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## **Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Myanmar: Analysing the Effect of Global Policy at National and Local Level**

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### **Abstract**

*In planning and enacting Myanmar's National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) (2016-2020), the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) was adopted by policymakers to outline its educational challenges and issues towards implementing equitable and inclusive quality education. Using a theoretical framework of human capital, neoliberalism and world system theory, this paper offers an analysis of how the adoption of SDG 4 in NESP policy addresses the goal of equitable and inclusive quality education in Myanmar. The analysis indicates three nuances. Firstly, this policy focuses hugely on neoliberal perspectives of education, i.e., to equip individuals with 21<sup>st</sup> century global economic competency and make Myanmar a middle-income country. This paper argues that applying global education policy (SDG 4) for solely economic purposes, further reinforces the potential of global capitalist society, to sustain its power and influence on Myanmar's economy as peripheral to world labour division. Secondly, the policy lacks ethnic and civil society participation in both policy planning and enacting. This neither fulfils its aim of inclusivity nor addresses the existing gap of power, control and quality of education between the central government and ethnic groups. Thirdly, the policy lacks clear guidelines in assessing students' achievement in practice, and this raises concerns that it will not meet its aims. The analysis then considers ways forward to equitable and inclusive quality education in Myanmar's social, political and economic context.*

### **Keywords**

SDG 4, NESP, Myanmar, Comparative Education, Policy Analysis

## Introduction

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have received enormous attention around the globe as they envisioned a transformational shift to eradicate global challenges in poverty, social inequalities and climate change. The agenda with the title, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which includes 17 goals and 169 targets, was signed by 193 member states of the United Nations (UN, 2015). The SDG 4 of quality education states 17 targets to achieve qualitative, inclusive and life-long education for individuals, to be equipped with knowledge and skills for building a sustainable environment and developing innovative solutions for global challenges (UN, 2015). The quality education agenda has been adopted worldwide and has had an enormous impact on global education. For example, SDG 4 as a main reference in developing the continental education strategy for Africa (Tikly, 2015), and NESP in Myanmar (MOE, 2016). This paper analyses how the global education agenda (SDG 4) has impacted the planning of NESP and to what extent the goals and targets of NESP impact at the local level of Myanmar education. The paper is divided into four sections: the theoretical framework for the analysis, the context of Myanmar education and the evolution of NESP, the analysis of the policy, and policy recommendation for future developments.

## Theoretical framework

The past century has witnessed a series of United Nations global agendas such as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), International Education for All program (EFA), and Sustainable Development Goals agenda 2030. These global movements date back to when the United Nations was founded in 1945, with a vision that international collaboration in economy would improve health and social conditions (Shields, 2013, p.12). Then, education became a significant tool for economic growth by the defining body of human capital theories. Human capital theory refers to an individual's ability to produce an economic outcome (Mincer, 1958). This has led to a trend in third-world countries to invest in education as a path for economic growth and prosperity (Shields, 2013, p.14). The human capital model of education has caused the marginalisation of the cultures, values and beliefs of traditional societies, whilst economic failures result in structural adjustments of third-world countries leading to an

increased burden of debt to global institutions such as the World Bank (Shields, 2013, p.18).

Responding to the limitations of understanding development solely in economic terms, international education development programs in the 1990s shifted their focus of development to promoting universal access to education and human rights, whilst ensuring equity and social inclusion needs were met (Shields, 2013). Such programs include International Educational for All and Millennium Development Goals. This is applicable to Sen's (1999) definition of development as the freedoms, opportunities and rights of individuals. The EFA movement has received huge support and achievement in terms of an increase in primary enrolment of schools all over the world (UNESCO, 2015). However, scholars argued that universal schooling is problematic as it could only lead to benefits for capitalist society. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that formal schooling prepares students for exploitative wage labour with a set of capitalist-associated values, such as obeying authority, following timetables and producing work according to deadlines. With the spread of formal schooling around the world, Wallerstein (1974) argued that world capital owners would find ways to expand their profits by transforming traditional societies to include cultural and social aspects of capitalist society. World system theorists, Wallerstein (1974) and Arnove (1980), argued that the universal education program was another way to maintain the wealth of the global capital by reformulating exploitative core/peripheral relationships through schools. Adding to this perspective, post-colonial scholars argued that the control and transference of western knowledge in universal education programs has contributed to the continued dominance of colonial powers on the colonised countries (Said, 1978; Escobar, 1995).

Despite the growth of debates and concern of the dominance of hegemonic knowledge through universal schooling, the interdependence and interconnectedness among nation states has rapidly increased through the process of globalisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The removal of international borders has enabled the freedom of competition in trade. Neoliberalism is trending, the conceptualisation that a nation's economic development depends on the competency, efficiency and innovation of individuals or states to compete in the global economy (Tooley, 1997). As countries compete with one another in the global economy, the best practices of education are in high demand to equip students with knowledge and skills for competitiveness in the global economy.

International education testing systems, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), have evolved to accommodate the emergence of the neoliberal agenda in education. However, the neoliberal idea of schooling is highly criticised by world-system theorists who argue that the power and autonomy employed by the global economy in education would further limit opportunities and rights of marginalised groups. For example, *Schooling the World: The Last Whiteman's Burden* documentary portrays how children in Ladakh moved away to the city in pursuit of modern schooling for employment, but that this resulted in the lack of ability to speak their indigenous languages and to understand their cultural heritage (Burden, 2011).

### **The Context of Education in Myanmar and the Evolution of NESP**

Education in Myanmar is highly centralised<sup>1</sup> and mainly provided by the Ministry of education (MOE) (Zobrist and McCormick, 2013). In 2016, there was a total of 47,363 schools in the basic education system (primary and secondary) run by the government, monastic and private sectors in which 45,837 were government schools (MOE, 2016). Apart from these schools, there are a number of schools run by ethnic armed organizations, Christian churches, and local communities. Learning in schools has a heavy emphasis on rote learning through the process of repetition and memorisation, whilst assessment focuses mostly on the quantity of knowledge learned (Carnell and Lodge, 2002). A study of pedagogical practices in 23 primary schools in Myanmar showed opportunities for students to learn collaboration, problem solving and critical thinking in learning were rare (Hardman *et al.*, (2020). Nevertheless, education in Myanmar was considered to be superior compared to its neighbouring countries in 1948, as a newly independent state from the British colony, with the literacy rate at 60% (UNESCO, 2006). Myanmar education has declined since the military coup in 1962, standing at the bottom of league table of ASEAN countries in enrolment, achievement and investment (UNESCO, 2015). However, as the country

<sup>1</sup> Since the military coup in 1962, Myanmar government education planning, budgeting, and decision-making are mainly authorised by higher officials. Teachers and administrators lack the ability to challenge authority (fear for greater risks if not followed guidelines) and see themselves as not responsible for shaping educational policy but rather as implementers of the top-down policy (Zobrist & McCormick, 2013, p. 25).

has undergone major political reform in the past decade, education was one of the priorities of the government reform agenda (Zobrist and McCormick, 2013).

Improvements in the education sector were witnessed at the start of 2011 under the new government led by the President U Thein Sein, the retired Military General. In July 2012, the government implemented a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) in collaboration with its development partners (Asian Development Bank, Global partnership in education, UNESCO, UNICEF). The purpose was to review the entire education system in order to find challenges and problems to be addressed for a more accessible, equitable and quality-based education (MOE, 2016). The review consists of three phases: rapid assessment, in-depth analysis and a strategic plan with cost analysis. By the end of the CESR review in 2014, the government launched the National Education Law which was further amended in 2015 under the new democratic government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) to fulfil the demands of teachers, students and parents on the limitations of the education law such as academic freedom (Phyu, 2016). These reform practices have achieved an increase in government expenditure<sup>2</sup> in education, free education for upper-secondary level in 2016 (primary in 2010 and lower-secondary in 2013) (Soe, *et al.*, 2017). As a result of the CESR analysis and the demands of the National Education Law, MOE launched NESP 2016-2020, the previous government's plan for education reform, in 2016 with nine transformational goals towards quality education for all students at all levels. The goals included enhancements in pre-primary education; promoting access, inclusion and quality in basic education; planning and reform of the basic education curriculum; students' assessment and examinations; vocational education; alternative education; teacher education and management; higher education and education administration and governance (MOE, 2016).

## **Analysis of Myanmar's NESP Policy**

From the perspective of neoliberalism, it is clear that the policy portrays a vision of education to equip individuals with knowledge and skills needed to compete in the global market. The language used in the policy clearly highlights this aspect:

<sup>2</sup> The allocation of budget to education from total Union budget has been increasing annually and significantly from at 3.66% in 2011/12 to 7.75% in 2017/18 (UNICEF, 2018).

*Education provides our youths with skills to compete in the labour market and it is a key driver of economic growth... countries which invest in education are likely to reap substantial long-term benefits, such as greater economic and social prosperity ... Myanmar becoming an upper middle income country by 2030 (MOE, 2016).*

These ambitions set actions for the 'World Class' quality education for all students which are described in Strategy 1, 2 and 3 (MOE, 2016, p. 33). From a world system perspective, the best schooling practices are heavily based on the needs of the global economy and western epistemological values. For example, in the critical discourse analysis of education under SDG 4, Brisset and Mitter (2017) concluded that, despite using a strong transformative language throughout the agenda, SDG 4 has a huge emphasis on the pro-growth model of development and a utilitarian approach to education. Therefore, it is important to question whether the adoption of mass schooling for the neoliberal agenda would fulfil the economic goals of Myanmar, or whether it would sustain the inequality of economic relations between the core and periphery countries.

To further analyse the impact of the neoliberal agenda of NESP at the local level, it is vital to look at the history of conflict and distrust relationship between the central government and ethnic minority groups. Under goal 10.2 of NESP (basic education reform for the 21<sup>st</sup> century), strategy 2 states that in providing education at a national level a firm collaboration is required between the central government education system and different education service providers to ensure inclusivity (MOE, 2016, p. 31). Nevertheless, civil society groups and ethnic-based educational organisations were not allowed to participate in the decision-making process of NESP (Lwin, 2019, p. 274). For instance, a civil initiative known as the National Network on Education Reform (NNER), which has argued for decentralisation in education and mother-tongue-based multilingual education in the previous reforms, was not invited to participate in the planning of NESP (Lwin, 2019). This clearly highlights the government's agenda to sustain its existing centralised power by marginalising civil society and ethnic group voices. Moreover, the gap in power, control and quality of education between the government system and these different education providers has existed for several decades as a result of the long-standing armed conflicts between the central government and the ethnic minority groups (South and Lall, 2016).

For example, the Mon ethnic schools, which are run locally by the Mon National Education Committee<sup>3</sup> (MNEC), face several challenges in sustaining their mother-tongue-based multilingual education program. MNEC's schools lack secure infrastructure, sufficient teachers' salaries and teaching resources, pre-service teacher training (South and Lall, 2016). MNEC has been demanding that the government should officially recognise Mon ethnic schools and provide salaries for its teachers. Yet, the government only provides free textbooks for support (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, 2020).

In addition to these struggles for autonomy and representation in education, Zobrist and McCormick (2013) pointed out that decentralising responsibilities and autonomy of educational governance would be a shift of burden to the local groups. Local education providers, which are mostly in poor, rural areas including the ethnic groups, do not have the same level of funding as urban schools. Regarding its goal of equitable and inclusive education, NESP stated many aspects of improvements such as: expansion of existing schools and building new schools in less developed areas; supporting at-risk children with remedial education and retaining children in high drop-out schools (MOE, 2016, p. 33). However, these definitions of inclusivity are limited. Similar to this situation, Unterhalter (2019) questioned the narrow scope of interpretation of equity in SDG goal 4 and argued that equal access does not simply mean enrolling the marginalised or under-served groups into schools, but rather to look at critical ways in which education might reproduce inequalities from the classroom level to administration and policy formulation. This is because equal provision may not be adequate for inequalities in education of all groups as inequalities intersect and compound with each other (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 46). Therefore, in the case of NESP, (i) the assumption of 'equitable' as limited to redistribution of resources, (ii) the power imbalance and distrust between the government and ethnic minority groups, and (iii) the lack of ethnic-minority and civil society groups' participation in the decision-making process, reflects how unlikely it is to achieve the goal of inclusive education in NESP policy.

Despite the dominance of government power and control over education, the NESP policy was informed with some prospects of quality education such as enhancing

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<sup>3</sup> MNEC is a non-governmental organisation, founded by the New Mon State party (an armed ethnic minority group) in 1992 (MNEC, 2021).

students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, cultural and ethnic values to support a democratic peace-building process in Myanmar (MOE, 2016). NESP stated that this should be done by establishing a national school quality standards assurance framework that focuses on promoting the school environment, funding and capacity building for teachers for a better learning and teaching process. The policy aims to achieve by 2021 the significant improvements experienced by students in their school and classroom learning environment (MOE, 2016). However, the policy lacks guidelines and indicators of many aspects of assessing quality assurance, such as assessment procedure and assessment bodies. For example, despite proposed changes to child-centred approach<sup>4</sup> (CCA) in learning and teaching process in the policy, the old assessment system for matriculation exams is still in use and under debate for reform in the academic year 2019 (Tanaka and Khine, 2019). Moreover, evidence from CCA learning program, adopted as part of the reform process in 2011, has shown little impact of the approach on teaching and learning processes. This is due to: (i) high teacher and student ratios, (ii) lack of space, time and teaching aids, and (iii) lack of compatibility between CCA learning and exam system (Borg *et al.*, 2018). In this case, it remains unclear how the goals of quality education in NESP policy will be fulfilled with a quick shift from rote learning to 'CCA' with no clear guidelines on assessment and implementation.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In moving forwards to equitable and inclusive quality education, Myanmar has yet to overcome major obstacles embedded in the cultural, social, historical and political aspects of its education. A sustainable solution to the long-standing relationship between the government and ethnic minority groups would be challenging, unless equitable representation is provided in all sectors of reform. However, as suggested by Zobrist and McCormick (2013), the decentralising of autonomy in education could produce more harm than good. Further research is vital to focus on a broader geographic and ethnic scope to ensure that the needs of minority groups have been addressed. If the decentralisation policy is to be implemented in Myanmar, a careful

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<sup>4</sup> CCA - an approach that facilitates learning based on students' interests and engagement to promote their problem-solving skills and creativity (Borg, et al., 2018)



analysis and systematic plan with proper funding and budget guidelines must be addressed.

Moreover, inclusivity and equity in education should not only be viewed from the perspective of redistribution and demographic, but rather as a substantive perspective that (i) navigates the complex contexts of curriculum reform and pedagogic engagement, (ii) reflects on multilingualism, and (iii) understands values and the complexity of the relationship of policy and practice (Unterhalter, 2019). Regarding the quality of education, the risks of quick-fix solution in NESP policy need to be carefully analysed and assessed. With a huge transformation from rote learning to CCA, this shift requires a long-term plan to develop relevant pedagogy practices, teachers' capacity training and systematic assessment criteria. The specific targets and assessment indicators should be defined at the local and regional level in order to track the development of students' achievement. Although aspects of quality and equity of education may be challenging to measure, Unterhalter (2019) argues that if standard measurement were able to enhance the human rights agenda, research and critical discussion are crucial for developing indicators for assessing qualitative improvements.

Finally, the pressure to benchmark citizens against global league tables with a view to entry into a global marketplace compromises important moral values, such as the preservation of cultural nuances, traditions and democracy within a local context. Civil society and ethnic groups should be equally provided with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process, to serve a true purpose of democracy. Globally, it has been observed that few systems of governance form policy from evidence and that the process of evidencing policy is often retrospective (Alexander, 2012). Whilst 'quick-fix', poorly-evidenced policies are not unique to the Myanmar education context, challenging decision-makers to critically reflect on their framing and approaches towards education, through transition to evidence-based policy making, could be the key to significant education reform. Moving forward, if policy-makers in Myanmar are to be provided with space to challenge their aspects of development and reconsider their role in the world system, there are possibilities of developing a system of inclusive and equitable quality-based education that could drive towards a just, peaceful and sustainable environment.

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