime following decades of military rule. There have been a number of far-reaching reforms made in the hopes of sparking the rebirth of the nation. However, the progress has been slow especially in the social sector, which has taken a backseat to the economic sector. Consequently, educational reforms do not appear to have brought about positive changes and the state-education system seems to have deteriorated even further. Considerable regional and income disparities persist in terms of the provision of basic needs of children and poor children, so called ‘have-nots’, continue to be marginalized in this society. To bridge the gap left by the state-run education system, civil society actors have begun seeking alternative ways to provide basic education. These civil society actors are now playing a tremendously important role in saving these children.

This paper will bring into focus the current conditions of these children, the state-education system, and various civil society initiatives in the education sector. A comparative case study was conducted to provide insight into their activities. Civil society activities are crucial for helping the neglected segments of society, however there are additional challenges in terms of the quality of the education, what services are provided, and how the administration is run. This is due to a variety of factors including pressure from the government. Therefore, volunteerism is essential for ensuring the future success of the development of alternative education, which depends in part on both internal and external supports.

1. Introduction

There has been an on-going series of wide-ranging political and economic reforms in Myanmar accelerated by the transition to democracy taking place after nearly 50 years of military rule, which ended in 2011. Myanmar appears to have grown and has received a lot of attention from foreign investors in recent years due to their abundant and largely untapped natural resources and human capital. However, Myanmar’s GDP growth rate is still the lowest among the other countries in the region and the economy is adversely affected by high inflation (UNICEF 2012).

Myanmar’s Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2013 is still 0.524—in the low human development category—positioning the country at 150 out of 187 countries (UNDP 2014). An estimated 26% of the population lives in poverty, with the median income only 25% above the poverty line. Moreover, the rate of poverty is twice as high in rural areas where 70% of the population lives (UNDP 2013).

One of the reasons that Myanmar is no closer to achieving better human development is a failure of state-education. The socio-economic condition has suffered immensely in recent years resulting in uneven development of many public services (Lindsay 2011). According to the research done by The World Bank (2015), Myanmar’s public spending on education, in 2011 is 4.4% of the total government expenditure—the lowest among all the 84 countries for which data is available.

As Myanmar’s state-run education continues to deteriorate, civil society has had to develop alternative approaches to teaching and ways to provide basic educational materials for the poorer segments of the society (Lorch 2007). Civil society led schools are now playing a tremendously important role to fill up a deficiency in the state education. However, thus far...
there has not been a lot of research done about recent civil society activities in Myanmar's educational sector.

This paper aims to describe and discuss the current situation of Myanmar in terms of children, the educational sector and the roles of civil society within that sector. A comparative case study based on civil society led community-based schools in Tanyin town is presented to explore educational initiatives undertaken by civil society actors. The benefits and the challenges are also examined in order to provide additional insight into the alternative or informal educational system. The hope here is that such an attempt might enable the international community as well as individual players to support civil society actors as they enhance the opportunities and capabilities of poor children.

2. Current living condition of children

Poor children and women are the most vulnerable part of the society in Myanmar. The population of Myanmar stood at 55.7 million in 2014, of which about 26.6% were between 0 and 14 years of age (CIA 2014). In terms of age, there is an indicative trend towards an older population, with fewer children and more working aged people. This is mainly due to a decline in fertility and mortality rates. However, even though the mortality rate is on the decline, there are around 56,000 children under age five who die every year mainly due to a lack of knowledge of basic disease prevention resulting in the highest under age five and infant mortality rates among ASEAN member countries (UNICEF 2012, IGME 2014).

Epidemics like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria are still one of the most crucial issues although The United Nations has sought to provide technical and financial assistance for years. Other humanitarian emergencies such as child malnutrition also continue to have severely affected the survival and development of children and women (Lorch 2007). There are also considerable regional and income disparities in terms of the provision of the basic needs of children, such as economic security, quality of education, basic sanitation and adequate health care.

Children from poor families tend not to enroll in or drop out of school although education is supposed to be free for all children in Myanmar. The current net enrollment rate is 84% in primary education which means that 16% of children of primary school age are not in school (UNICEF 2012). Figure 1 shows the net primary school completion rate by area of residence, mother's education level and wealth quintile between 2009 and 2010. The total net completion rate is only 54.2 % (MNPED, MOH, & UNICEF 2011), but more notably the disparities do exist by those variable factors.

![Figure 1: Net primary school completion rate by area of residence, mother's educational level and wealth quintile, Myanmar 2009-2010 (MNPED, MOH, & UNICEF 2011)](image-url)

The first factor is the area of residence. 66.6 % of children living in urban areas complete primary education whereas the rate drops to 49.6% in rural areas. The educational level of one’s mother significantly impacts a child’s education. The completion rate shows that children who have a mother with no education stay in school much less often than children with an educated mother (27.1% for mothers with no education, compared with 76.1% for mothers with secondary education). Interestingly, children who have a non-educated mother drop out of school more often than those who have no mother. The same significant disparities are seen based on socio-economic status. Only 31.2 % of children from the poorest families complete primary education compared with 78.7% from the richest families.

Many children work to support their family and are sometimes subjected to abusive child labor, which in turn condemns them to lifelong poverty without
basic education. Children generally do not participate in decision-making that affects them, due to the socio-cultural norms and values people possess. Consequently, many poor parents who lack education themselves ignore their responsibility to their children and do not value education above work for their children (UNICEF 2012). The accumulation of so many disadvantages regarding health, poverty and education may lead to a national crisis in the future if no immediate solutions are found.

3. Have-nots Children

'Have-nots' children as opposed to 'Haves' are the ones who are without wealth, social position, or other material advantages. They have little opportunities to improve their situations and are often neglected and marginalized by society. There are generally four types of children in this category: street children, handicapped children, children infected with HIV/AIDS, and domestic assistants.

Street children are generally from poor families and many of them drop out of primary school. Even though they still have access to formal schooling, they have no time to study. Some children are engaged in child labor and others are beggars on the streets with or without parents. In some cases, they are organized by local gangs and particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Handicapped and children infected with HIV/AIDS are also isolated from communities. Most families regard these children as burdens since they have little chance of leading a productive life. Some poor children in especially rural areas go without any treatment at all.

Another type of neglected children is domestic assistants. They are typically poor under-aged girls who are sent or sold to wealthier households to work in return for a small amount of money that their parents receive. They perform household duties all day every day without pay and are sometimes sexually abused by the owners. Needless to say, all these children mentioned above have very little chance to receive the minimal level of basic education that is available to them.

4. State-run education system

Table 1 shows the academic structure of the basic educational system in Myanmar. It is a 5-4-2 system, consisting of five years of schooling for primary school, four years of schooling for lower secondary level and two years of schooling for upper secondary level (MOE 2014a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>No. of years</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5+ to 7+</td>
<td>1 to 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8+ to 9+</td>
<td>4 to 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10+ to 13+</td>
<td>6 to 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14+ to 15+</td>
<td>10 to 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are currently 35,548 primary and post primary schools, 3,022 lower secondary schools and 2,036 upper secondary schools. Some 5.2 million students are enrolled in primary schools, 2.3 million students in lower secondary schools and 0.7 million students in upper secondary schools (UNICEF 2012). This means 44% and 13.5% of the students who enroll in primary schools move up to lower secondary and upper secondary schools respectively. However, it must not be overlooked that enrollment rates vary considerably depending on the source, therefore it is questionable whether the data is valid and reliable.

5. Problems of state-run education system

For many years, Myanmar's level of education was one of the highest in Asia with the highest literacy rate in its own language. However, decades of under-investment and civil conflict have caused the decay of the state-educational system across the country (Lall 2009).

To improve the current situation, the government established a 30-year education development plan in 2001-2002 and implemented the Myanmar national action plan of 'Education for All' (EFA) approved by the Ministry of Education aimed at the improvement of the education sector with the expansion of schools as the highest priority (MOE 2014b). The 2008 Constitution also reaffirms the state’s responsibility to provide free basic education to all children and
Myanmar has committed to achieving universal primary education (Millennium Development Goal 2) by 2015 (UNICEF 2012). Due to the educational reforms undertaken by the government, the number of schools has increased, however many problems remain especially with regard to access to schools, quality of instruction, and student retention (Lall 2009).

In some rural areas, government schools do not exist. Additionally, they are poorly equipped and in many cases lack basic teaching materials such as benches, textbooks and tables. The textbooks and curricula are often outdated (Lorch 2009). Although education is free for all, there are many unofficial and hidden costs, which parents must pay. Frequently, poorer parents are unable to afford these costs because not only do they need to buy textbooks and school uniforms for their children but they must also pay enrollment and maintenance fees for the school buildings. Consequently, they are forced to take their children out of school (Lorch 2007).

Another major issue is with teachers' reluctance to work in rural areas. This is because the wages are poor and teachers typically do not receive adequate compensation for going into these remote areas. Therefore, even though a village may have a school building, sometimes there are no teachers available who are willing to work in that village. Many rural families must support teachers by supplementing their salaries as well as providing food, living quarters, water and so on just to retain them. However, few teachers choose to stay for long. Schools tend to be overcrowded resulting in a high student per teacher ratio (Lorch 2009, UNICEF 2012).

Apart from these problems, a considerable number of primary and secondary teachers are not certified to teach at the appropriate levels (UNICEF 2012). They are often poorly trained and generally rely on traditional didactic teaching methods supported by the encouragement of rote learning. They tend to be repetitive, outdated, teacher-centered and based on cathedra teaching due to the state-run teacher educational system, which has been markedly deteriorating (Lorch 2007, UNICEF 2012).

Even though the government has introduced the action plan and has implemented various educational reforms, the situation does not seem to be improving. This should not be surprising considering the low government expenditure on education. Lorch (2009) reported that according to several international aid workers, the younger the applicants are, the lower the educational level is. This points to a persistent deterioration of the educational system. She argues that this has resulted not only from a lack of access to schooling and the quality of education, but also a system that suppresses critical thinking and discourages creativity. Lall (2009) describes the situation stating that:

'As in most dictatorships, one of the reasons that military government has been keen to retain control of education is largely because of the belief that an 'independent' way of thinking poses a direct challenge to them. One could question whether the under-investment in the education system was motivated by the politics of control—the military elite perhaps hoping that a less-educated population would pose less of a challenge.'

6. Civil society activities in education

There are many definitions of civil society used in different ideological traditions. The notion of civil society originally stemmed from European and American political schools of thought, which makes its application to non-Western contexts problematic. In addition, there are various types of civil society actors that have different degrees of diverse pressure including military regime. Whereas some actors intend to influence or subvert government policy, others are more solicitous for relative autonomy (South 2008). Thus an accurate definition that takes into account the diverse nature of what a civil society entails is of critical importance. According to the definition provided by Gosewinkel et al., civil society activities are characterized by

'—not only, but mainly—by self organization and self-reliance, by their operating in the public sphere, by using discourse as a means of resolving conflicts, by tolerance of heterogeneity and pluralism, by their differing from violence and war,
and by their pursuit of collective goods (as cited in Lorch 2007).

There are many types of civil society associations depending on their degree of formality and institutional forms in Myanmar. In the case of the education sector, due to the failure of state-run education, people have begun to seek alternative ways to provide basic education. As a result, non-profit and self-help groups of various forms and sizes have emerged.

Amongst these various civil society organizations, monastic schools or monastic education centers are the most prominent civil society organizations bridging the accessibility gap in the state-run education system in government-controlled areas (Lorch 2009). Monastic schools provide generally only primary education especially for poor children but at no cost and they operate all over the country. There are also no additional costs such as enrollment fees and maintenance fees and all necessary materials are generally provided.

Some monastic schools specifically target street children, orphans, and ethnic minorities, providing accommodation and food in addition to an education. 30% of monastic schools operate as orphanages often having medical and income generating facilities such as tailor shops and carpentry (Lorch 2007, BI & MED 2014). Even though some monastic schools generate revenue from the work performed, this does not cover all the expenses. Monastic schools must rely on donations from the local community or in some cases international NGOs, international donors and friends.

There are three types of monastic schools. The first type of monastic school strictly follows the principles of Buddhist teaching. The second type also follows the principles of Buddhist teaching but places additional emphasis on literacy skills. The third type adapts the curriculum put forth by the government and follows a formal education (Lorch 2009).

These schools use official school curricula but also teach the Buddhist culture and way of life. At the completion of primary level education at a recognized monastic school, pupils are able to take their final exam. If they pass the exam, they can acquire an officially recognized degree. There are about 1,400 registered monastic schools serving around 180,000-20,000 children in an estimated 230 townships (UNICEF 2012). However, in terms of quality, monastic schools share some of the same problems as the state-schools. Specifically, many teachers are improperly trained and their teaching methods are often repetitive and outdated.

Various other civil society activities in the education sector are supported by a number of actors such as monks, nuns, the local NGOs, and engaged groups of individuals, such as university students, members of local communities, Christian churches, parent-teacher associations, culture and literature committees, and sometimes members of international agencies or NGOs. They also run schools or educational and cultural programs free or with a small charge for children in especially poverty stricken, rural or ceasefire areas.

7. A case study of community-based schools in Tanyin town

A pilot research was conducted in order to understand the conditions of two civil-society led monastic schools in Tanyin town, outskirts of Yangon in February 2014. Data was collected through observations and informal interviews with monks and nuns of the schools. The main information of the two monastic schools (Monastic school A and B) is shown in table 2.

Monastic School A

School A is a government-registered school that has adapted the curriculum put forth by the government. It is run by 10 monks and provides four years of primary education from 1st to 4th grade. According to the chief monk, they would be able to provide a full five years of primary education from 2015. There are 300 students in total from the nearby neighborhoods. Almost all the students commute to the school but occasionally they house children who otherwise wouldn’t be able to succeed in the school. Since they are short of funds, they cannot provide food to pupils every day. In addition, they can only accept
Burmese children but not children of ethnic minority groups, despite a desire to accept all needy children regardless of ethnic background.

Table 2: Monastic schools in Tanyin town

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastic School</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>Primary (up to 4th grade)</td>
<td>Primary &amp; lower secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>440 (230 residents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of teachers</td>
<td>11 (incl. 3 monks)</td>
<td>15 (incl. 2 graduates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student background</td>
<td>Poor children from the nearby neighborhood</td>
<td>Orphans &amp; poor children from all over the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Burmese</td>
<td>Ethnic minorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of teachers' salaries subsidized by the gov. (ratio of subsidized salaries)</td>
<td>3 teachers (27.3%)</td>
<td>10 teachers (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student / teacher ratio</td>
<td>27:1</td>
<td>29:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarks</td>
<td>• Very little subsidy • Incomplete primary education • Single ethnic group • Limited food, facility &amp; materials • Low teacher quality</td>
<td>• More subsidy • Primary &amp; Lower secondary education • Multi-ethnic group • Better food, facility &amp; materials • Low teacher quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are 11 teachers including 3 monks working as teachers. The school receives a subsidy for only 3 teachers from the government of 36,000 kyat per person per month (35 US dollars). Salaries for the teachers not covered by the subsidy are covered by donations. A teacher's salary is 86,000 kyat (84 US dollars) per month. The ratio of salaries for teachers covered by the subsidy is 27.3%. Due to the low pay, the school has difficulties finding qualified and experienced teachers and have to rely on volunteers from the community or teachers who are neither certified nor properly trained.

The main school building was old and shabby and appeared to be built of wood, bamboo and galvanized sheet. It has only one story with 3 classrooms. The teaching materials and resources were also extremely limited. However, there was a new building used as a library and a hall. It was built using donations from a unified junior and high school in Japan just before our visit in October 2013.

School Picture: School A

Monastic School B

School B is also registered with the government. It is run by nuns and provides primary and lower secondary education. It is a relatively new school having opened in 2006. The main building and facilities are funded by the Japanese government under the 'Grant Assistance for Grass-Roots Human Security Projects' in 2011. They also operate as an orphanage and provide food to all the pupils.

There are 440 students out of which 230 students reside in the school and others commute from neighboring communities. They are orphans or deprived children from ethnic minority groups, who come from all over the country but especially from the poorest areas near the border. There are generally four possible paths for students who complete the lower secondary level. First, students go back to their hometown and become teachers. Second, they become teachers at the school. Third, they go to upper secondary school after passing a special test. The last option is that they work in the agricultural sector in a neighboring district.
Fifteen teachers work in this monastic school consisting of seven primary and eight lower secondary level teachers, out of which two teachers are graduates of the school. The subsidy for one primary level teacher is 36,000 kyat per month (35 US dollars) and for secondary level is 40,000 kyat (39 US dollars). The school is subsidized by the government covering the salaries of 10 out of the 15 teachers working there. The ratio of salaries for teachers covered by the subsidy is 66.7%.

The school building, which was made of concrete, was new and clean. It had two stories with 6 classrooms. The students are all girls wearing Buddhist novice robes except for a few boys from neighboring communities. Regarding teaching method, it was predominantly teacher-centered and repetitive using a lot of recitation and memorization. The quality of the teachers was also of great concern in this school.

8. Findings and conclusion

Civil society actors have a vital role to play especially for have-nots children in the education sector in Myanmar. However, although monastic schools certainly bridge some of the gap left by the state-educational system, there is an imbalance in the provision of education within the same region. The monastic schools A and B are both government-registered civil society led educational organizations in the same region and take care of have-nots children who cannot go to or who have dropped out of state-schools. However, even though their purpose is fundamentally the same, there are a number of concerns identified in terms of the services provided, the administration, and quality of education.

The biggest concern is the subsidy they receive from the government. While school A receives a subsidy for only 3 teachers, school B receives it for 10 teachers (ratio of subsidized salaries of school A and B are 27.3% and 66.7% respectively). It is obvious that the amount of subsidy does not correlate with the number of students or teachers but with the degree of tolerance and cooperation with the government. Due to the lack of donations or subsidy, school A cannot provide enough food, teaching materials or adequate facilities.

Another related issue is the education they provide. While school B offers primary and lower secondary level of education, school A can only provide incomplete primary education. Although those students receive four years of education from school A and gain literacy in that time, they have no chance of acquiring an officially recognized degree. This is likely due to a lack of donations and the school being over capacity. The school is set to provide five years of education starting next year with a new school building funded by a Japanese junior and senior high school. This means that if school A had not had any connections with the Japanese donor, it would not have been possible to plan to provide a complete primary education for the students. This shows that there is no system in place for connecting donors with needy schools—a failure of the current school administration. Also it shows that receiving the donations depends very much on the recognition of the monks. It is doubtful that these children with four years of schooling will be able to escape this cycle of poverty and expand their future possibilities without a basic education and an officially recognized degree.
Another point to note is that children are treated differently depending on their ethnicity. Due to the lack of donations, school A accepts only Burmese children in neighboring districts at the moment. This method of selection would be regarded as discrimination and could generate unfavorable friction in the community. Establishing schools like school B that accepts ethnic children from all over the country might have been the only educational opportunity available to those ethnic children.

A final point regarding a problem shared by both monastic schools in this study was the struggle to recruit and retain good teachers. As previously mentioned, this is a common problem not only with monastic schools but also with state-run schools. The immediate cause of the problem is obviously the lack of donations and subsidy but the fundamental problem lies in the government's attitude towards education as evidenced by the low investment. This is a serious issue long-term because memorization and repetition have limitations in their effectiveness and children are less likely to acquire or develop their creativity and critical thinking skills: both crucial skills in a democratic society.

The services, administration, and quality of monastic schools are greatly affected by school locations, recognition of chief monks and nuns, and the degree of tolerance and cooperation from the government. In light of this situation, there should be a system to collect and distribute donations in a more systematic way so that more children may receive the same quality of education regardless of factors like social class or ethnicity. Therefore, social and individual volunteerism is essential to ensure the provision of education for these otherwise neglected members of society. In turn, the future success of the monastic education system depends, in part, on external supports.

9. Conclusion and future direction

This study has clearly identified the positive effects as well as the weaknesses that remain with monastic education specifically in the rural and remote locations within Myanmar. However, this case study was conducted on a small scale and compared the conditions of just two monastic schools within the same region. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize the data and see a fuller perspective of the civil society activities in this educational field. More research on monastic schools and other educational activities are needed in order to gain a fuller perspective and decide how best to proceed for the benefit of the children.

In addition, the scope of this research needs to be extended to the broader community and social sector reforms affecting future opportunities and the rights of children across the nation. Equally important areas that require further research include:

1. Promotion of children rights in ethnic and rural regions of Myanmar through cultural development programs
2. Diversification and differentiation of voluntary education in relation to ethnic equality through case studies supported by international and national CSOs
3. Myanmar's social sector reforms and eradication/reduction of community-poverty programs
4. Multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-linguistic society and peace-building approaches for classrooms in Myanmar

This paper was prepared based on a visual survey conducted as part of the alternative educational system in Myanmar in February 2014. It was designed to inform a preliminary position paper outlining further study into children’s rights and ethnic equality in developing countries as part of doctoral research.

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