Teaching ethnic minority languages in government schools and developing the local curriculum:

Elements of decentralization in language-in-education policy

Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Mael Raynaud

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Acronyms And Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BECF	Basic education curriculum framework
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organizations
EBEPs	Ethnic Basic Education Providers
KED	Karen Education Department
ENAC	Ethnic Nationalities Council
KIC	Karen Information Centre
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
LCC	Literature and culture committee
LIC	Language of the immediate community
MIMU	Myanmar Information Management Unit
MNEC	Mon National Education Committee
MNCC	Myanmar National Curriculum Committee
NNER	National Network for Education Reform
MTA	Mong Tai Army
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoEA	Ministry of Ethnic Affairs
MTBE	Mother Tongue Based Education
MTB-MLE	Mother Tongue-Based – Multilingual Education
MINE	Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education
NESP	National Education Strategic Plan

NMSP	New Mon State Party
RCSS	Restoration Council of Shan State
SAZ	Self-Administered Zones
SIL	Summer Institute of Linguistics
SLORC	State Law and Order Restauration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

About the Authors

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Urbanize: Policy Institute for Urban and Regional Planning

Urbanize is a local think tank, founded in June 2018 in Myanmar, and based in Yangon. Researchers working with Urbanize specialize in a variety of fields: urban and regional planning, decentralization, the peace process, education, land, agriculture, natural resources management, community-based tourism, and more.

Its vision is to contribute to fostering local political eco-systems, at the regional, township, and municipal levels, where elected representatives, civil servants, representatives of political organizations, civil society organizations, the business community, and the media, can better participate to public debate and political decisions in defining the future of their regions, cities and towns.

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- decentralization, federalism and peace,
- decentralization in the field of urban and regional planning,
- decentralization in the field of education,
- decentralization and political parties.

On these projects, research has been conducted in Chin State, Kachin State, Shan State, Kayah State, Kayin State, Mon State, Thanintharyi Region, Yangon Region, Bago Region, Sagaing Region, Mandalay Region, and in Naypyidaw.

In order to achieve its objectives, Urbanize works towards developing local research capacity, providing support and supervision to young researchers eager to lead their own research projects.

In that sense, its activities include, on any issue that is the focus of one of its projects:

- leading research projects and publishing reports and articles
- developing local research capacity
- building networks
- engaging stakeholders
- fostering local political eco-systems

Executive Summary

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar is a country of complex ethno-linguistic diversity. Managing this diversity and the issue of the political representation of ethnic minorities has constituted a daunting challenge in the process of building a nation-state, with critical implications in a chaotic contemporary political history marked by decades of multiple conflicts and successive military dictatorships.

Indeed, relations between the center and the periphery have continuously been at the core of the countries' political issues, as reflected in the constitutions of 1947 and 1974, as well as the 2008 Constitution. Yet, by any standards, the Myanmar state has been unitary, and indeed centralized to an extreme degree, since independence in 1948, leading to 70 years of conflict.

This report focuses on the specific issue of teaching ethnic minority languages and cultures in government schools, and its implications in multiple contemporary challenges the Union of Myanmar is facing. In the context of a modern State founded on supposedly federal grounds, the absence (or suppression) of ethnic languages in government schools has continuously ranked high among ethnic minority groups' grievances towards the State in Burma/Myanmar. This very issue, often pointed-out as a tangible evidence of a deliberate "Burmanization" process orchestrated by the State, has largely contributed to the birth of ethnic consciousness, certainly playing a significant role in triggering (or sustaining) the formation of several ethnic armed movements.

The authors of this report believe that the "Burmanization" narrative has often been overly simplistic, notably by ignoring the more organic aspects leading to the diffusion of elements of the national identity, including the national language. Many authors have repeated sentences along the lines of "the teaching of ethnic languages was banned after 1962", without questioning how accurate these really are (see Chapter 2). While the curtailing of ethnic minority languages in formal education under military regimes remains patent, most notably under the SLORC and SPDC, this type of blanket statement has contributed to hamper the assessment of contemporary challenges.

In the post-junta political context, the reintroduction of ethnic languages in formal education was first announced under President Thein Sein's government in June 2012. However, the following years have been rather frustrating in this regard, both because of a general lack of readiness of all the actors involved and a manifestly insufficient support from the Ministry of Education (MoE). Ethnic minority languages could be taught but only outside of school hours, often with inadequate teaching material, by teachers receiving, at best, 30,000 kyat monthly (to teach one period per day).

In this rather bleak context, a number of voices, echoing a more general international education trend, have been demanding for greater inclusion of ethnic minority languages in formal education. The argument for this prospect entails three dimensions, which all appear extremely relevant for the future of the Union of Myanmar's social and political life: improving access to education of ethnic minority children, preserving linguistic and cultural diversity, and contributing to "national reconciliation".

More specifically, many actors, including ethnic activists and education experts, have recommended the setting-up of a *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education* (MTB-MLE, or *Mother Tongue-Based Education,* MTBE, in short) system, throughout the country. The basic principle of such system is that children start primary education with their mother-tongue as a medium of instruction, followed by a gradual shift towards the national language (and the introduction, later-on, of an international language, such as English).

While a rich literature does support the pedagogical benefits of a well-functioning MTBE system, the recommendations to immediately start setting-up such system in the Union of Myanmar stemmed, in our opinion, from a confusion between what we view as two distinct issues (the EBEPs, and the teaching of ethnic minority languages in government schools, as described below). These recommendations subsequently tend to overlook a number of challenges, which are well documented in the literature on MTBE around the world, and which seem particularly acute in the case of Myanmar.

Different issues, multiple challenges

There are, in our opinion, two certainly connected but nevertheless distinct issues regarding the development of a language-in-education policy bringing all the above-described benefits, and both are, in essence, decentralization challenges.

The first issue, which has attracted significant attention, is the recognition of non-state "ethnic" education systems (also known as Ethnic Basic Education Providers, EBEBs) by the government and the building (or strengthening) of bridges between these education systems and the Ministry of Education. These organizations, which include the education systems of several armed-groups, define themselves in reference to an ethnic identity. They provide different forms of basic education (i.e. primary and to a lesser degree secondary), using their respective ethnic languages to different extents, to an estimated 300,000 children. In that regard, the *Mon National Education Committee* (which teaches to about 12,000 students, most notably in its 133 *Mon national schools*) has often been presented as a model for Myanmar's language-in-education policy, since its syllabus very much aligns with MTBE, through a transition from the local language (Mon in this case) to the national language. While these EBEPs are not the focus of this report, they do constitute an important aspect in the debates over language-in-education policy in Myanmar. The Mon model can certainly be a source of inspiration for other "ethnic" education providers but a transition towards that model also proves to be challenging in practice. These challenges entail not only the current relations between other EBEPs and the government, but also, more structurally, specificities of the Mon ethno-linguistic identity, generally conceived as homogenous and fundamentally belonging to the Union of Myanmar, and thus widely perceived as the single easiest example regarding MTBE.

The second and closely related issue – which is the main focus of this report – deals with the inclusion of ethnic minority languages and cultures in the 46,000 government schools across the country, which provide education to a total of over nine million (including five million primary school children, of whom more than 750,000, according to official figures, are already learning

an ethnic minority language). Despite concerning the lion's share of the students, in quantitative terms, this aspect has attracted much less overall attention so far. This situation can partly be explained by the slow progresses of ethnic minority languages classes during the years following the beginning of the reform, in 2013. However, and while EBEPs play a role that goes beyond "simply" education matters, including in the context of the peace process, the focus on the EBEPs as the center of the "ethnic education" issue has also, arguably, contributed to an underestimation of the practical challenges involved in including ethnic languages in government schools throughout the country. The "Ethnic *vs* Bamar" lens, which tends to underpin this perspective, has often contributed to boil the issue down to the willingness of the State to include ethnic languages in education, while dimming other daunting geographic, administrative, political and linguistic structural challenges.

The Union of Myanmar indeed presents a number of overall characteristics which commend a cautious and progressive approach when developing a language-in-education policy. Ethno-linguistic diversity (there are officially 135 "national races/ethnic nationalities"[1] and latest estimates give the figure of 120 living languages[2]) as well as limited public resources are not uncommon in Asia and the rest of the world. However, the extent of the politicization of *ethnicity* – which largely finds its roots in colonial classifications underpinned by essentialist notions of *race* – does constitute a striking feature of contemporary Myanmar.

In this context, the structural challenges towards a greater inclusion of ethnic minority in education mainly correspond to answering a seemingly simple question: "which language should be taught in which school?". Blanket policies suggesting using the "main" languages of the different States in education (e.g. Tai Long for Shan State, Jinghpaw for Kachin State) appear utterly unfeasible from a political standpoint: "minorities" in both these Sates – and arguably in all States – may well add up to be majorities, and convincing them to start their educative journey in the language of their ethnic neighbors is more than likely to be problematic in 2020 Myanmar. In addition, this type of policy could not only defeat the very purpose of using "mother tongues" for educational achievement and cultural preservation, but also arguably constitute an additional burden for children and threat, as far as "non-selected" languages are concerned. While detailed language mapping is still missing, it appears that none of the lower administrative divisions (Districts, Townships) correspond to Ethnic languages' spatial distribution. The school thus appears to be a critically relevant level for decisions in terms of language-in-education policy.

More specifically, the main structural challenges we identify can be described as two-fold. The first one corresponds to the situations of schools in urban settings and close to main roads where – as a general rule in a country of striking diversity – populations tend to be more diverse in terms of ethno-linguistic background. These populations also tend to have better skills in the national language and a lesser command of "their" respective ethnic languages, as well as to be more eager to learn and master languages perceived as higher values in terms of life and

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[1] တိုင်းရင်းသား

[2] *Summer Institute of Linguistics* (www.ethnologue.com), 2019.

economic opportunities, such as Burmese, English, Chinese or Thai[3]. This type of situations, where multiple ethnic groups are attending the same school, create challenges when developing a language-in-education policy, and the magnitude of these challenges is proportional to the ambitions of the policy. Understandably, making these languages available as subjects, a few periods every week, is logistically less complex (although it already proves to be challenging in certain highly diverse regions) than using them as media of instruction. This second prospect, which would entail separating, at least to some extent, children according to their ethnicity during primary education, is also likely to have political consequences.

The second challenge, that we have dubbed "the minority language standardization conundrum" and echoes situations observed elsewhere in the world, correspond to the philosophical contradictions underpinning the standardization of ethnic minority languages, notably in order to use them in formal education (as opposed to less formal "community" teachings). This prospect, especially in the more ambitious perspective of MTBE, indeed strongly suggests using written and standardized languages, in order to produce curricula and train teachers. This endeavor of transforming what in Myanmar is, in many instances, a variety of dialects and scripts into a common, written and somewhat standardized language attached to a single ethnonym (a situation which defines, to a large extent, the specificity of the Mon identity among Myanmar's minorities) also correspond to the nation-building agendas of a multitude of actors who wish to defend, mobilize and strengthen their particular ethnic identity. However, while the official list of 135 ethnic groups remains highly contentious, producing a list of languages attached to their respective ethnonyms is to a large extent an arbitrary exercise, directed by considerations that are often more political than linguistic. Agendas of the actors involved tend to conflict, very much in a Russian doll fashion.

In a variety of levels and situations, actors seeking to represent and mobilize a particular ethnic identity (such as literature and culture committees, religious institutions, armed groups, political parties, ethnic media…) wish to promote linguistic and political "unity"[4] as a remedy to the "division/difference/heterogeneity"[5] within what they perceive as their group. However, these discourses on "unity in diversity" between "brothers and sisters" often have a lot in common, both in terms of philosophy, narrative and vocabulary, with the propaganda of the former military government, and its cult of "unity" within what has been described as a "Burmanization" project.

A variety of similar actors, associated with different components of the said perceived groups, do not fail to notice these similarities and inherent contradictions. Appealing to their own "ethnic rights" (which are now inscribed in the law), they often seek to consolidate their own ethno-linguistic identity by affirming their singularity and emphasizing cultural and linguistic differences from the group that they perceive as trying to "swallow" them.

Standardizing ethnic minority languages in order to introduce them into the schools thus often amount to suppressing diversity in the very name of diversity, an underlaying "Faustian bargain"

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[3] These perceptions are ignorant of the benefits that could bring a properly functioning MTBE system in terms of mastering several languages, but they nevertheless constitute an additional challenge to setting up such system.

[4] စည်းလုံးညီညွတ်မှု

[5] ကွဲပြားမှု

which is not conducive to compromises, especially in a point and time of Myanmar's political history where a multitude of actors are mobilized to defend their particular "ethnic rights". Echoing the accusations of "Burmanization", words (or corresponding perceptions) starting with an ethnonym and finishing in "-ization" (such as Sgawization, Jinghpawization, Shanization…) seems to be appearing or strengthening, denouncing cultural and linguistic situations, projects or aspirations perceived as hegemonic. In a number of situations, the aim of helping pupils understand their teachers better seems to take backseat to the nation-building objectives of the actors involved.

In other words, this seemingly unavoidable "discretization" process – going from a situation where a virtually uncountable number of variations of a large number of languages are spoken in the homes of primary school pupils across Myanmar to a situation where a limited number of standardized languages are taught in government schools – is much easier said than done. The cases of certain States and ethnic groups are exanimated in this report, such as Chin State, where the regional government, at the time of writing, considers promoting six "main" languages in the schools, out of the many Chin languages (estimations range from about 30 to 80 – 53 according to the official 135 list – and 24 are currently taught in government schools). The case of Kachin State, where 6 Kachin and 5 Shan languages are currently being taught in government schools, and where multiple actors have different visions of what should be the language-in-education policy (echoing different understandings of the ethnonyms Kachin/Jinghpaw notably) is also discussed. The more specific situations of ethnic groups such as the Red Shan, Akha, Danu, Kadu and Kanan are likewise briefly presented.

Ongoing developments and upcoming prospects

Despite these structural challenges and diverging voices regarding which type of language-in-education policy should be developed in Myanmar, the last few years – as opposed to the frustrating beginning of the shift in 2013 and the following years – have witnessed increasing momentum and significant developments in terms of introducing ethnic minority languages in government schools. As of 2019-2020, according to official figures, a total of 64 languages are being taught to 766,731 children by 24,792 teachers throughout the country, within school hours in most cases.

In accordance with the 2014-15 Education law, ethnic languages are being introduced through two channels: teaching them as subjects, 3 to 5 periods every week, and using them orally, as "classroom languages" in order to explain, when necessary, the (Burmese language) national curriculum. This combination of approaches, which has been criticized as not going far enough (as opposed to MTBE) by most observers, is in fact, in our opinion, a well-calibrated solution for the foreseeable future, one which may constitute a decisive step towards more ambitious policies later on, without prematurely raising the stakes behind these complex issues. The code-switching approach of the "classroom language" indeed offers flexibility for teachers to adapt to their specific classroom, while largely bypassing the above-described challenges in using ethnic minority languages as (written) medium of instruction. At the same time, the teaching of ethnic minority languages as subjects both allow ethnic minority children to be literate in their mother

tongue from the early stages of education, and fosters discussions among minorities regarding the prospect of standardizing and formalizing (or not) their respective languages, with ethno-linguistic projects that are likely to merge or divide over the next few years.

The process of making these languages available in government schools should also be observed in the context of a certainly slow and often frustrating, but nonetheless ongoing decentralization process, based on the 2008 Constitution. Following the 2014-15 Education law, the States and Regions are indeed emerging as critical levels for implementing the language-in-education policy, with the involvement of both the local representatives of the Union administration (ministry of Education, and the recently-created ministry of Ethnic Affairs, MoEA) and local actors (State/Region governments and parliaments, ethnic literature and cultures committees, as well as other local personalities and CSOs).

The regional governments and parliaments are in charge of approving the ethnic languages that should be taught in the schools within their State/Region, and despite Education not being directly under their prerogatives (Schedule 1 of the Constitution), they are thus central institutions of the unfolding language-in-education policy. The State/Region has also become the most crucial level for the registration of literature and culture committees (LCCs). These civil society institutions, which are now associated to government decisions, are in charge of composing their respective ethnic languages curricula, of identifying the schools where their languages should be taught and training the ethnic languages teachers. This emergence of the State / Region as a critical level of the language-in-education policy manifests both within the administration, in the subnational offices of the MoE, and at the level of subnational governments, and simplifies the logistics of making ethnic minority languages available in the schools.

However, this evolution can also create, at times, additional challenges, in cases where populations usually considered as belonging to the same group inhabits different administrative divisions and end-up competing for recognition in their respective State/Region with different linguistic projects, instead of working together. In addition to the linguistic, religious, political or interpersonal differences that may work against language standardization, State and Region politics, in the context of political dynamics largely based on identity politics, sometimes contribute to the appearance of new fault lines within what is usually perceived as a single group.

New teaching positions have also been created since 2017-2018: the teaching assistants (TAs). As of 2019-2020, 11,718 of them have been appointed throughout the country. Recruited through the LCCs and the MoEA, these TAs must master their respective ethnic language and have completed at least Grade 9. Their duty is both to teach ethnic minority languages as subjects and to help the teaching process by using these languages as "classroom languages". They receive 4,800 kyat per day from the MoE, amounting to salaries which are significantly less than a full-fledged government primary school teacher (180,000 kyat at the time of writing) but three to four-fold the amount received for the "30,000 kyat" ethnic language teachers position created in 2013. These TAs are also encouraged to pursue their training in order to access government teacher's positions, an overall shift which contributes to link career opportunities to ethnic minority language skills, for candidates who do not readily meet the requirements in terms of formal education. Other measures are being unfolded to encourage the access of students from remote

townships to Education Colleges, as elements of answer to the longstanding language barrier issue and the "chicken-and-egg" problem of shortage of local teachers able to use local languages in many regions.

Another important development regarding the integration of ethnic languages and cultures in government schools, is the development of the local curriculum, which is underway since 2017, based on the 2014-15 Education law. This project involves the teaching of content developed in each State and Region, amounting to 15% of the total syllabus (10% in middle and high schools). There is still a lot of uncertainties regarding the details of the curriculum framework for this local content, which include ethnic minority languages, but also their histories, traditions and cultures, as well as local geography, economy, agriculture, and vocational training later on. However, the periods are already allocated in the schools' timetable since 2019-2020 and used notably for the teaching of ethnic minority languages.

In five States (namely Mon, Kayin, Kachin, Chin and Kayah), teams composed of actors from the local governments, ministry of Education, ministry of Ethnic Affairs, UNICEF, literature and culture committees, and local organizations including in some instances the Education departments of armed-groups, have been working closely and intensively to produce *Local knowledge* textbooks dealing with their respective State history, geography, population and customs. This process has entailed regular meetings and dialogues, requiring diligence and willingness to negotiate, especially regarding sensitive topics such has history. In a country which has undergone many decades of conflict, historical narratives tend to diverge dramatically; one group's hero is often, precisely, the other group's villain. This process also echoes the multiple ongoing controversies surrounding the celebration of historical figures such as Aung San or Saw Ba U Gyi, as well as the diametral opposition between the national curriculum (including the new version which is being released) and the history textbooks used by some of the armed groups' education systems. Composing these State-level history textbooks has often required a good deal of compromise between the representatives of the different ethnic groups involved; carrying on with the process in other States and Regions as well as in higher levels of schooling will not be an easy task.

Many challenges and uncertainties thus remain, on the brink of elections that have the potential to increase the political weight of ethnic political parties, and many questions are yet to be answered. The unfolding of the different aspects of the above-described policies should be monitored closely, in order to assess their strength, their weaknesses and the extent to which they actually deliver on their educational and political promises. However, we do believe that the current policy aiming at including ethnic minority languages and culture in governments schools is overall well-calibrated for the foreseeable future and that gradual processes such as these, entailing regular interactions between actors who used to ignore each other, are critical in creating local political ecosystems. These ongoing processes constitute decisive steps towards decentralizing the Union of Myanmar, building capacity at sub-national levels and thereby taking on the great political challenges the country has been facing since its inception.

Key messages

► The (re)introduction of ethnic minority languages in formal education is a key aspect of the Union of Myanmar (a country founded on supposedly federal grounds)'s unresolved issues regarding the management of ethnic diversity, which have led to decades of ethnic conflicts and military dictatorship.

► Including ethnic minority languages in government schools is liable to bring a number of benefits in at least three different dimensions: improving access to education of ethnic minority children, preserving linguistic and cultural diversity, and contributing to "national reconciliation".

► While successive military government, and particularly the SLORC/SPDC, have undeniably contributed to the curtailing of ethnic language use in formal education, their policies have often been depicted in an overly monolithic and simplistic way, through repeating phrases along the lines of "the teaching of ethnic minority languages was banned after 1962".

► The recognition of existing EBEPs by the MoE and the introduction of ethnic minority languages in government schools are two related, but nevertheless distinct, critical issues. The confusion between these two issues and the focus on the first one, mainly through a "ethnic minorities vs Bamar State" lens, has contributed to blur the assessment of challenges regarding the second issue.

► The two main structural challenges to the introduction of ethnic minority languages and cultures in government schools are geolinguistics (and decentralization) challenges, that are also described in the literature on language-in-education policy across the world:

  1. The heterogeneity of populations, in terms of ethno-linguistic backgrounds, in the schools of certain regions of the country, and notably in urban areas.

  2. The difficulties involved in the process of producing a list of ethnonyms with a standardized language attached, to be used in education.

► The Union of Myanmar presents a number of characteristics that makes the more ambitious language-in-education policies particularly challenging. While ethno-linguistic diversity and limited public resources are not uncommon in Asia and the rest of the world, the extent of the politicization of ethnicity – which largely finds its roots in colonial classifications underpinned by essentialist notions of race – does constitute a striking feature of contemporary Myanmar.

► Different actors within ethnic minority regions often have very different conceptions of what should be the language-in-education policy, with conflicting nation-building agendas. Blanket policies suggesting the recognition of the "main" ethnic minority languages to be used in education defeat, to a large extent, the different purposes of the reform

(maintaining diversity, improving educational results, fostering "national reconciliation"). They are very likely to be resisted in the contemporary Myanmar political context.

► In the context of these structural challenges, the current language-in-education policy, (namely teaching ethnic minority languages as subjects and using them orally, as "classroom languages"), based on the 2014-15 Education law, is in our opinion well calibrated for the foreseeable future, and may constitute a decisive step towards more ambitious language-in-education policy. Despite the numerous critics saying that it did not go far enough (as opposed to a Mother Tongue Based Education system) resorting to orality (in addition to the teaching of ethnic languages as subjects) does offer a substantial amount of flexibility, and allow to bypass, at least to some extent, the above-described challenges.

► In this context, the last few years have witnessed significant developments and increased momentum towards introducing ethnic minority languages in government schools. As of 2019-2020, according to official figures, a total of 64 languages are being taught to 766,731 children by 24,792 teachers throughout the country.

► New teaching positions (the Teaching Assistants, TA) have been created for ethnic minority languages teachers, with salaries that are still modest, but constitute a very significant improvement compared to the 30,000 Kyats received by the language teachers (LT) positions created in 2013. The TAs are also encouraged to carry on their studies in order to become full-fledged government school teachers, a shift that could be seen as a form of positive discrimination, and which contributes to link carrier opportunities to ethnic minority language skills.

► Other measures to encourage the nurturing of teachers from the more remote geographic areas, in order notably to tackle the language barrier issue, include a shift in access to Education colleges, with seats attributed for candidates of each townships, proportionally to the school children population of these townships.

► The development of the Local curriculum – content produced for each State and Region, amounting to 15% of the curriculum and including ethnic languages – is also underway since 2017, with the support of UNICEF. Five pilot states have been producing Local knowledge textbooks for the teaching of their respective local histories, geographies and cultures. There is at the time of writing significant uncertainties regarding this ongoing process, which has already required a good deal of efforts and compromises to overcome diverging views, notably regarding history and its symbols.

► Despite these uncertainties, processes such as this, which entail regular interactions between State/Region levels actors (State/Region governments and parliaments, MoE, MoEA, ethnic literature and cultures committees, as well as other local personalities and CSOs) are critical in the emergence of new political ecosystems. These ongoing processes constitute decisive steps towards decentralizing the Union of Myanmar, building capacity at sub-national levels and thereby taking on the great political challenges the country has been facing since its inception.

Chapter 1:
Introduction

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar is a country of complex ethno-linguistic diversity. Managing this diversity, and the issue of the political representation of ethnic nationalities has constituted a central challenge in the process of building a nation-state, with critical implications in its chaotic post-Independence political history, marked by decades of multiple conflicts and successive military dictatorships.

Indeed, relations between the center and the periphery have continuously been at the core of the country's political issues, as reflected in the constitutions of 1947 and 1974, as well as the 2008 Constitution. Yet, by any standards, the Myanmar state has been unitary, and indeed centralized to an extreme degree, since independence in 1948, a situation widely understood as one of the root causes of conflict, which contributed to the birth of individual ethnic consciousness and the formation of several ethnic armed movements (Siegner 2019, Htun and Raynaud 2018).

In this report, we focus on the specific issue of including ethnic minority languages and cultures in government schools, and its implications in multiple contemporary challenges that the Union of Myanmar is facing, notably in terms of improving access to education and fostering peace, while maintaining its linguistic and cultural heritage. While the historical trajectories of these issues are not omitted, particular attention is given to recent developments, in the context of a slow but nevertheless ongoing process of decentralization.

Ethnic diversity and Education in Myanmar: a bit of context

At the crossroads between Chinese, Indian and South-East Asian regions, Myanmar presents a complex geography, notably in terms of ethno-linguistic settlement, with languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman, Austronesian, Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai, as well as Miao-Yao and Indo-Aryan families (Bradley 2018). Estimations suggest that approximately 78% of the population speak a language of the Tibeto-Burman family, 9% Tai-Kadai (Shan), and 7% Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) languages. Burmese, the national language, has by far the largest number of native speakers, estimated at around 36 million, out of a total of about 53 million (about 68% of the population). It is also spoken as a second language by about 30% of the population, with various level of proficiency, depending on their exposure to the national language, notably through national infrastructures, including government education (McCormick 2019).

Despite these useful orders of magnitude, more detailed data regarding the ethno-linguistic setting of the country are both unavailable and contentious. Officially, 135 "national races/ ethnic

nationalities" (တိုင်းရင်းသား)[6] inhabit the country, a figure which is a legacy of colonial conceptions of language as the critical marker of a "race" (which later on evolved into "ethnicity") and forged through successive census (McCormick 2019, Cheesman 2017). These officially recognized ethnonyms have also been aggregated into eight higher-order categories, corresponding to the names of the seven States (+*Bamar* for the Regions) complicating further the inherent methodological limitations to composing any official list of ethnonyms and dispatching the whole population into those discrete categories. The latest census, conducted in 2014, did collect ethnolinguistic data according to these 135 categories, but the section of the census dealing with ethnicity hasn't been released to this day. This data is indeed contentious: some of these categories are themselves disputed and, under the 2008 Constitution, the population figures associated to them have direct implications on political prerogatives in the States and Regions.

The most informed and up-to-date information on languages is provided by the *Summer Institute of Linguistic*'s *Ethnologue* database, which gives the figure of 120 languages (a number which has slightly increased over the last few years). While this type of classification is certainly useful to make sense of a great ethno-linguistic diversity, one should also bear in mind that the distinction between what should be counted as a separate language or just as a dialect is largely subjective, political considerations generally superseding strictly linguistic aspects.

Similarly, the mapping of this data (see Figure 1) constitutes an extremely useful and powerful tool to visualize and understand the spatial distribution of languages. But the production of such document also involves, by definition and especially at the national level, a number of simplifications. These simplifications include a tendency to represent homogeneously, through a single color, what may be considered as distinct ethnolinguistic identities on the ground. The Tai/Shan, for instance, are represented as a single entity on this map. However, despite a widespread sentiment of belonging to this Tai overarching family, in the context of the unfolding language-in-education policy, not less than five different Tai/Shan languages/dialects, using different scripts, are being taught in the schools of Kachin State only. Other examples, including linguistically diverse Chin State, will be discussed in the course of this report (see Chapter 5).

Regardless of these complexities, in the context of a modern State supposedly founded on federal grounds, the absence (or suppression) of ethnic languages in government schools, an issue that was discussed even prior to Independence (see Chapter 2), has continuously ranked high among ethnic minority groups' grievances towards the State in Burma/Myanmar. This very issue, often pointed out as a tangible evidence of a deliberate "Burmanisation" process orchestrated by the State, has largely contributed to the birth of individual ethnic consciousness and has certainly played a key role in triggering (or sustaining) the formation of several ethnic armed movements. While we argue that the often copied-and-pasted idea according to which "the teaching of ethnic languages was banned after 1962" is an oversimplification (constructed against an idealization of the 1948-1962 period), Burman chauvinism in general and a Burmese-centric education and language policy in particular certainly did contribute to an antagonistic mobilization of ethnic identities (Salem-Gervais 2013).

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[6] This term has been translated by "national races", "ethnic nationalities" or sometimes simply "ethnic" in English. This last translation omits the strong reference to indigeneity (by contrast to with populations living on the national territory but perceived as foreign).

An excellent illustration of this phenomenon is provided by the life trajectory of Kheunsai, the founder and editor of the *Shan Herald Agency for News*. In his essay "How I became Shan" (South and Lall 2018) he recalls how as a young boy, whose father had participated in demonstrations against "feudalist" Shan *sawbwas*, who enjoyed wearing longyis rather than Shan trousers, and whose Burmese used to be much more fluent than his Shan, started his journey towards becoming a Shan "rebel" in 1966. The turning point of this life trajectory is indeed clearly identified by the author: the announcement by the local education administration that Shan language classes will be stopped and that wearing longyis at school is to become mandatory.

Two distinct challenges

While the sidelining of ethnic minority languages in formal education has become much more patent under the SLORC and SPDC (1988-1997 and 1997-2011), the post-1988 round of cease-fire agreements and a renouncement of the post-socialist State to control every aspects of education has also opened new spaces for ethnic minority languages in education. In the overall context of what has been described as multiple responses of the civil society to the failure of the State (Lorch 2008, Lall 2008, Salem-Gervais 2013, Raynaud 2016, Mullen 2016), a number of alternatives and complements to government schooling have (re)emerged during that period. Particularly relevant to our perspectives are the various organizations described under the category *Ethnic Basic Education Providers* (EBEPs, Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016). These organizations, which define themselves in reference to ethnicity, provide different forms of basic (i.e. primary or secondary) education to an estimated 300 000, in local ethnic languages to some extent.

Among these EBEPs, the Education departments of ethnic armed organizations constitute key actors in the perspective of linking education to peace and "national reconciliation". A number of ethnic armed organizations have indeed, often during situations of cease-fire or *statu quo*, set up or strengthened schooling systems aiming at educating what they consider to be "their" youth, but with their respective ethno-nationalist perspectives. These perspectives are notably apparent in the teaching of history, with textbooks that almost look like photographic negatives of the national patriotic narrative embedded in the national curriculum, and in the choices of these organizations in terms of language-in-education policy (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012).

While their respective ethnic languages always constitute a priority for these organizations, they have made different choices in terms of language-in-education policy. Roughly, the *New Mon State Party* has followed what is today perceived as a classical *Mother Tongue-Based Education* (MTBE) model, with a transition from the local language (Mon in this case) towards the national language (Burmese) throughout schooling. The *Kachin Independence Organization* has historically followed the Burmese national syllabus (with some adaptations), adding content regarding

Main Spoken Languages of Myanmar

This map is based on the data of self-identified language names collected at the local level by the Ethnologue and the Language & Social Development Organization (LSDO). There may be more difference within language groups but some speakers identify with a larger, related language group.

Comments on the language information can be referred to Ethnologue_Editor@sil.org

LEGEND
Language Families & Groups
SINO-TIBETAN FAMILY
Central Tibeto-Burman
- Nungish

Western Tibeto-Burman, Bodish
- Central Bodish, Khams

Tibeto-Burman, Sal, Jingpho-Luish
- Jingpho-Luish, Jingpho
- Jingpho-Luish, Luish

Tibeto-Burman, Ngwi-Burmese
- Burmish, Northern
- Burmish, Southern
- Ngwi, Southern
- Ngwi, Central
- Ngwi, Southern, Bisoid
- Mru

Tibeto-Burman, Sal
- Bodo-Garo-Northern Naga, Northern Naga

Tibeto-Burman, Sal-Kuki-Chin
- Kuki-Chin, Northern
- Kuki-Chin, Maraic
- Kuki-Chin, Southern
- Kuki-Chin, Central
- Kuki-Chin
- Kuki-Chin-Naga, Tangkhul
- Kuki-Chin-Naga, Unclassified

Tibeto-Burman, Karenic
- Karenic, Central
- Karenic, Northern
- Karenic, Southern
- Karenic, Peripheral

Sino-Tibetan, Chinese
- Sino-Tibetan, Chinese

TAI-KADAI FAMILY
Kam-Tai, Tai
- Tai, Southwestern

AUSTRO-ASIATIC FAMILY
Mon-Khmer, Monic, Palaungic, Waic, Wa
- Waic, Wa
- Eastern Palaungic, Angkuic
- Eastern Palaungic, Waic, Bulang
- Western Palaungic, Palaung
- Monic
- Western Palaungic, Riang
- Western Palaungic, Danau

AUSTRONESIAN FAMILY
Malayo-Polynesian
- Moklen

HMONG-MIEN FAMILY
Hmongic, Chuanqiandian
- Hmongic, Chuanqiandian

INDO-EUROPEAN FAMILY
Indo-Aryan, Eastern zone
- Bengali-Assamese

- Mixed language area
- Language boundary
- River/Lake
- National Boundary
- State/Region boundary
- Union Capital
- State/Region Capital

Map ID: MIMU1300v03
Revision Date: 4 March 2020
Production Date: 8 August 2015
Paper Size: A4
Projection/Datum: Geographic/WGS84
Data Source:
SIL International, LSDO, World Language Mapping System, Global Mapping International
MIMU, SRTM, ETOPO, Natural Earth, ESRI

Place Names: General Administration Department (GAD) and field sources. Place names on this product are in line with the general cartographic practice to reflect the names of such places as designated by the government concerned.
Transliteration by MIMU.

This product has been prepared for operational purposes only, to support humanitarian and development activities in Myanmar.

Note that this map may not show all islands of coastal areas due to scale limitations.

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Figure 1

Kachin language, culture and history. Other groups, such as the *Restauration Council of Shan State* or the *Karen National Union* have been prioritizing their respective languages throughout the whole course of schooling, Burmese being taught as a subject, at best.

In the post-junta political context, these historical trajectories of language-in-education policies create what we perceive as two tightly linked but nevertheless distinct issues to using ethnic minority languages in education to promote peace, national reconciliation and overall progress in the sector of education (Salem-Gervais 2018). Both of these issues constitute, in essence, decentralization challenges.

The first crucial issue, which has attracted significant attention, deals with the EBEPs, their estimated 300,000 students[7], and the building of bridges between these organizations and the MoE's system. Finding ways to recognize these systems and implement workable compromises within a national education framework is indeed crucial to reform, if education is to play a role in peace-building (South and Lall 2016, Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016). This process, which has been described as "federalism from below" (South and Lall 2016) is referred to in the 2016 *National Education Strategic Plan* as "strengthening partnerships" with "other education systems"[8]. It has encountered mixed results so far: while some EAO's education departments (notably in Mon and Karen regions) have enjoyed significant improvements in their relations with the MoE during the last few years, many issues remain, dealing with overall recognition, students' transfer and funding. The compatibility of the syllabi (notably in linguistic terms), reflecting different senses of belonging (or not) to the Myanmar nation is a central issue, and following the "Mon Model" of MTBE often proves to be challenging. As Min Aung Zay, the *Mon National Education Committee* research manager puts it (talking about exchanges with other EBEPs):

> "This is our model. And we have found that many people like our system. But it is difficult for others to model themselves on us exactly, as we have different issues and histories."[9]

Different education systems indeed present very different situations, both in linguistic and political terms; so far arrangements are made *ad hoc* and no national framework for the EBEP's seems to be emerging.

The second and closely related issue – which is the main focus of this report – deals with the inclusion of ethnic minority languages in the 46,000 government schools across the country, which provide education to a total of over five million primary school children[10]. Despite representing

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[7] According to South, Schroeder, Jolliffe, Mi Kun Chan Non, Sa Shine, Kempel, Schroeder and Naw Wah Shee Mu (2018)

[8] *National Education Strategic Plan,* Ministry of Education, 2016, section 5.2.2. It should be noted that earlier draft versions of the NESP, circulated under the Thein Sein administration, had more explicit mentions of these non-state education systems.

[9] "ဒါ ကျွန်တော်တို့ရဲ့ မော်ဒယ် ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ သူများတွေ သဘောကျကြတာ တွေ့ရတယ်။ လူကြိုက်ပိုများတာကို မြင်တယ်။ သူတို့ ပြောင်းလဲဖို့ကျ သူတို့အတက်အခဲနဲ့ သူတို့။ အကြောင်းအရာ မတူတဲ့အခါကျတော့ တစ်ထပ်တည်းဖြစ်အောင်တော့ နည်းနည်းခက်တယ်။" Original Burmese version, the translation is from the English version of the article "Mon national schools show the way on Mother tongue Education", *The Irrawaddy*, November 29, 2019.

[10] Ministry of Education, 2019.

the lion's share of the students, in quantitative terms, this aspect has attracted much less overall attention so far. This situation can partly be explained by the slow progress of ethnic languages classes during the years following the beginning of the reform, in 2013. However, this   focus on the EBEPs as the center of the "ethnic education" issue has also, in our opinion, contributed to an underestimation of the practical challenges involved in including ethnic languages in government schools throughout the country. The "Ethnic *vs* Burman" lens which tends to underpin this perspective, has often contributed to boil the issue down to the willingness of the State to teach ethnic languages, while dimming other geographic and linguistic structural challenges.

Myanmar's language-in-education policy is in the process of being defined and implemented, in the context of an international movement in favor of *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education* (MTB-MLE, which entails a transition from the local to the national language throughout schooling). The current policy, slowly unfolding since 2013, and made official with the 2014-15 education law, consists in teaching ethnic languages as subjects and using them as "classroom languages" (a term constructed in contrast with "languages of instruction", see Chapter 4.2).

While significantly less ambitious than MTB-MLE, this policy is in our opinion well-calibrated for the foreseeable future, given the multiple challenges often occurring in determining which particular language(s) should be used in a particular school. This policy nevertheless implies decision-making at various levels of the administrative ladder, notably in terms of composing curricula and training teachers. It also entails, as we shall see in this report, the attribution of critical roles to non-state actors as well as measures which can be looked at as a form of positive discrimination.

These shifts should also be analyzed in the broader context of a slow but nonetheless ongoing decentralization process in the Union of Myanmar, and of the progressive emergence of the States and Regions as important players in the political field.

Decentralization in Myanmar

The fact that Myanmar was a country built on a complex patchwork of ethnic nationalities, and that this should be reflected in its constitution, has always been a fact accepted by all sides, ever since the negotiations prior to independence. The 1947, 1974 and 2008 Constitutions, not to mention the Panglong Agreement of 1947, all paid (at least) lip service to notions, and chief among them that of a "Union", that seemed to indicate the federal nature of the successive political systems.[11]

However, this hardly translated into any sort of reality, in practice. Even the 7 Divisions and 7 States that appeared in 1974 meant little, in terms of decentralization of political powers.

The 2008 Constitution, on the other hand, beyond the widely noted "hybrid" nature of its political system (Egreteau 2016, Raynaud 2016) – with elements of an authoritarian system (such as

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[11] On these issues, see Siegner (2019).

the 25% of seats reserved for the military in all parliaments, or the three ministries directly under the control of the commander in chief), and elements of democracy – offered a new set of institutions. For the first time, the 7 Regions and 7 States were equipped with as many regional parliaments and governments.

These regional parliaments and governments were granted specific powers. As detailed in Htun and Raynaud (2018), a series of "Schedules" list the powers of the various levels of government: Schedule One for the Union Parliament (the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw), Schedule Two for the State and Region parliaments (with article 249 of the Constitution providing that regional governments have executive powers over decisions made under Schedule Two by their respective parliaments). In addition to this, Schedule Three of the Constitution lists the powers of the Governing Bodies of Special Administered Zones and Divisions, and Schedule Five, critically, provides a frame for fiscal decentralization.

During the first legislature (2011-2016), these regional parliaments and governments remained relatively discreet, and few analysts or activists paid any real attention to them. The Government of President U Thein Sein, and the Union Parliament, especially the lower house, or Pyithu Hluttaw, chaired by U Shwe Mann, were the institutions everyone was looking at.

For a number of reasons, this has dramatically changed during the second legislature, since 2016. For one thing, the two houses of the Union Parliament have lost much of their dynamism, under the strict control of the government, after a landslide victory of the NLD in the 2015 elections. But also, a process of decentralization, that started under the Thein Sein administration, has accelerated in recent years, to the point of becoming the topic of much attention across the spectrum of Burmese politics.

Decentralization, however, is not federalism, the system so many organizations, particularly those representing ethnic nationalities, have demanded for several decades. And decentralization can take a number of forms, including that of "deconcentration". As The Asia Foundation (2018) states, "deconcentration is often considered a weaker form of decentralization". Deconcentration simply means a transfer of responsibilities and powers within the government administration, in the case of Myanmar from the line ministries in Nay Pyi Taw to their own "departments", at the subnational level, in the 14 States and Regions.

Deconcentration does take place, to a limited but significant extent, as the many interviews led by the authors in the education departments of six States and two Regions show. Civil servants there have seen their responsibilities significantly grow over the last few years, especially in the context of reforms such as those documented in the present report.

But what the authors of this report have witnessed, in the field of education reform as well as in other fields (health care, economic development, natural resources management[12], to name only a few, seems to go far beyond this limited move to delegate powers to the regional offices of various line ministries.

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[12] Sahla and Chay (2019)

Institutionally, the regional governments, more than the regional parliaments at this stage, now play a central role in reforms that have the potential both to improve the quality of education provided to the children of Myanmar, and in particular those whose mother tongue is not Burmese as far as the reforms documented here are concerned, and to answer some of the most fundamental and legitimate demands formulated by organizations representing the interests of ethnic nationalities.

Furthermore, these reforms necessitate a remarkable level of involvement by civil society organizations representing dozens of different ethnic nationalities: the literature and culture committees (see Chapter 4), a number of EBEPs, often linked to or directly the education departments of EAOs (for instance the KNU or the NMSP), as well as the UNICEF, an international agency. What the processes developed to implement new language-in-education policies and the local curriculum amount to, in the authors' opinion, is the fostering of local political eco-systems.

Fostering local political eco-systems, empowering the democratic institutions of States and Regions, widening the scope of responsibilities of the departments of various line ministries, including the education departments and departments of ethnic affairs at the regional level, all these are fundamental aspects of decentralization, and certainly are also fundamental aspects of preparing Myanmar for a future where a federal system would replace the very centralized systems that have characterized the country in its recent history.

Such a transition, it must be noted, does warrant a careful and well managed process; the challenges to decentralization are many, and very real (Htun and Raynaud 2018). Various research projects led in parallel to this one, by other organizations such as the *Myanmar Center to Empower Regional Parliaments*, the *National Enlightenment Institute* or the *Panna Institute*, as well as other research projects led by Urbanize (all participants to the Decentralization Project funded by KAS) all seem to come to similar conclusions: decentralization, and, in the future, federalism, necessitate more powers provided to States and Regions (under Schedule Two), as well as budgets that correspond to these new powers (under Schedule Five). These perspectives also require a greater capacity for all stakeholders (civil servants, elected representatives, as well as civil society organizations or the media) at the regional level to do their job. Finally, they necessitate a much more mature, and democratic, political culture, where these local political eco-systems are able to tackle the issues that will arise as decentralization deepens.

Indeed, as the Natural Resources Governance Institute (2019) puts it: *"decentralization in the mining sector raises serious concerns. States and Regions have new responsibilities but not necessarily the skills and resources to fulfill them effectively"*. NRGI continues: *"in its current form, decentralization risks driving corruption and mismanagement"*.

Beyond the debates around the reality, or the extent, of decentralization, and beyond the challenges associated to it, lie some of the most important questions the people of Myanmar need to find answers to.

Debates around language-in-education policy and debates around constitutions indeed share a common basis: ultimately, these debates are based on the same fundamental question: what is Myanmar? As much as diverging views regarding the answer to that question have constituted great challenges during the last seven decades, the road towards decentralization and federalism entails facing similar, "decentralized" questions and challenges. Ultimately, what is Shan State? What is Kachin State? What is Chin State (and so on so forth) in the political context of 2020 and in the future, and in a federal future in particular? These issues appear particularly challenging in contemporary Myanmar, when a multitude of actors are mobilized for the defense of their respective "ethnic rights" (which are now inscribed in the law) and when social media constitutes such a volatile and contentious space of public discussion.

In order to build Myanmar as a Nation, or rather, in order to take the country closer to a situation where adopting a federal constitution would become possible (Htun and Raynaud 2018), a process of decentralization has been initiated in the last decade, this process is evolving, slowly but surely, and has led to some significant, if often underestimated, progress.

The authors, sources and methods of data collection

This report builds on research conducted by the authors, both of whom started working on Myanmar in the early 2000s, over the course of the last 15 years, and is the fruit of a collaboration that dates back over a decade.

Nicolas Salem-Gervais obtained a PhD at INALCO in Paris, in 2013, with a dissertation (written in French) titled: "School and Nation-Building in the Union of Myanmar". Other publications relevant to this report include: Salem Gervais and Metro (2012), Salem-Gervais (2013, 2018a,b,c) Salem-Gervais and Raynaud (2019, 2019a, b, c). Education, nation building, identity and languages have been and remain the main focus of his research.

Mael Raynaud co-authored a report on decentralization: Htun and Raynaud (2018): "Schedule Two of the 2008 Constitution: Avenues for Reform and Decentralization and Steps Towards a Federal System", supported by KAS. He is the author of a number of articles on decentralization, and has written on education since 2014. He's been researching issues related to federalism in Myanmar since 2002.

Other academic works and reports dealing with similar or closely related issues include: Callahan (2003), Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2008), McCormick (2016, 2019), South and Lall (2016, 2018), Jolliffe and Speers Mears (2016), Margontier-Haynes (2016), Lopes Cardozo and Maber (2019).

The primary method of data collection, in addition to observation in government schools and consultation of academic literature, reports, articles, speeches and policy documents online, has consisted in a total of 140 semi-structured interviews, 137 of which were conducted in Burmese. These interviews took place in two periods, one between December 2018 and February 2019, and the other between May and November 2019, in Shan, Kachin, Chin, Kayah, Kayin and Mon States, as well as Sagaing and Yangon Regions and Naypyidaw Union Territory.

Two additional researchers, Ei Shwe Phyu and Tinzar Htun, have contributed to this project, since October 2018.

Interviewees include:

- ► Regional Social affairs and Ethnic affairs ministers, MPs from regional parliaments

- ► State/Region representatives and a Director General of the MoEA

- ► Administrators of the MoE, such as Township, District, State/Region Education officers and their staff, Director General and Deputy Director Generals of several departments of the MoE in Naypyidaw, representatives of the Myanmar National Education Policy Commission.

- ► Teachers and headmasters of schools, notably teachers of ethnic minority languages, as well as informal discussions with students.

- ► Representative of various civil society organizations involved in Education, including about 60 literature and culture committees, EAO's education departments and local NGOs.

- ► Local Media and ethnic political parties' representatives

In the course of this project, the authors have been able to collect a significant amount of official documents from civil servants both in Nay Pyi Taw, at the Ministries of Education (MoE) and Ethnic Affairs (MoEA), and in the various departments of these ministries in the States and Regions visited (see the list above). Whether these officials shared existing documents, printed them for the authors, or prepared them specifically for the authors, the willingness of these civil servants to share the results of their work is both one important way data was collected, and a key finding of this report in itself. Ministries have gone, within a matter of years, from being places that could hardly be accessed by any outsider, to places where it has become relatively easy to meet high level civil servants. This may or may not be true in other services, but the authors can only testify of the fact that civil servants in the ministries of education and ethnic affairs were generally welcoming to researchers trying to documents the reforms being undertaken.

While all official data should be treated with caution, and notably in Myanmar, a country in which statistics were notoriously used for propaganda by military regimes, it seemed important to us to present that data, and show that significant reforms were under way. Many non-state actors also agreed with the idea that the MoE's statistical data regarding the teaching of ethnic minority languages in government schools is increasingly conform to reality, as a more ambitious language-in-education policy, involving the payment of salaries to almost 25,000 teachers, is being unrolled.

Chapter 2:
Education, identity and language policies in Myanmar: a brief history

Throughout Myanmar's political history, the realm of education in general, and language-in-education policies in particular, have played a central role in multiple and often competing endeavours of nation-building. Post-independence governments, often taking inspiration from the Burmese nationalist movements of the colonial era, have increasingly relied on a conception of the nation-state strongly associated with Burman identity (Houtman 1999). Meanwhile, a number of actors in minority-populated peripheries, denouncing what they perceived as a deliberate "Burmanization" policy orchestrated by the central government, launched armed resistance movements, mobilizing their particular ethnic identities.

Both at the centre and at the periphery, schooling has been assigned a crucial role in these political projects, education becoming sort of a battlefield in itself. As we shall see in this chapter, language-in-education policies of successive governments – while often depicted in an overly simplistic way – have played an important role in the shaping of these antagonisms.

1. Precolonial and colonial eras

Between the mid fifteenth and dawn of the eighteenth century, early Western visitors to what is today the Union of Myanmar were struck by the high literacy rates of the local populations, which were superior not only to those observed in India at the same period, but probably also to those in their own Western societies (Scott 1906, Furnival 1931, Lieberman 1984). This situation is imputable to the strength of monastic education among (mainly lowland) Buddhist populations and the custom of sending young boys to the monastery to learn at least basic literacy and mathematics, in order to access religious and secular knowledge (Dhammasami 2004, Thaung Htut 2000, Than Htut 1980). This practice is particularly well documented for Burmans (and Burmese vocabulary, such as the word ကျောင်း, which can designate both the *monastery* and the *school*, are a testimony to this heritage) but other languages such as Mon, Shan, Arakanese – and of course Pâli for the religious content – were also used in the monastic education process[13].

The monasteries and their educative activities constituted a powerful legitimizing force for the Buddhist monarchy and, especially from the seventeen-century onwards, Burmese kings strived to gain control over the *Sangha*, notably through the introduction of State-sponsored exams (Mendelson 1975, Lieberman 1984, Dhammasami 2004). However, the material constraints and

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[13] The "literacy rates" may have been very different from one region to another, Comestock (quoted in Leider 2008) suggests for instance that it may have been lower in Arakan than in the center of the country. Meetings with members of the *Shan Literature and Culture Association* of Taunggyi (December 2011) suggest lower proportions in Shan state too.

the political concepts of the time (such as *Cakravartin monarch*) did not encourage the establishment of a strong administration over the territories under the authority of the king; the content of monastic education remained uncentralized to a large extent (Mc Daniel 2008, Than Htut 1980).

Western missionaries, arriving in Myanmar from the sixteen-century onwards, began establishing schools, which increasingly came into contact with hill-dwelling, non-Buddhist and largely illiterate groups. The missionaries, who extended their reach into the territory during the three phases of the British conquest, created or adapted scripts for groups and sub-groups including Kachin, Chin and Karen. They used these scripts in order to translate the Bible, while also spreading, to a more limited extent, English among these populations. The appearance of these written languages, together with Christian faiths uniting to some extent what previously had often been disparate groups, constituted a critical step in the emergence of new identities in the *Frontier areas* and Karen regions (Sakhong 2003).

Under British rule, monastic schools continued to serve students, but other educational options appeared (notably for women, Ikeya 2011). Although the British had initially hoped to set up an education system based on the monasteries, they were unable to come to agreement with the monks about the role of education and the relationship between the colonial state and the monasteries (Bagshawe 1998). Therefore, the British administration devised a three-tiered school scheme, with various administrative and financial status and divided according to the language of instruction.

While elites attended a small number of *English* and *Anglo vernacular schools* (in which, in addition to Burmese, Indian and Chinese languages, as well as Sgaw karen, could officially be used as media of instruction)[14], the vast majority of those receiving any formal education attended *vernacular* or even monastic schools[15]. The latter, once praised for Burma's high literacy rates, were now deemed out of fashion and associated with poverty, in a world in which English was widely perceived as the key to personal and economic success (Bagshawe 1998). On the contrary, individuals originating from the mountainous regions, which had often been perceived as backward and lacking in educational opportunity, were now able to reach important positions in the colonial system, thanks to their English language skills and missionary education (Hanson 1924, Tinker 1961, Taylor 2006).

From today's perspective, some of the choices regarding language-in-education policies at the time can be surprising, revealing different perceptions of the relationships between language, identity and power. For instance, when the *Shan Chieftain School*, a high school for the education of *sawbwas*' families, is opened in 1902 in Taunggyi, the majority of the *Sawbwas* decided that

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[14] *Burma Education Calandar 1941-1942*, p305. According to Chakravarti (1971), the teaching of Burmese, as a subject, was made compulsory in this type of anglo-vernacular schools only in the 1920's.

[15] The literacy rates seem to be as low as 20-30 % in the 1920-1930.

Burmese, rather than Shan, would be the second language of instruction, after English.[16]

Nevertheless, the developments in the realm of education throughout colonial period played a key role in the constitution of multiple ethnic consciousness and antagonisms, in the more general context of what has been called a "reification of ethnicity" (Taylor 2006), through classifications entailing distinctions between "alien races" and "indigenous" populations as well as discrete *racial* (later on *ethnic*) categories (McCormick 2019, Thant Myint U 2019). At the center, emerging in the first years of the twentieth century, Burmese nationalist movements, led by monks and later students, sought to restore Burmese tarnished pride, notably through education. Created in the wake of the 1920 student strike, the *National Schools* (အမျိုးသားကျောင်း), were a patriotic alternative to colonial education (then labeled "slave education system" ကျွန်ပညာရေးစနစ် by the nationalists), prioritizing Burmese language, literature and history, the study of Pâli and Buddhism (Aye Kyaw 1970, Mya Han 1997, Thaung Htut 2000).

The *National Schools* movement also succeeded in securing from colonial authorities the right to use Burmese as the main medium of instruction in *Anglo-vernacular schools*. Interestingly –especially in regard of today's debates regarding language-in-education policy – the chief argument of the Burmese nationalists for this shift was that being educated in a language other than one's mother tongue in early years of schooling could hamper one's intellectual and linguistic development (Than Htut 2005a, 2005b, Myo Oo 2009).

In the early 1930s, Burmese nationalist movements famously reaffirmed the position of their language as a critical identity marker (most visibly through the slogan of the *Doh Bamar Asi-Ayone*: "Burma is our country! Burmese is our literature! Burmese is our spoken language! Love our country! Appreciate our literature! Respect our language![17]") along with Buddhism and references to the great kings of the past. This posture, influenced by Western ideologies of ethnicity and nationalism (Renard 2006, Thant Myint-U 2001), was primarily directed against the colonial power but also, inevitably, contributed to alienate the minorities and their English-educated elites, who often already possessed their own nationalist aspirations, organizations, leaders and historiography[18].

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[16] The introduction of the Shan Chieftain School's Journal, in 1932, briefly discuss this language issue: "*It may be questioned why a publication like this in a Shan school has no Shan section. The Editor pleads an ignorance of Shan, in answering this imaginary query, but it has come within his observation that, while Shan is here the language of the playground, when it is a matter requiring, or rather aiming at a fineness of expression, the boys turn to English or to Burmese. This may not, of course, necessarily point to the poverty of the native idiom, but may quite probably be traceable to an ignorance of the refinements of the language itself* ".

[17] "ဗမာပြည်သည် ဒို့ပြည် ၊ ဗမာစာသည် ဒို့စာ၊ ဗမာစကားသည် ဒို့စကား ဒို့ပြည်ကို ချစ်ပါ၊ ဒို့စာကို လေးစားပါ၊ ဒို့စကားကို လေးစားပါ။"

[18] The *Karen National Association was created in 1881, the* All Ramanya Mon Association in 1939. Saw Aung Hla's Karen history, which traces back the roots of the Karen to a migration from Babylon to Mongolia two millenaries before Christ was written in 1932 (Cheesman 2002).

2. Independent Union of Burma (1948-1962)

Myths or imprecisions about the past can be great obstacles to an accurate assessment of contemporary challenges. When it comes to education, many, including politicians[19], journalists[20], and scholars rapidly describe the parliamentary period – in contrast to the subsequent post-1962 dictatorship years – through a short sentence along the lines of "Burma/Myanmar once had (one of) the best education system in (South-East) Asia", leaving the reader to imagine a sort of golden age, during which the whole of Asia jealously envied Burma, seemingly a land of wise and educated people. This simplistic assessment of the past is problematic and constitutes an obstacle in measuring contemporary challenges.

After the end of the Japanese occupation, a period which saw the beginning of a "dewesternisation" of the education system on Burmese nationalists' terms[21], and with the ending of World War II during which Burmese nationalists and minorities often fought in opposed camps, the country gained independence under great instability. With a multitude of rebel armed groups (Karen, Mons, *Kuomingtang*, CPB, *Mujahids* and others) operating in many parts of the Union's territory, including the outskirts of Yangon, the government had no choice but to give priority to Defense. Access to schooling thus remained extremely scarce, even in the center of the country, at least until the mid-1950's (Tinker 1961, UNESCO 1951, Thaung Htut 2000, Salem-Gervais 2013).

In 1959, despite an eight-fold increase of the education budget over a decade and very significant improvements compared to the years immediately following independence, only 13% of the total state schools' population was in middle schools and 3% in high schools, a situation that was mainly attributed to poverty by the Ministry of Education[22]. In rural areas of Shan state for instance, at the same period, less than 10% of children finished primary school (Sai Kham Mong 2004).

This overall situation contrasted with the educational opportunities accessible to urban elites (and to some extent Christianized rural populations) who had access to an English-medium education, similar to, or better than, that found elsewhere in the British empire. Burma's elite education was indeed renowned beyond its borders and those who obtained a medicine degree from Rangoon University could, for instance, pursue their education directly in England, which was not the case in Indian universities (Steinberg 2001). Tinker (1961), however, describes the

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[19] See for instance Aung San Suu Kyi speech at Queens College, September 9, 2012, in which she states: "At one time, Burma had the best education system in South East Asia".

[20] See for instance "Myanmar once had one of Asia's best education systems. Here's how it can get back to the top", 3 nov 2017 on www.weforum.org

[21] During their brief domination (1943-1945), the Japanese suppressed the three-tiered school scheme set-up by the British and began its replacement by a homogenous education system, free and directly controlled by the State. After a number of violent clashes between the Burman nationalists of the *Burma Independence Army* and pro-British minorities ideas such as *Master race* and slogans such as *One race, One Blood, One Voice* (Sakhong 2003) are developed. Burmese becomes the sole medium of instruction, and English vocabulary linked to higher education and academic subjects was replaced by words of Pâli origins. However, it is not clear if the teaching of other autochthonous languages was banned of formal education or not during this period.

[22] Education Enquiry Committee, 1959, *Interim Report to the Ministry of Education*, Rangoon, 58p (p49)

trade-offs of *quality* for *quantity* occurring in those post-colonial years, with more students accessing higher education.

In the context of a 1947 Constitution which attributed a "special position" to Buddhism (article 21.1) and did not mention languages other than Burmese (see Figure 10 in Chapter 4), the education system set-up after independence was much more centralized than what Aung San suggested in the years and months preceding his assassination. Indeed, he had repeatedly asserted – among other statements that may appear contradictory to one another – that each ethnic group should have its own schools[23]. Schooling was seen as critical tool to build the nation and, despite efforts to develop an inclusive discourse about the "Union"[24], Buddhism was a central component of the identity content conveyed by the schools (Nash 1963, Thaung Htut 2000, Smith 1965).

In theory, ethnic languages could be taught as subjects in public schools, up to *Grade* 3 (Thaung Htut 2000). In practice, however, the presence or absence of particular languages in the government schools depended on the socio-linguistic situations and readiness of the different groups: the lack of trained teachers and teaching materials, the necessity of inventing scripts or standardizing dialects, the complexity of ethnic settings and local balance of demography and power between groups often constituted enduring obstacles (Kyaw Yin Hlain 2007, Sai Kham Mong 2004).

Among major groups, the Shans managed to produce readers (known as *Tiger heads*, see Figure 2) up to *Grade* 5, throughout the 1950's. These readers use the simplified script devised by the *Shan Cultural Committee* and were made official in 1955. Simplification and standardization of the script was indeed perceived by Shan elites as a *sine qua non* for the survival of their nation: "Change the script or the Shan nation will disappear" was the committee's motto (Perrin 1958:259, Sai Kham Mong 2004:324), a political aim which is reasserted in the introduction of each reader.

Regarding the medium of instruction, the Shan State government, largely composed of *sawbwas* and ethnic elites striving to mobilize a Shan nation, had a similar stance to that of Burmese nationalists of the early 1920's and some advocates of Mother Tongue-Based Education (MTBE, see Chapter 3) today. Invoking the language barrier problem, and arguing that most children of Shan State understand Shan regardless of their ethnicity, they supported the idea that Shan should become the medium of instruction, for the whole of Shan State (Sai Kham Mong 2004).

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[23] "*Each ethnic group should have its own cultural rights. For example, Karen have the right to karen schools, as shan have the right to their own. This also applies to special holidays, national dress, traditional customs, and the use of native languages in books and government offices.* « Aung San's letter to the Karen », February 9 1947 (Naw 2001). This idea is reiterated in May 1947, in a speech at the Jubilee Hall, through a Lenin quote: "A minority is discontented… because it does not possess its own schools. Give it its own schools and all grounds of discontent will disappear." reproduced in Silverstein (1993). In 1946, the Education Policy Enquiry Committee recommended that languages other than Burmese could be used along all the primary cycle.

[24] See for instance Ministry of Education, 1954, ဘဝသစ်ဖန်တီးမှု ပညာရေးနှင့် ကျောင်းဆရာ, Yangon, 85p.

The Mons, for various reasons, including the perceived importance of their place in the country's history, their relative linguistic homogeneity, and their early formation of an organization aimed at preserving culture[25], managed to obtain support from the Ministry of Education. As a result of these circumstances, Mon language was taught up to *Grade* 7 in some public schools, as well as in a few high schools, as part of the discipline of archaeology (Kasauh Mon 2008). Teachers trainings were organized in Yangon and Moulmein. A *Special Mon Deputy Inspector of Schools* supervised the teaching of Mon in more than a hundred schools in the districts of Thaton and Amherst (Kyaikkhami today) alone, and by 1954, schools had the possibility to include Mon as a subject for the primary exams (Aung Myint 2007, Ministry of Education 1956).

Other languages, including Karen languages, seem to have been, to a lesser extent, taught within government schools, sometimes with a dedicated representative in the administration of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 1956). However, it seems that most ethnic languages remained outside of the schools, taught by religious institutions or some of the earliest Literature and culture committees that appeared during the 1950s (the *Shan Cultural Committee* was, for instance, founded in 1952 in Taunggyi). Beyond government-controlled areas, the *Karen National Union* (KNU), the most powerful armed-group, established a parallel government, integrating the preexisting *Karen Education Department* to oversee the education system on its territory (Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016).

Overall, the parliamentary period saw the centrality and importance of Burmese language increase throughout the Union, which would prove to be a double-edged sword: while the spread of the national language among minorities was an important aspect of the nation-building process, this situation also allowed ethno-nationalist movements to denounce the growing influence of Burmese language and culture. More specifically, it also enabled ethnic minority groups to better understand the political views developed in the center of the country, including the Burman chauvinism often underlying the discourses on the Union and the nature of its "unity" (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2008).

3. The Burmese way to socialism (1962-1988)

In 1962, following political turmoil, the uprising of several ethnic armed groups and the beginning of negotiations regarding a more federal political system, General Ne Win took over, invoking the risk of disintegration of the Union. During the first years of the *Burmese way to socialism*, the State's administration was centralized, major companies were nationalized, written production was submitted to systematic censorship and student demonstrations were heavily repressed.

Unsurprisingly, education was seen as highly strategic for the advent of a socialist society. Private schools – perceived as a vestige of colonialism, contributing to the differentiation of social classes and largely controlled by missionaries, Indians and Chinese – were not trusted to guide the youth

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[25] The *All Ramanya Mon Association*, aiming at preserving Mon language, culture and identity was founded in 1939 (South 2003)

toward the "correct thinking" (မှန်ကန်သည့်အတွေးအခေါ်) of the *Burmese way to socialism*. All schools were nationalized by 1966 and the "Ba Ka" program (monastic schools following the government's curriculum) was suppressed (Dhammasami 2004, Than Htut 1980). It should be noted however, that while the majority of students still didn't go beyond primary education, the number of schools, teachers and overall access to schooling seem to have increased very significantly during this period (Taylor 2009, Steinberg 2001, Thaung Htut 2000, Salem-Gervais 2013).

Figure 2: Shan "tiger heads" readers for grade 4 and 5,
composed by the Shan Cultural Committee in the late 1950's and early 1960's.

As noted by Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2008) and Taylor (2005), and in contrast to the tendency to idealize the parliamentary period as a golden age for education as described in the previous section, the assessment of the language policy under the *Burma Socialist Program Party* (BSPP) has often been very simplistic. Many, including activists, journalists, and scholars, seem to copy and paste a short assessment, along the lines of "the teaching of ethnic languages was banned after 1962", as part of a systematic "Burmanization" policy[26].

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[26] See for instance the report ပဟိုချုပ်ကိုင်မှုစနစ် ကျင့်သုံးခြင်းကြောင့် ကျေးလက်တိုင်းရင်းသားဒေသရှိ ကျောင်းများအပေါ်အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုများ accessible on https://www.kaungrwai.org. "Burma's ethnic writing is emerging after years of exclusion", September 28, 2015, on www.britishcouncil.org, Banyol Kong Janoi and Lamin Chan, September 2014, "Banned by Junta, Ethnic Dialects Return to Burma Schools", www.worldcrunch.com. See also South and Lall (2016), Lall and South (2018).

This assessment of the past lacks accuracy. The 1974 Constitution, while proclaiming, just like the previous (1947) Constitution, that Burmese is the national language, is the first Constitution to officially recognize ethnic minority languages. Article 102 states that "The Burmese language shall be used in the administration of justice" but also that "Languages of the national races concerned may also be used, when necessary, and arrangements shall then be made to make interpreters available." In the realm of education, article 152(b) proclaims that: "Burmese is the common language. Languages of the national races may also be taught.".

Retracing the historical background of language policies in Myanmar, Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2008) gives a detailed and nuanced account of the BSPP's policy, rejecting the monolithic accusations of a will to "Burmanize" the country. Stating that "The problems of teaching minority languages were also more complex than many scholars and ethnic nationality intimated" he also shares the assessment by Callahan (2003) about the priorities of the authorities: "What was necessary, they believed, was to turn everyone – Burman and non-Burman – into socialists first and foremost. Other group identities were tolerated as long as socialism came first."

This is certainly not to say that Ne Win's promises of support for literatures, languages and cultures (Cheesman 2017) were totally fulfilled and that the *Burmese way to socialism* started a golden age for ethnic identities within the Burmese state. Evidence of actual oppression of the State's institutions towards ethnic languages undoubtedly exist. In some instances – especially in regions where Ethnic Armed Groups were operating – the army forbade ethnic language classes altogether, suspecting that it could be an ideal setting for the spreading of ethno-nationalist ideas, and arrests of ethnic language teachers have often been reported (Ferguson 2008, Thein Lwin 1999).

In practice, situations seem to have differed widely from one region to another: while ethnic languages remained the *de facto* "classroom languages" (meaning they were used to explain the Burmese language curriculum, see Chapter 3.3 and 4.2) in many primary schools across the country, anecdotal evidence also suggest that some headmasters in specific schools strongly discouraged the use of ethnic languages, sometimes out of chauvinist but well-meaning intentions to help their students improve their skills in the national language. In townships such as Tamu in Sagaing Region, some of our interviewees remember coercive methods, such as small fines for students who spoke in an ethnic minority language rather than in Burmese within the classroom.

While such experiences certainly contribute to explain bitterness toward a State perceived as Burman-dominated and the birth of many individual ethnic identities, reality is in fact more complex and heterogeneous than the blanket descriptions of a systematic "Burmanization" policy starting in 1962. The schools were, officially, allowed to teach ethnic minority languages up to *Grade* 3, with a maximum of 5 classes of 45 minutes a week (Thaung Htut 2000). Readers for the teaching in government schools of several ethnic languages, such as Kachin (Jinghpaw), Shan (Tai long), Karen (Pwo and Sgaw), Chin (Hakha) and Mon, were produced by the Ministry of Education during the 1970's and 1980's (see Figure 3).

Detailed reports on ethnic languages were also compiled by the Ministry of Education, among other state-directed work on ethnic languages and cultures. Some of these languages could be studied at university, and many of the literature and culture committees (LCCs), whose main activity was the teaching of ethnic languages and cultures outside of schools, were founded or restructured during this period. For instance, the *Mon Literature and Culture Committee*, was founded in 1966 at Moulmein university[27], the Chin LCC of Yangon celebrated in 2019 the 55th year of its foundation in 1964, and 2020 marks the Golden Jubilee of the Kayin LCC for Kayin State, founded in 1970 (see Chapter 4.5). Through these institutions, a number of groups managed to set up literacy campaigns – despite the suspicions and occasional interdiction by the authorities – such as the *Ma-Ha-To*, a Shan version of the Government's Burmese *A-Thon-Lon* (အသုံးလုံး).

Overall, in the context of multiple ethnic rebellions active over the territory of the Union and of an army deeply pervaded by Burmese nationalism, the State gave little support to the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools, omitting for instance to replace some teachers after their retirement. The MoE justified this lack of support by pointing at the lack of interest of ethnic people themselves, and to the supposed disadvantages which minority students would face by bearing the burden of cramped timetables (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2008). It is also often said that the revival of English as a subject in 1981 (supposedly following the failure of Sandar Win, Ne Win's daughter, to enter the Royal Medical School in England because of an insufficient command of English) contributed to a sidelining of ethnic languages at school (Than Oo 1999).

Meanwhile, beyond government-controlled territory, and before the signature of the late-1980's and early-1990's ceasefire agreements, several armed organizations, notably in Kachin, Shan, Karen and Mon areas, managed to set-up "jungle schools", to structure and expand their basic education departments, with a strong emphasis on their respective languages and ethno-nationalist perspectives on History. Within very heterogenous situations, it is also important to note, in that regard, that some minority groups remember being forbidden to teach their languages by local dominant ethnic armed-groups, at least as much as by the central State[28].

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[27] **"**Mawlamyine University holds 50th Anniversary of Mon Literature and Culture Committee", *Mon News Agency*, February 10, 2016.

[28] On the case of Shan Ni in Kachin State see for instance Lorcan Lovett, "Once-taboo language lives again in rural Myanmar", *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 30, 2018.
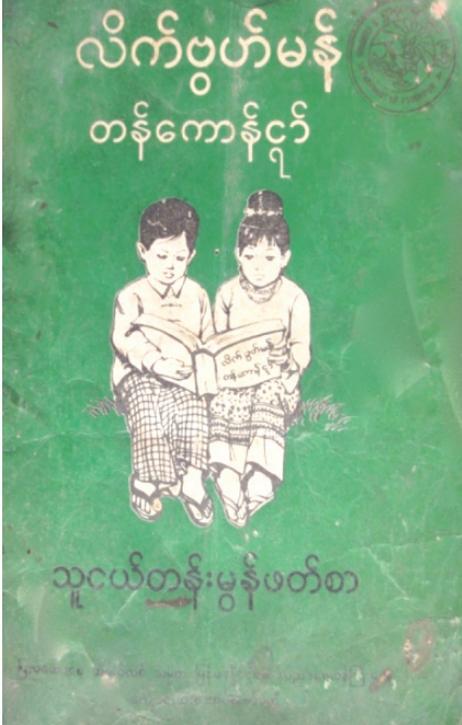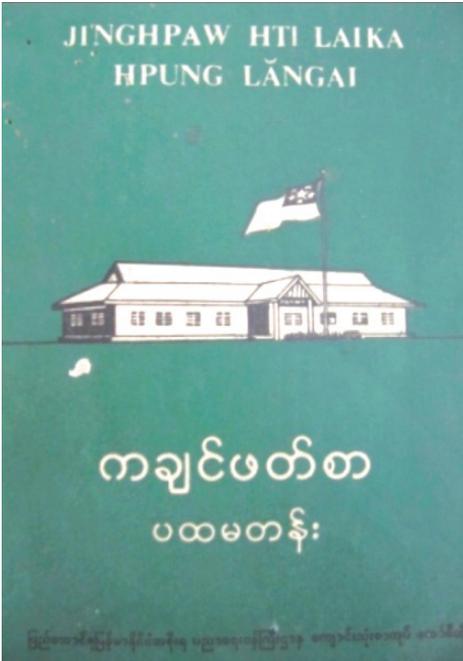
Figure 3: Covers of readers for (Tai Long) Shan (1985), (Jingphaw) Kachin (1972), Mon (1982) and Pwo Karen (publication date unknown), produced by the Ministry of Education.

4. SLORC/SPDC (1988-2011)

After the 1988's uprising, beyond the classical "unity in diversity" rhetoric, the transition to a post-socialist junta era marks a new step towards Burman-centric national identity (Houtman 1999). History textbooks shifted toward an ancient and glorious "Myanmar" collective past, replacing Aung San with the great kings as the main historical inspiration for the Union, and designating the Thai neighbor as the new national enemy alongside the British (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012).

As far as government schools are concerned, ethnic languages were sidelined too: in the early 1990's the official program from the MoE indicated that schools could choose to allocate up to 2 sessions of 30 minutes a week to the subject of ethnic languages, on the slot dedicated to physical education and school activities (Than Oo 1999). This modest possibility seems to have disappeared altogether from the updates of the official program at some point during the mid-1990's (Than Oo 1999, Thaung Htut 2000). In practice, several interviewees, notably in Mon and Shan States, anecdotally confirmed that they had received basic training in literacy in their respective languages in government schools as late as the early 2000's, but this seems to be the exception rather than the norm (Salem-Gervais 2013).

However, while this new step in the erosion of ethnic language classes in government schools was taking place, the post-socialist State also renounced to control all the educative activities of the country, and signed ceasefire agreements with several of the main armed groups. These two shifts opened new possibilities, and a number of complements and alternatives to government schooling gained ground during the 1990's and 2000's (Lorch 2008, Lall 2008).

These forms of education can be seen as answers from different segments of civil society and from the private sector to perceived shortcomings of public education in three dimensions: *access, quality* and *identity* (Salem-Gervais 2013). In government-controlled areas, despite facing regular difficulties and punctual setbacks, private schools, tutoring sessions, monastic schools, Chinese schools, and other community schools reappeared or extended their reach. Different regions may have seen extremely different dynamics in this regard, cease-fires often contributing to more leeway in the teaching of ethnic languages by faith-based networks and literature and culture committees during summer, weekend and evening classes.

Beyond government-controlled areas, the cease-fire agreements allowed several armed groups to significantly consolidate their education systems. Among them, the *Kachin Independence Organization* and the *New Mon State Party* managed to set up and run over 200 schools each by the end of the 2000's. Both of these education systems were emphasizing, each in its own way, ethnic language and culture (Jinghpaw and Mon respectively) in the education process, while also using the national Burmese language curriculum and maintaining bridges toward the government education system for their students. Meanwhile, "rebel" armed-groups such as the *Karen National Union* (KNU), Mong Tai Army (MTA) and *Karenni National Progressive Party* (KNPP), losing ground to the *Tatmadaw* on the battlefield, strived to develop their educational activities, primarily along their respective border regions, teaching little or no Burmese to their students (Lall & South 2012, Salem-Gervais 2013, Jolliffe and Speer Mears 2016).

Chapter 3:
Introducing ethnic languages and cultures in public schools: rationale, modalities, challenges and relevance to the Myanmar context

The longstanding and reiterated demands that ethnic languages should be included in public schools in Myanmar cannot be understood simply within Myanmar's national context; they are also in line with a global trend, which has been accelerating during the last decades.

In this section, after providing a short discussion regarding shifting language policies around the world, we'll try to categorize the arguments in favour of teaching ethnic minority languages in formal education and examine the relevance of these arguments to the specific Myanmar context. From there, we'll move on to describe the different forms that the teaching of minority languages in formal education can take and, finally, to briefly review some of the common challenges faced by projects aiming at introducing ethnic minority languages in formal education around the world, particularly in the perspective of using them as media of instruction.

1. Towards recognition and empowerment of minoritized languages?

The process of building modern nation-states, notably through colonisation and decolonisation, around a single (or a limited number of) standardized national language(s), has largely contributed to lower the status of all the other languages, "minoritizing" them within the borders of their respective nation-states (Lane, Costa and De Korne 2018). This process, contributing to the reduction of language diversity, has also, in turn, created the conditions, notably during the decolonisation process and after the end of the cold war, for cultural and linguistic claims, either within the nation-states or resulting in the creation of new countries.

By opposing *constructivist/situationalist* approaches to *essentialist/primordialist* views of the world[29], anthropologists have argued that *ethnicity* – a concept often equated with language – despite being often perceived as an essence – based notably on colonial conceptions of *race* – is to a large extent, a social construct (Leach 1954, Barth 1969).

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[29] A thorough discussion of these complex debates lies beyond the scope of this work. Gao and Wan (2013) give the following definition: "One of the theories contends that ethnicity is determined by nonmalleable, deep-seated essence and the essence would give rise to stable personality traits and abilities across situations, this is called the essentialist theory of ethnicity. The other theory, however, denies the real existence of ethnic essence, ethnicity is a social construction that is arbitrarily created due to social and political reasons in historical contexts, which is termed the social constructivist theory."

> "Essentialists view a category of persons as having a stable set of traits that are required for inclusion; they therefore think of contemporary members of indigenous groups as linked to their ancestors by those shared traits. The contrasting social constructivist (anti-essentialist) idea is that the criteria for inclusion in a category of persons are contingent, changing, and subject to social and political negotiation. Essentialists tend to see significant transformation as constituting a loss of identity, while anti-essentialists tend to view indigenous groups as inventions or artifacts, for whom significant transformation is possible without loss of the more tenuous continuity needed for and indigenous identity" (Sylvain 2014)[30]

For Otayek (2001) an ethnic group is an "imagined community", not unlike the *nation* defined by Anderson (1983). However, the politicization of ethnicity, a striking feature of the 20th century (notably trough periods shaping or reshaping the nation-states map of the world such as colonisation, decolonisation, and post-cold war eras) has often constituted a challenge to the construction or the consolidation of nations (Amin 1995, Weber 2009).

Modern nation-states present very different historical trajectories from one another. Simplistically, some correspond, to a large extent, to a particular ethnic identity from their inception, often associated with a *primordialist* conception of citizenship, while others have been aiming at building a nation from multiple ethnic identities. Among the latter, through different contexts and historical trajectories, countries have made different choices to manage diversity, on a spectrum going from *assimilation*, to *integration* and *accommodation*. According to Siegner (2019), drawing on the work of McGarry, O'Leary and Simeon (2008):

> "(…) assimilation is characterised by the erosion of private, cultural and other sorts of differences among citizens to create a common national identity. This implies that state power is captured by one or a few groups of a state, reducing the rights and freedoms of members belonging to groups that do not share the same ethnic affiliation, religion or language of the dominant group. An assimilationist strategy is usually located in cases with a strongly unitarist system of governance. Advocates of assimilationist policies usually proclaim that it "promotes nation building, with benefits for social solidarity, stability, and territorial integrity."
>
> An integrationist strategy recognises and respects difference, but these are relegated to the private domain and group targeted policies are rejected. Integration entails that the state is neutral when it comes to managing identity-based differences. McGarry et al. point out that an integrationist strategy implies a centralised political system that is either characterised by a unitary state with no significant internal boundaries or a federation with a strong central government and limited self- and shared-rule as well as internal boundaries that are not based on ethnic or cultural characteristics.

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[30] A thorough discussion of these complex debates lies beyond the scope of this work. Gao and Wan (2013) give the following definition: "One of the theories contends that ethnicity is determined by nonmalleable, deep-seated essence and the essence would give rise to stable personality traits and abilities across situations, this is called the essentialist theory of ethnicity. The other theory, however, denies the real existence of ethnic essence, ethnicity is a social construction that is arbitrarily created due to social and political reasons in historical contexts, which is termed the social constructivist theory."

Finally, accommodationist strategies entail recognition of ethnic and/or cultural differences and propagate group-specific policies to address them. Accommodationists advocate a decentralised political system that is characterised by strong self-rule for constituent units drawn along ethnic and/or cultural characteristics. It has been argued that accommodationist strategies imply support for pluralist federations that additionally have a strong shared-rule dimension."[31]

Different countries present different combination of these three strategies, evolving throughout their respective histories, and this is certainly true for the Union of Myanmar, a country founded on supposedly federal grounds but which has undergone five decades of military dictatorship. However, the third strategy, *accommodation*, has also been criticised, because it entails identity-based recognition, which can amount to "reifying categories that may misrepresent the lived experience of group members" (Malloy 2014), and potentially opening the door for endless recognition-seeking, rather than compromise and social construction:

"Not only *can* identity-based recognition claims fail to improve group members' position; such claims *must* fail since they can only meaningfully exist if the recognition-seeking group accepts the equation of its identity with victimization, powerlessness, and antagonism."   Brown 1995, Malloy 2014)"

Critics of identity politics have also noted that identity-based recognition can distract from other important social issues, and that this type of policies were often implemented in connection with neoliberal ones (Lane, Costa, and De Korne, 2018, Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). While the intricacies of these complex issues lie beyond the scope of our work, *recognition* tends to be opposed to *redistribution*, both in theoretical and political debates[32].

"When transposed from anthropological theory to politics, the debate between essentialism and constructionism becomes a disagreement between identity politics, for which justice requires recognition, and class politics, for which justice require redistribution." (Sylvain 2014)

As Costa (2013), referring to the work of Speed (2005) puts it:

"In the case of Mexico, while Indians are busy defining and debating which ethnic groups they belong to and what language they (ought to) speak, they are not busy voicing other types of social demands."

In their work on education in Thailand, Mounier and Tangchuang (2010) also warn against the tendency of localists movement to become *de facto* allies of neoliberal forces, in the process of demanding a diminution of the central state's prerogatives.

Nevertheless, in the context of an erosion of the world's culture and language diversity (see Chapter 3.2) arguments supporting the recognition and preservation of minority cultures and

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[31] Footnotes have been removed of the quote and separations between the three paragraphs added.

[32] See Sylvain (2014) for a more thorough discussion.

languages remain extremely convincing and influential. In the 1990's and 2000's "the overall trend in policy from international to local scales has been to provide increasing recognition and rights to minoritized groups" (Costa, De Korne, and Lane 2018). This dynamic has taken different forms, involving actors at different levels:

> "On a local scale, members of minoritised communities have engaged in efforts to gain improved status for themselves and their social and linguistic practices, both independently and in conjunction with regional, national, and international policies. These efforts have taken different forms, from promoting literature, song and language aesthetics, to attempts at establishing locally controlled education and negotiation of territory and resources" (Lane, Costa and De Korne, 2018)[33]

The 1990's and 2000's saw the ratification by most countries of international declarations, initiated by the United Nations or INGOs, aiming at protecting minorities cultural and linguistic rights, such as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (1992) or the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1996). In line with the program *Education for All*, led by UNESCO (an institution which has been advocating for the use of vernacular languages in education at least since 1953[34]), these declarations encourage a departure from the largely monolingual education models used to build most nation-states, including in South-East Asia (Sercombe and Tupas 2014), during the 20th century. In this regard, during the last decade, heterogenous but significant developments have occurred among South-East Asian nations (Kosonen 2017).

Access to education in one's mother tongue has even recently come to be considered as a right, at least "when possible". Article 14 of the *United Nations Declaration on the rights of indigenous people*, adopted by the United Nations in 2007 (and ratified by Myanmar), affirms that:

> "States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language"[35].

According to Benson (2019), "Increasingly, countries with former colonial or other dominant languages in education are using at least some non-dominant languages for at least some months or years of early schooling." For Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat (2019), while there is indeed a trend towards including "indigenous languages" in education in Asia, this trend is in most cases largely rhetorical and "the number of local languages being used in education remains a minute fraction of the total".

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[33] Some references have been suppressed of that quote, to increase readability.

[34] UNESCO, 1953, *The use of vernacular languages in education*, Paris, 156p.

[35] Of course, the expression "when possible" leaves plenty of room for interpretation. Interestingly it is sometimes eluded in the Burmese translations of this particular article in material published by ethnic activists "နိုင်ငံတော်အနေဖြင့် ဌာနေ တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးများနှင့် လက်တွဲပူးပေါင်းပြီး မိမိတို့၏ လူမှုအသိုင်းအဝန်း ပြင်ပတွင်ရောက်ရှိသော ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များအပါအဝင်၊ အထူးသဖြင့် ကလေးသူငယ်များ အတွက် မိမိတို့၏ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုနှင့်အညီ မိမိတို့၏ ဘာသာစကားဖြင့်သင်ကြားပေးသော ပညာရေးစနစ်များအား အသုံးပြုနိုင်ရန်အတွက် ထိရောက်သော လုပ်ဆောင်မှုများ ပြုလုပ်ရမည်။" ENAC (2018).

Like elsewhere in the world, there is in ASEAN a double (albeit often disconnected) trend towards English in the one hand, and mother tongues in the other (Tupas 2018). The actual implementation of this second shift is however still limited in most of the eleven countries of ASEAN (Kosonen and Person 2014, Tupas 2018) and may not be sufficient to actually counter or significantly slow down the language erosion process (see Chapter 3.2).

Ideologically, this development, within the broader context of what has been described as a crisis of the nation-state *vis-à-vis* global/regional levels in the one hand and local levels on the other (Appadurai 1996, 2000), nevertheless constitutes a noticeable departure from the largely monolingual policies that have been used to build south-east Asian nation-states in the post-colonial context.

When it comes to the Union of Myanmar, against the backdrop of the country's history of ethnic conflict, these shifting international and regional perceptions of the minorities' rights *vis-à-vis* their respective states certainly strengthen contemporary claims regarding the representation of ethnic identities in the realm of education. Advocates of the teaching of ethnic languages in Myanmar do anchor their demands to these international declarations (ENAC 2018), and the various organizations involved in this activity often receive financial, technical or moral assistance of actors supporting this activity globally, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, as well as various INGO and religious organisations.

2. Why teach ethnic languages in public schools?

According to this overall argument, using ethnic languages in public education is liable to bring various benefits (see Chapter 3.3 for a discussion on the different modalities of ethnic language teaching and their respective implications). We will now categorize these benefits into three dimensions and proceed to briefly examine their relevance to the specific Myanmar context.

To contribute to the preservation of languages and cultures

In the 1990's, in a post-Cold war political context and with rapidly evolving telecommunication technologies, it has become more and more apparent that the *"war of languages*" (Calvet 1987) is merciless. The field of *endangered languages* has gained momentum in sociolinguistics, notably at Yale university, with researchers documenting how languages *de facto* compete one with another, and the consequences of that competition. Parallel to the discourse on diminishing world biodiversity, sociolinguists have attempted to raise awareness by trying to quantify the erosion process which is affecting language diversity (Grinevald and Costa 2010).

Identifying, delimiting and listing languages of a particular country or region of the world is an endeavour which is inevitably deeply influenced by political and ideological considerations (Grinevald and Costa 2010). There is indeed no clear definition of what constitutes a language and a dialect and the factors used to distinguish the two are almost exclusively political, rather than linguistic (Weber 2016). Nevertheless, estimates, such as the one offered by the *Summer*

Institute of Linguistic (SIL) publication/website *Ethnologue*, allow to picture orders of magnitude. According to its 2016 classification, 21.5% of the 7,097 living languages in the world are currently *in trouble* and 13% are *dying*. Unsurprisingly, this threat is particularly acute in a linguistically diverse part of the world such as South-East Asia: 32,9% of its 1,247 living languages are classified as *in trouble* and 9,1% as *dying* (Lewis, Simons and Fennig, 2016).

For many, the presence of ethnic languages in formal education constitutes one of the key aspects of language maintenance. The absence or scarcity of minority ethnic languages in education has been described as "one of the most important direct causal factors in this (process of) disappearance", amounting to a form of "linguistic and/or cultural genocide" and "crime against humanity" (Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010), strong terms that have been also used by ethnic activists in Myanmar (Pon Nya Mon 2014).

Some researchers tend to qualify this overall argument (see Chapter 3.3), but a genuine shift towards a more inclusive language-in-education policy in a particular country, is nevertheless generally considered as one of the key aspects to the preservation of its linguistic and cultural diversity (Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group 2013).

This first aspect – preserving linguistic and cultural diversity - is certainly relevant in the case of the Union of Myanmar, a country which counts officially 135 ethnic groups and rich, according to *Ethnologue's* latest estimate of 120 indigenous living languages (this figure has been slightly increasing during the last few years). Some of the languages which were documented in the 1960's (such as Megyaw and Samang) are no longer spoken today (Bradley 2015, 2018) and half of the 120 indigenous living languages listed by *Ethnologue* are somewhere in the lower half of their *Expanded Graded International Disruption Scale* (EGIDS): 41 are *vigorous* but unstandardized, 16 are *in trouble*, and 4 are *dying*.

The ongoing shift of language policy in public education in Myanmar described in this report, while still too recent for its impact on language preservation to be assessed or predicted, could thus constitute a critical dimension of Myanmar's minority languages and cultures' maintenance.

To improve access to and quality of education

Since the 1990's, in line with the goals of the *Education for All* movement launched by UNESCO and signed by 164 countries in 2000 in Dakar, the concern about ethnic minorities' poor access to education has been growing. According to some estimates, up to 40% of the world's population does not have access to formal education in their mother tongue (Walter and Benson 2012). Unsurprisingly, these figures tend to be particularly high in ethnically and linguistically diverse regions of the world, such as South-East Asia (Kosonen 2005).

In line with this movement, an abundant literature (Dutcher 2001, Benson 2002, Kirkpatrick 2011, Malone & Paraide 2011, Seid 2019 to name only a few) confirms what common sense seems to suggest: becoming literate in one's mother tongue during early stages of education, before moving on to other languages and scripts, yields better results in the education process

than schooling starting in a language which is less familiar for the child. Shifts towards more inclusive language-in-education policies (particularly *Mother-tongue Based Education*, see Chapter 3.3) are thus liable to improve minorities' performance in education, both from quantitative (improved chances to attend and remain a significant number of years in school) and qualitative (better understanding and achievements) standpoints (Walter & Dekker 2011).

In Myanmar, minority languages have featured only marginally in public education, with a strong tendency towards side-lining under successive military regimes (see Chapter 2). The "language barrier" presented by this Burmese-speaking education system has often been described as a central, if not the main problem in the education of ethnic minority kids (Shalom 2011, NNER 2014, Lo Bianco 2016, South and Lall 2016, ENAC 2018). It must be noted that the education system has had plenty of pressing issues during the last decades (e.g., with funding, corruption, and teaching method) and that other factors contribute to early drop-outs (including poverty, conflict, topography and distance to schools, attraction of neighbouring countries, rural/urban differenced perceptions, attitudes and practices[36]). Emphasizing these language issues above other educational problems, in resonance with the above-described global trend to encourage the use of ethnic languages in education, is often associated with a political position inclining towards federalism and/or ethno-nationalism, and away from centralization.

Assessments of the relative importance of this "language barrier" issue for educational achievements collected during interviews throughout the years are thus diverse[37], and depend both on very heterogenous sociolinguistic situations (as a general rule, the national language is better understood in urban areas) and political positioning of ethnic minorities towards a Burmese-speaking State. Assessments of this particular issue by actors such as the Education departments of ethnic armed organizations should thus certainly be taken into account, but also need to be put in perspective.

Nevertheless, as recently acknowledged by the Ministry of Education[38] the "language barrier" does constitute a genuine issue, reducing ethnic minority students' educational attainments and contributing to early drop-outs and poor performances. Bradley (2015) estimates that the main hurdle for non-native speakers in learning the national language through schooling is Burmese diglossia and its literary style, which is often disconnected from daily usages. Studies and teachers interview also suggest that difficulties in understanding Burmese in the early grades often has consequences for students' achievements in all subjects, including "scientific" subjects such as mathematics[39].

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[36] Ministry of Education (DERPT), UNICEF, UNESCO, 2018, *Myanmar Report on Out-of-school children Initiative*, 152p. "မိခင်ဘာသာစကားသင်ကြားရေး မျှော်လင့်ချက်" *Myanmar Times*, December 30, 2019.

[37] See for instance Margontier (2016).

[38] *NESP Blueprint* February 2017, p48. "Schools to get more ethnic language teachers", Ei Shwe Phyu, *Myanmar Times,* September 2, 2017.

[39] This is what shows a study conducted by one NGO, Shalom (Nyein) foundation, in a (2011) report "မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ မူလတန်းအဆင့် တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးစုကလေးငယ်များအား ပညာသင်ကြားရာတွင် အသုံးပြုသောဘာသာစကားနှင့်ပတ်သက်သော ပညာရေးမူဝါဒစာတမ်း". Although the methodology and neutrality of the authors of that report might be questioned, the debate could only deal with the extent of that "language barrier", and its relative importance, in different regions, compared to other issues in the education system

Available statistics are somewhat contradictory one to another and do not always give a very clear-cut picture when it comes to school attendance in minority-populated regions. The 2014 census, for instance, shows rather high attendance rates for children of secondary school age for Kachin, Chin and Kayah states (as opposed to Shan and Karen states). However, Shan State does systematically present the lowest indicators, and the 7 States occupy the 7 lowest rankings in terms of literacy rates (in any language) among the 14 States and Regions (see Figure 4).

Different areas within each administrative division of the country may present very different situations in that regard, but language barrier should certainly be considered as one of the explanations of this overall low educational performance in minority-populated regions, particularly in the most rural settings. A shift in the national language-in-education policy, as part of the ongoing reform process of the education system in Myanmar, is thus likely to significantly contribute to an improvement of both *access to* and *quality of* education, throughout the territory of the Union of Myanmar.

To promote national cohesion

Thirdly and finally, according to this overall argument, the inclusion of ethnic languages in public education systems is liable to bring political benefits, by fulfilling the minorities' identity claims, and thus promoting national cohesion and, ultimately, peace. The question of the ideological implications, as well as empirical efficiency of this approach, which is a complete departure from the assimilation policies often used to build nations in the 19th and 20th century, is complex and beyond the scope of this work. However, arguments supporting this view can certainly be made: research focusing on (post-colonial) Asia, conclude that while every country's sociolinguistic situation and political trajectory is extremely specific, language policies inclusive of the diversity within the nation tend to be more effective in uniting its components, including in the spreading and adoption of the national language (Brown and Ganguly 2003, Lo Bianco 2016).

Regions where MTB-MLE programs seem liable to bring political benefits in situations of conflicts include the three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat in Thailand. Following a long history of failed attempts at assimilation of the Pattani Malay population (about 3 million today) into a monolithic sense of national identity (*thainess*), a shift in the language-in-education policy has been initiated in the wake of the 1999 Education Act. The development of a MTB-MLE system was initiated in 2007, in a limited number of pilot schools, with the involvement of both Thai universities and international organisations, and with "fostering true and lasting national reconciliation" as one of its explicit objectives (Premsrirat 2011). While conflict is still ongoing, the development and expansion of this project is facing multiple challenges (Huebner 2019, see Chapter 3.3) but most accounts describe the encouraging educational and political benefits offered by this initiative (Khreeda-Oh 2014, Premsrirat and Person 2018)
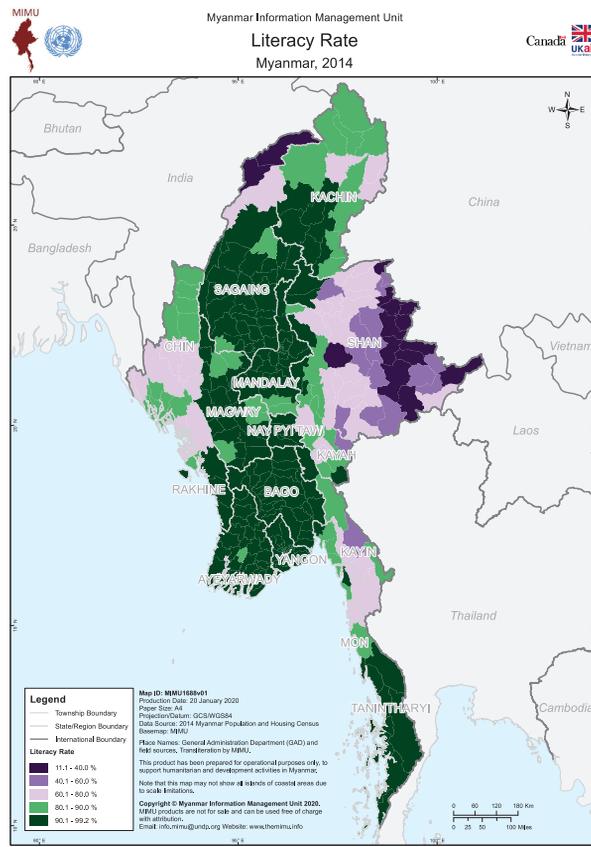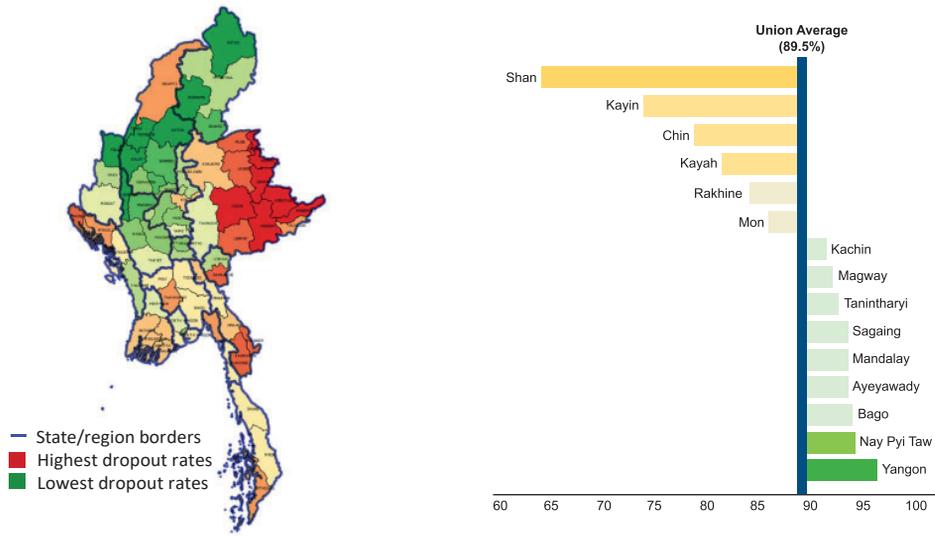
Figure 4: School attendance[40] and literacy rates, in the States and Regions of the
Union of Myanmar, according to the 2014 census results.

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[40] Source: Spohr C., 2017, Evidence to guide Myanmar's secondary Education Curriculum Reforms (Presentation, Asian Development Bank).

In any case, organisations such as the World Bank (2005), UNESCO (2005, 2007) and UNICEF, have added this political aim in their policy regarding language and education to the more established ones described above. More specifically, UNICEF has launched, respectively in 2012 and 2013, the *Peacebuilding Education and Advocacy* (PBEA) and the *Language, Education and Social Cohesion* (LESC) programs, which both include Myanmar. As their names suggest, both aim to link education and language policies with peace-building and social cohesion objectives.

As seen in the Introduction and Chapter 2, linguistic claims have been at the very core of multiple ethnic actor's demands in Myanmar, in some cases since before Independence. The marginal place of ethnic languages in formal education in particular, has often been pointed-out as a tangible evidence of a "Burmanization" political agenda. A shift in language policy, notably in education, thus certainly offers leverage in the perspective of "national reconciliation" (အမျိုးသားပြန်လည်သင့်မြတ်ရေး), to bring about peace and promote a sense of belonging to the Union (Lopes Cardozo and Maber 2019). During the last few years, this link between teaching ethnic languages in government schools and the peace process has been made, more or less explicitly, by scholars (South and Lall 2016) and political personalities, including by the minister of education and the State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi[41].

3. Ethnic languages as subjects or MTB-MLE?

In practice, using ethnic languages in formal education can take different forms. The first option is to teach them as subjects, a few hours every week, like *Mathematics* or *History*, while the medium of instruction remains the national language. A different – and much more ambitious – option is called *Mother Tongue Based - Multilingual Education* (MTB-MLE, also called L1-based MLE). The second half of that expression (Multi-lingual Education – MLE) can refer either to MTB-MLE or be used as a less specific term for education systems using several languages. As noted by Benson (2019), the (full) term MTB-MLE (also referred to as Mother Tongue-Based Education, MTBE) has also often been used somewhat loosely, including to designate policies similar to the one decided by Myanmar in 2014-15 (see Chapter 4.2):

> "Across the Asia/Pacific and Africa regions, it has become an umbrella term for a range of programs, but it was never meant to represent programs that exclude learners' own languages, nor those that use the L1 only for oral explanations or codeswitching (Kosonen & Benson 2013)."

Beyond these general concepts, which can be useful in international conversations on language-in-education policies, we believe that precision regarding the modalities of integrating ethnic minority languages in formal education is key to constructive discussions on these complex issues, focusing on the feasibility, potential benefits and challenges in implementing concrete choices in language-in-education policy.

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[41] See for instance ပညာရေးစနစ်နှင့် နိုင်ငံအနာဂတ် *New light of Myanmar*, editorial, April 10 2018.
"Minister ties improved education for ethnic minorities to peace", *The Myanmar Times*, September 30, 2016.
"Public Urged to Report Corruption at Latest Peace Talk", the Irrawaddy, December 29, 2017.

The basic principle of "proper" MTB-MLE is that the children are taught mainly in their mother tongue (L1) during preschool and early grades of primary, moving gradually towards the national language (L2) as a medium of instruction. Often, an L3 (most likely an international language such as English) is progressively introduced later on (see Figure 5). Some models suggested for MTB-MLE include up to five languages, such as one proposed in 2010 by an advisory-body of the MoE in Timor-Leste, planning to teach the mother-tongue (L1), Tetun (L2), Portuguese (L3), Indonesian (L4) and English (L5, Taylor-Leech 2019).

As stated above, an abundant literature supports the idea that being educated and becoming literate in one's mother tongue during early stages of education, before moving on to other languages and scripts, indeed yields better results in the education process than schooling starting in a language which is less familiar for the child. If properly implemented (and in situations in which children do not leave schools prematurely), MTB-MLE thus does not amount to favoring the local language "against" the national language, and tends to foster better overall educational outcomes, including in the national language.

Primary level	G6	L1 (Language of Instruction + subject)	L2 (Language of Instruction + subject)		L3
	G5	L1 (Language of Instruction + subject)	L2 (Language of Instruction + subject)		L3
	G4	L1 (Language of Instruction + subject)	L2 (Language of Instruction + subject)		L3
	G3	L1 (Language of Instruction)	L2 (subject, oral + written)		L3
	G2	L1 (Language of Instruction)	L2 (subject, oral + written)		
	G1	L1 (Language of Instruction, Literacy)	L2 (subject, oral)		
Pre-primary level	ECE1	L1 (Language of Instruction, Literacy)		L2 (subject, oral)	
	ECE2	L1 (Language of Instruction)			

Figure 5: A possible model for MTB-MLE, throughout pre-primary and primary levels (adapted from Kosonen 2006)

In this regard, it should be noted that different countries, throughout the world and in southeast Asia, present extremely different language situations, notably when it comes to the place of languages with an international status, such as English, French or Spanish, in education. This heterogeneity can contribute to blur the debates around MTB-MLE, which is liable to correspond to different projects and claims. In certain situations, MTB-MLE can refer to an education starting in the national language(s), or in local languages recognised in education, by opposition to an education starting in languages such as English, French or Spanish. In some South-East Asian countries, such as the Philippines or Singapore, English has an official status and has been widely used in education, including as a medium of instruction. However, in most Southeast-Asian countries, including Myanmar, MTB-MLE refers to an education beginning in local ethnic minorities languages, by opposition to an education starting in the national language.

It should also be noted that mother tongue-based education, which is widely advocated by organisations such as the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO, particularly since the late 1990's – early 2000's, is not a new idea in Myanmar's educational and political debates. During the colonial period, while the education system was divided according to different media of instruction (and social classes), Burmese nationalist movements in the 1930's used the idea that education should start in the mother tongue, for obvious pedagogical reasons, at the forefront of what was also a political agenda directed at the British colonialists. A similar educational argument was made after Independence, for Shan to become the medium of instruction of Shan State, by a local government largely composed of *sawbwas* (local rulers) and ethnic elites striving to mobilize a Shan nation (Sai Kham Mong 2004, see Chapter 2).

More recently, some of the armed-groups' education systems, and most specifically the one set up by the *New Mon State Party*, evolved into *de facto* MTBE systems in the late 1990's, through the building of curricular bridges between primary education, where Mon is the main medium of instruction, towards a secondary education similar or identical to the (Burmese medium) national curriculum (see chapters 2 and 5).

In the post-SPDC political context, several organisations, such as the *National Network for Education Reform* (NNER), the *Ethnic Nationalities Council* (ENAC) and the *Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education* (MINE) as well as a number of scholars (Lall and South 2016, Lo Bianco 2016, Lall 2018) have been advocating for a deep shift in the national language-in-education policy: the implementation of a MTB-MLE system in public schools of minority regions all over the country.

Another channel for using ethnic language in the education process, which has attracted the attention of policy makers in Myanmar (see Chapter 4.2) is a form of code-switching in the teaching process. By contrast to MTB-MLE (see Benson 2019 quote above) which strongly suggests the production of curricula in multiple languages for multiple subjects (at least for lower grades of primary school), code-switching in education can refer to using local languages orally, in order to explain the curriculum, which remains in the national language.

This type of solution – which does not exclude the possibility of teaching of local languages as subjects – offers flexibility for teachers to adapt to their students in contexts where implementing a proper MTBE system is not (or not yet) feasible, for different reasons, including the presence of multiple languages in a single school, or challenges in identifying what is the mother tongue and producing curricula in standardized languages (Benson and Young 2016, see Chapter 5.2). In the case of Zimbabwe, Gotosa, Rwodzi and Mhlanga (2013) observe that the implementation of MTBE has not been successful, and recommend the formalization of the code-switching practice (which has emerged naturally) at least as a starting point of a shifting language-in-education policy:

"The study critically analyses four studies that focus on the language of instruction in Zimbabwe's public schools to establish a feasible way of incorporating the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Prescriptions for mother tongue use in Zimbabwean schools are not working. From the review, it is clear that most proposals researchers have put forward for implementation of mother tongue use are not feasible at the moment. Practically, the mother tongue is used in class oral discourse only through code switching; a practice teachers and pupils have devised in order to solve classroom language problems. The study recommends that, this code switching which has emerged naturally be formalized as a starting point towards sole use of the mother tongue. All indigenous languages should be used in Zimbabwean public schools alongside English through code-switching, practitioners being left to decide on the language(s) of instruction depending on the demands of their situations."

This approach has been used *de facto* for many years in Myanmar and elsewhere (see the case of Laos in Cincotta-Segi 2014), but only in situations where teachers mastering local languages are available, which have been the exception rather than the rule in many regions. This approach, which has been recently referred to as "classroom language" in Myanmar, thus requires – just like any other prospect of including ethnic minority languages in formal education – a policy encouraging the training of local teacher who are able to use ethnic minority languages in the teaching process (see Chapter 4.4).

Understandably, among these different channels for shifting language-in-education policies, a nation-wide MTB-MLE system is the most ambitious. While it seems likely to offer substantial leverage in each of the three above-described rationales for the introduction of ethnic minority languages in government schools (preserving linguistic diversity, improving access and quality of education and promoting national cohesion), this prospect also entails much greater challenges, and these challenges may imply major trade-offs in each of these dimensions (see Chapter 5). Some of the common challenges that have appeared around the world regarding the teaching of ethnic languages and implementation of MTB-MLE projects will be briefly discussed in the following section.

4. Common challenges in introducing ethnic minority languages in education

Do MTBE and mother-language teaching deliver the benefits they promise? An important literature focuses on describing the pedagogical benefits of MTB-MLE and the developments regarding the acceptance of (or reluctance towards) this type of language policies by governments. In that regard, critical proponents of MTBE, such as Tupas and Martin (2016), describe how a "discursive manoeuvring", towards educational benefits and away from politics and cultural identities, was necessary to make the case of mother tongues much more appealing to various stakeholders of education, in the Philippines' context.

Regardless, research in multilingual societies in different parts of the world suggest that a number of challenges may arise when actually working towards implementing MTB-MLE (Gacheche 2010, Ghimire 2012, Nyaga and Anthonissen 2012, Curaming and Kalidjernih 2014, Singh 2014, Wa-Mbaleka 2015, Piper, Zuilkowsky and Ong'ele 2016, Namanya 2017, Metro 2018, Medilo 2018, Perez 2019). Strong advocates of MTB-MLE such as Dekker (2016) state that "Moving from pilot projects to national implementation is not easily done". While the above-described benefits of properly implemented MTBE are well documented, in certain situations, these practical challenges may diminish, nullify or even reverse these benefits. In this section, we briefly review some aspects of the experiences of other countries. Other features more specific to the Myanmar context will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Multiple contingent factors

Firstly, the success of MTB-MLE programs seem to depend largely on whether adequate resources are allocated to the program, and whether teachers are properly trained. Pilot projects in Papua New Guinea, in which teachers were carefully trained and resources were devoted to curriculum creation, resulted in improved student performance; however, subsequent MTBE programs that were implemented without ample time to develop mother tongue curricula resources and train mother tongue-literate teachers were much less successful (Malone & Paraide, 2011). Nyaga and Anthonissen (2012) show that despite Kenya's MTBE policy, the lack of resources and material hindered the implementation of the MTBE policy. Even when teachers fluent and literate in students' mother tongues are available, without a proper curriculum and training in methodologies for language or bilingual teaching, MTBE might not provide all the educational advantages it promised (Nyaga & Anthonissen 2012, Igboanusi 2008).

In many instances, States are indeed reluctant, beyond the formal acceptance of such perspective under the insistence of international institutions, to implement policies often perceived as potentially divisive for the Nation. In some countries, like Vietnam, there has been a wide gap between policy and practice, with the weakening of previously supportive policies to match the non-implementation in practice (Kosonen 2017).

From a pedagogical standpoint, a number of studies, notably in the Philippines context, also question the idea that MTBE systematically leads to a better command of the L2 (English in this case) compared to an education starting in this language (Wa-Mbaleka 2015, Alberto, Gabinete and Rañola 2016, Namanya 2017, De Jesus 2019). Overall, this type of assessment seems to be a minority, and proficiency in the L2 is depending on a variety of factors, including the school (and its environment)'s language situation as well as the actual implementation of MTB-MLE.

The benefits of MTB-MLE policies in terms of language preservation too, are not necessarily a given. When mother tongues are placed in competition with dominant languages those programs may not always succeed in reducing the vulnerability of ethnic languages (Tupas 2014). In other words, language-in-education policies cannot force students, parents, or teachers to value languages that, for whatever reason, they find less attractive. While shifts towards inclusiveness

in language-in-education policies are likely to contribute to positive attitudes of ethnic minorities towards their languages and cultures, making a language available in education does not automatically make it desirable; other socio-linguistic aspects, beyond the walls of the classroom, are equally critical (Murray 2016).

In certain parts of Nigeria for instance, bilingual education, despite positive research findings on its benefits from a pedagogical standpoint, has faced rejection from the population (Igboanusi 2015). Similarly, in several Quechuan communities of Peru, bilingual education has often been perceived as a backward move by parents (as opposed to local activists) preferring their children to be educated in Spanish (García 2005). These perceptions might be ignorant of the benefits that could bring a properly functioning MTBE system in terms of mastering several languages, but they nevertheless constitute an additional challenge to setting up such system.

Tupas (2014) refers to the phenomenon by which certain languages take primacy because of their social power as "inequalities of multilingualism". Depending on the extent of these inequalities, MTBE policies may or may not bring its intended benefits, including the preservation of minority languages and cultures:

> "Finally, a formidable challenge that the policy must overcome are the prevailing attitudes to languages in the Philippines, especially English (Tupas 2015). A large majority of Filipinos continue to embrace the English language as the only language through which scientific knowledge and economic stability are gained (Martin 2010; Mahboob and Cruz 2013). While these attitudes and perceptions exist, the intended benefits of MTB-MLE will remain unattainable." (Tupas 2016)

This phenomenon may be particularly acute in countries were global languages such as English (and to a lesser extent, languages such as Chinese, Spanish or French) are commonly used in education, reducing the comparative attractivity of local languages. This type of situation, on the other hand, is likely to avoid some of the political complexities that often come with a national language perceived as attached to a particular ethnic identity.

MTBE in multilingual environments

Another – and arguably the greatest – challenge to MTB-MLE programs is linguistic heterogeneity, in its different forms. Unsurprisingly, research tend to show that these programs are easier to implement and more successful in countries with a limited number of languages (Gacheche 2010, Ghimire 2012, Nyaga and Anthonissen 2012, Kang 2012, Wa-Mbaleka 2015, Singh 2014), and most MTBE programs are designed to function in rural, linguistically homogenous communities (Benson and Young 2016).

For Huebner (2019), when discussing the case of Pattani Malay and Northeastern (Issan) Thai, certain characteristics of the geolinguistic situations of these languages, notably the fact that they are "spatially cohesive" constitute a strong comparative advantage in the perspective of implementing MTB-MLE:

" (…) In both cases, the local variety is spoken in regions adjacent to the country in which an official variety is codified (Edwards, 1992, pp. 38-39). Finally, both varieties are spatially cohesive, involving concentrations of speakers within a given region, rather than dispersed among a larger population."

There is often a lack of clarity about what to do in the cases in which there are students with different linguistic backgrounds in one school. As Curaming and Kalidjernih (2014) put it in the case of Timor-Leste, in some cases, "the logistical requirements and level of administrative complexity required for administration are simply mind-boggling".

Splitting primary schools or classes according to the mother tongues of the students indeed requires a dramatic increase of the resources allocated to education. Organizing classrooms by language rather than by age or grade level (Kosonen 2006, Benson and Young 2016) may have other pedagogical implications, as well as divisive effects on multi-ethnic societies. Other solutions (see Benson and Young 2016) may be particularly challenging to implement beyond project schools, as a national policy.

Some countries have found middle ground solutions. Nigeria, for instance, specifies in its policy that the "language of the immediate community" (LIC, which corresponds to 3 major languages among the 400 spoken in the country) may be used in place of students' mother tongues (Igboanusi, 2008, 2015). However, resorting to "LIC", "*lingua francas", "*main" or "locally dominant*" languages may have multiple implications. Depending on specific linguistic situations, it may or may not bring the full benefits of MTBE from an educational standpoint. Is the LIC indeed fully and equally mastered by all students? Seid (2019), in the context of Ethiopia, confirms that the benefits of MTBE only concern children from ethnic majorities whose language are indeed available in the schools, and not those with a different mother-tongue. In India, only a minute of the 1,652 languages identified by the 1971 census (*Ethnologue* 2019 gives an estimate of 453 languages and 22 languages are scheduled in the Constitution) are currently used as media of instruction:

> "The total number of individual languages offered as medium of instruction is 31. As we noted in the Introduction above, according to Rao (2008), approximately 60 languages were used as media of instruction in the 1980s and 47 were used as media at the time of Rao's own survey." (Meganathan 2011)

> "Despite India's stand to promote minority languages with all the policies and constitutional mandate the Seventh All India School Educational Survey (7 AISES, NCERT, 2006) shows that in India only 47 languages are currently used either as the subject of instruction or as the medium of instruction, though the figure has a mere improvement from the Sixth Survey which has 41 the figure has declined from 81 in 1970 to 67 in 1976 (Chaturvedi and Mohale, 1976), 58 in 1978, 44 in 1990 and 41 in 1998, showing a clear picture of non-preference to mother tongue in the Education." (Devi 2017)

Designating one LIC instead of teaching all languages present in a school or in a given region means that some languages will be overlooked. This pragmatic solution is thus liable to have deep implications when it comes to the survival of smaller languages, arguably bringing them

under even greater threat, by reinforcing the position of locally dominant languages. This type of solution is also liable to be counterproductive to the peace-building aims of MTB-MLE, causing controversies in countries where ethnicity is politicized to a large extent (see Chapter 5.2 regarding the Union of Myanmar).

The Philippines, a country which has officially endorsed a MTBE policy in 2009 as a shift from bilingual (English and Filipino) education (Tupas 2016), and is thus often presented as an example for the rest of Southeast Asia in that regard, has a comparable policy. Nineteen languages, considered regional *lingua francas*, are officially used in MTBE programs, among the estimated 170 language spoken in the country (others languages are used in programs supported by non-governmental actors, Kosonen 2017). While most researchers seem enthusiastic about the prospects of this MTBE policy, they also describe the multiples challenges facing its implementation. These challenges include lack of enthusiasm of some populations (particularly those for whom English is the mother-tongue), overall work load for the children and difficulties in teacher training:

> "In addition, teachers themselves have reported that they are not knowledgeable enough about their own mother tongues to teach them. Nolasco (2012) has reported that "teachers are not being given enough time to learn their own L1, particularly for literacy, much less learn how to teach in the L1. Teachers who think that they are implementing MLE may not be doing much different from what they did previously" (Tupas and Martin 2016).

But the most daunting aspect seems to be the linguistic challenges in deciding which particular variety of which particular language should be used in multilingual environments (Sumalinog 2019)[42]. Cabansag (2016) describes this difficulty through the testimony of a teacher:

> "A challenge to the implementation of mother tongue-based instruction is the multilingual environment. A teacher (T8) cited her class as a mix of different languages such as Ilocano, Yogad, Ibanag, & Tagalog so she has to use Tagalog as the mother tongue that is commonly understood by all her pupils. She expressed this viewpoint: "I am using Tagalog in my classroom because my pupils are Ilocano, Yogad and Ibanag." Children whose first language is other than Tagalog do not really get instruction in their first language while the policy requires the use of mother tongue exclusively for the first three grade levels."

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[42] See also "Teaching in mother tongues", interview of Dr. Elizabeth Calinawagan, February 2018. Website of the *University of the Philippines*, Accessed December 2019.

Issues surrounding language standardization

This type of multilingual environment (a situation which is extremely frequent, notably in urban areas, in the Union of Myanmar, see Chapter 5.1) is not the only type of challenge entailed by the perspective of implementing MTB-MLE. A proper MTB-MLE requires starting education in the mother tongue and using this language both in its oral and written forms, at least throughout primary education:

> "Application of the term L1-based MLE has been less successful in calling attention to the fact that learners should fully develop oral, written and analytical skills in one of their best languages to reap the benefits of transfer to additional languages" (Benson 2019).

However, in many instances, ethnic minority languages are heterogenous, unstandardized, and attached to more or less disputed and overlapping ethnonyms (see Chapter 5.2 and 5.3 regarding the Union of Myanmar). Ethno-linguistic nomenclatures are fundamentally debatable, and there are often major discrepancies between official classifications and extremely complex linguistic realities[43]. More often than not, the perspective of using ethnic minority languages in education, especially if they are to be used in their written form, and within the more general context of their revitalization, strongly suggests interventions on these languages. As noted by Huebner (2019) in the case of Isan (North-eastern Thai):

> "(…) The expansion of the domains of use that these activities promote highlights the need to address issues of corpus, including standardization of Isan grammar (no easy feat since linguists have identified at least 14 regional varieties of Isan), the construction of a dictionary and the selection from among the various Isan orthographies one to be the standard."

This type of issue also comes up for some of the languages in the Philippines, as noted by Tupas and Martin (2016):

> "A successful MTB-MLE policy rests on the existence and acceptance of an orthographic system for the mother tongues to be used in schools. However, for some of the Philippine languages included in the policy, this orthographic system is either not in place or unacceptable to stakeholders. Attempts to standardize a spelling system, such as the case of the Ilocano language, have so far been contentious."

"Corpus planning", the process of prescriptive intervention in the forms of a language, is often described through three aspects: "Graphization" (development, selection or modification of scripts and orthographic conventions), "Standardization" (the process of having one variety of language taking precedence over regional and social variations) and "Modernization" (the process of expanding a language's resources and functions).

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[43] In Vietnam for instance, the official nomenclature recognizes 54 ethnic groups, which does not reflect accurately a much greater linguistic diversity (*Ethnologue* estimates that 110 languages are spoken in this country). Kosonen, 2017, UNESCO, Background paper for the 2017/8 Global education monitoring report, Language of instruction in Southeast Asia.

These three interconnected dimensions are likely to entail challenges and controversies, but "Standardization" tends to be particularly contentious. While example of efforts to develop (and teach) non-standardized languages do exist (see the concept of "polynomic language" in Corsica, Ottavi 2010), a common script, a common orthography, a developed and standardized lexicon certainly simplify the process of training teachers and producing textbooks. Standardizing what may be multiple regional dialects and/or scripts allows to increase the political weight of a language, contributing to strengthen its formal use (and prospects of survival), and thus fitting with the "nation-building" agendas often held by the political actors active in mobilizing a particular ethnic-identity, and the educators striving to teach the attached language.

However, the solution consisting in selecting one particular "prestige" dialect, among others, to be used in a MTBE model are rarely successful, as Weber (2016), from the *Summer Institute of Linguistics* explains:

> "While this seems the easiest solution, seldom does it work. In the competition for resources, some dialects are seen as more deserving and resentments arise, particularly when outsiders are making the decisions. Often problems arise out of a unified orthography, and although it would be possible to learn, the desire to have one's own writing system can make unification impossible."

Other solutions, such as artificially creating a pan-dialect which would include characteristics of several language varieties (an "Esperanto", see Chapter 5.2), entails major issues and are often unsuccessful. While each country and each language situation is unique, Weber (2016) tells us about two "smaller" closely related Quechuan dialects, for which the choice was made – for some time – to join forces in order to develop material to be used in education:

> "For several years the materials proved effective; children were reading and writing in the two varieties. However, as community leaders became enamored with the idea that "different is better," not only were there changes to the orthography but a "them" and "us" dichotomy became more prevalent and two different sets of materials became necessary."

This example illustrates the fundamentally political nature of these language-in-education issues – which, in our opinion, are too often presented only in terms of minorities "against" the central State – and the role of local leaders, for whom proclaiming difference is often a way to exist at some level(s) of the political and administrative scene. Lane, Costa and De Korne (2018, in the introduction of a recent book dealing with countries and regions such as Russia, Canada, West Africa or Scotland) give us precious insights on the fundamental tensions and contradictions inherent to the prospects of standardizing minority languages across the world, which certainly resonates with our own observations in Myanmar:

> " (…) social actors involved in these processes often find themselves at odds with conflicting priorities. On the one hand, standardisation remains a potent way of doing or inventing language, of producing languages as bounded, discrete entities and as social institutions and subsequently increasing the social status of those who use them."

But, as they follow:

> (…) " On the other hand, standardisation is inherently a limitation of diversity (Milroy and Milroy 1999) and a way to harness and act upon linguistic, that is to say, social differences. Promoting language standards is thus both a way for validating groups and for limiting group-internal diversity. **Considering that diversity is often the very *raison d'être* for minority language movements based on the claims that all ways of communicating are equally legitimate and that language diversity needs to be protected, this trade-off is at best contentious and at worst a Faustian bargain**."

The desire to formalize and standardize more or less heterogenous ethnic minority languages and dialects, which more often than not goes hand-in-hand with the prospects of using ethnic minority languages in formal education, arguably contains its own philosophical contradictions. It tends to reproduce, in a Russian doll fashion, the very discriminations that are mobilized against.

> "Language advocates, and in some cases state or regional authorities, often view standards as emancipatory and empowering, a way to promote education and other forms of civic communication through mother tongues and ensure better chances of equal achievement for minority groups. **Yet, such processes require selecting particular forms over others; they generate and legitimize certain varieties of writing or speaking, as well as the structures and institutions that sustain their diffusion. This potentially establishes linguistic standards that speakers themselves cannot meet, together with new hierarchies that give advantage to some speakers over others.**"   Lane, Costa and De Korne (2018)

Proponents of MTBE with experience in developing teaching material, such as Weber (2016), also describe the centrality of written languages, not only in the development of effective teaching material but also in these "internal" political challenges. She also mentions religion as one of the factors contributing to (written) linguistic fault lines within what is generally considered as a single group from an ethnolinguistic standpoint (a situation which is certainly common in the Union of Myanmar, see Chapter 5.2):

> "Foundational to effective materials is the writing system. Whether there is an established orthography or one has to be developed, there are challenges. Living languages change through contact with other languages. They are influenced by local religions with differing scripts, and by a growing sense of ethnic identity. Effective orthographies depend on the flexibility of designers and users, and the dialectal diversity of phonological, lexical, and grammatical elements. (…) However, all of these obstacles can be overcome when there is enough internal motivation to compromise."

Overall, while well documented, the benefits of MTBE programs seem to be often inversely related with administrative convenience and affordability and are often contingent on multiple, both structural and policy-related, variables. For these reasons, some authors, like Gupta (1997) affirm that, in some cases, MTBE "may not be desirable", in particular in multilingual settings,

where identifying a single mother-tongue can be difficult, in situations where it is likely to carry "social and ethnic divisiveness", and where local actors are not willing to compromise. All of these complexities are certainly worth trying to overcome, but they cannot be ignored.

The exact nature and the magnitude of these challenges thus differ greatly from one country to another. In this regard, the Union of Myanmar appears to present a comparatively complex combination of characteristics. While ethnolinguistic complexity and limited financial resources are not uncommon around the world and in Asia, the deep-seated and intense politicization of ethnicity, which is largely rooted in the colonial period (see Chapters 2 and 5), does constitute an additional feature. Together, these three characteristics arguably shape a particularly challenging context for the implementation of a MTB-MLE policy.

Chapter 4:
Education, Decentralization, and the unfolding language-in-education policy

In this chapter, we provide a general description of the policy choices towards introducing ethnic languages in Myanmar's formal education system, in the wake of the 2011 political transition. From the first policy shifts, under President Thein Sein's administration, to the latest developments aiming at training more ethnic language teachers, limited but significant elements of decentralization have been introduced in the education system, based on the 2008 Constitution as well as the 2014-2015 National Education Law. As a language-in-education policy is progressively materializing, with new languages being taught as subjects and used as "classroom languages" every year, the States and Regions are emerging as a critical level for implementing this policy. This process includes relatively new institutions (the governments, and to a lesser extent, the parliaments governing States and Regions), together with the civil servants of their corresponding/respective Education and Ethnic affairs departments, organizations representing civil society and dozens of ethnic nationalities (the literature and culture committees), as well as agencies such as the UNICEF. As a result of a clear decision at the Union level to push towards decentralization, on the one hand, and through the new dynamics generated in the course of every day practice, on the other hand, the reforms documented in this chapter are part of both the empowering of official institutions of the States and Regions, and of the fostering of local political eco-systems.

1. Shifting education policies

The pace of political reforms under the Thein Sein government has taken many observers off guard. In this context of transition from direct military rule to a quasi-civilian "hybrid" regime (Egreteau 2016, Raynaud 2016), the necessity of reforming the education system, which had long been described as both a political tool to protect the military's power and a major hindrance to the development of the country became impossible to ignore. In his inaugural speech, President Thein Sein announced that human resource was key to success, and therefore education was among his top priorities (Lall 2016, Ye Htut 2019). The following years have seen undeniably significant, if sometimes frustrating, developments regarding education in general and the teaching of ethnic minority languages in particular.

Developments regarding education and access to schooling since 2011

Education reforms are slow processes and the education system in Myanmar today continue to face many pressing challenges, including those described in this report, as well as corruption issues, witnessed in all sections and at all level of the administration in Myanmar. Also, the authors are well aware of the discrepancies that often exist between what is described in the statistics of a ministry in Naypyidaw and the reality on the ground, at the schools.

Nevertheless, the post-2011 era has witnessed some significant policy shifts towards facing some of the longstanding issues of schooling in Myanmar, notably in terms of access, quality and inclusiveness of education.

While gathering precise and comparable figures is often challenging, the notoriously low support of the State to education under the SLORC/SPDC has gradually increased over the last decade. Estimated to 1,3% of the total government expenses during the late years of the SPDC, the education budget accounted for about 5% in 2015-2016, and has now reached 8,41% (2,685 billion kyats) for 2019-2020 (against 1,756 billion kyats in 2017-2018). This represent a dramatic increase: almost nine-fold (in nominal value) between the 2011-2012 (300 billions Kyats) and the 2019-2020 fiscal years[44] (see Figure 6). It should however be noted that priorities are many in post-dictatorship Myanmar, and this Education budget still compares very unfavorably to those of most South-East Asian countries: Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, or Singapore, for instance, invest close to or above 20% of their budget in education; "Target 7" of UNESCO's Muscat Agreement (2014) aims at an allocation of 15-20 % of the public expenditures, or 4-6% of the Gross Domestic Product, by all countries by 2030.

Yearly expenditures on Education (Billion Kyats)

Year	Value
2011-2012	310
2012-2013	761
2013-2014	893
2014-2015	1106
2015-2016	1406
2016-2017	1726
2017-2018	1756
2018-2019	2175
2019-2020	2686
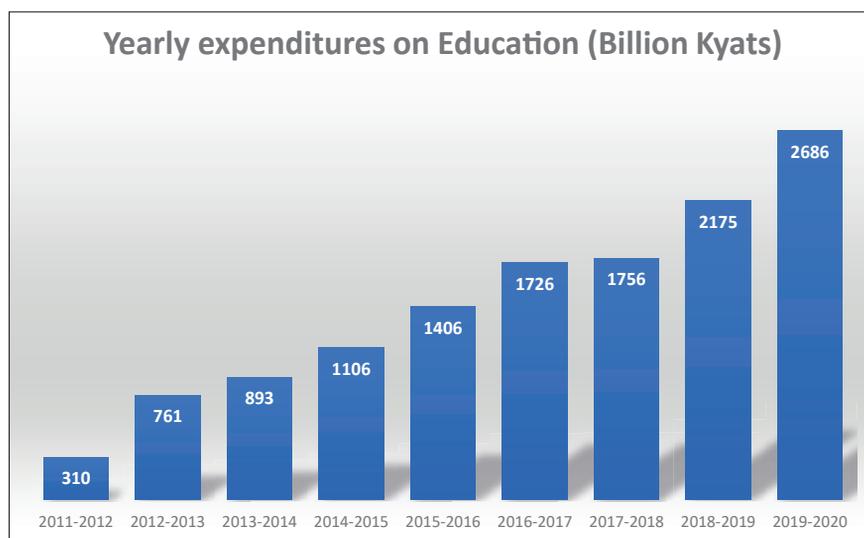
Figure 6: Yearly expenditures on Education, in raw values and compared to the Gross Domestic Product. Source: Ministry of Planning and Finance[45].

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[44] Myanmar 2018 Education Budget Brief, UNICEF and Ministry of Education. "Tracking the Myanmar Govt's Income Sources and Spending", Nan Lwin, *The Irrawaddy*, October 22, 2019.

[45] Graph reproduced from "ပညာရေးအသုံးစရိတ်ကိုဆန်းစစ်ခြင်း", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, December 16, 2019.

Education expenses compared to GDP (%)

Year	Value
2011-2012	0.67
2012-2013	1.48
2013-2014	1.54
2014-2015	1.69
2015-2016	1.93
2016-2017	2.13
2017-2018	1.92
2018-2019	2.05
2019-2020	2.26
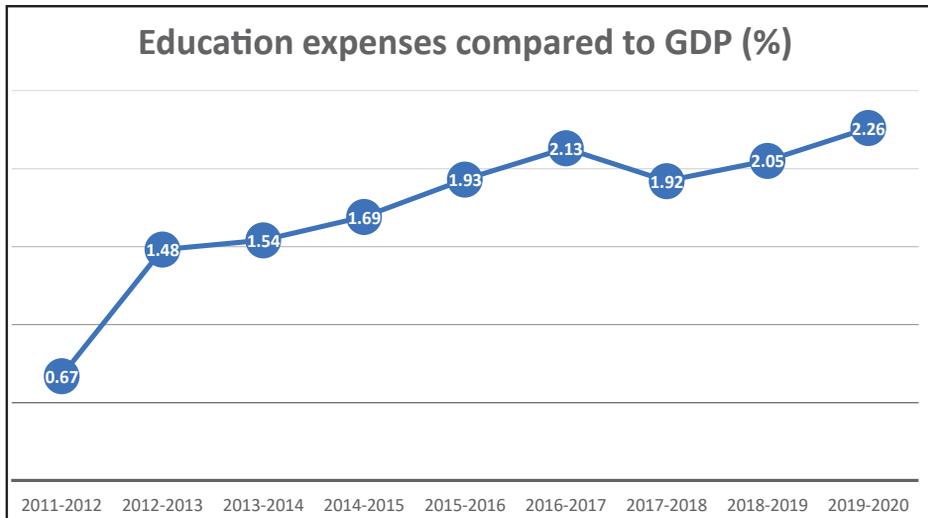
Nevertheless, while the Basic Education department received 77% of the total education budget in 2017-2018, this shift has had noticeable positive impacts on many aspects of primary and secondary education, such as access to schooling, including in areas populated by ethnic minorities. The increase of teachers' salaries (a primary teacher today earns 180,000 kyats, against 35,000 in 2011), the abolishment registration fees, stationery and parent-teachers association, as well as the creation of stipends for disadvantaged students and grants for school maintenance have contributed to some improvements in access to schooling (Harp-f and MIMU 2018, Suante 2019).

While figures and the process leading to their production should certainly be discussed, estimations of the primary net enrolment rates suggest a dramatic increase in access to primary education, from 87,6% in 2009-2010[46], to an estimated 97% in 2017-2018[47]. Official figures also relate a massive increase in the number of government schools (47,005 in 2019 against 39,676 in 2011) and teachers (404,444 in 2019 against 277,645 in 2011).

A shift in the teaching methods, from rote learning towards "child-centered approach" has also been initiated, notably through the new national curriculum, which is being released year by year, and contributes to encourage "critical thinking" through open-ended questions, which can have multiple answers (Salem-Gervais 2018, Metro 2019)[48]. This shift may also be facilitated by some improvement in material conditions, such as the diminishing average student-teacher ratio. However, classes with fifty or more students are still relatively common, and a departure from the "teacher-centered" pedagogy, deep rooted into Myanmar's monastic education tradition and encouraged by successive military regimes, entails deep shifts in the whole society, which involve trade-offs and do not happen overnight.

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[46] Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey (IHLCS) in Myanmar: Poverty Profile (2009–10).

[47] *Myanmar 2018 Education Budget Brie*f, Unicef and Ministry of Education.

[48] See also "ပညာရေးစနစ်သစ် ဘာတွေ မျှော်လင့်နိုင်မလဲ" *DVB Debate*, July 2019.

While overall access to schooling seems to have significantly progressed since 2011, issues thus remain many and different regions may also present different dynamics. Recent testimonies mention, for instance, dramatic improvements in access to education in the Naga SAZ of Sagaing Region during the last decade[49]. On the contrary, people living in regions affected by conflicts are regularly confronted, among many other problems, to the closure of the schools[50].

Early signs of language policy shift under Thein Sein's administration

Regarding the more specific issue of language-in-education policy, in the early 2010's, within this context of a political and educational landscape beginning to shift, it wasn't long before the issue of teaching ethnic languages in public schools was brought to the attention of the policy makers. As soon as March 2011, during the first session of the parliament and just a month after the Thein Sein Government took office, Dr Chan Nyein, then Minister of Education, was questioned by a representative of Bhamo district regarding the teaching of ethnic languages. He then answered that the government had no plan to introduce ethnic languages within formal education, invoking the great number of languages existing across the Union and the complex ethnic settings[51].

However, in the context of a significant, if limited, representation of ethnic parties in the parliaments after the 2010 elections and with the signature of new cease-fire agreements with most armed-groups – with the major exception being the *Kachin Independence Organisation* (KIO) – it was not long before the question of teaching ethnic language in government schools was brought up again by MPs from different States. After several failed attempts[52], in June 2012, Dr Chan Nyein finally announced that ethnic languages could be taught in government schools, up to grade 3, but that these subjects had to remain outside of regular school hours, which were already full with the other subjects, including with the national and an international language, namely Myanmar and English[53].

While this announcement marked an important step towards the (re)introduction of ethnic minority languages in government schools, in practice, the following years have witnessed rather frustrating progresses towards that aim. Beyond the formal authorization to teach, State support relating

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[49] "Catching up with the 'lowlands': education in the Naga hills", *Frontier Myanmar*, July 2, 2019.

[50] "118 schools still closed in Paletwa", *Myanmar Times*, June 28, 2019. "Thousands of children in conflict zones lack safe learning places", Sit Htet Aung, *Myanmar Times*, November 21, 2019. "Plundered future" Chin Human Rights Organization, January 18, 2020.

[51] *New Light of Myanmar,* March 16, 2011.

[52] "After the election of President Thein Sein's civilian government in 2011, the leaders of five ethnic political parties representing Shan, Mon, Rakhine, Chin and Karen ethnic nationality communities, submitted, without success, several proposals for the teaching of ethnic languages and literature in government schools. Among this group, the Mon representatives continued actively to push for inclusive language education and the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools." Margontier-Haynes (2016)

[53] "တိုင်းရင်းဘာသာသင်ခန်းစာများ သင်ကြားပေးနိုင်ခြင်းဖြင့် တိုင်းရင်းဘာသာစကား၊ စာပေ၊ အနုပညာနှင့်ယဉ်ကျေးမှု ဓလေ့ထုံးတမ်းများ ခိုင်မာရှင်သန် လာမည်" *New Light of Myanmar*, June 16, 2012

to the salaries of the ethnic language teachers has indeed been extremely limited, with only 30,000 kyat a month, often paid only at the end of the school year. Not only these situations were unsustainable without the support of the teachers' respective literature and culture committees and/or village communities (see Chapter 4.4), but the teaching of ethnic languages outside of school hours placed these classes in competition with other activities, including the infamous *tuitions*, thus contributing to an overall perception of the subject of ethnic languages as a low priority.

Developments regarding the teaching of ethnic languages in the years following the 2012's announcement have been uneven across the Union, a situation which is revealing of both the heterogeneity of socio-linguistic situations and of an emerging decentralization process during these years. While incomplete statistics prevent from accurate comparison, for the 2015-2016 school year, about a third of the 1,436 schools in Mon State were offering classes in Mon, Sgaw and Pwo Karen, as well as in Southern Pa-O, mobilizing 987 teachers[54], a situation which compares very favorably to other states.

This head start of Mon State, is all but surprising. As we argue elsewhere (see Chapter 5.2) the Mons, for multiple reasons (including linguistic homogeneity, a sense of belonging to a single ethno-linguistic identity and an emphasis given to education and language preservation through several Mon organisations), constitute the single "easiest" case across the Union of Myanmar when it comes to introducing ethnic languages in formal education.

In this context, and with a significant representation of the *All Mon Region Democracy Party* (AMDP) in the Mon State parliament after the 2010 elections, a proposal allowing ethnic languages to be taught within school hours in the primary schools of Mon State was adopted in April 2014[55], which prompted discussions in Naypyidaw as the article 188 and Schedule 2 of the 2008 *Constitution* does not specifically give provision for Regions/States parliaments to pass laws regarding education[56] (more on the legal framework in the next section).

Parallel to these progressive developments, the Thein Sein administration launched in 2012 the *Comprehensive Education Sector Review* (CESR), involving the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, the World Bank and donors such as AusAID and DIFID, and aiming at producing a comprehensive education plan. Later on, in October 2013, a parallel committee, with much less foreign influence, the *Education Promotion Implementation Committee* (EPIC) was constituted in Yangon by the President's office (South and Lall 2016, Ye Htut 2019).

In September 2014, a *National Education law*, shaped by the CESR and EPIC and largely amended by the parliament, was enacted. This enactment, also following the exclusion of the *National Network for Education Reform* (NNER) of the discussions, triggered student protest all over the country in the following months, until a violent police crackdown in March 2015 (Ye Htut

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[54] Interview at the UNICEF office in Mawlamyine, July 2016.

[55] EMREF, 2019, ဖက်ဒရယ်စနစ်နှင့် ငြိမ်းချမ်းရေးအတွက် ပညာရေး

[56] EMREF, 2019, ဖက်ဒရယ်စနစ်နှင့်ငြိမ်းချမ်းရေးအတွက် ပညာရေး

2019)[57]. The main grievances of the protesters were: insufficient inclusiveness of the stakeholders in the drafting process, insufficient expenditures on the education sector, not enough decentralization of the education system and, more specifically, not enough "autonomy" for the universities.

Among the comments, mostly sympathetic to the student's demands, Rosalie Metro noted that ideas of "autonomy" and "decentralization" might be somewhat idealized by the students – which is to be expected in a post-dictatorship context – through the idea that "centralization" was the root cause of all the issues of Myanmar's education system[58]. While she concluded that the main challenge was rather to define "decentralization"[59], Mael Raynaud noted the contrast between Myanmar student's demands, and those of their European counterparts, for whom "autonomy" is often seen as a cover-up for "privatization"[60].

Somewhat unexpectedly, the students also incorporated the specific issue of ethnic languages (an issue which has always been among the NNER's priorities) in the list of their 11 demands, calling for an "(*7.) Inclusion of a provision in National Education Law that ensures freedom for the practice of ethnic languages and mother tongue based multi-lingual education for ethnic populations and tribes".*[61]

All these demands led to a few compromises, materializing in several amendments in a June 2015 version of the law. Among these amendments, the new version of article 31(a) prescribes to "aim for education expenditures amounting for 20% of total State expenditures"[62], a low committing but direct answer to the protestors' demands. The content of this law in terms of decentralization and language-in-education policy will be analyzed in the following section.

2. The legal framework, decentralization and choices in terms of language policy

In this section, we provide a brief analysis of the constitutional and legal framework regarding decentralization in the field of education and the choices in terms of language-in-education policy progressively made during the last decade. Our argument is that despite the legitimate critics made to both the 2008 Constitution and the 2014-2015 Education law, certain aspects of these legal texts do offer some leeway and avenues for decentralization, notably regarding the emergence of the States and Regions as critical levels for the unfolding language-in-education policy.

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[57] "Students, Activists allege violence in Rangoon protest crackdown", Nobel Zaw, *The Irrawaddy*, March 6, 2015.

[58] "I Consider Nothing to Have Changed", (Interview of Dr Thein Lwin), *The Irrawaddy*, November 20, 2014.

[59] "Decentralize education – then what?", Rosalie Metro, *Myanmar Times*, December 8, 2014

[60] "Education protests offer lessons", Mael Raynaud, *Myanmar times*, November 24, 2014.

[61] Statement regarding the Need for Creation of National Education Policies and Laws for Realization of Democratic Education System, *Action Committee for Democratic Education*, 24 January 2015

[62] Unofficial English translation. "နိုင်ငံတော်၏ ပညာရေးအသုံးစရိတ်ကို နိုင်ငံတော်အသုံးစရိတ်အားလုံး၏ ၂၀ ရာခိုင်နှုန်းအထိ ရောက်ရှိရေးအတွက် ရည်မှန်းချက်ထားရှိ ဆောင်ရွက်ရမည်။"

Decentralization and the emergence of the States and Regions in Education

We have seen in the introduction how States and Regions have gained in importance politically, in recent years. Decentralization, as it was imagined by the authors of the 2008 Constitution, was very limited, to say the least, and amounted to little more than making the 7 States and the 7 Regions another administrative level between the Union, on the one hand, and the districts, townships, wards and village tracts, on the other hand.

The 2014-2015 National Education Law, and its implementation with regards to language-in-education policy in particular, has constituted a limited but nevertheless significant step towards decentralization in the field of Education.

However, it is still interesting to notice that the Constitution itself, in addition to creating subnational governments and parliaments, did provide for a number of articles that seem to veer towards the changes witnessed today, or at least profess a vision of the Union that allows for the reforms described in this report:

> 28. The Union shall:
>   (a) earnestly strive to improve education and health of the people;
>   (b) enact the necessary law to enable National people to participate in matters of their education and health;
>   (c) implement free, compulsory primary education system;
>   (d) implement a modern education system that will promote all-around correct thinking and a good moral character contributing towards the building of the Nation.
>
> 348. The Union shall not discriminate any citizen of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex and wealth.
>
> 365. Every citizen shall, in accord with the law, have the right to freely develop literature, culture, arts, customs and traditions they cherish. In the process, they shall avoid any act detrimental to national solidarity.
>
> 366. Every citizen, in accord with the educational policy laid down by the Union:
>   (a) has the right to education;
>   (b) shall be given basic education which the Union prescribes by law as compulsory;

However, when it comes to the actual division of powers, Education squarely remains in the domain of the Union. Schedule Two, that lists the powers of States and Regions, does not cover Education. Schedule One, that lists the powers of the Union Parliament, on the other hand, includes the following:

9. Social Sector
- (a) Educational curricula, syllabus, teaching methodology, research, plans, projects and standards;
- (b) Universities, degree colleges, institutes and other institutions of higher education;
- (c) Examinations prescribed by the Union;
- (d) Private schools and training;

Interestingly, the fact that Education would be included in the "social sector" is reflected in the fact that, at the regional level, it is the ministers of social affairs who seem to take a leading role with regards to Education in all States and Regions observed. Indeed, despite Education falling under the jurisdiction of the Union level under Schedule One of the 2008 Constitution, several articles of the 2014-15 Education law attribute functions to the States and Regions governments regarding this sector. These functions of the subnational governments on matters included in Schedule One constitute an often overlooked but fundamental aspect of their mandate, as described in article 249 of the Constitution (Raynaud 2019).

In addition to articles more directly linked to the language-in-education policy (which are described in the next section) article 49 of the National Education Law describes the prerogatives of the regional governments in the Education sector. It states that these institutions:

49. Regional governments:
- (a) shall help and guide educational matters in accordance with current law.
- (b) shall aim and work to have every child complete the free and compulsory education.
- (c) shall have programs to reward exceptional students.
- (d) shall implement programs for the continuing education of both exceptional students and those with learning difficulties. They shall also assess and approve programs of outside help.
- (e) shall work to make it convenient for non-local teachers and educational administrators to live and travel in their area.
- **(f) shall have the freedom to administer educational matters in accordance with current law.**
- **(g) shall cooperate effectively with government ministries, government organizations, and community organizations for educational development.**
- **(h) can cooperate with local and international organizations and scholars for educational matters.**

Articles 42 and 56, also detail functions, some of which are immediately linked with the teaching of ethnic minorities language and culture, in which the States and Regions governments are to collaborate and share responsibilities with the ministry of Education:

42. The Ministry, Division or State Governments, and Self-Administered Division or Region Governments shall:

     (a) arrange for the ability to communicate and transfer between government and other schools.

     (b) help to open classes to develop the ethnic groups' literature, language, culture, arts and traditions and to start subjects/majors in ethnic groups' culture, literature, and history in universities."

56.

     (a) The Ministry of Education, relevant ministries and the Higher Education Cooperation Committee shall administer relevant higher education schools in accordance with this and other current laws.

     (b) Administration of schools, apart from those mentioned in sub-paragraph (a) will be shared by the Ministry of Education, other relevant ministries, and regional governments."

Reciprocally, according to article 58(c):

The ministry's roles and responsibilities towards regional governments are as follows:

(…) (c) **to help regional governments in implementing educational development by providing experts, techniques, and funds and through the opening of schools and helping to assure equal standards of educational quality."**

Finally, article 39 of the 2014 Education law stated that:

     (g) that "**there shall be freedom to develop the curriculum in each region** based on the curriculum standards mentioned in (f)."

The 2015 amendment to this paragraph removed the term "freedom" but made the article clearer in terms of administrative responsibilities, by replacing the vague "each region" by "in each State and Region"[63], paving the way for the local curriculum as it is currently being developed (see Chapter 6).

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[63] (ဆ) "သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်းစံကို အခြေခံ၍ သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်းဖွဲ့ ဖြိုးမှုကို တိုင်းဒေသကြီးနှင့် ပြည်နယ်အလိုက် ဆောင်ရွက်နိုင်ခွင့်ရှိရေး"

Similarly, many articles of the 2015 *Ethnic rights protection law* reaffirm or give prerogatives to the States and Regions governments in the administration of ethnic affairs[64].

Parallel to this evolving legal framework attributing limited but significant prerogatives to the regional governments, and with the opening of offices of the ministry of Ethnic Affairs in each State and Regions after 2016, there has been some extent of deconcentration towards States and Regions (as well as Districts and Townships) within the administration of the ministry of Education.

In other words, two distinct but symbiotic processes have taken place, in recent years: on the one hand, subnational governments have been granted new powers over Education, and on the other hand, subnational offices of the Ministry of Education (as well as the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs) have been given new responsibilities.

While limited, these new powers and responsibilities deserve a closer look. Final decisions in the processes of identifying the specific variation on each language/dialect spoken by the families of the students in an individual classroom, vetting teachers or TAs able to use that specific language in the classroom, and teach it, not to mention the writing of the local curriculum, are all necessarily left to the subnational level (civil servants, elected representatives and civil society organizations). Knowing the highly sensitive and political nature of these decisions, this form of

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[64] Notably: "12. The Region or State Ministry shall form the service organization necessary for respective ethnic affairs under it with the approval of the relevant Region or State Government.

13. The Region or State Ministry shall draw annually allotment in the budget of the Region or State Government to implement the relevant ethnic affairs.

14. Ethnic groups may submit to the relevant Region or State Government for getting protection in the case of the failure of ethnic rights.

15. The relevant Region or State Government shall, if received the submission under section (14), for giving necessary protection not to fail the right of ethnic group: (a) assign duty to the relevant Region or State Minister for ethnic affairs; (b) assign duty to any suitable Minister being the member of the Region or State Government if Minister cannot be assigned under sub-section (a).

16. The Minister assigned under Section 15 shall:

(a) scrutinize whether the failure of ethnic rights is arisen or not, in respect of the matter assigned

to him; (b) carry out for giving protection according to the decision of the relevant Region or State Government or, in coordination as necessary with Ministries, government departments, government organizations, Self-Administered Division or Self-Administered Zone Leading Bodies in the relevant Region or State if the failure of ethnic rights is arisen, scrutinizing under sub-section (a); (c) submit the case to the relevant Region or State Government or to the Union Ministry of Ethnic Affairs through the relevant Region or State Government, if necessary, to get the support of other Union level Ministries, government departments and government organizations in carrying out subsection (b).

17. The Region or State Government shall submit the case to the Union Government if it is found that the submission under sub-section (c) of section 16 is necessary to get the support of Union level Ministries, government departments and government organizations.

19. The Minister assigned under section (15) shall, if he is not able to protect the failure of ethnic rights in his assignment, submit completely the causes and effects to the Region or State Government.

20. The Region or State Government shall submit the case to the Union Government for carrying out as necessary if it is found that the submission under section (19) is the case to be undertaken at the Union level.

29. The Union Minister may delegate the duties and powers prescribed in section (9) to the relevant Region or State Minister, if necessary, for implementation.

32. The Region or State Government shall assign the relevant Minister for Region or State Ministry of Ethnic Affairs to carry out any ethnic affair in this Law. In Regions or States where there is no Minister for ethnic affairs, let the Minister assigned by the Chief Minister of the relevant Region or State carry out."

decentralization amounts to giving the subnational level real and significant powers.

This is consistent with observations made not only in the course of this research project, but also with observations made in the course of other research projects on decentralization led by Urbanize, and by other organizations researching other aspects of decentralization the authors have talked to, in the last 18 months.

Decentralization might be limited, and it might be taking place at a slow pace, but there seems to be a real and conscious will, at the political level, and at the highest level of government in Naypyidaw, to gradually empower elected representatives and civil servants at the subnational level, and maybe gradually get them accustomed to taking responsibilities that for decades were taken at the center.

As Figure 7 and 8 show, these developments are accompanied by a significant increase of both the budgets transferred to the State/Region offices of the MoE, within the 2011-2018 period, and the budgets allocated to State and Region Governments. Again, decentralization remains limited, since financial responsibility over the education system remains for the most part in the hand of the ministry, in Naypyidaw. But the day to day handling of a growing portion of public finances has shifted to the subnational offices of the ministry, that work closely, as described in this report, with the elected representatives, as well as civil society organizations, in their respective State or Region.
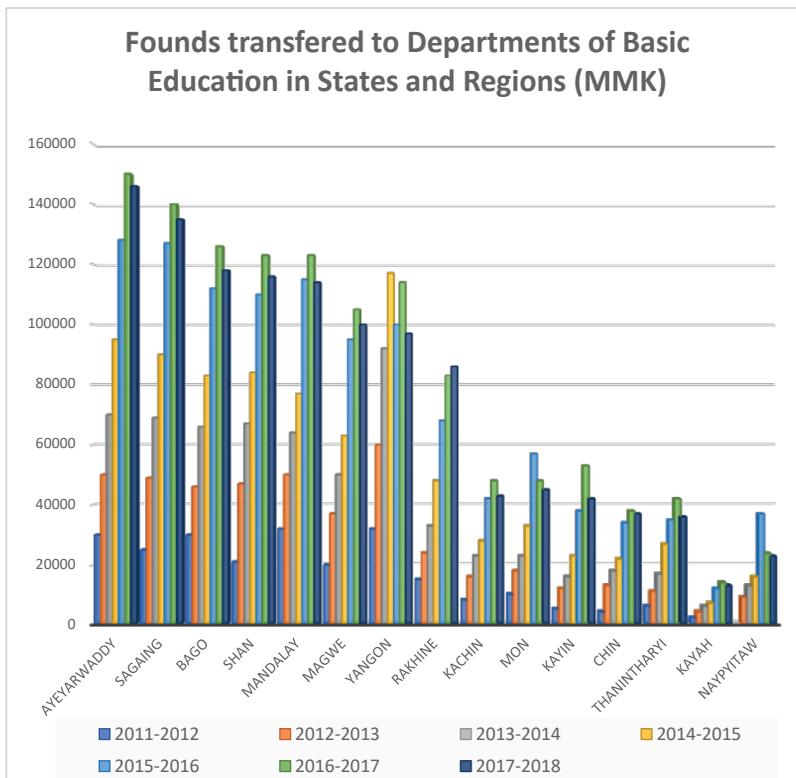
Figure 7: (Source: Unicef and Ministry of Education, 2018)

To speak only of the MoE, it is clear that it remains a much-centralized institution. However, this slow process of deconcentration within its administration does constitute one of the aspects of the emergence of the States and Regions as important administrative levels in the field of Education, and most notably language-in-education policy. These developments constitute also, arguably, a step towards building an administration that would be capable of managing the responsibilities that would become hers in the event of the transformation of the system into a federal one.

Furthermore, the authors believe that a fundamental aspect of this process is the emergence of State-level political ecosystems, involving actors such as the State/Region governments and parliaments, the State/Region MoE and MoEA offices and civil society actors such as the literature and culture committees (see Introduction and Chapter 6). Such a level of direct responsibilities granted by the State to civil society actors over such sensitive and defining issues in running the education system, in particular, seems quite remarkable.

As seen above, another aspect of this emergence of the States and Regions as critical levels in the Union of Myanmar political life, is the increasing yearly budget allocated to State/Region governments (see Figure 8). However, when it comes to direct financial involvement of the State and Region governments in educational matters, the share of these State/Region budget ending up being used for activities related to the teaching of ethnic minority languages remains extremely limited.
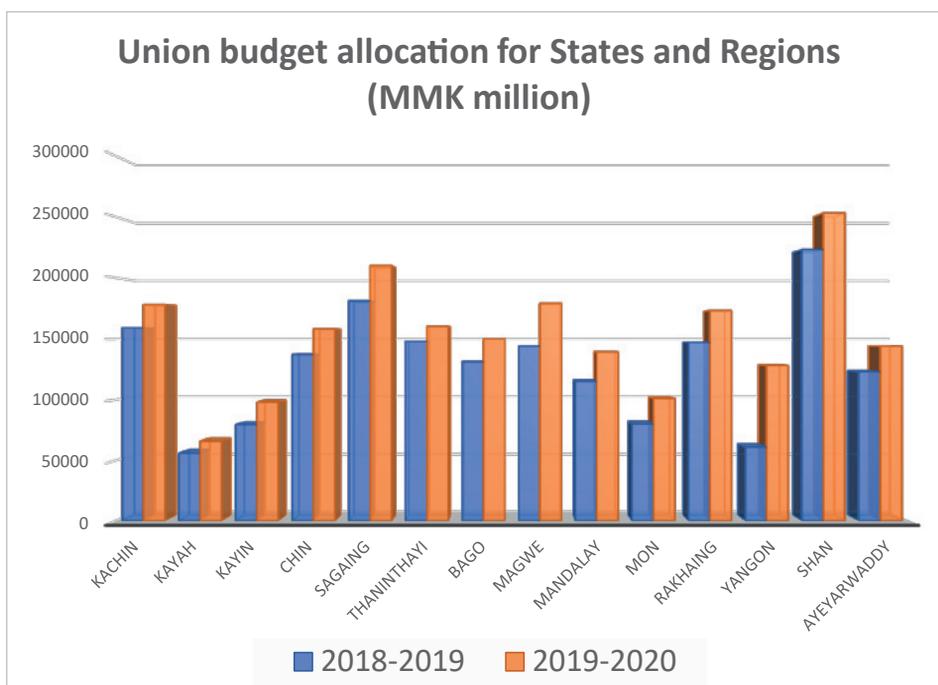
Figure 8 (Source: Ministry of Planning and Finance[65])

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[65] Quoted in "Spending on electricity tops budget for the first time", *Myanmar Times*, October 10, 2019.

The main channel for this endeavor seems to be through the Ethnic Affairs ministers of the local governments. The budget allotted to these ministers varies from one State/Region to another. Anecdotally, in 2017-2018, the three Ethnic Affairs ministers of Mon State State (Bamar, Pa-O and Kayin) received respectively 1,500; 1,500 and 2,000 lakhs. In 2018-2019, the seven ethnic affairs ministers of Shan State (Bamar, Kachin, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, Intha and Kayan) received 600 lakhs each. In some instances, when there are no Ethnic Affairs ministers, this type of fund is allocated directly to the literature and culture committees by the regional governments (see for instance the case of Kayah State in Chapter 4.5). This type of budget is typically used for ethnic national days and religious events, as well as the organization of summer classes and teacher trainings in ethnic languages. In some rare instances, the regional government has also covered the expenses for the distribution of ethnic language textbooks in the schools, such as the Mon State government for the Mon language textbooks in 2018-2019 (see Figure 9).

The financial, or fiscal, aspects of decentralization in the field of Education (see Batcheler, 2019) mirror the dynamics observed in the evolution of the decision-making process, within government institutions. New powers and responsibilities seem to be gradually granted to the subnational level, both within the administration and with regards to State and Region Governments, but with the pace of the process being carefully controlled from Naypyidaw.
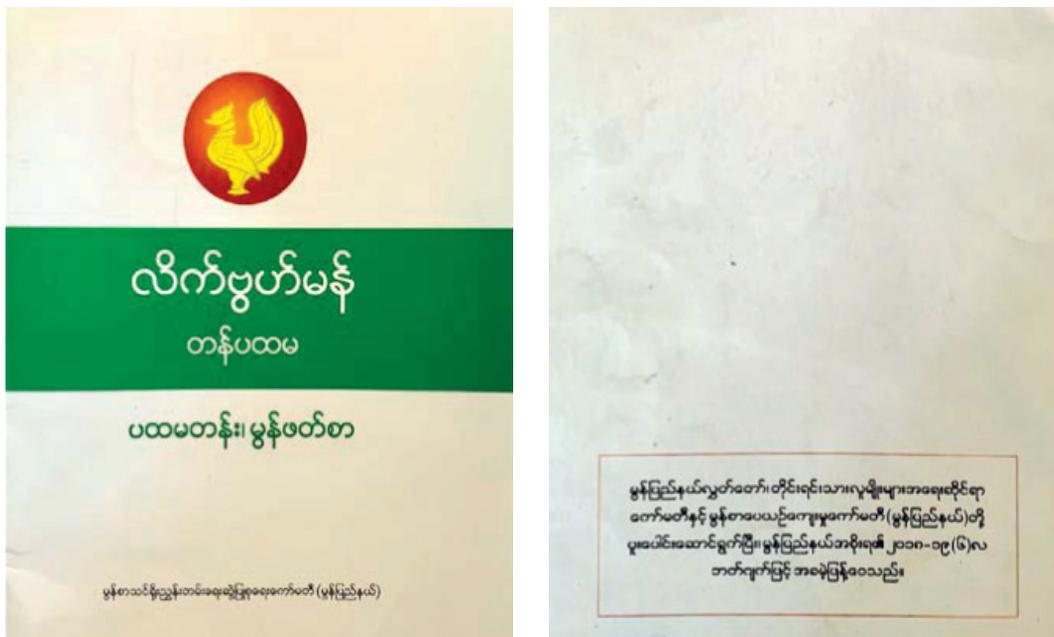
Figure 9: Cover and back of a Grade 1 textbook for the teaching of Mon language, whose distribution was covered by the budget of the Mon State government in 2018-2019.

Overall, the State and Region governments, despite limited budget and prerogative that are not always totally clear, are thus progressively emerging as critical political actors in a number or fields, and most notably regarding language-in-education policy (see next section). This was for instance

clear when we tried to meet with the State/Region education officers (the highest representative of the MoE in the State/Region), who typically asked that we obtain the authorization of the regional Social affairs minister before accepting the interview. Some of our interviewees described this aspect of decentralization through the distinction between the Pali/Burmese concepts of *ana* (အာဏာ, power, authority) and *awza* (သြဇာ, influence), the regional governments still often lacking the former (as well as financial capacities) but having an increasing amount of the latter.

Choices in terms of language-in-education policy

In addition to attributing functions to States and Regions in the field of Education, the 2014-15 *Education law* paves the way for the language-in-education policy which is in the process of unfolding today (see Chapter 4.3). This legal framework is based on the 2008 constitutional framework, which includes a number of provisions regarding ethnic minority languages. The table below (Figure 10) shows the evolution of the treatment of these issues in the three successive constitutions.

Article 39 of the 2014 Education law states that "The (National Education Policy) Commission shall ensure that the following is true in regard to the curriculum:

> 39 (d) the curriculum should give the ability to raise each ethnic group's rich literature, culture, arts, traditions and historical heritage along with the values that every citizen should have[66]

Article 44 officializes the teaching of ethnic minority languages as subjects in the government schools, also suggesting that this activity will not be limited to the primary level (and making States and Division governments responsible for this endeavor, as described in previous section).

> 44. In Divisions or States, teaching of ethnic languages and literature can be implemented by Division or State governments, starting at the primary level and gradually expanding to higher grades[67]

Article 42 (b) states that the administrative levels in charge of education, including States and Regions, shall participate in the opening of ethnic languages and culture classes beyond the primary and secondary schools, in the universities:

> 42. The Ministry, Division (sic.) or State Governments, and Self-Administered Division or Region Governments shall:
>
> (…)

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[66] ၃၉။ ကော်မရှင်သည် သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်းများနှင့်စပ်လျဉ်း၍ အောက်ပါအချက်များပါရှိစေရန် ကြပ်မတ်ဆောင်ရွက်ရမည်
(ဃ) နိုင်ငံသားအားလုံးတွင် ရှိသင့်ရှိအပ်သောတန်ဖိုးများနှင့် တိုင်းရင်းသားမျိုးနွယ်စုအသီးသီး၏ ကြွယ်ဝသော စာပေ၊ ယဉ်ကျေးမှု၊ အနုပညာ၊ ဓလေ့ထုံးစံနှင့် သမိုင်းအမွေအနှစ်တို့ကို မြှင့်တင်နိုင်စွမ်းရှိရေး၊

[67] ၄၄။ တိုင်းဒေသကြီး သို့မဟုတ် ပြည်နယ်များတွင် တိုင်းရင်းသား စာပေနဲ့ ဘာသာစကား သင်ကြားသင်ယူမှုကို သက်ဆိုင်ရာတိုင်းဒေသကြီး သို့မဟုတ် ပြည်နယ်အစိုးရအဖွဲ့၏အစီအစဉ်ဖြင့် အခြေခံပညာမူလတန်းအဆင့်မှ စတင်၍ အကောင်အထည်ဖော်ပြီး အဆင့်ဆင့်တိုးချဲ့ ဆောင်ရွက်နိုင်သည်။

1947 Constitution	1974 Constitution	2008 Constitution
Article 216 **The official language of the Union shall be Burmese, provided that the use of the English language may be permitted.** **Article 217** Two copies of the Constitution shall be made, one in the Burmese language and the other in the English language, both copies to be signed by the President of the Constituent Assembly and enrolled for record in the office of the Registrar of the Supreme Court. Such copies shall be conclusive evidence of the provisions of this Constitution.	**Article 21** (a) The State shall be responsible for constantly developing and promoting unity, mutual assistance, amity and mutual respect among the national races. (b) **The national races shall enjoy the freedom to profess their religion, use and develop their language, literature and culture, follow their cherished traditions and customs, provided that the enjoyment of any such freedom does not offend the laws or the public interest.** **Article 102** **The Burmese language shall be used in the administration of justice. Languages of the national races concerned may also be used, when necessary, and arrangements shall then be made to make interpreters available.** **Article 152** (a) Every citizen shall have the right to education. (b) **Burmese is the common language Languages of the other national races may also be taught**. **Article 153** (a) Every citizen shall have the right to freely conduct scientific research, work with creativity and initiative to develop the arts, literature and other branches of culture. (b) **Every citizen shall have the right to freely use one's language and literature follow one's customs, culture and traditions and profess the religion of his choice** The exercise of this right shall not, however, be to the detriment of national solidarity and the socialist social order which are the basic requirements of the entire Union Any particular action in this respect which might adversely affect the interests of one or several other national races shall be taken only after consulting with and obtaining the consent of those affected. **Article 198** **Burmese shall be used as the official language for the purpose of uniformity and clarity in communications between the higher and lower level organs of the State and between such organs at the same level. If necessary the language of the national race concerned may be used.**	**Article 22** **The Union shall assist:** **(a) to develop language, literature, fine arts and culture of the National races;** (b) to promote solidarity, mutual amity and respect and mutual assistance among the National races; (c) to promote socio-economic development including education, health, economy, transport and communication, so forth, of less-developed National races. **Article 354** Every citizen shall be at liberty in the exercise of the following rights, if not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality: (a) to express and publish freely their convictions and opinions; (b) to assemble peacefully without arms and holding procession; (c) to form associations and organizations; **(d) to develop their language, literature, culture they cherish, religion they profess, and customs without prejudice to the relations between one national race and another or among national races and to other faiths.** **Article 365** **Every citizen shall, in accord with the law, have the right to freely develop literature, culture, arts, customs and traditions they cherish.** In the process, they shall avoid any act detrimental to national solidarity. Moreover, any particular action which might adversely affect the interests of one or several other national races shall be taken only after coordinating with and obtaining the settlement of those affected. **Article 450** **Myanmar language is the official language.**

Figure 10: Articles dealing with language issues in the successive Constitutions

b. help to open classes to develop the ethnic groups' literature, language, culture, arts and traditions and to start subjects/majors in ethnic groups' culture, literature, and history in universities.[68]

The *Ethnic right protection law*, enacted in February 2015, also guarantee, albeit in more vague terms, the right of ethnic minorities to teach their languages:

4. (b) Ethnic group, if it is not contrary to the provisions of the existing Laws for security of the State, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility and public order and morality: (…)

have the right to teach and learn their language and literature if it is not contrary to the education policy of the State;[69]

It defines the duties of the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs, including:

9. (j) revealing, preserving, protecting and carrying out for the development of language, literature, fine art, culture and custom of the minority and ethnics who are almost extinct.

The policy of teaching ethnic languages and cultures as subjects was later on confirmed in the final version of the *National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021)*, which ranks this endeavor in number 3 of the "Education sector reform priorities for the government":

Support and promote nationalities' languages and cultures, including curriculum development, implementation and monitoring by State and Region governments to support primary-aged children who speak different languages.

This policy has been since reaffirmed as a long-term trend in the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (2018-2030), which counts among its "action plans" (4.1.8):

Improve access to quality basic education, including through the use of multilingual and ethnic language-based content[70]

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[68] ၄.၂။ ဝန်ကြီးဌာန၊ တိုင်းဒေသကြီး သို့မဟုတ် ပြည်နယ်အစိုးရအဖွဲ့၊ ကိုယ်ပိုင်အုပ်ချုပ်ခွင့်ရတိုင်း သို့မဟုတ် ကိုယ်ပိုင်အုပ်ချုပ်ခွင့်ရဒေသ ဦးစီးအဖွဲ့တို့သည် (...) (ခ) တိုင်းရင်းသားများ၏ စာပေ၊ ဘာသာစကား၊ ယဉ်ကျေးမှု၊ အနုပညာနှင့် ဓလေ့ထုံးစံများ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးအတွက် သင်တန်းများ ဖွင့်လှစ်သင်ကြားရေးနှင့် တက္ကသိုလ်များတွင် တိုင်းရင်းသားများ၏ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုစာပေနှင့် သမိုင်းအထူးပြုဘာသာရပ်များ ဖွင့်လှစ်သင်ကြားရေးတို့အတွက် ကူညီဆောင်ရွက်ရမည်။

[69] ၄။ တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးများသည် နိုင်ငံတော်လုံခြုံရေး၊ တရားဥပဒေစိုးမိုးရေးနှင့် ရပ်ရွာအေးချမ်းသာယာရေး၊ ပြည်သူတို့၏ ကိုယ်ကျင့်တရား အကျိုးငှာ ပြဋ္ဌာန်းထားသည့်ဥပဒေများနှင့် မဆန့်ကျင်လျှင်
(ခ) မိမိတို့၏ စကား၊ စာပေတို့ကို နိုင်ငံတော်၏ ပညာရေးမူဝါဒကို ထိခိုက်မှုမရှိစေဘဲ သင်ကြားခွင့်နှင့် သင်ယူခွင့်ရှိသည်။

[70] *Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (2018 – 2030)*, 2018, The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Planning and Finance

Medium of instruction and "classroom language"

Equally importantly, the 2014-15 *Education law* – in continuation of article 450 of the 2008 constitution which states that "Myanmar language is the official language" specifies the policy choices in terms of medium of instruction, through the two paragraphs of article 43. The first paragraph, stipulates the two main language of instruction: Myanmar and English.

> 43. (a) Instruction can be in Myanmar or English or in a combination of Myanmar and English.

In practice, Burmese remains the main medium of instruction, except for certain science subjects, for which the curriculum is composed in English, as it was the case prior to 2011. As noted by McCormick (2019) there is often a distinction between "teaching" and "explaining" in Myanmar's educational practices (a distinction which is also relevant to the "classroom language" issue explained below). Using English as a medium of instruction, as far as government schools are concerned, often means that English textbooks are read aloud and then "explained" in Burmese.

Using English, instead of Myanmar, as a common medium of instruction for the whole country has often been suggested by ethnic minority activists, arguably particularly by Christian minorities whose elites tend to possess a better grasp of this language. Their argument, often illustrated by foreign examples including India and Singapore, is that having English as a medium of instruction would both benefit the economy of the country on the long run, while depoliticizing the medium of instruction issue and leveling the educational playing field, since English is not the language of any ethnic group in the country. Counter arguments in this debate include different relationship to the colonial past of the country among the inhabitants of the Union of Myanmar but also, more practically, a general lack of fluency of both the teachers and the general population in this language.

The second paragraph (b) of article 43 in the first version (2014) of the *Education law* included provision for using ethnic minority languages as a media of instruction during primary and secondary education:

> (b) If there is a need, an ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar as a **language of instruction** at the basic education level.[71]

This paragraph was amended in 2015, after the student demonstrations, in what is in fact a step back in terms of introducing ethnic minority languages in formal education.

> (b) If there is a need, an ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar as a **classroom language** at the basic education level.[72]

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[71] (ခ) အခြေခံပညာအဆင့်တွင် လိုအပ်ချက်ရှိလျှင် တိုင်းရင်းသားဘာသာစကားကို မြန်မာဘာသာစကားနှင့်အတူ သင်ကြားမှု ဘာသာစကားအဖြစ် တွဲဖက်အသုံးပြုနိုင်သည်၊

[72] (ခ) အခြေခံပညာအဆင့်တွင် တိုင်းရင်းသားဘာသာစကားကို မြန်မာဘာသာစကားနှင့်အတူ စာသင်ခန်းသုံး ဘာသာစကားအဖြစ် တွဲဖက်အသုံးပြုနိုင်သည်။

Replacing "language of instruction" (သင်ကြားမှုဘာသာစကား) by "classroom language" (စာသင်ခန်းသုံး ဘာသာစကား) seems to be a clarification that ethnic minority languages, in addition to be taught as subjects, can be used orally to "explain" the rest of curriculum, which remain in Burmese (and English). This policy thus echoes "code-switching" solutions found by other countries, notably when facing structural challenges in implementing a MTB-MLE system (see Chapter 3.3).

The change in the wording of Article 43 (b) is thus a clarification that ethnic languages are not meant to be the language of instruction *per se* in government schools, like in a MTB-MLE system. Rather, the law makes official a situation which has already been happening in the minority regions of the country for decades, at least in cases where ethnic language speaking teachers were available (see Chapter 4.4 on this issue): the teachers using the local language(s) to *explain* the curriculum, when necessary.

The following paragraphs will offer a short discussion of this "classroom language" policy, which has often been perceived as going not far enough, marginalizing the aspirations of ethnic nationalities, by refusing them MTB-MLE:

> "Ethnic minority languages are now allowed as "classroom language" to help explain concepts when necessary; however, the plan remains silent on the issue of ethnic language as a medium of instruction, and there is no mention of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). Thus, ethnic nationality hopes and concerns remain marginalized within debates on education reform in Myanmar." (Lall and South 2018)

> The NLD needs to revisit the education provision in ethnic states and look at the medium of instruction. The Thein Sein government's support to teach the ethnic languages as a second language in schools did not go far enough (Lall and South 2016). Only if international good practice of mother-tongue based education is rolled out across Myanmar's ethnic states will all children be able to have an equal chance in life. (Lall 2018)

> "The 2014 Education Law recognizes the role of languages other than Burmese in the classroom, but does so in a limited way. It states, "If necessary, things can be explained orally in children's mother tongue" (MoE 2014, 5). It also states how ethnic languages can be taught as a subject. This directive is a direct rebuff to attempts by many in civil society to see the dominant ethnic language of a particular school/classroom be the primary language of instruction.

> (…) Thus, despite the advocacy efforts to date, the promise of a state education system that acknowledge and embraces diversity, and affords opportunities for multilingualism remains unmet. This has consequences not only for social cohesion, but also the degree to which this education system can be inclusive and equitable to all." (Shah and Lopes Carodzo 2019)

Criticism of that policy and advocacy of a proper MTB-MLE system has also been shared by organizations active in the fields of education and the defense of ethnic minority rights, such as the *National Network for Education Reform* (NNER), the *Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education* (MINE)[73] and the *Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center* (ENAC 2018).

However, in our opinion (Salem-Gervais 2018, Salem-Gervais and Raynaud 2019) as far as government schools (as opposed to EBEPs, see Introduction) are concerned, given the daunting and multiple structural challenges on the way to implementing an MTB-MLE system in Myanmar (see Chapter 5), the policy of teaching ethnic minority as subjects and using them as "classroom languages", is a realistic shift toward including ethnic minority languages in government schools for the foreseeable future. This policy may be expanded towards more ambitious models, such as MTB-MLE later on, if appropriate. The "classroom language" approach may not bring the complete educational benefits of a proper MTB-MLE system, but relying on code-switching and orality to tackle the language issues faced by ethnic minority children, does offer a lot of flexibility in contexts where determining a single standardized and written mother tongue is complex (see Chapter 3 and 5).

This policy indeed adresses one of the main hurdles in including ethnic minority languages in formal education, namely using written (and thus somewhat standardized) languages, which are indispensable components of a MTBE system in the strict sense of the term (Kosonen & Benson 2013, see Chapter 3.3). The challenging implications specifically linked to using written ethnic minority languages in education, and the possibity to resort to "code-switching" as an element of answer to this problem, were already identified in the case of Myanmar:

> "(…) A related assumption is that a language must have a script and texts in order to be used as the medium of instruction, even though teachers or some kind of classroom assistants could use one local medium orally for "explaining" rather than teaching." (McCormick 2019)"[74]

A teacher's testimony, related in a recent article on Chin State, echoes the many interviews we have realized throughout the country regarding the pedagogical benefits of using ethnic minority languages as "classroom languages" (despite the challenges in translating certain concepts):

> "Using the local language to explain and discuss the concepts and information helps the students understand the lessons which are written in Myanmar language," said Ning Za Man."[75]

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[73] *Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education in Karen Areas* (MINE-Karen areas) Response To The Republic Of the Union Of Myanmar National Education Law And The Basic Education Law Of the Republic Of the Union Of Myanmar 2nd Draft (2014), 31 August 2014

[74] This paper was apparently written significantly earlier than its publication date, which explains the absence of reference to the unfolding policy by its author.

[75] "Mother tongue helps the learning" Tin Htet Paing, Unicef Website, December 9, 2019.

Using ethnic languages as "classroom languages" – in addition to their teaching as subjects – it should finally be noted, is a similar approach to the one choosed by some EBEPs, including armed-groups education systems, such as KIO's Education department, which tend to use the Burmese curriculum with additional Jingphaw subject(s).[76]

Actual implementation and efficiency of this "classroom language" policy, and most critically efforts towards training more local teachers (see Chapter 4.4) and practical challenges arising in a variety of language situations, should be closely monitored in the years to come. It should also be noted that "classroom language" and MTB-MLE policies do not differ much, as far as *Early Childhood Care and Development* is concerned, since education is not focusing on literacy, properly speaking, at this stage.

While pre-schooling in Myanmar still concerns only a fraction of the general population, the *Myanmar National Early Childhood Care and Development Policy*, signed by President Thein Sein in June 2014, gives significant provision for using ethnic minority languages at this early stage of education (Meyers 2016). This document mentions the use of local languages in education several times and in an explicit fashion. For instance, article 257 states that: "All preschool services will respect local cultures and will be provided in the mother tongue of the children and their parents. Educational materials will be prepared and provided in the language of the children attending the preschool. This may necessitate the use of two or more languages in some preschools."[77].

Tainyintha only

The legal framework described above paves the way for the deep shift in language-in-education policy which has been unfolding during the last few years, and which may, in time, prefigure more ambitious language-in-education policies. However, citizenship remains a complex issue in Myanmar (South and Lall 2017), and not everyone's languages are included in these reforms. Indeed, what is translated by "ethnic" in the *Education law* (and "national races" in the 2008 Constitution), correspond to the term *Tainyintha* (တိုင်းရင်းသား) in the original version, in the national language.

This Burmese language legal framework thus explicitly states that only languages associated to the 135 officially recognized "ethnic nationalities"/"national races" can be taught in the schools. Languages of groups which are not fully recognized as citizens, such as Indian and Chinese languages, Nepali, or the Rohingyas' Chittagonian dialect, are thus not supposed to be taught within government schools' premises. The 34 branches of the *Gurakhas Dhamma Association* existing across the country, for instance, continue to teach Nepali language in religious settings, during summer vacations, just like they did under military regimes[78].

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[76] "Students in Kachin-controlled territory face education barriers", Fishbein E., *Frontier Myanmar*, September 3, 2019. More details on KIO's education policy in Lall and South (2016). According to certain sources, KIO's education system has been using less Burmese since the collapse of the ceasefire in 2011.

[77] *Myanmar National Early Childhood Care and Development Policy, p109.*

[78] Interviews with the *Gurakhas Dhamma Association,* in Tamu and Myitkyina, July-August 2019.

The scope of the languages included or not in the language-in-education policy has been an object of debates in several instances. While the *National Network for Education Reform* (NNER) has made clear, when advocating MTB-MLE, that whatever language is relevant should be used in the schools, other actors, including nationalist monks (formerly known as the *Ma Ba Tha*) and an education adviser to President Thein Sein[79], have argued that the term "mother tongue" could imply "non-indigenous" languages, such as Chinese languages, Nepali or the Rohingya dialect. This type of views has probably influenced policymakers, both to be warry of the term "mother-tongue" (မိခင်ဘာသာစကား) and to make sure the term *Tainyintha* is always associated with "languages" in the legal framework.

Somewhat ironically, according to our interviews, many ethnic educators actually agree with limiting the introduction of ethnic minority languages in government schools to officially recognized ethnicities, despite basing their arguments (for their own language) on "inclusiveness" and educational benefits for the children. Epitomizing these debates and tensions over language policy, in September 2018, a meeting was held in Sittwe by 200 representatives of Buddhist religious orders, Rakhine political parties and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) as well as civil society groups. The purpose of this meeting was specifically to oppose a project by the Maungdaw District Education office to hire Rohingyas Teaching assistants, aiming at using the Rohingya dialect as classroom language, in order to alleviate the language barrier for local children[80].

3. The development of ethnic languages classes in government schools, as of 2019-2020

Within the legal framework described in the previous section, the teaching of ethnic minority languages has gradually increased since 2013-2014, with seemingly an acceleration since the 2017-2018 school year. In this section, we provide information regarding the number of languages, schools, teachers and students involved in the different regions of the country. We then move on to briefly describe the production of the curricula and the financial implications of teaching ethnic minority languages.

Which language? Where? When?

The data presented below comes from the Ministry of Education's statistics, collected either in State/Region offices or in the department of Basic Education in Naypyidaw. Keeping in mind the affection military regimes used to have for ever-increasing statistics supporting their propaganda, this information should be taken with a little bit of caution, as the MoE may want

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[79] "Reflections on a Debate on Education Reform", Raynaud M., 2017, *Tea Circle*, April 3.

[80] "Analysis: Why the Rohingya Teaching Assistants Project is Facing Opposition", Moe Myint, *The Irrawaddy*, September 20, 2018.

to demonstrate the success and expansion of its policy. Cases where schools, teachers and students are included into official statistics without classes being held on a regular basis most probably exists, particularly, as admitted by the MoE's representative themselves during interviews, in situations where teachers already belonging to the MoE are in charge of these classes (a situation which tend to be discouraged lately, see Chapter 4.4).

This being said, the MoE is the only institution able to gather such data at the national level. While additional, in-depth research in specific geographical areas is necessary to better understand the practical challenges at school level and the possible discrepancies between statistics and reality, our research so far does not suggest a blatant contrast. Recent policy developments, such as the appointment of Teaching Assistants since 2017-2018 (as opposed to the "30,000 kyats" teachers, see Chapter 4.4), as well as the inclusion of these classes within school hours, are also likely to contribute to increasing consistency between data sheets and reality.

Indeed, up to 2018-2019, ethnic minority languages were taught outside of school hours, a situation which was pointed-out as a shortcoming of the policy, and contributed to the perception of these subjects as low priorities by parents and children[81]. Things are in the process of changing, since the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. In the perspective of implementing the local curriculum (see Chapter 6), schools around the country now have a slot for local ("ဒေသ") content in their timetable, one period out of height, within school hours. This period is already often used for the teaching of ethnic minority languages, particularly in schools presenting relatively homogenous linguistic situations.

According to official figures, a total of 54 languages were taught in the different States and Regions in 2018-2019 and 64 are taught in 2019-2020 (see details in Figure 11). While producing a list of languages spoken in a country is not an exact science, listing languages officially taught in schools can be a problematic exercise too, particularly in a time where ethnic identities and written languages associated with them are being renegotiated (see Chapter 5).

Groups listed under the same ethnonym may have slightly different written languages and use different curricula, they may choose to split or to unite from one school year to another, and their level of readiness to actually teach may vary. The Basic education department, which centralize all this data in Naypyidaw, may also not be able to follow the latest details of all the linguistic developments in every States and Regions, as opposed to regional offices of the MoE and MoEA. In particular, the Basic Education department may have a hard time determining how to count separate curricula and scripts referring to the same ethnonym, in the case of ethnic groups spread over several States and Regions.

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[81] See for instance (among many older articles discussing this issue) "ရေဝတီတိုင်းတွင် တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေသင်ကြားမှု ခရီးမပေါက်ဟု အစီရင်ခံစာဆို", *The Voice*, September 18, 2018.

State/Region	Languages taught
Kachin State (11)	Jingphaw, Lachit, Lisu, Tai Leng, Tai Leu, Rawang, Lohwo, Zaiwa, Tai Sar, Shan (Tai Long), Tai Khamti
Kayah State (6+)	Kayah, Kayaw, Gaybar, Tai Long, Kayan, Sgaw (+ Pa-o, Yintelay and Manumanaw)
Kayin State (12)	Sgaw, Western Pwo, Eastern Pwo, Pakanyaw, Mon, Pa-O, Kayan, Kayaw, Gaybar, Bwe, Shan, Lekwekaw
Chin State (20+)	Hakha, Mara, Falam, Hualngo, Tedim, Zo, Thado, Cho, Matupi, Zotung, Upu, Daai, Yindu, Ya, Khumi, Lautu, Rakhaing, Lemi, Hkongso , Mro…
Sagaing Region (17)	Shan Ni, Tai long, Kayanyuyan naga, Thado, Falam, Hakha, Tedim, Rushaing, Zo, Hualngo, Makuri Naga, Kyakya, Tankon, Pannyon, Lainyaung, Kognet, Gonwanponyo.
Tanintharyi Region (3)	Sgaw, Mon, Pwo
Bago Region (East) (7)	Sgaw, Mon, Pa-O, Asho Chin, Shan, Kayah, Kayin
Bago Region (West) (3)	Sgaw, Asho, Shan
Magway Region (6)	Asho, Upu, Hakha, Cho, Daai, Zotung
Mandalay Region (2)	Shan, Lisu
Mon State (4)	Sgaw, Eastern Pwo, Mon, Pa-O
Rakhaing State (6)	Rakhaing, (?) Chin, Upu, Sontu Chin, Asho Chin, Thet
Yangon Region (4)	Sgaw, Shan, Asho Chin, Westen Pwo
Shan State (south) (8)	Shan, Pa-O, Palaung, Lisu, Kayan, Kayah, Kayaw, Lahu
Shan State (East) (5)	Shan, Lahu, Akha, Wa, Kachin
Shan State (North) (6)	Shan, Wa, Lahu, Palaung, Kachin, Lisu
Ayeyarwady Region (5)	Sgaw, Pwo Kayin, Rakhaing, Asho Chin
Naypyidaw council (3)	Kayan (Gekho), Asho Chin, Sgaw

Figure 11: Languages taught in government schools in 2019-2020[82]

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[82] This table is based on the MoE's internal documents. Languages names below are mostly based on their name in Burmese and spellings may vary, especially for Chin and Naga languages. One of the language names in the table may also correspond to several different languages being taught. Inversely, similar languages can be recognized under different ethnonyms in different States/Regions, see Chapter 5).

State / Region	Number of schools	Total number of teachers (before the appointment of the second batch of TA, in 2019-2020)	Number of students
Kachin State	594	777	31,382
Kayah State	311	342	13,622
Kayin State	1440	2,160	93,361
Chin State	1465	2,993	54,757
Sagaing Region	615	1,241	43,968
Thanintharyi Region	232	584	15,511
Bago Region (East)	338	902	27,468
Bago Region (West)	208	355	8,609
Magway Region	396	783	18,796
Mandalay Region	55	169	7,432
Mon State	612	1,395	54,917
Rakhine State	2,813	5,652	133,183
Yangon Region	271	477	15,461
Shan State (South)	981	1,852	50,403
Shan State (North)	388	1,976	54,722
Shan State (East)	136	170	6,735
Ayeyarwady Region	1,626	3,350	136,346
Naypyidaw	5	14	458
TOTAL	**12,486**	**24,792**	**766,731**

Figure 12: Number of Schools, teachers and students learning an ethnic minority language in the government schools of the different States and Regions.[83]

[83] Source: internal statistics of the MoE. See Introduction for a discussion on the data. Mistakes in this table might come from the authors.

Regardless of these complexities, the overall trend toward more languages being taught in government schools year after year is undeniable. Languages in the process of being introduced in schools in 2019-2020 include Lisu of Kayah State, Khami in Rakhaing State, Taungyo in Southern Shan State and Palaung in Mandalay Region. Recent articles, including in "ethnic" media, and interviews of "ethnic educators", while still underlining weaknesses in the implementation of the policy (such as lack of teachers, textbooks and schools where these classes are not held properly[84]), tend to acknowledge these positive developments[85]. Official statistics – which does not seem to be available for each year and, again, should be taken with a little bit of caution – also show a quantitative increase in the teaching of ethnic minority languages, in terms of schools (12,486 in 2019-2020 against 12,248 in 2018-2019) and children (766,731 in 2019-2020 against 724,772 in 2018-2019). The number of teachers has equally increased, although counting them is a little bit complex given their multiple and shifting status (see Chapter 4.4). There is a total of 24,752 of them in 2019-2020, against 20,673 in 2017-2018[86], and an estimated 15,000 in 2016-2017[87].

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[84] "တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေမြှင့်တင်ရန် ဆရာ/မများကို လုံလောက်သည့် အထောက်အပံ့ပေးစေလို", *Kantarawaddy Times*, November 21, 2019.

[85] See for instance "ကရင်စာ သင်ကြားရေး အကဲဖြတ်ချက်", *Karen Information Centre*, November 16 2019. "Mon national schools show the way on Mother tongue Education", *The Irrawaddy*, November 29, 2019. "Mother tongue helps the learning", Tin Htet Paing, UNICEF Website, December 9, 2019.

[86] Figures from the Department of Basic Education's Statistics.

[87] "တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေ သင်ကြားပေးသည့်ဒေသခံဆရာများကို သင်ကြားရေးလက်ထောက်အဖြစ် ခန့်အပ်မည်", *The Voice*, June 3, 2017.

Distribution of students learning languages spoken in Myanmar in Government Schools of Mon State, 2019-20
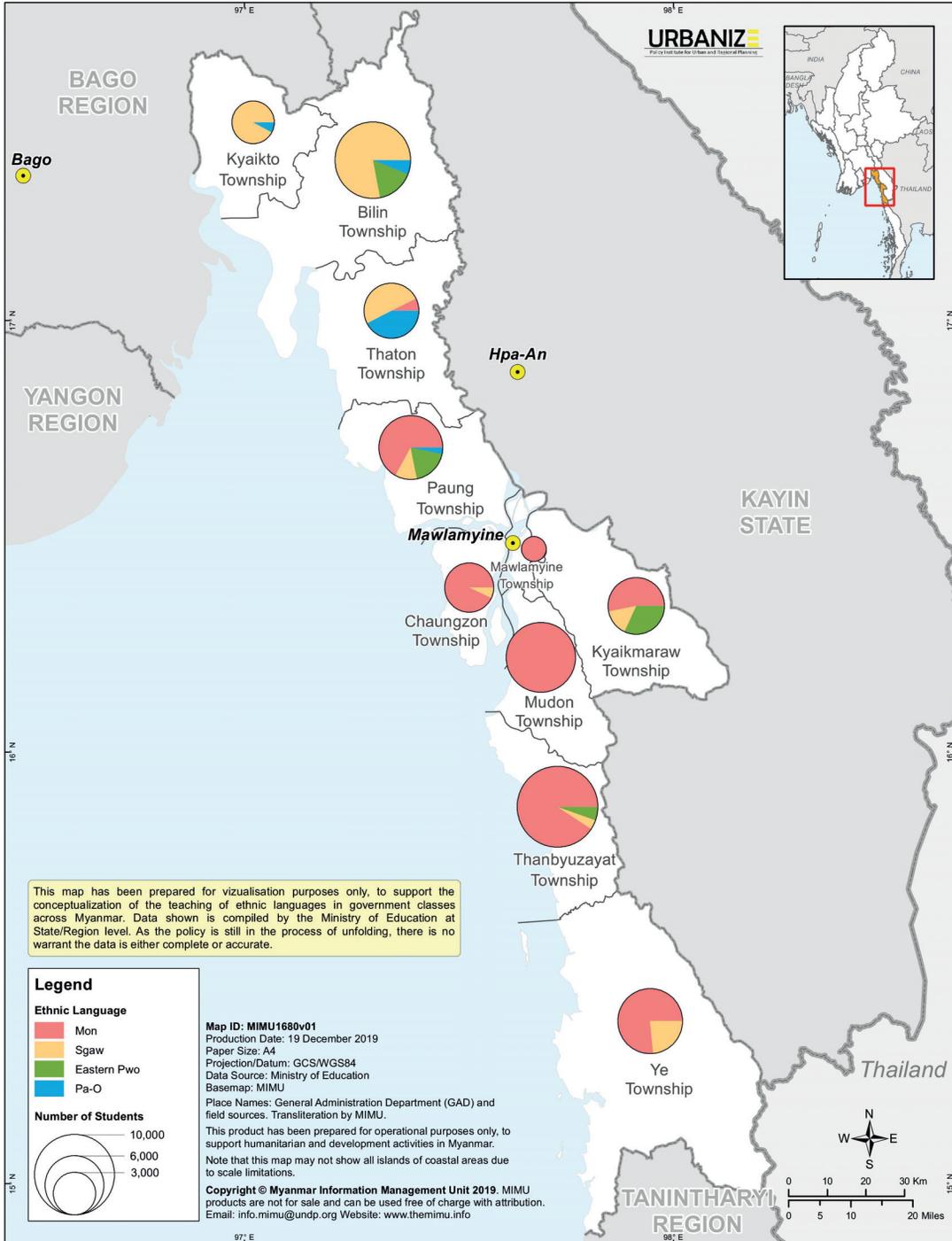
Figure 13

Distribution of students learning languages spoken in Myanmar
## in Government Schools of Kayin State, 2019-20


Figure 14

Myanmar Information Management Unit
Distribution of students learning languages spoken in Myanmar
in Government Schools of Kayah State, 2019-20
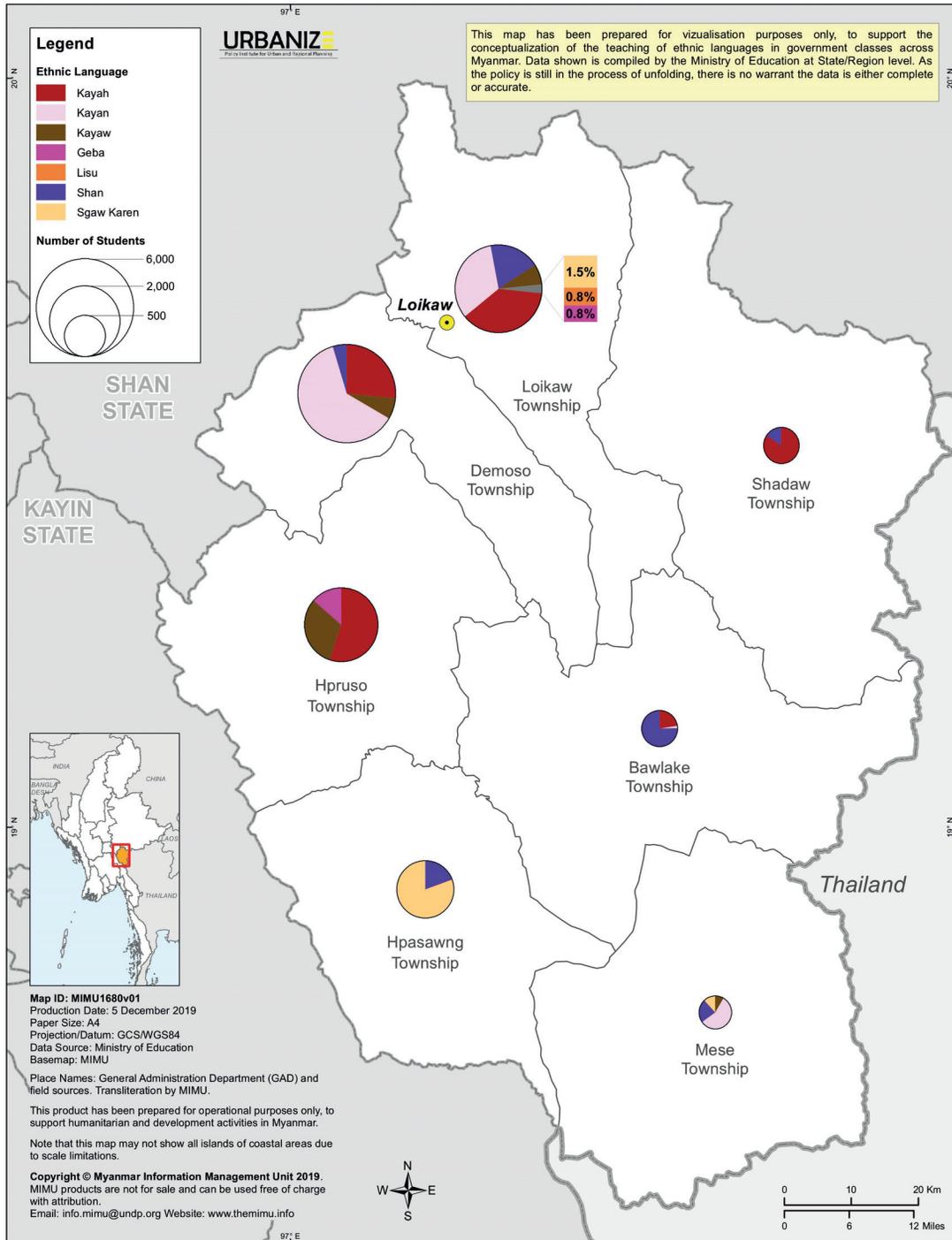
Figure 15

Figure 16: Classes of Akha, Shan (Tai Long), Pa-O, Rawang, Mon and Lahu languages, conducted in government schools of Shan, Kachin and Mon State (2017 – 2019)

Ethnic languages curricula: work in progress

One of the crucial aspects of introducing ethnic minority languages in government schools as subjects is the production of curricula for each of these languages. Beyond the sometimes-complex questions regarding which particular versions of which languages should be introduced in the schools (see Chapter 5), producing these curricula require significant resources, and may take time, depending on the level of "readiness" of the different groups. While recent years have seen rapid progress towards developing curricula for Grade 1 to Grade 3, early attempts at composing ethnic languages textbooks were sometimes clumsy, leading in some instances to discontent and frustrations.

An issue that was often pointed-out, during the first years of the introduction of these subjects in government schools was that in some instances, the textbooks were direct translations of the Burmese readers (ဖတ်စာ) into different languages (see Figure 17). This type of approach, often prompted by hasty instructions of an unprepared MoE administration and the lack of "readiness" of some literature and culture committees, was heavily criticized[88], including by MoE staff in charge of this issues locally[89], and for good reasons. Directly translated material has proved to be largely ineffective, because it may not follow a logical learning process for other languages, and the translation of the original texts are often out of reach for the students of a particular grade. Moreover, this first generation of textbooks, following word for word the Burmese curriculum was often seen as an evidence that the efforts of introducing ethnic minority languages and cultures in formal education were not genuine, amounting to a new form of "Burmanization".

In Mon State for instance, a first attempt at composing textbooks for the teaching of Mon in government schools in 2014 involved local university teachers, who ended up directly translating the Burmese readers into Mon. The project was heavily criticized by the local community, and the following year, another project, supported by UNICEF and other international institutions, aimed at composing a "second generation" of textbooks for the teaching of Mon language. The *Mon National Education Committee* (MNEC), the executive body of the education department of the *New Mon State Party* (NMSP an armed group), was involved in this project, and the final textbooks, inspired by the MNEC's own curriculum, were printed for the first time in early 2016 (see Figure 18).

While most groups seemingly never resorted to this "first generation" of translated textbooks, for others with less resources and overall readiness to produce curricula, the transition period between these first attempts and finalizing a proper "second generation" curriculum following logical pedagogical steps has been longer[90]. In most instances, "interim" pedagogical solutions,

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[88] See for instance the report ပဟိုချူပ်ကိုင်မှုစနစ် ကျင့်သုံးခြင်းကြောင့် ကျေးလက်တိုင်းရင်းသားဒေသရှိ ကျောင်းများအပေါ် အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုများ accessible on https://www.kaungrwai.org, or the intervention of U Naing Ngwe Thein in *DVB Debate* "how to make school reforms inclusive", February 2017.

[89] "Translated Textbooks Hinder Ethnic Language Education", *The Irrawaddy*, July 20, 2017.

[90] "Translated Textbooks Hinder Ethnic Language Education", *The Irrawaddy*, July 20, 2017.

through draft textbooks or lessons, have been found by LCCs and teachers in the meantime[91]. In any case, the idea that the government only allowed ethnic minorities to translate directly the Burmese textbooks, in addition to the extremely low salaries of ethnic language teachers and the fact that these classes were conducted outside of school hours, has been perceived as an evidence of a lack of genuineness of the government regarding inclusion ethnic minorities languages in education.

Figure 17: Translation in a Palaung language[92] (left) of a lesson from the Grade 3 Burmese reader (right)

Figure 18: Mon language readers, developed with the participation of the *Mon National Education Committee* and the Mon State Government.

Some of the groups with more resources and experience in teaching their languages in non-religious settings under military regimes have managed to produce and publish their own curricula, without government support. The *Shan Literature and Culture Committees*, for instance, after a national meeting held in July 2012 in Yangon attended by delegates of 68 Shan LCCs branches, have produced two curricula in order to teach "standard" Shan (Tai Long) in government schools. These two curricula use slightly different scripts due to linguistic and interpersonal divergences within the Shan LCCs, but both of them follow a logical progression for the teaching of the Shan language and are still used to this day.
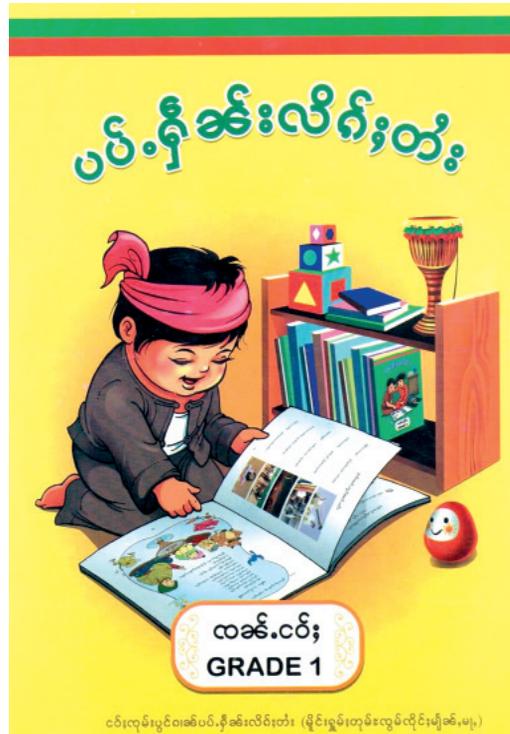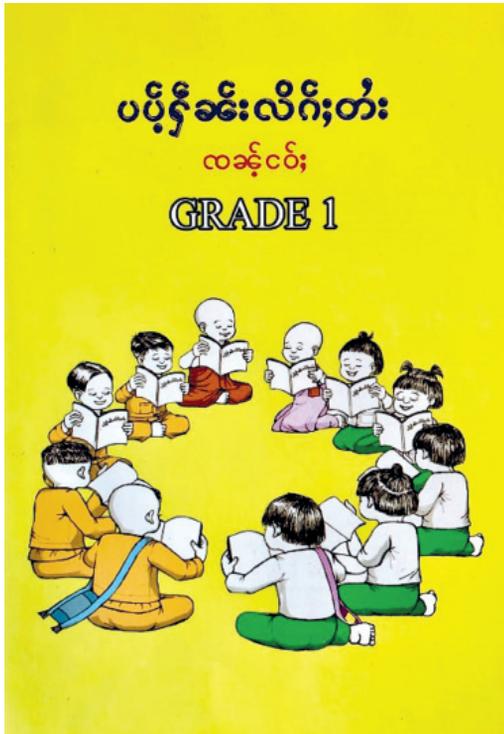
Figure 19: Two Shan (Tai Long) readers prepared by different branches of the Shan Literature and Culture Committee

February 2016, a month before the NLD government took office, marked an important development in the unfolding language-in-education policy, with the announcement by the MoE that *Basic Education Department* will cover the costs related to printing and distribution of the ethnic languages' textbooks, and that drafts should be sent to the MoE Education Offices of each States and Regions (EMREF 2017). This announcement was concomitant to the release of the *National Education Strategic Plan* (2016-2021), which contains, as part of the strategies to reform the curriculum, a component "Development of curriculum for nationalities' languages" stating that the MoE will "assist responsible staff from states and regions, as well as nationalities literature and culture committees and other experts to identity nationalities' languages, literature, culture, arts, customs, heritage and traditions. Especially, designing curriculum and teaching of nationalities' languages overseeing by state and regional governments."

The current process to obtain this support from the MoE requires a number of documents from various institutions: a formal request to teach by the LCC; samples copies of the textbooks; documents showing that the group is united regarding the particular language and written form used in the textbooks; letters from the district education offices with estimations of the number of schools, teachers, students and textbook copies needed; supporting letters from State/Region offices of the MoE and MoEA; and approval by the State/Region government (who is also in charge if groups want to teach beyond G3). This process, which ends up at the Union level by

the validation of the *National Education Policy Commission*, of the *Myanmar Curriculum Committee*[93] reveals two aspects of the language-in-education policy reform we are describing in this report.

First, it illustrates the fact that equating an ethnonym with a single written language and curriculum is sometimes problematic (see Chapter 5), and that the MoE thus wants to make sure groups reach internal consensus before printing their material, both to avoid wasting public money and risking fueling internal disputes.

Second, this process illustrates the central role, as prescribed by the education law of 2014-15 (see Chapter 4.2), of the State/Region administrative level, and in particular the regional governments, in the unfolding language-in-education policy. While the State/Region governments still lack the budget to play a significant role in the production of the ethnic language textbooks (exceptions include some support of the Kayah State government to the production of the textbooks for the local curricula in 2018, and the Mon State government covering the costs of distribution of the Mon language textbooks in 2018-2019) these institutions are nevertheless central in validating which language should be included in the schools within their territory.

Figure 20: Textbooks for the teaching of Lisu and Sgaw Karen (Pakanyaw) in Grade 2 and Grade 1 respectively. Covers indicates that the MoE has participated in the distribution (Lisu) and publication (Sgaw Karen) of these textbooks.

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[93] Ministry of Education internal documents, 2019.

Another important actor in the development of ethnic minority languages curricula in Myanmar is UNICEF, which is closely associated with the development of the local curriculum (see Chapter 6). Within this program, UNICEF has largely contributed, in collaboration with the local literature and culture committees, with the State/Region MoE/MoEA offices and with the local governments, to the production of curricula for 25 ethnic languages, for Grades 1, 2 and 3, in Mon, Kayin, Kachin and Kayah States (Chin State is included in the 5 States which started to develop their local curriculum in 2018, but presents a particularly challenging linguistic situation, see Chapter 5.2).

This process has been conducted under the guidance of a national consultant for the production of ethnic languages curricula, hired by UNICEF, organizing multiple workshops with representative of the LCCs of the participating States. After a review of the existing material used by the different groups for the teaching of their respective languages (within their respective various summer schools and religious programs or in government schools), the LLCs, with the technical support of UNICEF and its consultant, have worked towards adapting and completing this material, in order to teach in government schools, within the common framework of three periods (of 40 minutes) per week, between Grade 1 and Grade 3.

Different groups have made slightly different choices, depending on their priorities and specific language situations: some emphasize oral development first, others start with a focus on literacy. Benefiting from advices on modern language teaching methods from the consultant, all the groups involved in this process have created comprehensive programs, including teacher's textbooks[94]. Teacher training course for these curricula have also started, notably since the appointment of the second batch of Teaching Assistants in September 2019. Such teacher training courses were for instance organized between October 24 and 28, in Hpa An's MoEA office, by the local (Kayin, Mon, Pa-O and Shan) LCCs and the Kayin State government[95]. Shortly after this training, while copies of the new curricula were not printed and distributed to the schools yet, the Education minister reaffirmed, during a parliament session, the commitment of the MoE to take responsibility for printing and distributing all the ethnic languages curricula approved by the States and Regions[96].

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[94] Naw Ku Shi, presentation at the conference: *The Inclusion, Mobility, and Multilingual Education Conference – Exploring the role of languages for Education and development*, UNESCO, Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education working Group, Bangkok, September 2019.

[95] "ကရင်အပါအဝင် တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေ သင်ရိုးသစ်အတွက် ပထမအကြိမ် ဆရာဖြစ်သင်တန်းဖွင့်", *Karen Information Center* (KIC), October 25, 2019.

[96] "၂၀၁၉-၂၀၂၀ ပညာသင်နှစ်တွင် လိုအပ်သော တိုင်းရင်းသားဘာသာသင်ရိုး ကျောင်းသုံးပုံနှိပ်စာအုပ်များကို တိုင်းဒေသကြီး၊ ပြည်နယ်အလိုက် လိုအပ်ချက်များ ပေါင်းစပ်ညှိနှိုင်းလာပါက ပညာရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာနကတာဝန်အညီပြုပြီး ပုံနှိပ်၍ အခမဲ့ဖြန့်ဝေဆောင်ရွက်မည်ဟု ပြည်ထောင်စုဝန်ကြီး ပြောကြား," *Eleven News*, November 7, 2019.

Figure 21: Cover of textbooks developed for 6 languages of Kayah State (Gheba, Kayah, Kayan, Kayaw, Manu Manaw (Koyo) and Yintalay) by the local literature and culture committees, UNICEF, and the Ministry of Education.

UNICEF has also supported, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs, the development of bilingual story books (in ethnic minorities and Myanmar languages) by LCCs across the country. In 2019-2020, 3,5 million copies of 832 story books in 90 languages have been printed by UNICEF and the MoEA, in order to be used both inside and outside schools, notably for pre-primary aged children, in order to support "early literacy"[97], and the development of skills in both the mother tongue and the national language.

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[97] Early literacy is usually defined as "what children know about reading and writing before they can actually read and write".
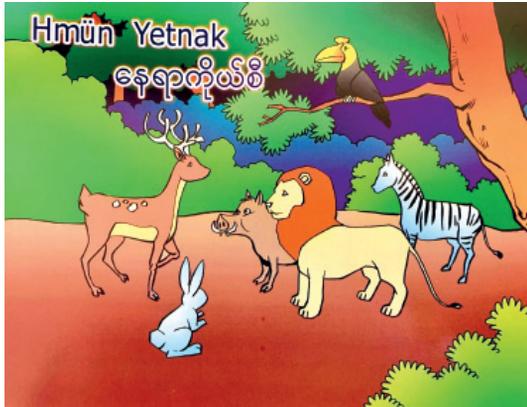
Figure 22: Covers of Story books in Daii Chin, Rakhaing, Sgaw Karen, Shan (Tai Long), Western Pwo Karen and Uppu Chin, produced by UNICEF, the MoEA and the MoE.

4. Towards training more local teachers

As described in previous pages, since 2011, successive governments and the Ministry of Education have progressively enacted laws aiming at protecting ethnic cultures and languages, notably through education, while progressively acknowledging that the language barrier does constitute an additional issue for ethnic minority children attending government schools. The *New Education Strategic Plan* (NESP) notably, explicitly states that "The 'language barrier' is also a significant factor for children from nationalities groups that contributes to their dropping out of school"[98]. These developments have resulted in a two-fold language-in-education policy regarding ethnic minority languages which is detailed in the 2014-2015 Education law: teaching these languages as subjects and encouraging their use as "classroom languages" (see Chapter 4.2).

Understandably, this policy requires a deep shift regarding crucial actors of the education process – the teachers – in order to make sure that the local students, who do master the relevant ethnic languages, are indeed trained to become government school teachers and are posted in the schools. Article 20(c) of the Education Law states that "The Ministry of Education and other relevant ministries (…) shall produce teachers who value the languages, literature, culture, arts, traditions and historical heritage of all ethnic groups in the nation and who have the ability to guide the development of all ethnic groups and the modern development of the nation".

Some aspects of the policy deployed to fulfil that aim – which at time could be seen as positive discrimination – as well as the evolving status of the ethnic minority language teachers, will be discussed in the following pages. These measures involve decentralization and the attribution of new functions to local, including non-state, actors and, crucially, contribute to link career opportunities to ethnic minority language skills.

Shortage of local teachers and "language barrier"

The education system shaped by successive military governments has been particularly centralized, monolithic and top-down, with Burmese language as its main medium of instruction (as well as English, to some extent, for science subjects in higher standards). Despite this situation and the progressive curtailing of ethnic minority languages as subjects, in practice, testimonies suggest that in many classrooms of primary schools, ethnic minority languages have been used informally to explain the national curriculum, even under military regimes.

However, in many – arguably most – instances, this practice was impossible for a simple reason: the absence of local teachers mastering the local ethnic minority language(s) in the schools. Under this heavily centralized system, the minimum marks to the Grade 10 exam allowing access to Education Colleges being set at the national level, a vicious circle has indeed been affecting ethnic minorities, sustaining the language-barrier they often experiment when confronted to a Burmese-speaking education system.

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[98] NESP, p48.

Children from ethno-linguistic minorities, partly because of their linguistic disadvantage when entering a Burmese-speaking education system, do not perform as well, on average, as children from the center of the country in the education system (see Chapter 3.2). This situation contributes to higher drop-out rates, and more specifically to a shortage of students from ethnic minorities attending the Education Colleges, in order to be trained as teachers. Having few teachers from ethnic minorities, in turn, prevents the usage of ethnic languages in the education process, sustaining the language barrier issue. This chicken-and-egg problem echoes a common challenge around the world, as described by Benson (2019):

> "In some cases, those best suited to become MLE teachers have never had the opportunity to gain teaching credentials for the very reason MLE is being proposed now: the prior system used only a dominant language, excluding them from attaining more than a basic education."

According to some estimations, 70 % of the teachers in ethnic minority areas do not speak the local language(s)[99] and our interviews across the country confirm that teachers from other regions, notably the dry zone of central Myanmar, form a large proportion of the teachers in certain ethnic minority regions. In some instances, these teachers stay several years in their posting, or may even end-up settling in the region, and invest in learning at least rudiments of the local language(s). This type of personal commitment can have tangible benefits on the overall learning process of the children, as well as on perceptions of government schooling by the local community (Lopez Cardozo and Maber 2019).

But these situations are a minority. In most instances, the teachers do not wish to remain in more or less remote minority areas more than necessary for the advancement of their career. In addition to its linguistic and pedagogical implications in the classroom, this overall trend reinforces the perceptions of the education system as a Burman-centric institution, causing in some instances reluctance from local communities to see a government school opening in their village (Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016).

Overall, in the last few decades, with the cease-fire agreements and some progress in access to education in most ethnic areas, the proportion of local teachers has probably been slowly increasing. Anecdotal information also indicates that this proportion varies significantly from one region to another, according to different factors, primarily the access, involvement and achievement of local populations in the government education system. In some of the more remote townships of Kachin State for instance, school years during which no candidates obtain the Grade 10 exam are sadly normal[100].

Habits and "work culture" are also an important factor in this situation: in many parts of Shan State for instance, in addition to the limited access to schooling in remote areas, there is a longstanding tendency to disregard civil servant positions and their modest salaries, including as teacher, among those who do complete secondary education. Several representatives of the

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[99] Jolliffe and Speers Mears (2016), quoting a Pyoe Pin report of 2014.

[100] Interview with the representative of UNICEF for Kachin State, Myitkyina, July 2019.

MoE and MoEA, who identify as Shan and speak the Shan language, explained during our interviews that attitudes of their community were only beginning to shift, and that they were less often criticized for being civil servants lately. Attitude and work culture seem often different in Mon State (which often tops the list among all States and Regions in terms of passing rate at the matriculation exam, see Figure 23), and which seems to have a much higher proportion of local teachers.

	Total population	Students in basic education (2017-2018)	Teachers in basic education (2017-2018)	Matriculation results (2016-2017)	Matriculation results (2018-2019)
Ayeyarwady Region	6,184,829	1,177,446	53,723	27.46	28.90
Sagaing Region	5,325,347	1,016,133	47,725	37.71	34.15
Bago Region	4,867,373	913,337	43,929	31.52	E 26.76 W 29.46
Shan State	5,824,432	841,124	38,372	30.80	S 27.69 N 31.51 E 20.79
Mandalay Region	6,165,723	978,429	41,928	40.22	36.13
Magwe Region	3,917,055	730,598	36,253	37.98	32.29
Yangon Region	7,360,703	1,030,618	34,956	37.24	32.63
Rakhine State	2,098,807	480,774	25,211	17.16	23.97
Kachin State	1,642,841	343,607	13,879	30.05	29.28
Mon State	2,054,393	405,450	16,110	41.12	37.54
Kayin State	1,504,326	326,056	13,224	29.47	27.67
Chin State	478,801	133,681	9,166	19.14	19.59
Thanintharyi Region	1,408,401	321,932	12,860	31.35	33.78
Kayah State	286,627	71,119	3,612	30.25	27.96
Naypyidaw	1,160,242	218,033	8,269	34.68	30.86
Total	50,279,900	8,988,337	399,617	Missing data	31.44

Figure 23: Basic information regarding school children and teacher's population, as well as matriculation exam results for 2016-17 and 2018-19[101].

[101] Source: UNICEF and Ministry of Education, *Myanmar Education budget Brief*, 2018 and Official 2018-2019 matriculation exams result, *New Light of Myanmar*.

The "30,000 kyats" teachers

Parallel to the progressive shift in language-in-education policy started in 2012, a number of measures have been slowly unfolding, in order to staff schools with teachers able to teach ethnic languages as subjects and, more recently, to use these languages as "classroom languages". These measures, to say the least, have been limited during the first five years and widely perceived, at best, as half-hearted.

The first measure towards having teachers able to conduct ethnic minority language classes in government schools (outside of school hours) goes back to the 2013-2014 school year, with the MoE gradually providing stipends of 30,000 kyats per month to those teachers (over the nine months during which schools are open) for teaching a period per day. Understandably, this extremely low income (a primary school teacher currently receives 180,000 kyats/month) has often been pointed-out as an evidence of a lack of commitment of the State in genuinely making ethnic minority language available in the schools[102].

After shaky first steps during the first few years following the beginning of the policy shift in 2012, the number of "30,000 Kyats" teachers has nonetheless steadily increased. According to official statistics, there were 18,300 teachers receiving this salary for 2016-2017 school year[103], 20,673 in 2017-2018 and 23,812 in 2018-2019[104].

In fact, this "30,000 kyats" ("၃၀၀၀၀ စား") teaching positions correspond to two very different situations. According to the MoE 2018-2019 data, 53% of the 23,812 "30,000 kyats" ethnic languages teachers are "outsiders" ("၃၀၀၀၀ စားအပြင်", more recently known as language teachers – LT), teaching about 20 hours monthly (one period per school day) in government schools[105]. While this work timetable often allows these teachers to have another job aside or sometimes to teach in more than one school, these positions remain extremely precarious and unsustainable. Complaints about a lack of consideration from their colleagues and the local MoE administration are common among these outsider teachers and cases where even their meagre stipends are not actually paid have often been reported[106]. Often, the village community and/or the literature and culture committee (LCC, see Chapter 4.5) which train them have been striving to supplement these meagre stipends, which may not even cover the monthly cost of transportation between the teacher's home and the school.

As an example, in 2013-2014, the 60 Pa-O language teachers in government's schools of Mon State did not receive anything from the MoE and were paid 30,000 kyats by their literature and culture committee. Things even worsened the following year, in 2014-2015, as the number of teachers increased to over 80, and the Pa-O LCC could only provide 20,000 kyats per teacher

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[102] For instance, Mwe Khur, 2017, "Challenges in teaching ethnic language in Burma", *SHAN/BNI*, January 10.

[103] ၂၀၁၇/၂၀၁၇-၂၀၁၈ ခု �’ဏ္ဍာရေးနှစ်ရသုံးခန့်မှန်းခြေငွေစာရင်းဆိုင်ရာ အချက်အလက်များ

[104] Official data sheets transmitted by the MoE.

[105] See also "တိုင်းရင်းသားဘာသာစာပေ သင်နေတဲ့ ဆရာ ဆရာမတွေ လစာမတိုးသေး" *Kumudara journal* 14 mai 2019.

[106] See for instance "Ethnic language teachers face salary cut despite receiving only Ks 30,000 per month", *Chin World*, February 2018 or "ပူတာအိုရှိ တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေသင် ဆရာအချို့လနှင့်ချီ၍ လစာမရ" *BNI*, October 21, 2019.

and per month. In 2015-2016, the MoE started to actually provide the 30,000 kyats stipends, completed by 10,000 kyats of the LCC. The situation has improved further from 2017-2018, as most of these teachers obtained Teaching Assistant (TA) positions (see next section).

Figure 24: Representatives of the Pa-O Literature and Culture Committee of Thaton (Mon State), with ten "outsiders" language teachers.

For 2018-2019, national official statistics count 12,941 of these external language teachers (LT), a figure which has dropped sharply in late 2019, with all the teachers matching the requirements applying for TA positions[107]. This type of position and their unattractive salaries are quickly losing popularity today, as the TA program is being unrolled: According to the MoEA's statistics, only 222 new candidates for the whole Union applied to LT positions in 2019-2020.

The remaining 47% (10,759 individuals) of the "30,000 kyats" ethnic languages teachers present in the schools in 2018-2019 were full-fledged government school teachers ("၃၀,၀၀၀ စားအတွင်း"), teaching ethnic minority languages in addition to other subjects, and receiving this amount in addition to their normal salaries.

While economically sustainable, this type of situation is not encouraged anymore, as the government rolls out the Teaching Assistant policy. The number of those teachers has already significantly dropped from 10,760 in 2018-2019 to 7,080 in 2019-2020. The main reason invoked by the MoE for this trend is that it is particularly difficult for the administration to make sure that the ethnic language classes are actually conducted, on a daily basis, by these teachers already present in the schools, who may not always have sufficient language skills or may see this subject as secondary.

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[107] The statistics we obtained from the MoE were compiled before the appointment of the second batch of TAs. The number of LT remaining after this appointment can be roughly estimated to 6,000.

Overall, the "30,000 kyats" teacher positions, both as "insiders" and "outsiders", thus seem bound to decrease rapidly, as more ambitious policies aiming at increasing the availability of local teachers in primary schools are being implemented since 2017-2018. According to the MoE's statistics for the 2019-2020 school year (before the second batch of Teacher Assistant appointment, which transformed many outsiders "30,000 kyats" teachers into TA) there is 7,080 insiders and 12,941 outsiders "30,000 kyats" ethnic language teachers.

The ("Ethnic") Teaching Assistants

In 2017-2018, new positions for ethnic minority language teachers were created through a collaboration between the MoE and the newly created Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (MoEA): the "ethnic" teaching assistants (TA, the position itself already existed in the MoE, the novelty is the ethnic language dimension).

The mission of these TAs is two-fold, and precisely corresponds to the two components of the language-in-education policy shift (described in Chapter 4.2): 1. teaching ethnic minority languages, as subjects, and 2. using ethnic minority languages informally, when needed, as "classroom languages", to help overcome the language barrier in the process of teaching the national curriculum. Through daily wages (နေ့စားလပေး – 4,800K per day), these TAs receive salaries that represent three to five-fold the amount of the regular ("30,000 kyats") ethnic languages teachers.

Candidates to TA positions are required to have pursued their formal education beyond Grade 9 (priority is given to higher level of education) and must possess good ethnic language skills (assessed by a literature and culture committee). Application files of the TA are usually sent to the State/Region office of the MoEA, then transmitted to their local counterparts of the MoE. They are then sent to the Basic Education department in Naypyidaw, which gives the final decision in appointing the Teaching Assistants.

Among the TA candidates, those who have a university degree (whose proportions vary significantly depending on State/Region and ethnic groups) are encouraged to receive a training in their State/Region's Education College, in order to become full-fledged government schoolteachers (a significant improvement in their career and salary). Among the 5,161 TA hired in 2017-2018, roughly 50% had their matriculation exam and 719 had a university degree[108]. Among the later, 277 have already completed a short training in one of the Education Colleges, and are now full-fledged civil servants. Another batch of 443 is set to complete the same training in 2019-2020, and the MoEA's internal document suggest that other batches will follow.

The Teaching Assistants with lower levels of academic achievements have the possibility to follow the same path: some of the TAs appointed in 2017-2018 interviewed during our visits to the schools in several States are preparing their matriculation examination as external candidates, in the perspective of obtaining a university degree through distance education, and to ultimately become full-fledged permanent teachers.

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[108] "Ministries of Ethnic affairs, Education, Nay Pyi Taw Council explain third-year performances", May 15, 2019, MoE website.

As opposed to other government schoolteachers who are sent to different places throughout their career, these TA are not only allowed but strongly encouraged to remain in their hometown, precisely to be able to fulfil their missions of both teaching and using ethnic minority languages in the schools.

While it is too early to really assess the impact of this reform, these new career perspectives (by comparison to the meagre 30,000k/month for the LT) seem liable to generate enthusiasm among students with ethnic language skills. For the whole Union, a first batch of 5,161 Teaching Assistants was appointed during the 2017-2018 school year, out of which 4,783 were still in the schools in June 2019. In 2019-2020, out of 12,430 candidates, a second batch of 6,935 TA was appointed, 6,469 of them actually taking their post in the schools (see Figure 25 and 26).[109]

After discussions regarding the guidelines for the appointment of these TA, the current policy requires a minimum of 20 children of a particular ethnic minority present in a school for the attribution of one post, additional positions being attributed for each hundreds of children[110]. While the appointment of more than 11,000 ethnic language TAs within two years constitutes a very significative development, the unsurprising consequence of these guidelines is frustration in schools with number of students below the minimum required to be attributed a single or an additional TA position. In Kayin State for instance, while local actors such as the Kayin LCCs and Social affairs regional minister were overall satisfied with the appointment of 805 TA in 2019-2020, they also pointed-out the situations of schools where such position were still needed[111].

Interviewed on this specific subject, the MoEA's representative replied that they are well aware that more TA positions will be needed but that they have to consider the limitations of the MoE's budget (in which the total payroll accounts for 80%). The MoEA is also considering lowering these student headcount guidelines for Self-Administrated Zones and remotes regions. By contrast with these TA positions, in 2019-2020, candidates to "30,000 kyats" Language teachers positions were very few, only 175 were appointed out of 222 applications.

Making the best use of the TAs and local teachers all around the country will certainly take time. As of today, all the TAs recruited may not have all the necessary skills to fulfil their tasks, either in terms of formal education, or in terms of mastering an ethnic language well enough to be able to teach it. The school-level MoE administration may also not always have a clear idea of how to best utilize these TAs to face the specific language-related issues they have to deal with locally. As of October 2019, trainings have started in the perspective of teaching the new curricula produced with the support of UNICEF.

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[109] "Govt to promote ethnic language teaching assistants", Ei Shwe Phyu, *Myanmar Times*, August 2, 2018. Internal statistics of the MoE and MoEA.

[110] Interviews with the MoE and MoEA, November 2019, Naypyidaw. See Also, "တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေသင်ကြားရေး ဆရာခန့်အပ်မှု သတ်မှတ်ချက် ဖြေလျှော့မည်", Zu Zu, *The Irrawaddy*, November 15, 2019.

[111] "ကရင်မှာ တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေသင်ကြားဖို့ ဆရာတွေ ခန့်လိုက်ပြီ", *7 Days TV*, September 8, 2019.

Ethnic Minority Languages Teaching Assistants appointed in the States and Regions since 2017

MIMU

Canada
UKaid
from the British people

URBANIZE
Policy Institute for Urban and Regional Planning

This map has been prepared for vizualisation purposes only, to support the conceptualization of the teaching of ethnic languages in government classes across Myanmar. Data shown is compiled by the Ministry of Education at State/Region level. As the policy is still in the process of unfolding, there is no warrant the data is either complete or accurate.

India

Bangladesh

China

Vietnam

Laos

Thailand

Cambodia

601
164
KACHIN

528
152
SAGAING

475 468
CHIN

856
592
SHAN

67 56
MANDALAY

318
82
MAGWAY

1,482

6 13
NAY PYI TAW

55 156
KAYAH

145
RAKHINE

348 292
BAGO

805
513
KAYIN

1,188
977
AYEYARWADY

160 127
YANGON

423 398
MON

136 104
TANINTHARYI

Legend

Teaching Assistant 2017-2018

Teaching Assistant 2019-2020

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0   50   100   200 Km
0   30   60   120 Miles

Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 25

TAs appointed for Shan State in 2019-2020
(breakdown by languages)

| Shan	Pa-O	Palaung	Lahu	Akha	Jinghpaw	Wa	Lisu	Kayan	Kayah	Lohwo
329	164	131	109	29	28	5	15	35	1	2

Figure 26 (Source: Eastern Review[112]**)**

A shift in access to Education colleges

Unless, as described above, they manage to pursue their training, obtain a university degree and become full-fledged government school teachers, the TA's roles remain limited to the teaching of ethnic languages as subjects and the use of local ethnic minority languages in primary schools to facilitate the education process. This second duty is not always clearly defined yet and may entail a variety of practices, depending on specific socio-linguistic local contexts.

Parallel to this program, other recent policy shifts aim at nurturing more local teachers, who possess an extensive knowledge of the specific socio-cultural context of their respective school, notably through their skills in the local language(s). These measures aim at leveling the playing field through decentralization, and encouraging access to Education Colleges of students from the more remote regions, who on average do not perform as well as their urban counterparts.

The idea of favoring access to Education Colleges of students from ethnic minorities and/or remote regions, whose grades are often insufficient under a national or State-level competition, resembles that of an earlier initiative. In 2016, the *Pa-O National Organisation* (PNO) had indeed set-up its own Education College, in cooperation with Taunggyi's (MoE) Education College in Southern Shan State (Lall 2016). This college funded by the PNO but staffed with MoE teachers trains each year about a hundred students (including a few Shan and Danu) whose marks would otherwise have been insufficient to access the government's teacher training facilities, to pass

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112 "ရှမ်းပြည်တွင် တိုင်းရင်းသား ဘာသာစကားသင် နေ့စားလပေး ရှစ်ရာကျော် ခန့်အပ်", *Eastern Review*, September 7, 2019.

the formal Education College exam, and become government school teacher. At the time of our last interview (July 2019) this Pa-O Education college was active, but the Education department of the PNO did take notice of the multiple ongoing shifts in the MoE system, notably regarding access to Education colleges. Depending on these shifts, they will reassess the relevance of their institution in 2021, the renewal year of their MoU.[113]

Beyond this specific example, the country-wide shift in access to Education Colleges, which started in 2017-2018, is based on two geographical and administrative levels: the State/Regions, and the township. Primary and middle school teachers receive pre-service training through 25 Education Colleges (ECs) geographically spread throughout the country. Four of these Education colleges have opened since 2013: Hakha (Chin State), Katha (Sagaing), Lashio (Northern Shan State) and Kyaington (Eastern Shan State).

There are two main routes to access Education Colleges in Myanmar. Diploma in Teacher Education (DTEd) is a 2-years diploma, in the process of being upgraded to a 4-years degree, which is accessible immediately after the exam of Grade 10. Other routes, notably Pre-Service Primary Teacher Training (PPTT) are accessible to university degree holders, after an entrance exam, and are much shorter: 6 months in an Education College, or a year through distance education. In both cases, priority is given, to some extent, to candidates from the respective States and Regions to access their Education Colleges.

In addition, since 2017-2018, the MoE has a township-based enrolment policy for the DTEd route, meaning that every year a number of places in the Education Colleges are attributed for candidates obtaining their Grade 10 exam in each of the townships of the State/Region. Several criteria are taken into account to select the candidates from each township: the overall capacities of the local Education Colleges and the student population in each township of the State/Region, of course, but also the gender of the candidates (a 50/50 ratio is scrupulously respected) as well as their subject stream (there must be 30% of "arts" (ဝိဇ္ဇာ) 30% of science (သိပ္ပံ) and 40% of "mixed" ဝိပ္).

In practice, this shift thus allows the best candidates from the more remote townships fitting with the guidelines to access Education colleges, even with matriculation exam grades that would have been insufficient if the competition was set at the national, or even at the State/Region levels. The map below (Figure 27) shows, for instance, the number of seats, among the 150 available at the Myitkyina Education college, attributed for each township of Kachin State in 2019-2020.

Priority to candidates from the State/Region is also given for the PPTT course. However, the Director General in charge of the Education Colleges in the higher education department estimates that compromises are needed between at least three imperatives: (1) the necessity to train more teachers to keep up with the recent progresses in access to schooling and efforts to diminish student/teacher ratio; (2) decentralization and the training of more local teachers; and (3) maintaining the education standards of the teachers. In several States, for a number of

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[113] Interviews with the representative of the PNO Education department, Taunggyi, 2017, 2018, 2019.

Figure 27

reasons described in the beginning of this section (overall lower performance in education, "work culture" pulling the best students away from civil servant positions…) the academic level of the local candidates to the PPTT entrance exam in ethnic minority regions is often markedly below the required standards. According to the MoE, this gap explains the presence of candidates from other regions of the country in the PPTT courses of the Education colleges of several States, a situation which is often protested against by local activists.

Nurturing local teachers, a necessity, not a panacea

All these reforms are still young, and within the national imperatives of decentralizing teacher training while improving *quantity* and maintaining *quality*, different regions present different situations in terms of language barriers and available human resources.

More generally, the nurturing of local teachers for primary schools in ethnic areas should be seen as a crucial step towards overcoming the language difficulties ethnic minority students face, but not a panacea in itself. According to multiple testimonies collected during our interviews, in several regions, where there is already a significant proportion of local teachers, the latter are more likely to be affected by certain issues, such as being more absorbed by the local social life, sometimes to the detriment of their teaching tasks. This type of situations stands in contrast to teachers who are posted in a region where they do not have any social attachments and who tend to focus more on advancing their careers (for better or for worse).

Another problem, directly linked to our reflection on language-in-education policies, seems to be, in some instances, the overuse of local languages in the education process. In Chin State for example, we have heard numerous stories of schools where the students, despite learning the national curriculum, do not speak fluent Burmese at the end of middle school. Our interviewees partly attributed this situation to an excessive usage of local languages orally in the classrooms.

A successful "classroom language" policy will thus require teachers who not only possess the necessary language skills, but who also have received proper training on how to use both the local and the national languages in a bilingual education frame, in a fashion which is relevant to the particular socio-linguistic context they are working in.

5. Renewed importance of the Literature and Culture Committees

The process of introducing ethnic minorities languages in government schools, trough measures of decentralization, has prompted the attribution of new roles for actors that have been mentioned numerous times in the previous sections: the literature and culture committees (LCCs).

The literature and culture committees (စာပေနှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှုအဖွဲ့များ) are civil society organizations representing dozens of ethnic nationalities and languages. As noted by observers such as Patrick

McCormick[114], the name of these organizations, both in Burmese and in English, is slightly misleading: among a variety of cultural activities that they are liable to carry out, their main focus tends to be *literacy*, rather than *literature*.

The most prominent of these organizations were formed decades ago, often in the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes earlier (for instance, the Shan LCC was formed in 1952 in Taunggyi, the Mon LCC celebrated in 2016 the golden jubilee of its foundation in 1966[115], a Chin LCC of Yangon was founded in 1964, the Karen LCC of Kayin State in 1970 and the Pa-O LCC of Kayin State in 1972). These organizations have long been active in the teaching of their respective languages within their communities, often during summer or Sunday schools, facing in some instances interdictions or various administrative hardships under the military regimes.

These institutions are highly diverse in terms of resources, capacities, organization, histories, whether they represent an overarching (for example "Karen" or "Kachin") or more specific (for example "Sgaw" or "Lisu") ethnic identity, the perceived legitimacy of their leaders, their affiliation (or not) with religious orders or armed groups, as well as geographical level of recognition by the authorities. These LCCs can indeed be registered at different administrative levels: township, district, State/Region or Union, and the different branches under a single ethnonym may or may not work together.

However, in the context of the unfolding language-in-education policy described in the previous sections, two trends are observable. First, organizations corresponding to more "specific" ethnic identities tend to emancipate from the overarching ones (see Chapter 5.2). Second, recognition at the State/Region-level seems to be increasingly important, since it is the critical administrative level for deciding which languages should be taught in the schools and developing the resources to teach, with the support of the State/Region offices of the MoE and MoEA, as well as UNICEF. While some LCCs have been operating without formal recognition, or did not renew their registration at some point in history for a variety of reasons, obtaining formal recognition at the State/Region level, in front of a commission chaired by the minister of Social affairs of the regional government, is increasingly important. Understandably, these two trends sometimes work against ambitions of promoting single coherent ethnic identities in the whole Union.

In Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung's (2011) words, historically "these various cultural and literate organizations have been founded by – and attracted and produced – many community leaders and aspiring politicians, enabling them to acquire experience and skills in leadership, management, and organization, to establish contact with their respective communities across the country, and to foster ethno-national aspirations in nonviolent ways". However, under military regimes, and especially under the SLORC/SPDC, the LCCs certainly had limited leeway in their activities. Chairing such organization was, to a large extent, an honorary position within the community for leaders with an interest in the promotion of a particular ethnic identity, language and culture.

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[114] Personal communication

[115] "Mawlamyine University holds 50th Anniversary of Mon Literature and Culture Committee", *Mon News Agency*, February 10, 2016.

The 2010 elections have enabled more direct contacts between the LCCs and front row institutional politics, as epitomized by the destiny of Dr Sai Mauk Kham, the chairman of the Shan LCC in Lashio, who ascended to the position of Vice President in 2011. Several other regional ethnic affairs ministers followed similar, albeit less prominent, trajectories.

Yet, beyond the destinies of individuals using these institutions as platforms for a political career in the strict sense of the term, during the last few years, the new roles of the LCCs and their association to government decisions, most notably in the perspective of teaching ethnic minority languages in the schools, have risen the stakes behind these organizations. New LCCs have been founded or revived during the last decade, and a new generation of leaders, perfectly conscious of the renewed political significance of their positions in the post-junta context, has progressively emerged. Representatives of the LCCs have regular contacts not only with State/ Region, but also Union-level institutions, notably the MoE and the MoEA, including meetings with the minister of Ethnic Affairs[116]. Study trips, involving hundreds of representatives, are organized for the LCCs members to familiarize with the institutions in Naypyidaw, notably the parliament[117] (see Figure 28).

Figure 28: Some of the representatives and members of LCC invited to visit the Parliament during its fourteenth regular session, in November 2019.

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[116] "တနင်္သာရီတိုင်းဒေသကြီး ညွှန်ကြားရေးမှူးရုံး ဆောက်လုပ်မည့်မြေနေရာ ပြည်ထောင်စုဝန်ကြီး ကြည့်ရှုစစ်ဆေး၊ ထားဝယ်မြို့ရှိ တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေနှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှုအသင်းအဖွဲ့များအား လက်ခံတွေ့ဆုံ", Ministry of Ethnic Affairs website, December 3, 2019.

[117] "ပြည်ထောင်စုလွှတ်တော်သို့ လာရောက်လေ့လာခြင်း နေပြည်တော်၊ နိုဝင်ဘာ ၂၈", website of the Parliament, November 28, 2019.

As an illustration among others, the Shan LCC for Kayin State, for instance, was founded in 2017, after obtaining the approbation of the Kayin State parliament and government. This LCC has composed new textbooks in the tham/yuan script, with the support of UNICEF and the MoE, for the teaching of one of the three Shan dialects spoken in Kayin State[118]. Beyond this involvement in the teaching of Shan language in Kayin State, the LCC's President, has a direct political role regarding the representation of the Shan ethnic identity in Kayin State. The later, representing the Myawaddy constituency in the Kayin State parliament, is indeed taking a leading role in advocating for the creation of a Shan ethnic affairs minister in his State[119].

Despite their heterogeneity, the LCCs are thus becoming central actors regarding ethnic identity representation in the States and Regions, notably for groups who do not possess an ethnic affairs minister. In the absence of the latter, they often receive direct (but limited) financial support from their respective State/Region governments for the organization of their National days and activities related to the teaching of ethnic languages, both inside and outside the government schools. For instance, in 2018, the 6 LCCs officially recognized as "local" in Kayah State (see Chapter 5.2) have received between 33 and 74 lakhs from their government for the production of their respective curricula[120]. Similarly, in 2019, the Shan LCC of Kayin State has received 50 lakhs, which were used for the finalization of the curriculum, the training of teachers, and the organization of their national day[121].

The LCCs' roles are thus multiple: they are in charge of creating (or refreshing) the ethnic languages curricula (with the support of UNICEF and the MoE), of helping the MoE identifying the schools in which their respective languages should be taught, of assessing the ethnic language skills of the candidates who wish to apply for the positions of language teacher and TA. They are also in charge of training, sometimes with the technical support of UNICEF, the ethnic languages teachers. In October 2019, for instance, trainings have started to take place, in the MoEA office of Hpa-An, for the teaching of the new ethnic language curricula of Kayin State (including Karen languages, Mon, Pa-O and Shan)[122].

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[118] According to the president of the local Shan LCC, there are three Shan languages spoken in Kayin State: Tai Long, Yuan and Lao. However, at the time of the interview (august 2019) they are only planning to teach Tai Long and Yuan, the latter being similar to the ancient Lao (tham) script.

[119] "Shan in Karen State 'Have Someone to Help Them", Nyein Nyein, *The Irrawaddy*, July 8, 2019. Interview with Sai Aik Kyan Kham, President of the Shan LCC for Kayin State MP of the Myawaddy constituency in the Kayin State parliament, Hpa An, August 2019.

[120] "Gov't provides fund for development of ethnic literature curriculum", *Kantarawaddy Times*, August 30, 2018.

[121] Interview with Sai Aik Kyan Kham, President of the Shan LCC for Kayin State MP of the Myawaddy constituency in the Kayin State parliament, Hpa An, august 2019.

[122] "ကရင်အပါအဝင် တိုင်းရင်းစာပေ သင်ရိုးသစ်အတွက် ပထမအကြိမ် ဆရာဖြစ်သင်တန်းဖွင့်", *Karen Information Center*, October 25, 2019.

Chapter 5:
Structural challenges to the introduction of Ethnic languages in government schools and MTB-MLE perspectives in the Union of Myanmar

The previous chapter has shown that there has been slow but significant policy shifts towards the introduction of ethnic languages in government schools since 2013, through decentralization measures, with an acceleration during the last few years. In our opinion, the language-in-education policy selected options, namely teaching ethnic minority languages as subjects and encouraging the training of teachers able to use ethnic minority languages as "classroom languages" (see Chapter 4.2), in addition to the development of the overall local curricula (see Chapter 6), is a realistic choice for the foreseeable future, which may pave the way for more ambitious projects later on.

However, the inclusion of ethnic minority languages in government schools is facing significant challenges. These challenges, which echo difficulties observed in other countries (see Chapter 3), appear particularly daunting when considering the eventuality of implementing a MTB-MLE system throughout the Union of Myanmar. In fact, they already materialize today, under the current policy of teaching them as subjects. They mainly correspond to answering a seemingly simple question: which language(s) should be used/taught in which school?

In this chapter, we are presenting what we identify as the two main challenges in answering this question. The first aspect is the geographical and administrative complexities of making the relevant languages available in the schools, particularly in urban settings, which tend to be inhabited by populations with heterogenous ethno-linguistic backgrounds, and for whom the learning of an ethnic language within formal education is not always a priority. The second aspect, is what we call the "language standardization conundrum": both the drives toward and the challenges to having a list of standard languages, corresponding to a list of ethnonyms, to be taught in the schools. We conclude this chapter by providing a number of case-studies illustrating these challenges.

1. Challenges in teaching ethnic languages in urban and multi-ethnic settings

The patchwork of colors of an ethno-linguistic map (see Figure 1, in Introduction) is, by definition, a schematic representation of a socio-linguistic reality which at times can be extremely complex. In the case of Myanmar, not only is there often extremely significant linguistic (and political) heterogeneity within the groups represented by a single color (an argument detailed in the second section of this chapter), but there is also often a prevalence of multilingualism in the most populated areas. This situation brings a number of questions regarding the administrative levels that should be in charge of deciding which language(s) should be available in which school. It also raises the specific issue of urban settings, whose socio-linguistic situations tend to contrast with more rural locations, notably in terms of population's ethno-linguistic background homogeneity, level of penetration of the national language, and enthusiasm for the formal learning of ethnic minority languages.

Which administrative level is relevant for language policy decisions?

Parallel to the progressive unfolding of the current language-in-education policy since 2012 (see chapter 4), several experts and organizations[123] have been calling for the setting up of a MTB-MLE policy in Myanmar. When reflecting on how a mother tongue-based – multilingual education (MTB-MLE, MTBE in short) policy could be implemented, proponents of that policy have suggested options at different geographical and administrative levels, including the recognition of the "main" ethnic languages of the relevant states, to be used in public administration, justice and primary schooling (South and Lall 2016, ENAC 2018, Lopez and Cardozo 2019)[124].

However, the option consisting in deciding of a single (or a limited number of) language(s) to be used in primary education in each of the State of the Union seems highly problematic from a political standpoint in contemporary Myanmar, when a multitude of actors are mobilized to defend their particular "indigenous" ethnic rights "တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးများ၏ အခွင့်အရေး" (which are now the object of a specific law[125]). For instance, deciding that Shan would become the official language for primary education in Shan State, or Jinghpaw in Kachin State, is more than likely to cause controversy among speakers of other languages of these States (which in both cases may constitute the majority of the population)[126].

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[123] Notably the *National Network for Education Reform*, the *Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education*, Joseph Lo Bianco, Ashley South and Marie Lall and the *Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center*.

[124] More precisely, Lopez and Cardozo (2019) mention having the "dominant ethnic language of a particular school/ classroom be the primary language of instruction" a prospect which is discussed in next section.

[125] Indigenous Persons' Rights Protection Law (8/2015).

[126] McCormick (2019) has a similar, albeit more cautious assessment of this perspective: "Blanket policies of making the "state" language the medium of instruction may also face resistance – minorities in Shan State, for example, may chafe under having to be taught in Shan."

Even without considering its political consequences, this type of policy – deciding of one (or a very limited number of) "main" languages for each State to be promoted, notably through education – would also largely defeat the other purposes of introducing ethnic minority languages in education, both from an educational standpoint and from a language/culture preservation perspective. Selecting the "main" ethnic languages, to be used in education, would indeed mean that a large proportion of children across the Union of Myanmar remain educated in (or have to learn formally) a language other than their mother tongue, a language that they do not understand in some instances. Such choice of language policy could also arguably turn these "main languages" into the most direct threats to "smaller" languages' survival.

The current policy, namely, producing an evolving list of languages for each States / Regions to be taught as subjects, seems to be a more realistic approach. At the time of writing, for instance, eleven languages are recognized by the Kachin State government, seventeen in Sagaing, more than twenty in Chin State (see Chapter 4.3). This more inclusive process does not however constitute a panacea that would easily and immediately open the door for much more ambitious language-in-education policies to be designed. Recognition policies and producing lists of official languages to be used in education is an often-contentious process, which implies compromises and tradeoffs (see chapters 3.4 and 5.2).

Regardless, as shown in chapter 4, the States and Regions are emerging, in the context of decentralization and in the frame of the 2008 Constitution and the 2014-15 Education law, as a critical administrative level for the recognition of ethnic languages and the implementation of the language-in-education policy. This emergence of the State/Region as new actors and administrative level for language-in-education policy both simplifies the logistics of making ethnic languages available in the schools and contributes to the appearance of local political ecosystems. However, at times, it also creates additional challenges, in the (extremely common) cases of minorities residing over several States and Regions (see Chapter 5.2).

In any case, not only the unrealistic option of recognizing and using only the "main" ethnic languages for each State in education seems to be off the table in terms of language policy in the foreseeable future, but the overall approach of deciding that a particular language should prevail within a particular administrative division has also been discarded.

Indeed, below the States and Regions, none of the lower administrative levels (District, Township) seem relevant in terms of determining a single language to be taught, either as a subject or as a medium of instruction. While detailed geo-linguistic data are missing, as of 2019-2020, townships where a single ethnic language is being taught constitute exceptions (see Chapter 4.3). Unsurprisingly, the 330 townships of Myanmar and their boundaries do not correspond to the distribution of speakers of the various languages (see the discussion on "mapping" languages in introduction of this section).

Consequently, the two critical administrative levels in terms of introducing ethnic minority languages in the MoE system are now the State/Region, on the one hand, and the school, on the other. Languages must be recognized at the State/Region level, through the LCCs and the

regional governments, and ethnic language teachers are then appointed according to the children's ethno-linguistic background in each school.

Urban settings and situations where the ethnic language is not the mother tongue

The school is thus a critical level to make language-in-education policy decisions, and some have suggested that the "dominant" ethnic language of the school should become the language of instruction:

> (About the 2014-15 Education Law) "It also states how ethnic languages can be taught as a subject. This directive is a direct rebuff to attempts by many in civil society to see the dominant ethnic language of a particular school/classroom be the primary language of instruction.

> (…) Thus, despite the advocacy efforts to date, the promise of a state education system that acknowledges and embraces diversity, and affords opportunities for multilingualism remains unmet. This has consequences not only for social cohesion, but also the degree to which this education system can be inclusive and equitable to all." (Shah and Lopes Carodzo 2019)

While this type of solutions appears more feasible in the more rural settings, which tend to be more "ethnically homogenous", not all primary schools allow the choice of a single ethnic minority language (either as a subject or as a medium of instruction). As a general rule, the closer a school is located to an urban area or a main road, the higher the chances for children from multiple ethno-linguistic backgrounds to attend that school.

This type of urban environment tends to present socio-linguistic situations that are very different from more rural settings. The national language (i.e. Burmese) is typically more used in this type of environment, which often diminishes, from an educational standpoint, the imperative of having multiple teachers using multiple languages, either as a language of instruction or as "classroom languages", to overcome the language difficulties faced by ethnic minority students.

In some instances, the children in this type of environment actually have little to no skills in the local language of the group they (supposedly) belong to, because of a prevalence of the national language (or another language) in the environment they grew up in. Below is, for instance, what Min Aung Zay, the *Mon National Education Committee*'s research manager, says about a major city like Mawlamyine, when discussing the mother tongue issue:

> "By mother tongue language we mean a child's own language, whatever the location. For any child, whether they are Mon or Bamar, the location in which they are raised is important. If they are raised in Mawlamyaing, where Burmese is the main language, they speak Burmese first and their own language is Burmese, so Burmese is their mother tongue. The child's familiarity with the first language they learn at home or in the community determines their own tongue."[127]

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[127] "Mon national schools show the way on Mother tongue Education", *The Irrawaddy*, November 29, 2019.

While different cities and towns present very different language situations, schools in which children from different ethno-linguistic background are being educated would constitute major challenges in the perspective of an MTB-MLE policy, especially if this policy is guided by essentialist conceptions of ethnicity. Should children be separated in order to form "ethnically homogenous" schools? Should the schools and the classes be split according to ethnicity and language for primary instruction[128]?

In contrast to informal daily multilingualism, which has been the norm in the country and region (Badenoch 2016), these options, arguably leading to a transformation of primary education into another channel of "discretization" according to ethnic identity throughout the whole country, would be likely to have political consequences, and could amount to *de facto* segregation. This type of policy would also have major financial implications since they entail a sharp increase in the number of classes, and thus of teachers, whose salaries represent the lion's share (about 70 to 80%) of the education budget[129].

Situations where children supposedly belonging to a particular ethnic identity do not speak the language anymore completely transform the pedagogical implications of introducing ethnic languages in the schools, not only as media of instruction or "classroom languages", but also as subjects. From efforts towards literacy in the mother-tongue in order to facilitate the education process, this type of situation, from a pedagogical standpoint, can amount to the addition of a foreign language into the curriculum, largely based on essentialist conceptions of ethnicity. Such situations are common in urban settings of certain States and Regions but do exist in more rural settings too (see the case of Red Shan in Kachin State / Sagaing Region, in Chapter 6.3). While acknowledging that teaching "their" language to children who grew up speaking only Burmese necessitates a pedagogical approach radically different from literacy in the mother-tongue, a Shan educator of Kayin State – echoing essentialist understandings of ethnicity that are extremely common in Myanmar – was nevertheless fairly optimistic: "for them it's easy, because they are Shan, it's in their blood".

Relationship to the national language and varying levels of enthusiasm

Another question not to be completely overlooked is the level of interest of ethnic minority children and parents themselves for the formal learning of an ethnic language. In that regard, while eagerness seems to be overall high, attitudes seem to vary widely from place to place, even family to family, if not from one child to the next. The politicization of the issue by actors seeking to mobilize different ethnic identities may thus, at time, give a slightly distorted picture of reality.

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[128] This second solution was for instance considered by the *Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education* (MINE) in 2014. "Pan-Ethnic Network Launches to Promote Multilingual Education in Burma", Michaels S., *The Irrawaddy*, February 21, 2014.

[129] *Citizen's budget*, Year 2017-2018. Myanmar 2018 Education Budget Brief, Unicef and Ministry of Education.

Some populations may be extremely attached to their particular language and even reluctant to send their children to a Burmese-speaking school, while others speak one or several ethnic languages in their everyday life, but do not prioritize the formal learning of those languages, sometimes believing that they should be left outside of formal education, or be an optional subject, available only for those with a special interest in it.[130]

Individuals are liable to have mixed perceptions regarding the national language too, with on the one hand feelings of discrimination and misrecognition when struggling at school because of the language barrier, and on the other hand the view that mastering Burmese is critical to their future. The second part of that argument is now fairly consensual, and was notably defended by the Minister of Ethnic Affairs Nai Htet Lwin, an ethnic Mon who has been involved in the defense of Mon identity as well as Mon language education for many years, and who supports the formal teaching of ethnic languages, but insists that children must master languages such as Burmese and English to be able to "compete with the world".[131]

As discussed in Chapter 4.2, among those who refuse to embrace the centrality of the Burmese language in the Union of Myanmar, one common view is that a language which is not directly attached to any of the ethnic groups composing the Union, such as English, should become the main medium of instruction, in order to level the playing field between native speakers of Burmese and ethnic minority. This perspective, however, raises the challenge of having teachers mastering English well enough to be able to use this language in formal education, a prospect which seems distant. Having English as the main language of instruction, in addition, does not address the issue of tackling the "language barrier" by starting education in the mother tongue.

In this regard too, as a general rule – and keeping in mind the heterogeneity of situations – the largest gap seems to be between rural and urban populations, the latter being less likely to desire an education in a local language[132]. Often, urban dwellers live in an environment which is deeply influenced by the Burmese language (as well as, depending on specific situations, by other languages such as English, Chinese, or Thai). They tend to see the national language, which serve as a *lingua franca* between people of different ethnic background, as one of the keys to modernity and economic opportunity.

In that regard, several interviewees belonging to various *Literature and Culture Committees* (LCC), clearly expressed that they want to find solutions allowing them to preserve – and even further develop – their respective languages, but without "sacrificing" (sic.) the future prospects of their youth, through an education giving too much emphasis to languages bearing their respective cultural uniqueness but which tend to have limited scope (in terms of number of speakers, vocabulary, available knowledge…).

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[130] Meeting with many representatives of LCCs can arguably give a distorted picture of the general enthusiasm of minorities for the teaching of their languages. Less formal discussions on the matter with people who do speak ethnic languages but are not involved in these organisations gives a more contrasted picture.

[131] "New Portfolio, Old Political Hand for Ethnic Affairs Post", *The Irrawaddy*, March 22, 2016. "If we know only our language, we won't compete in the world: Ethnic Affairs Minister", *Mon News Agency*, May 16 2016.

[132] On the case of urban *vs* rural language attitudes for the Pa-O, see for instance Margontier-Haynes (2016). In the case of the Akha, Ghoemeh (2015), identifies religious affiliation as a major predictor of literacy proficiency and usage.

It can legitimately be argued that situations where parents are reluctant to see their children starting formal education in an ethnic language often stem from a lack of understanding of the MTB-MLE principles (see Chapter 3). Indeed, when all the conditions for a functioning MTBE system meet, starting education in the L1 (mother tongue) ultimately leads to a better command of both the L2 (Burmese in this context) and L3 (most likely English). Provided that children do not drop-out too early in the course of their schooling, MTB-MLE thus does not entail giving priority to local languages at the expense of the national language.

Regardless, reluctance towards the use of local languages in education, when it exists, does constitute an additional challenge to the teaching of ethnic languages as subject and the more long-term perspectives of MTB-MLE. Assessing and taking into account this heterogeneity in enthusiasm will be critical to the development of long-term local-context sensitive language-in-education policy. Indeed, as common sense suggests and Weber's (2016) experience confirms, the involvement and enthusiasm of the local community is absolutely critical to the success of any MTBE project:

> "When a MTB program arises from a desire and request from the language community, internal motivation exists. An externally motivated program, with little or no community involvement in decisions, will likely be ineffective even if every dialect is provided with materials. (…)"

This variable level of enthusiasm for formal usage of ethnic languages was patent during our fieldwork, both as a challenge expressed by some of the LCCs, and in less formal conversations with youth of urban centres[133]. This situation is for instance described in an article published by the *Karen Information Center* (KIC) in 2018[134], following a survey among its readership. The results of this survey point towards a limited audience for news, articles, or literary works published in Karen languages, as well as towards a limited participation of communities to language-related initiatives. The article also notes that despite the mobilisation of the LCCs, the involvement and enthusiasm of the population itself remains one of the main issues when it comes to the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools[135].

The end of dictatorship, the (very relative) progress of the peace process and, more specifically, the introduction of ethnic languages as subjects in government schools, may have multiple and paradoxical consequences for the future of these languages. Kheunsai (in South and Lall 2018), explains this idea through a proverb that is known by speakers of multiple Tai languages: "when the water is hot, the fish lives; when the water is cold, the fish dies"[136]. The idea here is that

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[133] See also, for instance, "ပူတာအိုရှိ တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေသင် ဆရာအချို့လနှင့်ချို၍ လစာမရ" BNI, October 21, 2019.

[134] "လူမျိုးမပျောက်ရေး ကရင်စာပေ စကားကို တန်ဖိုးထား လေ့လာထိန်းသိမ်းပေး", *Karen Information Center*, February 26, 2018 (accessed via BNI). See also "ဧရာဝတီတိုင်းတွင် တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေသင်ကြားမှု ခရီးမပေါက်ဟု အစီရင်ခံစာဆို" *The Voice*, September 18, 2018.

[135] "လက်ရှိပြည်တွင်း၌ ၂၀၁၄ ခုနှစ်မှစ၍ အစိုးရ အခြေခံပညာကျောင်းများတွင် မူလတန်းအောက်အဆင့်ကို တိုင်းရင်းသားဘာသာစကား သင်ကြားခွင့် ရရှိထားပြီး ထို့အတွက် ကရင်စာဖွံ့နှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှု ကော်မတီများက အားဖြည့်လုပ်ဆောင်မှုများရှိသော်လည်း ကာယကံ့ရှင် မိဘများနှင့် ကရင်လူငယ်လေးများ ကိုယ်တိုင် အားတက်သရော သင်ကြားလိုစိတ်ရှိရေးမှာ အခိကနေရာတွင် ဖြစ်နေသည်။" in "လူမျိုးမပျောက်ရေး ကရင်စာပေ စကားကို တန်ဖိုးထား လေ့လာထိန်းသိမ်းပေး", *Karen Information Center*, February 26, 2018 (accessed via BNI)

[136] น้ำร้อนปลาเป็น น้ำเย็นปลาตาย (in standard thai).

oppression tend to create resistance, and that one of the consequences of a more "inclusive" language policy could be a demobilizing effect.

Historical oppression of the Burman majority and military regimes as a paradoxical reason of language and identity maintenance is not a new theme in Myanmar. Ferguson (2008) tells us about discussions of this idea in 2005, by a Shan monk and an educator comparing the situations of the Shan language in Myanmar and that of Northern Thai in Thailand. The Shan educator was apparently wary of the effects that a more open stance of the Burmese government regarding ethnic language print media could have on the mobilization of the Shan language and nation.

Adjacent themes also came up during our 2019 interviews: for instance, one of the board members of the Shan Ni LCC in Kachin State developed a long argument affirming that if it was not for the underdevelopment of their State under successive military regimes, and if proper roads and telecommunication infrastructure had been built during that time, the Shans of Kachin State would have already forgotten their language.

Jenny (2015) similarly noted that the post-SPDC shift towards a more inclusive language policy, notably in education, may to some extent contribute to depoliticizing the act of using the Mon language. The development of private media, airing Burmese language content that is now much more attractive than the old school SLORC/SPDC broadcasts, he argues, may also contribute to an increased popularity and influence of the Burmese language among Mon youth.

Overall, the evolving socio-linguistic landscape, both in terms of language policy and telecommunication technologies, seems to be having multiple and often contradictory effects. To which extent the mobilization of ethnicity on the political scene goes hand-in-hand with an actual involvement of the population in ethnic minority language-related developments remains an open question, to which answers are certainly complex and multiple. Further studies will be needed to better understand the dynamics at play in different regions, and the evolving interactions between shifting language-in-education policies and language attitudes of the population.

Teaching multiple languages in urban schools?

Parallel to these fundamental but complex underlaying questions, under the current language-in-education policy, multi-lingual situations often found in urban areas already greatly complicate the teaching, as subjects, of all the languages of children attending school. Below are data collected across the country, which help understand how the challenges materialize concretely in different townships, cities and towns.

In Sagaing Region, so far, twenty-one languages are taught or are in the process of being included as subjects in government schools, including Chin, Naga, and Shan languages, as well as Kadu and Kanan. Within Sagaing Region, in townships such as Tamu and Kalay, where populations from different parts of Chin State have settled, respectively 8 (Shan, Thado, Falam, Hakha, Tedim, Lushai, Kante and Zo) and 6 (Lushai, Tedim, Falam, Hakha, Zoton, Hualngo)

languages are already being taught, and other LCCs are in the process of getting ready to teach. Situations in which groups of children from five to six different ethno-linguistic background are present in a single school are relatively common, not only in the towns themselves, but often also in surrounding villages.

The representatives of the LCCs, MoE and MoEA interviewed during our visits explain that this type of situation has challenging logistical implications for teaching ethnic languages as subjects. For instance, teaching 5 languages in a primary school, 5 periods a week and over three grades (e.g. KG, Grade 1, Grade 2) requires a lot of resources, notably in terms of teachers and classrooms (seventy-five periods a week in this case).

Different regions and towns present different situations, which can be sketched through the statistical data shared by the local MoE offices and confirmed by the LCCs: while six languages are being taught in Hpa An township (four Karen languages, Mon and "Southern" Pa-o), there is no schools teaching more than two languages in the city of Hpa-An for 2019-2020[137]. Mon is being taught in about 40 schools of Mawlamyine township, but not in the city itself (where summer classes are available).

According to the Regional MoE office's statistics, for the year 2019-2020, over 16,000 children are learning an ethnic language in the Yangon Region, in 284 schools located in 13 townships (out of 2,700 schools in 44 townships). For this year, the languages available (sometimes out of school hours, during the summer break but inside the school premises in some instances) are Sgaw Kayin, Western Pwo Kayin, Tai Long Shan, and Asho Chin.

In the city of Taunggyi, Shan State, no ethnic minority languages were taught in government schools at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. Explanations were many and somewhat paradoxical one to another: some cited the ethnic diversity in the schools; others the lack of interest of urban populations to learn ethnic languages; or students and parents giving priority to other subjects and activities which are perceived as more important for economic and social opportunities. At the same time, some spoke of the sensitivity of teaching ethnic languages, which is likely to cause controversy if, for one reason or another, some languages are absent in a particular school while others are taught.

While the presence/absence of particular languages at given schools is likely to be increasingly politicized by a variety of actors in years to come, it should be noted that the children and parents themselves do not seem to be always overly ethnic-identity conscious regarding the language(s) taught in their school. In many instances, we have seen children from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds learn whichever language was available in their school, and members of the language and culture committees often take great pride in stories of children from other ethnic groups doing outstandingly well in their ethnic language.

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[137] On urban settings being late compare to rural ones regarding the teaching of ethnic minority languages in Kayin state, see for instance, "မြို့ ပေါ်ကျောင်းများတွင် တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေ သင်ကြားရေး တိုက်တွန်းပေးစေလိုဟု ကြီးကြပ်အဖွဲ့ပြော", *Karen Information Center* (KIC) January 31, 2017

Regardless, when it comes to ethnic language teacher's appointment, the MoE/MoEA guidelines do take small student headcounts into account to a significant extent. In theory, ten students asking to learn a particular language in a school is enough to request a position of Teaching Assistant (TA), and a second post can be asked if the headcount is beyond 100 students. Budget limitations apparently did not allow to closely follow these guidelines for the 2019-2020 batch of teaching assistants (see Chapter 4.4) and positions were attributed only for schools with at least 20 students of a particular ethnic minority.

There are no such minimum requirements for the "30,000 kyats" language teachers (LT) and anecdotal evidence suggests that in some cases, smaller groups are being taught an ethnic language. The *Kante Chin Literature and Culture Committee* interviewed in Tamu, for instance, has trained a total of 3 teachers for 58 students in Sagaing Region, including in a school with only six children.

Overall, many schools, particularly in urban settings, will continue to face challenging linguistic situations, which may lead to difficult choices in terms of whether to have all the relevant languages available as subjects.

When asked about what could be the solution to these logistical challenges they are facing, some of the LCCs interviewed in the most complex ethno-linguistic settings were starting to consider the possibility of a step back in terms of the unfolding language-in-education policy. While having their languages taught in government schools with official recognition and support is important to them as a political symbol, returning to teaching on weekends and during summer schools rather than during busy school weeks, as many had been doing for decades, may significantly simplify the logistics of making multiple languages available.

2. The language standardization conundrum

"A language is a dialect with an army and navy"
Max Weinreich

After this discussion of the geographical and administrative complexities linked to introducing ethnic languages in formal education in urban and multilingual settings, we are now examining another challenge to the unfolding language-in-education policy. While the first challenge was dealing with the multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages in a single geographic location, this second challenge concerns the linguistic unity attached to various ethnonyms and the often-difficult choices regarding which particular form of a language should be promoted through education.

Reproducing the "Mon model"?

When discussing the prospects of introducing ethnic languages in formal education and MTB-MLE perspectives in Myanmar, many (including Lall & South 2016, Rinehart 2016, ENAC 2018) have pointed towards the example of the *Mon National Education Committee* (MNEC). The MNEC is the executive body of the education department of an ethnic armed group, the *New Mon State Party* (NMSP) and the model it uses in terms of language-in-education policy is indeed inspiring.

After signing a cease-fire agreement in 1995, the NMSP made the choice of an education model of "federalist" inspiration (Lall & South 2012). This model, despite facing a number of challenges[138], provides a transition from a Mon language curriculum to the national curriculum, throughout primary, middle and high schools levels, in a way that is very much aligned with international MTB-MLE models (see chapter 3).

The MNEC schools gather 12,000 students in Mon State, Kayin State and Tanintharyi Region (to be compared to a total of about 405,000 in Basic education in Mon State, of which about 55,000 learn an ethnic language in Grade 1, 2 or 3). Currently, the government provides free textbooks for the MNEC schools. However, the MNEC would like the government to officially recognize these schools and provides salaries for its teachers, who currently receive 96,000 kyats, against 180,000 kyats in government schools. Despite these difficulties, the MNEC can certainly constitute a source of inspiration in the perspective of recognizing and creating bridges between the other Ethnic Basic Education Providers (EBEPs) and the Ministry of Education (MoE), even if process proves to be challenging, so far, in practice.[139]

However, the idea that the *Mon National Schools*[140] could readily constitute an inspiration for a MTB-MLE policy in government schools throughout the whole country is problematic. This vision seems to overlook the fact that the MNEC schools, and the Mons in general, represent a unique socio-linguistic situation, making it by far the single easiest example across the Union of Myanmar for introducing ethnic minority languages in formal education.

While the perception of Mon as a single and standardized language may not be totally conform to reality (see Jenny 2015 on Mon dialects) the differences between these varieties are not great enough to affect mutual intelligibility, and the written language seems to be relatively homogenous. Even more importantly, throughout and in reference to a history that is more than a millenary old, the Mons (including their armed-group and its education system) have forged a strong sense of belonging to a single ethnic identity. Arguably no other ethnic group across the Union of

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[138] See for instance, "Mon national schools show the way on Mother tongue Education", *The Irrawaddy*, November 29, 2019.

[139] Taking inspiration from the Mon model and language policy has proved to be challenging in practice for other EBEPs, for multiple reasons, including relationship of the armed-groups with the State and varying language situations (see Introduction) "Mon national schools show the way on Mother tongue Education", *The Irrawaddy*, November 29, 2019. "From a War Zone to a Classroom: Teachers at Mon Schools Preserve Their Heritage" *The Irrawaddy*, December 3, 2019.

[140] As opposed to the the "mixed schools" of the MNEC, in which Mon language, culture and history are only taught as subjects, in a fashion which seems to align with the local curriculum prospects (see chapter 6).

Myanmar, notably among those whose ethnonym corresponds to a State, presents such a homogenous ethno-linguistic identity.

This specificity of the Mon situation implies additional challenges for other groups, preventing from simply replicating the model. Interviewees all across the country, both among government departments and ethnic actors, are very well aware of this comparative advantage of the Mons, often envied or perceived as the "easy" example, and quite possibly idealized as such by other groups in comparison to the challenges they are facing.

Towards linguistic "discretization"?

All other ethnic minority groups across the Union of Myanmar thus present, to different extent, less homogenous ethnic identities than the Mons, and can be divided into sub-groups, corresponding to various ethnonyms, according to differences that include geography, religion and language.

In mathematical terms, the challenge we are describing in this section deals with the difficulties involved in the process of transforming continuous data into discrete data. In that case, continuous data would be what is described as 120+ languages, often presenting a variety of dialects and scripts, heterogeneous socio-linguistic situations, and often used within daily informal multilingualism. Discrete data would then take the form of standardized languages, fittingly corresponding to a list of ethnonyms, which could conveniently and exhaustively be listed and represented by a patchwork of colors on an ethnolinguistic map.

In other words, this transformation would involve going from a situation where a virtually uncountable number of variations of a large number of languages, attached to a variety of often overlapping ethnonyms, are spoken in the homes of primary school pupils across Myanmar, to a situation where a limited number of standardized languages are taught in government schools.

Our argument is that there are today in Myanmar, for reasons that we are going to explore in this section, strong forces pushing towards the formalization and standardization of ethnic languages. However, language standardization processes do not come without ambiguity and contradiction and — in Myanmar at least as much as elsewhere around the world (see Chapter 3.4) — these tend to be contentious. Additionally, in the process, the aim of helping pupils understand their teachers better often takes backseat to the nation-building objectives of the actors involved.

A Political matrix based on the recognition of indigenous ethnic identities

A key aspect underlying the linguistic conundrum we are describing in this section is the extent to which ethnicity has been politicized throughout Myanmar history, through an essentialist understanding of ethnic categories[141].

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[141] See for instance Clarke S.L., Seng Aung Sein Myint, Zabra Yu Siwa, (2019). Thant Myint U, 2017, "A resurgent nationalism is shaping Myanmar politics", *Nikkei Asian Review*, October 19, 2017.

A thorough discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope and ambitions of this report, but many such as Lieberman (1978) have warned against viewing pre-colonial history through the prism of discrete ethnic categories, while Taylor (2006) has observed that the "reification of ethnicity" was a striking feature of colonial rule. Candier (2019), also described the influence of anglo-american concepts such as *race* and *nation* on Burmese terms for categorizing people.

The colonial State, in its 1931 Census, strived to approach the "true racial classification" of the "indigenous races of Burma", pondering the relative importance of linguistic criteria, compared to other features, such as "(…) physical appearance, body measurements, culture, customs, technology and the temperament (…)".McCormick (2016) noted that the imported concept of *race* (which will evolve into *ethnicity*) was often equated with language. McAulife (2017), describes how "Language became the census category that best approximated the European perception of race in Burma and thus the primary means of *measuring* race in Burma".

According to Thant Myint U (2019), these colonial classifications (including distinctions between indigenous populations and "alien races"[142]) and the overall "racial hierarchy" that was colonial Burma is the foundation of what he calls "indigenousness as the central ideology of the country".

Subsequently, since the inception of the independent nation-state in 1947, the Union of Burma's federal politics has been attributing prerogatives on an ethnic identity-recognition basis: the 1947 Constitution links citizenship to the belonging of one of the "indigenous races" of Burma and the seven States created and the decades following Independence all bare ethnonyms.

As noted by Cheesman (2017), Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) further politicized the idea of indigenous ethnicities, notably by attributing a central place to the concept of "national races" (တိုင်းရင်းသား) in official political discourse.

The SLORC/SPDC, while using patent Burman nationalist references in their discourse on the Myanmar nation and largely contributing to the curtailing of using ethnic minority languages use in formal education (see Chapter 2), also carried on with the trend of ethnic identity recognition-based politics. An obvious illustration of this conception of politics and citizenship is the 2008 Constitution, which further attributes (or denies) territories and political prerogatives along "ethnic" lines (notably Self-Administered Zones and Ethnic Affairs ministers).

The politicization of ethnicity is today firmly embedded into Myanmar's political culture: while the number of representatives sporting ethnic costumes in the Parliament has technically decreased after the 2015 elections (Egreteau 2019), about two-thirds of the political parties running for the forthcoming elections have a clear reference to an ethnonym.

Well beyond the Myanmar context (see Chapter 3), identity-based recognition policies have often been criticized, notably by Malloy (2014), mainly for "reifying categories that may misrepresent the lived experience of group members", and potentially opening the door for endless recognition-seeking, rather than compromise and social construction:

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[142] Bennison J.J., *1931 census of India*, volume xi: Burma, p47.

> "Not only can identity-based recognition claims fail to improve group members' position; such claims must fail since they can only meaningfully exist if the recognition-seeking group accepts the equation of its identity with victimization, powerlessness, and antagonism."

During our interviews, a significant number of actors, while being themselves often deeply engaged in this political matrix through their efforts to consolidate their particular ethnic identity and language, seemed to have a very clear vision of how identity-based recognition could (continue to) be a bottomless pit for Myanmar's political future. In several instances, we have heard criticism towards the very concept of attributing territories and political prerogatives along ethnic identity lines — as a dire legacy of the colonial mindset and ruling strategies — from the inception of the Union of Burma.

Additionally, critics have noted that identity-based recognition policies around the world tend to work hand in hand with neoliberalism (see Chapter 3.1). Costa (2013), referring to the work of Speed (2005) illustrates in a bold but vivid way problematics that could certainly be transposed to the contemporary situation of Myanmar (and which do echo the concerns of some individuals from ethnic minorities we have been working with in the frame of this report):

> "In the case of Mexico, while Indians are busy defining and debating which ethnic groups they belong to and what language they (ought to) speak, they are not busy voicing other types of social demands."

In their work on education in Thailand, Alain Mounier and Phasina Tangchuang similarly warn against the tendency of localist movements to become *de facto* allies of neoliberal forces, in the process of demanding a diminution of the central state's prerogatives.

135 Shades of Myanmar and the 2014 census

Despite this political matrix attributing political prerogatives along ethnic identity lines, ethnic categories, in Myanmar like elsewhere, are debatable and debated. Leach (1954) — whose work is precisely based on fieldwork conducted within ethnic minorities in what was then Burma — was among the pioneers in deconstructing essentialist conceptions of ethnicity, by demonstrating how ethnic identity is, to a large extent, a fluid reality. An individual is indeed likely to experience different sense of belonging, not only throughout the course of his life, but often over the course of a single day. This fluidity of identity and language practices, specifically in the Myanmar context, was already clearly identified by Bennison, who vividly states in the report of the 1931 Census:

> "Some of the races or tribes in Burma change their language almost as often as they change their clothes. Languages are changed by conquest, by absorption, by isolation and by a general tendency to adopt the language of a neighbour who is considered to belong to a more powerful, more numerous or more advanced race or tribe."

The fundamental contradictions between an understanding of ethnicity as an exclusive belonging to a single category and the reality of daily interactions and language practice in multi-ethnic regions of what is today the Union of Myanmar is also depicted and illustrated through the example of a "Kachin" woman by McCormick (2019):

> " (…) What this one-to-one equation fails to address is the high degree of multilingualism and multiple identities, especially prevalent among "upland" peoples who historically lived in small, politically acephalous communities, practiced until recently animism (now largely replaced with Christianity and some Buddhism), and were shifting or swidden agriculturalists. The case of the Kachin is illustrative: a "Kachin" woman may speak Lhaovo with her mother, Rawang with her father, Jinghpaw with other Kachin subgroups or in church, and Shan in the market, in addition to being educated in Burmese and English. Depending on the context, her languages and ethnic identities could include Lhaovo and Rawang, Jinghpaw or Kachin as a superordinate identity, and Burmese as a national identity, none of which can be reduced down to a single essential identity."

This fluidity of identity and language practices, notably in multilingual areas of the country, has challenging implications when it comes to determining a single ethnic identity, and a single mother-tongue to be used in education. Another underlying challenge to the production of discrete ethno-linguistic categories is that the criteria to distinguish what should be considered a dialect or a separate language (which, again, is often perceived as the most critical marker of an ethnic group) are largely subjective, with political considerations generally superseding strictly linguistic aspects.

Going back to contemporary and concrete debates, many have noticed that to this day, the results of the 2014 Census dealing with ethnicity, and collected according to the 135 ethnonyms list (see Cheesman (2017) on the origins of that particular figure), have not yet been published[143]. This data is indeed highly sensitive since population figures have direct implications in terms of political prerogatives, such as obtaining ethnic affairs ministers in the States and Regions or Self-Administered Zones (SAZ). Whatever results come out is thus likely to be contested by political actors feeling that the population of their particular group is underestimated or miscounted.

Indeed, not only do many ethnic actors seem to have inflated expectations regarding the demography of their particular group, but the 135 categories used for the Census themselves are often highly debatable and debated, as noted by scholars, including Ferguson (2015) and Maung Thawnhmung and Yadana (2018). U Thein Swe, Minister of Immigration and Population, has declared that the results dealing with ethnicity were not ready to be disclosed, due to "disputes about the names of the ethnic persons, the structure and the race"[144]. Issues include demands of replacing exonyms with autonyms, which are likely to have other implications and be attached to other sets of issues; a large number of respondents have reportedly self-identified has "other" (Su-Ann Oh 2014).

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[143] San Yamin Aung, 2018, "Still No Date for Release of Census Findings on Ethnic Populations", *The Irrawaddy,* February 21, 2018, *The Irrawaddy*.

[144] "Analysis: Where Some See Respect, Ethnic Groups See Burmanization and Loss of Rights", Nyein Nyein, *The Irrawaddy*, June 16, 2018.

In Chin State for instance, the official categorization contains no less than 53 ethnonyms. Amongst this complex official ethnic landscape (other estimates give 35 to 78 ethnolinguistic groups), one point seems fairly consistent though: the fact that this particular figure and typology does not reflect accurately the ethno-linguistic diversity of Chin State[145]. Some of the ethnonyms on that list are often perceived as categories corresponding to regions or clans, rather than ethnic groups or languages, and many interviewees said they technically belong to several categories on that list at the same time.

Another point, however, was also widely agreed-upon in interviews: the fact that producing a new list of ethnonyms for Chin State today, regardless of how "scientific" the ethnolinguistic criteria involved would be, is likely to be highly contentious.

A number of actors in Chin State, including in the State government and parliament — which regularly receive new demands for the teaching of languages they have never heard of — would like to materialize an aspiration that has been central in the mobilization of an overarching Chin identity: agreeing on a Chin common language, both for educational and political purposes.

In practice, very few if anyone reckons that agreeing on a single language today is a realistic project, unless this language is either English or some kind of Chin "Esperanto" (i.e. a language created artificially with features from multiple Chin languages, see below), two prospects that both bring their own set of issues. But a number of actors hope to be able to negotiate an agreement on a limited number of "main" languages (6 according to latest information, including Zo, Laizo, Hakha and Khumi, out of the 24 currently taught[146]) to be promoted, notably through formal education (the other languages/dialects, according to most interviewees, would then be taught outside of the schools).

While the prospect of getting all the stakeholders to discuss these issues together is certainly constructive, finding a consensus is likely to be challenging. The main issue is of course political: as we shall see in the next pages, cultural and political elites linked to "smaller" groups and languages, at this point and time of Myanmar political history, are rarely ready for such compromises (*a fortiori* if they have already obtained official recognition).

Furthermore, from an educational standpoint, several interviewees have contended that this type of project would amount, for a significant fraction of the population, to learning an additional language that differs significantly from their actual mother-tongue, thus defeating the purpose of introducing ethnic languages to facilitate the education process. This prospect may also potentially threaten the perspective of maintaining language diversity, by turning the "main" languages into the most direct threat to "smaller" languages.

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[145] "No Plan to Change List of Chin Sub-Tribes, Says Union Minister", *Khonumthung News*, September 12, 2019.

[146] Personal exchanges with the *Chinbridge Institute*.

Practical and ideological drives towards standardization

A central element underpinning the linguistic conundrum we are describing is the multiple drives towards standardization and formalization of languages. Multilingualism, uncountable shades of dialectal variations and abundant loanwords are unproblematic in daily informal contexts, or when languages are taught within community institutions. These institutions are able, or not, to teach a particular form of a language and students are free to attend or not.

However, systematically introducing them in an institution such as public schools, attended — at least theoretically — by the whole continuum of society over the whole national territory, strongly suggests an extent of standardization of these languages, for practical reasons including cost management (production of curricula, teacher training).

This contemporary drive towards language formalization and standardization also echo an idea deeply embedded in Myanmar's political culture, within the context of the above-mentioned "reified ethnicity". Kojima (2016) tells us a fascinating anecdote in this regard, of a meeting between Thakin Kodaw Hmaing and a Palaung sawbwa in the early 1950s. During the conversation, the Burmese literary figure reportedly asked if the Palaungs had their own script. The Palaung sawbwa, shamefully admitting that they did not was, according to that story, warned by Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, "ethnic groups which don't have their own script tend to perish".

While this episode may have contributed to the development of one of the Palaung scripts a few years later, it must be noted that sentences along Kodaw Hmain's line (such as "စာမရှိရင် လူမျိုးပျောက်မယ်(လေ)") are pronounced extremely often today by ethnic actors, as a rationale to their linguistic projects dealing with the production of a written and formal language. This conception of the necessity of a written (and thus somewhat standardized) language corresponding to an ethnonym also echoes the endeavors of multiple religious groups, and notably Christian missionaries, who have been creating dozens of written languages for groups located in what are today the peripheries of the Union of Myanmar, in the perspective of evangelization, from the early nineteenth century up to present days.

The practical and ideological drives towards ethnic minority languages standardization are thus multiple and powerful. To a large extent, these projects — many of which are not new but were lethargic under military regimes — have found new impetus in the possibility of teaching and using ethnic minority languages in government schools. But they are also underpinned by a political culture idealizing discrete ethnic categories, strongly influenced by colonial-era ideals of a single, written, language corresponding to a single ethnonym.

Actors linked to these multiple ethnic identities wish not only to preserve their languages but also to mobilize what they perceive as their nation, through a common, standardized and written language, with the critical mass of speakers/readers necessary to its long-term survival and (ideally) development.

The progress of telecommunications in minority-populated regions over the last few years also has multiple and somewhat contradictory effects, which play a role in these developments.

Access to the internet, on the one hand, certainly contributes to the spreading of languages which already have a strong presence online, including Burmese and English. But modern telecommunications, on the other hand, constitute a strong incentive towards the development of written and somewhat standardized languages, able to survive online, either as genuine media of communication, or at least in the perspective of being able to display written material fittingly corresponding to an ethnonym, a feature perceived as a central component of a "proper" ethnic group (see the cases of scripts recently developed for Burmese dialects such as Intha, Taungyo or Danu, in Chapter 5.3).

Standardizing ethnic minority languages to preserve them: a Faustian bargain?

In earlier publications[147], we have described two opposing forces at play among ethnic minorities in Myanmar, which have both gained momentum in the post-SPDC political context alongside the shift of language-in-education policy. On the one hand, there is movements towards standardization and the choice (or production) of "common" (ဘုံသုံး), standardized languages; on the other hand, the mobilization of particularism.

While the perspective of teaching ethnic minority languages in government schools strongly suggests some degree of standardization, the Myanmar political matrix, spearheaded by the contemporary legal recognition of "ethnic rights", also provides solid ground for the mobilization of "local" ethnic identities, *a fortiori* along the already established 135 categories, and almost regardless of their relevance in terms of linguistic proximity/difference.

The tension between these two forces, while certainly exacerbated by the weight of ethnicity in Myanmar political culture, is in fact a classical conundrum in the processes of standardizing minority languages in modern nation-states around the world (see Chapter 3.4). For Lane, Costa and de Korne (in the introduction of a recent book dealing with countries and regions such as Russia, Canada, West Africa or Scotland) these types of projects frequently amount to a "Faustian bargain", underpinned by often irreconcilable political, almost philosophical, contradictions. In the very name of consolidating "smaller" languages to protect linguistic diversity, these projects entail indeed, precisely, a reduction of… linguistic diversity:

> " (…) social actors involved in these processes often find themselves at odds with conflicting priorities. On the one hand, standardisation remains a potent way of doing or inventing language, of producing languages as bounded, discrete entities and as social institutions and subsequently increasing the social status of those who use them."

But, as they immediately follow:

> (…) " On the other hand, standardisation is inherently a limitation of diversity (Milroy and Milroy 1999) and a way to harness and act upon linguistic, that is to say, social differences. Promoting language standards is thus both a way for validating groups and

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[147] Salem-Gervais (2018a, b, c)

for limiting group-internal diversity. Considering that diversity is often the very raison d'être for minority language movements based on the claims that all ways of communicating are equally legitimate and that language diversity needs to be protected, this trade-off is at best contentious and at worst a Faustian bargain."

Russian Dolls and the example of Kachin State

In a variety of levels and situations, actors seeking to represent and mobilize a particular ethnic identity (such as LCCs, religious institutions, armed groups, political parties, ethnic media, NGOs, and so forth) wish to promote linguistic and political "unity" (စည်းလုံးညီညွတ်မှု) as a remedy to the "division/difference/heterogeneity" (ကွဲပြားမှု) within what they perceive as their group. However, these discourses on "unity in diversity" between "brothers and sisters" often have a lot in common, both in terms of philosophy, narrative and vocabulary, with the propaganda of the former military government, and its cult of "unity" within what has been described as a "Burmanization" (or "Myanmafication") project.

A variety of similar actors, associated with different components of the said perceived groups, do not fail to notice these similarities and inherent contradictions. Appealing to their own "ethnic rights" (which are now inscribed in the law), they often seek to consolidate their own ethno-linguistic identity by affirming their singularity and emphasizing cultural and linguistic differences from the group that they perceive as trying to "swallow" them.

Echoing the longstanding accusation of "Burmanization," a growing list of words starting by an ethnonym and ending with -zation are currently being heard across the country to denounce perceived situations (or aspirations) of cultural and linguistic hegemonies (we have heard for instance mention of political agendas of Sgaw-ization, Shanization, Jinghpaw-ization, even Hakha-ization in the case of Chin State discussed above).

Some political and linguistic projects have indeed striking similarities with the priority given to the common "Myanmar" (Burmese) language and identity by successive governments over the whole Union. In the case of Kachin State for instance, in the perspective of federalism, a number of political actors would like to promote the "Kachin" (Jinghpaw) language as an official language for Kachin State and a medium of instruction for primary schools.

Jinghpaw does have an history of being used as a common language for the various Kachin groups and the longstanding and close contacts between the different Kachin languages have induced processes of linguistic convergence (Kurabe 2016, Bradley 2018). Some non-Jinghpaw actors involved in Kachin politics do agree with the perspective of promoting Jinghpaw as a common language.

However, other actors among "non-Jinghpaw" Kachin minorities wish to promote their respective identities and languages instead, as shown for instance in the recent years controversy regarding

the utilisation of "Kachin" or "Jinghpaw" in the celebration of Manaw festival[148]. 6 Kachin (Jinghpaw, Lacid, Lhaovo, Lisu, Rawang and Zaiwa) and 5 Shan (Tai Leng, Tai Khamti, Tai Leu, Tai Long and Tai Sar) groups are officially recognized by the Kachin State Government and the textbooks for the teaching of these eleven languages, up to Grade 3, were completed in 2019 (See Figures 29, 30, 31).

These agendas are hardly compatible. Associating them, in terms of language-in-education policy, would suggest to use four languages throughout the education process (one of the eleven recognized Kachin and Shan languages, the "common" Kachin, Myanmar, and English), a challenging prospect in itself.

Even more problematically, the "sub-Kachin" (as well as Shan) identities, as articulated by their respective political leaders and cultural elites, are often precisely pitted against the encompassing Kachin political project, denounced as hegemonic and threatening to swallow Kachin State's minorities ("Jinghpaw-ization"[149]). As Müller (2016) notes:

> "Not only peripheral Kachin groups contest being affiliated with the Jinghpaw, or being part of the Kachin system. In the past decades, each Kachin subgroup has founded its own 'literature and culture' committees (…), promoted its own orthography, published primers and Bible translations. The Kachin Baptist Church, with its focus on Jinghpaw, was initially antagonistic to these efforts to create individual literary languages.

> These subgroup committees usually attempt to 'purify' their languages by replacing commonly used Jinghpaw words with newly coined words in a process similar to those in French, Icelandic, or Turkish. In places like northern Shan State where 'pure' Jinghpaw speakers are the minority, some subgroup Kachins prefer to speak their mother tongue (be it Lhaovo, Zaiwa, or Lashi) instead of using Jinghpaw as a lingua franca when talking to speakers of other Kachin languages."

Reciprocally, actors striving to promote a common Kachin political agenda tend to be dissatisfied with the contemporary prominence and independence of the five other Kachin sub-group identities, notably in the frame of the 2008 Constitution (there is a Rawang and a Lisu Minister of Ethnic Affairs in Kachin State) and in the perspective of teaching ethnic languages in primary schools. For them, this dynamic is the result of a divide-and-rule (သွေးခွဲ) strategy orchestrated by the Burman-dominated state, which will ultimately lead to more "Burmanization".

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[148] "ကချင်ပြည်နယ်နေ့တွင် မနောပွဲကျင်းပမည့်အစီအစဉ် ဖျက်သိမ်း။ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီအတွင်း မနောပွဲပြုလုပ်နိုင်ရန် ကချင်မျိုးနွယ်စု ခြောက်ခု ယနေ့ဆွေးနွေးမည်" *Seven Day News*, December 29, 2019. "ကချင်ရိုးရာ မနောပွဲကို ဖေဖော်ဝါရီမှာပြန်ကျင်းပမယ်", *BBC Myanmar*, December 31, 2019. "ပူတာအိုရှိ တိုင်းရင်းသားစာပေသင် ဆရာအချို့လနှင့်ချီ၍ လစာမရ" *BNI*, October 21, 2019. "Inside the controversy over the Kachin manau festival", Emily Fishbein, *Frontier Myanmar*, January 14, 2020.

[149] The term is for instance used in *Kachin Life Stories*, anthologies vol. 1 (https://kachinlifestories.com), with authors defending the idea that the contributions could be written in any language (opposing those seeing proper Jinghpaw, edited by educated person with advanced Jinghpaw skills, as the only language that should be used). "we should really encourage contributors to write in any language they like so as to avoid a "Jinghpawization" of #kachinlifestories!"

> " While widely regarded as subgroups within the larger pan-Kachin group, many Lisu and Rawang have asserted their identity outside the Wungpawn/Kachin group. This rejection of Kachin identity has emerged out of longheld grievances around what some describe as "Jingphaw domination" and pressure to assimilate into the larger group. In this context, the appointment of the two ethnic affairs ministers is seen as implying that Lisu and Rawang communities are entitled to an additional form of representation because they constitute groups separate from the pan-Kachin group, and because they each meet the threshold requirement in terms of population size. This appointment has drawn ire from members of the broad Kachin group, as it is seen as a move by the central government to affirm Lisu and Rawang identity as distinct from Kachin identity." (Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, Yu Siwa 2019)

But the complexity and diverging agendas do not end there. Within some of the officially recognized groups of Kachin State, there have been significant linguistic and political challenges in agreeing to a common language to be taught in schools (see Chapter 5.3 on the case of Shan Ni/Tai Leng in Kachin State and Sagaing Region). Some of the Kachin "sub-groups", such as the Rawang, who inhabit the mountainous borderlands with China and India, also seem to feature significant internal linguistic diversity: about 4-5 languages not always mutually intelligible and 70-80 smaller dialects, according to the Rawang Language and Culture Committee (which seems to corresponds to the estimations of linguists, Morse 1965)

At the time of the interview[150], the Rawang LCC was seemingly facing internal political challenges in maintaining and promoting linguistic unity based on a written version of the Matwang dialect, whose formalization seems to have been finished only in the 1980s. Just like the Myanmar state, and the pan-Kachin leaders, actors linked to this common Rawang identity stress the necessity of linguistic "unity" for what they perceive as their group, yet confront internal demands of actors mobilized for the defence of their particular strain of diversity.

Unsurprisingly, in the process of shaping these associations/antagonisms, the magnitude of actual linguistic difference itself is often by far secondary to the interplay of actors and political stakes involved. Slight phonetic or lexical variations could be mobilized to emphasize otherness in order to strengthen the self. Inversely, groups whose speech is not mutually intelligible may end up reaching a long-term linguistic compromise if they are united enough politically.

At the time of writing, Lisu and Kayan political actors, despite having to deal with very significant internal linguistic variations within their respective groups (Bradley 2015)[151], both seem to have achieved some levels of success in agreeing on a common formal language.

However, in both cases Buddhist minorities among them have been developing separate, Burmese alphabet-based, written languages, in contrast to the Roman scripts which the Christian majorities use. In certain regions, the local Kayan LCC chairmen also argue that the common language chosen by Kayan political leaders in 2007, the "standard" Pekhon dialect of Southern Shan

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[150] July 2019.

[151] See also www.ethnologue.com

State, is too distant to be understood. In the schools located in Kayan villages of Kayin State and Naypyidaw Union Territory, one variety of the Geko language (Shintani 2015) is taught instead.

Figure 29: Textbooks for the teaching of Jinghpaw, Lacid and Lhaovo in government schools, produced in 2019 with the support of UNICEF.
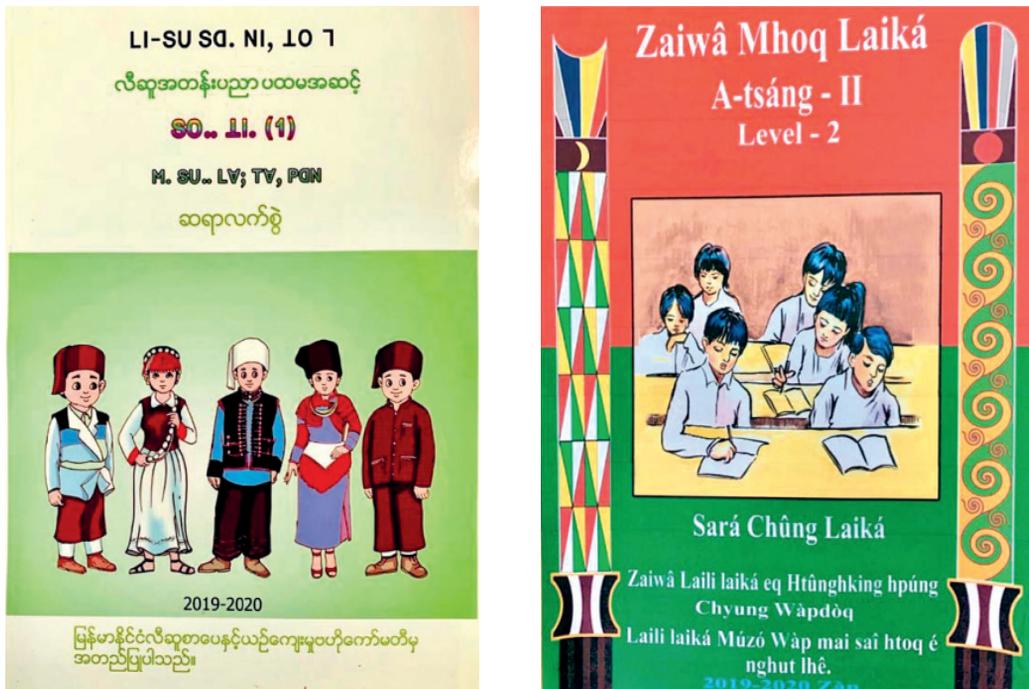

Figure 30: Textbooks for the teaching of Lisu, Zaiwa, Rawang and Tai Khamti in government schools, produced in 2019 with the support of UNICEF.
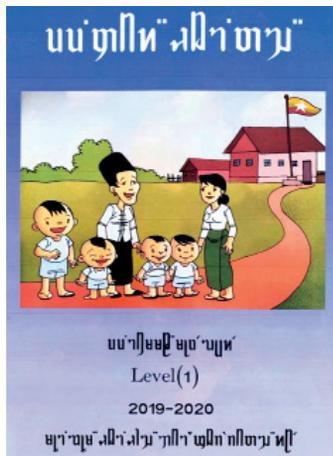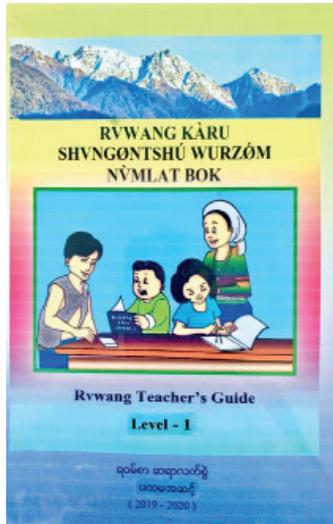
Figure 31: Textbooks for the teaching of Tai Leu, Tai Leng, Tai Long and Tai Sar in government schools, produced in 2019 with the support of UNICEF.

"Ethnic Esperantos" as a remedy to linguistic division within a perceived group?

One possible answer to the political problems often coming with the choice of a particular language/dialect/script over others (Weber 2016, see Chapter 3.4), is to appoint a committee of experts to devise a common language. Several actors among the Palaung (Kojima 2016), Naga and Chin[152], for instance, are trying to conduct such projects.

Usually, a literature and culture committee which is supposed to represent an overarching ethnic identity (but whose legitimacy may be contested) works to identify linguistic features common to all (or most of) the sub-groups included in their project, and use those features as the basis for the common language, while at the same time adding specific features from the varieties to foster a sense of inclusiveness.

This type of language standardization endeavour has various implications, which depend on the degree of heterogeneity of the languages varieties and scripts involved. Understandably, they are particularly challenging for languages that are not mutually intelligible. From a strictly linguistic perspective, the standardization of Tai Leng/Shan Ni (see Chapter 5.3) for instance, is much less ambitious than the production of common languages for overarching Naga, Palaung or Chin groups, each of which includes a great heterogeneity of languages.

Nevertheless, political and practical challenges to all standardization projects are multiple and daunting, which explains why similar projects around the world often have limited success in terms of generating traction: negotiating a sustainable agreement between all the elite actors regarding the new linguistic unity (which despite its inclusiveness still entails a reduction of diversity), overcoming practical linguistic challenges when merging the multiple languages/dialects, and last but not least, getting the population to actually adopt these new artificial languages or "Esperantos", first and foremost through education.

The Palaungs (Ta'ang), for instance, resumed the language unification projects they have had for decades (on these questions see Kojima 2016, Badenoch 2016 and Weymuth 2016) following language-in-education developments which started in 2012. The ongoing project is ambitious, since it does not only entail creating or adopting a common script, out of the 5-6 existing ones, but also devising a common language altogether out of the main Palaung languages/dialects[153].

Organizations such as the *Ta'ang education institute*, the *Ta'ang Student and Youth Organization* and *The Ta'ang Women Organization* are currently working with the Ta'ang LCC in order to devise a common language, by comparing the different forms in the different dialects and keeping those common to most. So far, the organizations leading this project have managed to reach some level of consensus, by involving personalities from all different groups. Key actors, such as the authorities of the Palaung Self-Administrated Zone and the *Ta'ang National Liberation Army* (TNLA) also seem supportive of this linguistic unification prospect. A first textbook was produced in 2017 for this common language (see Figure 32).

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[152] See the project of the *All Chin society*, Yangon.

[153] The Ta'ang LCC representatives estimates that there is a total of 13-14 Palaung languages/dialects. Interviews with the Chairman and representatives of the Ta'ang LCC, Lashio, January 2019.

However, according to the Ta'ang LCC in Lashio, a number of linguistic problems still need to be solved. At the time of writing, only (some of) the main Palaungs languages/dialects are being taught in government schools. Linguists following the project also note that the magnitude of the difference between the dialects constitute a serious challenge. While speakers of the northern dialects (Rumai, Shwe) tend to recognize the words, it is usually not the case for those of the southern dialects (Ruching), both because this common language might be more influenced by northern dialects, and because Ruching uses a specific script, derived from Tai Khuen, one of the Shan languages used around Kengtung[154]. The representatives of the Ta'ang LCC themselves acknowledge the great linguistic and political challenges ahead, in the process of developing the language, maintaining the consensus, and getting this language to be used by the population, in practice[155].

**Figure 32: 2017 Reader for the teaching of the basics of the common Palaung (Ta'ang) language, developed by the Ta'ang Literature and Culture Committee (left)
and textbook in the Rumai dialect (right).**

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[154] Personal communication of Mathias Jenny, august 2018.

[155] Interviews with the Chairman and representatives of the Ta'ang LCC, Lashio, January 2019.

State and Region politics: an extra layer of complexity?

Taking or not into account the linguistic endeavours undertaken by their "kin" living across the border is already a baseline question for many ethnic groups inhabiting borderlands. A lack of coordination can lead to additional difficulties, as when there is more than one project to produce a transnational, standardized language. The balance of power between sub-groups and official recognition in different countries can vary, as in the case of Akha and Lahu, whose speakers are both scattered over several countries.

Within the context of decentralization of the Union of Myanmar, the growing roles of States and Regions, while certainly facilitating the logistics of introducing ethnic minority languages in formal education (see Chapter 4), could well add a similar extra layer of complexity. In addition to the linguistic, religious, political or interpersonal differences that may work against language standardization, State and Region politics sometimes contribute to the appearance of new fault lines within what is usually perceived as a single group.

In some cases, actors from the same ethnic group living in different States or Regions do work together and produce a single curriculum. For instance, both the Mons and "southern" Pa-O LCCs in Mon and Kayin States work closely with their respective counterparts from the neighbouring State, producing single curricula. But in other cases, local LCCs for the same ethnic group may end up competing to obtain recognition and mobilize resources within their respective State or Region political ecosystems.

The Geba (Gaybar) of Kayah and Kayin States constitute a good illustration of this point: according to the *Geba Language and Culture Committee* of Kayah State, there are about 9 Geba dialects, but a common written language was devised by missionaries in 1868, and is widely accepted by all Catholic communities (a Baptist Gaybar minority use a different, Burmese alphabet-based script). According to the government-recognized list of 135 ethnic groups, the Geba belong to Kayah State, and the Geba LCC of Kayah State thus claims legitimacy to lead the Geba linguistic initiatives for the whole Union, materialized by its registration at the Union level in 2017. However, Geba population is much larger in Kayin State, where the Geba are listed as one of the 7 Karen "sub-tribes" (မျိုးနွယ်စု) by an overarching Karen organization which the regional government is in the process of recognizing as the Karen LCC for Kayin State, and which thus want to handle Gaybar ethnicity within Kayin State[156]. The comparable case of Shan Ni / Tai Leng in Sagaing Region and Kachin State will be detailed in Part Three.

In some States, such as Kayah and Kachin, terms such as ဌာနေတိုင်းရင်းသား or ဒေသခံတိုင်းရင်းသား ("local" indigenous race/ethnic nationalities), as opposed to ဧည့်တိုင်းရင်းသား ("guest" indigenous race/ethnic nationalities, which seems to be constructed on the model of ဧည့်နိုင်ငံသား "associate citizen") are also starting being used informally in conversations, medias and political discourse. These words introduce a distinction between groups that are supposedly indigenous to that State, such as Kayah or Kayan in Kayah State, or Kachin groups in Kachin State, and ethnic

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[156] "ကရင်မျိုးနွယ်စု ၇ စုအရေး လုပ်ဆောင်မည့် ကရင်အမျိုးသားမျိုးနွယ်စုများအသင်း ဖွဲ့စည်း", *Karen News*, July 10, 2019. "ကရင်မျိုးနွယ်စု ၇ စု အရေး လုပ်ဆောင်မည့် ကရင်အမျိုးသားမျိုးနွယ်စုများအသင်း- KNTA ဖွဲ့စည်း" *Karen Information Center*, July 9, 2019.

groups which should be regarded as "guests" (i.e. Shan in Kachin or Kayah State). Needless to say, this distinction has no historical foundation beyond the ethnonym attached to a territorial entity at its creation in the wake of colonization; the "guests" having in many instances, technically, inhabited and established centres of powers in the region much earlier than the "host".

This type of distinction, which could well add another layer of complexity to the politics of indigenousness recognition in Myanmar, seems to be part of the discussion in the process of negotiating the political and financial support of the States and Region to the LCCs, in the perspective of teaching ethnic minority languages in the schools.

In Kayah State, at the time of writing, only 6 groups seem to be fully recognized as "local" groups (Kayah, Kayan, Kayaw, Yintelay, Gaybar and Manu Manaw/Kawyaw). This situation implies that "guest" groups, such as Shan and Pa-O need the approval of the Kayah State government to teach in the regions populated by their groups within Kayah State and may receive less support from the Kayah State government for their educational and linguistic endeavours.

3. Linguistic complexities within a (perceived) group: a few brief case-studies

Among the different issues described in this report, many groups across the Union face more or less complex linguistic challenges in the process of making their languages available in government schools. These issues are multiple and can include these languages' scope, especially in the perspective of teaching them beyond primary school (see Chapter 6.2).

In the following pages, we are going to provide four case-studies, in order to illustrate the challenge described in the previous section (namely standardization), which is arguably the most daunting in the context of the ongoing shift of language-in-education policy. The following examples are illustrations of the difficulties often occurring in the process of devising standard languages and scripts, corresponding to particular ethnonyms, to be included in formal education.

Towards the Standardization of Red Shan?

The Red Shan ("Shan Ni" in Burmese or "Tai Leng", in Shan) inhabit western parts of both the Sagaing Region and Kachin state, with a population estimated to be several hundred thousand (some Shan Ni actors reckon they may total close to a million). In any case, their demographic weight is officially acknowledged, under the 2008 Constitution, to the extent that there is a Shan ethnic affairs minister in both Sagaing Region and Kachin State.

A large part of the Shan population in these two State and Region identifies as "Shan Ni/Tai Leng" (except for smaller groups such as Tai Khamti, Tai Sar, Tai Leu, etc.) even if many are registered as "Burman" on their official documents. It should be noted that the mobilization of a "Shan Ni" identity (distinct from overarching "Shan") is often linked to statehood claims, which

have been voiced by both an armed group[157] and a political party[158].

From a linguistic standpoint (and within the context of a relative homogeneity of the Tai languages family), there are not only differences between Shan Ni and the other Shan languages/dialects spoken in Shan state, Kachin State and Sagaing Region, but also significant dialectal variations according to different regions within speakers identifying as Shan Ni. These variations, as it is common among Tai dialects, include (fairly systematic) variations in consonants and tonal system, as well as some dissimilarities in the lexicon.

Another variation among Shan Ni dialects, which is possibly an influence of the Burmese language in certain regions, can be described as abundant syntactic change, from Subject-Verb-Object to Subject-Object-Verb (a feature that does exist, albeit in a much less systematic fashion, in certain parts of Shan State). Finally, in several townships of Sagaing Region, such as Tamu, many self-identified Shan Ni hardly speak the language anymore. During our visit in this region[159], several members of local Shan Ni LCCs openly admitted that their own skills in that language were extremely limited.

After several policy swings over the years, around the early 2010s, most of the Shan Ni LCCs decided to adopt a script slightly different from that used for Tai Long ("standard Shan") to write their language(s). The shape of certain consonants differs, as well as the tones marks. This has resulted in multiple Shan Ni / Tai Leng textbooks, produced during the 2010s, each with slightly different scripts, and based on different dialectal variations (see Figure 33).

**Figure 33: Covers of some of the textbooks produced
for teaching Shan Ni since 2013.**

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[157] "Without Territory, the Shanni Army's Difficult Path to Recognition", Chit Min Tun, *The Irrawaddy*, April 8, 2019.

[158] "Ethnic Groups Demand Self-Administrated States", *Shan Herald Agency for News*, January 18, 2016.

[159] June 2019.

The first conference aimed at standardizing the Shan Ni language was held in 2017 and was largely unsuccessful. A second conference took place in June 2019 in Monywa[160], resulting in an agreement of the Shan Ni LCCs from different townships on draft textbooks for kindergarten and Grade 1 (see illustrations). For the *Shan Ni Literature Research Commission* (သျှမ်းနီစာပေ သုတေသနအဖွဲ့) based in Monywa, these textbooks are the very first steps towards the standardization Shan Ni/Tai Leng language.

The road towards standardization is, however, paved with many challenges. In several townships of Sagaing Region, LCCs and other political actors tend to favor using Tai Long teaching material from Shan State, arguing that merging into the "common" Shan language and identity will broaden the perspectives of its youth.

The *Tai Leng Literature and Culture Committee* for Kachin State (who insists on being called "Tai Leng" and not "Shan Ni") have also completed their own textbooks (up to Grade 3), using a slightly different script, in the frame of the local curriculum developed in Kachin State, with the support of UNICEF and the Kachin State government. While the representatives of a one or two townships of Kachin State did attend the conference in Monywa, at the time of writing, the two projects remain distinct (see Figure 34).

Regardless of these political disagreements that may be overcome in the future, the project of standardizing Red Shan, in itself, is certainly ambitious. Beyond the completed textbooks for the two first grades, which merely present the script, the project of standardizing the language entails deciding on standard vocabulary, spellings, pronunciation and syntax, by merging language features of different regions.

Like elsewhere in the country (see for instance Müller 2016 in the case of the Kachin languages), the committee in charge of composing the textbooks aims at "purifying" the language, by reviving, or creating, vocabulary to replace the loanwords (mainly from Burmese) and getting rid of Burmese-style word order of some varieties, which the committee perceives as "un-Shan". It remains to be seen whether Shan Ni speakers of the different regions will actually adopt this new standardized language and ultimately meet the standards set by the committee.

In addition, in those regions where Shan Ni is no longer spoken (mainly in Sagaing Region), this project, from a pedagogical standpoint, amounts to adding a foreign language to the curriculum (see Chapter 5.1). This prospect may or may not generate enthusiasm and traction among the population, but its pedagogical implications are in any case drastically different from the perspective of using mother-tongues to facilitate the education process.

[160] One of the authors attended this conference.
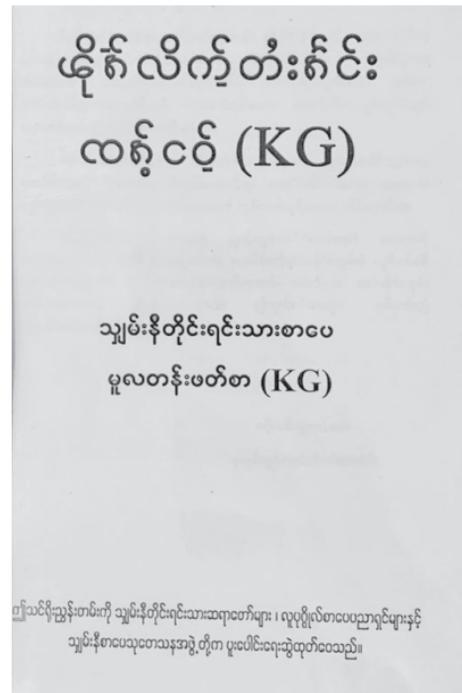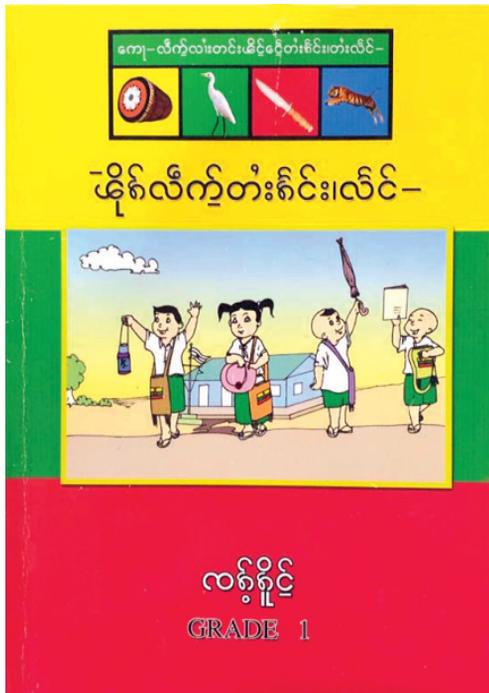
Figure 34: Covers of textbooks for the teaching of Tai Leng/Shan Ni, in Kachin State and Sagaing Region, respectively.

A specific script for a Burmese dialect such as Danu?

Linguistic dilemmas can also arise where they would be much less expected. The Danu are a community of Southern Shan State, with a population estimated between one and a few hundred thousand people and to whom the 2008 Constitution grants a Self-administrated zone.

Danu language is a dialectal variation of Burmese (comparable to Intha, Arakanese or Tavoyan), which tend to be among the more divergent compared to standard Burmese (McCormick 2016). According to the *Summer Institute of Linguistics*, Danu has a lexical similarity of 93% with standard Burmese; it has a different pronunciation of certain phonemes and at least a few hundred specific local terms. Bradley (2015) notes that through language contact, there is an increasing convergence of Danu towards standard Burmese.

Until very recently, all Danu written production was in Burmese, and given the linguistic proximity with the national language, according to the different branches of the *Danu Literature and Culture Committee* themselves, schooling in standard Burmese hasn't been challenging for Danu children[161].

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[161] Interviews with Dr Kyaw Lwin Htoo, and other representatives of *Danu Literature and Culture Committees* in Taunggyi and Pindaya, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019.

Nevertheless, around 2012-2013, when the MoE started encouraging the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools, the Taunggyi branch of the *Danu Literature and Culture Committee* (DLCC-T) started to compose textbooks for kindergarten and early primary grades, using Burmese script but following Danu pronunciation (see Figure 35). However, rapidly, the Danu educators realized that the children were confused when learning in parallel those two similar languages, and ended up having difficulty reading and spelling both.

The DLCC-T devised a prompt but radical solution to this problem. In 2014, they introduced a totally new Danu script composed by one of its board members, who took inspiration from ancient Pyu and Burmese scripts found on stone inscriptions to design the characters (see Figure 35). The awareness about this script was greatly facilitated by the concomitant diffusion of access to internet and social networks in regions populated by Danus, as well as the constant efforts of the DLCC-T to provide trainings, compose textbooks and create a Unicode font.
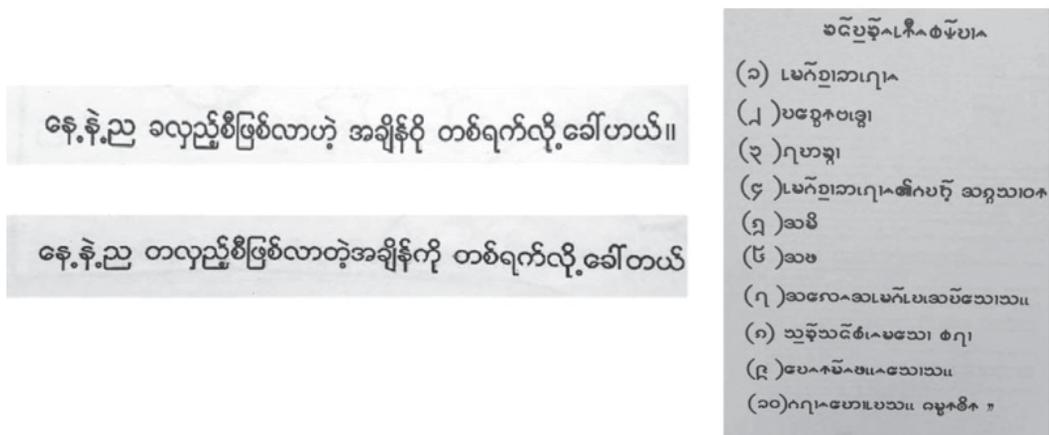

Figure 35: Sample phrase in standard Burmese and Danu pronunciation in the Burmese script (left) and sample text in the Danu script invented in 2014 by the Taunggyi branch of the *Danu Literature and Culture Committee*

This new Danu script did generate a surge of pride and excitement locally, and the Taunggyi branch of the *Danu Literature and Culture Committee* has been striving to promote it, through trainings and the creation of a font for its usage online. Remains to be seen how much it will actually be used, in the context of the overwhelming presence and linguistic proximity of standard Burmese, beyond the simple fact of being able to display written material fittingly corresponding to an ethnonym, a feature perceived as a central component of a "proper" ethnic group.

But more problematically, this young script has already generated formal opposition. Other branches of the Danu LCC and politicians, particularly in the townships of Pindaya and Ywa Ngan (two township of particular importance politically since they constitute the Danu Self-administrated zone) have mobilized against this script, arguing that Danu being a Burmese dialect, the need of a specific script is unjustified.

Both positions have been fiercely defended, notably through Facebook groups, with both sides competing in ingenuity at mocking the other. While this online controversy seemed to have cooled off in recent years, both sides seem to keep their ground. The authorities of the Danu SAZ, which are considering the possibilities of including some elements of Danu culture in the schools of their regions, still do not accept this script[162]. At the time of writing, and while a second script was apparently created more recently, the head of the *Danu affairs committee* stated that having a script would be a source of pride for the Danu, but that trying to spread a script created by a single scholar, without the approval of the committee, is harmful to the unity of the group, and the matter should be settled during their 2020 Danu national conference, which may decide to create yet another script, after setting up a commission[163].

Interestingly, the Taungyo, a group with a comparable socio-linguistic situation, and whose literature and culture committee's office is situated meters away from the Danu's in downtown Taunggyi, have also created their own script[164] and some actors among the neighboring Inthas also have a similar project (see Figure 36).

Figure 36: Samples of the scripts recently invented for Taungyo and Intha, on the cover of a pamphlet and in a Facebook conversation, respectively.

"Unified" Akha or "Common" Akha?

Another type of issue which is not uncommon across the Union of Myanmar, is competition between several scripts for what seems to be a single language. In some cases, these scripts are very recently created, either as the first written form for a particular language (see the case of Kadu and Kanan below) or aiming at standardizing, "unifying", all the written production of what is perceived as a group.

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[162] Interview with the chairman of the Danu LCC, Pindaya, July 2019.

[163] "ဓနုစာပေအက္ခရာတီထွင်ခြင်းကို အမျိုးသား ညီလာခံသုံးဖြတ်ချက်ဖြင့်သာ လုပ်ဆောင်ရမည်ဟု ဓနုတိုင်းရင်းသားရေးရာ အဖွဲ့ချုပ်ပြော", *7 day Daily*, January 4, 2020.

[164] Interviews with Dr Kyaw Lwin Htoo, and other representatives of Danu and Taungyo literature and culture committees, 2015, 2016.

In Eastern Shan State, the *Akha Literature and Culture Committee* of Kengtung has created in 2004 a *Unified Akha Orthography*, aiming at standardizing written production in Akha, a group which counts at least four distinct religious faiths, and multiple written traditions in different scripts. This new standardized script has gain momentum among Catholic, Baptist and to some extent Buddhist Akha of Eastern Shan State, but was not accepted by most animists, who began creating and promoting their own script in 2008 in neighboring Thailand: the *Common Akha Orthography* (Ghoemeh 2015, see Figure 37).

The ins and outs regarding these competing "unifying" scripts projects are quite complex: not only, at the time of writing, the Akha ethnic affairs minister for Shan state belong to the animist Akha minority, and thus tend to support the *Common Akha Orthography*, but this issue has also international ramification with different communities and their respective faith abroad, since Akha people are spread over five neighboring countries (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, China and Vietnam).

UAO (Unified Akha Orthography 2004)	Aˬkhaˬ tsawˇ jeuˬ oeˇ mˇ baˇ dzaˬ-eu zahˇ sahˇ qoˬ
CAO* (Common Akha Orthography 2008)	Aqkaq tsawr jeq oer mr bar dzaq-e zanr sanr khof
CAO* (Common Akha Orthography 2009)	Aqkaq tsawrjeq oermrbar dzaq-e zanrsanrkhovq

Figure 37: Sample text of the United Akha orthography and two different versions of the common Akha orthography (reproduced from Ghoemeh 2015)

Bradley (2015) also notes these associations between scripts and faith among the Akha and the resistances to projects aiming at unifying the written language. He also observes that for the Akha, just like many other groups, the dominant languages/dialects are in the process of replacing smaller ones. The 1,000 Akeu living in Eastern Shan state, for instance, already use Akha as a *lingua franca* and written language, and Akha seems to be in the process of supplanting Akeu. The point illustrated here is that the "language wars" (Calvet 1987) are multiple, and the national language is not necessarily the only or the more direct threat to a specific ethnic language. Other locally dominant languages/dialects, either linguistically related or not, may in some instances constitute a more immediate menace.

Black and Yellow Lahu

Not far from the Akha, the Lahu communities living in Eastern Shan State are also facing difficult choices when it comes to introducing their languages in the schools. Lahu populations live in China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, and experts have proposed different typologies, according

to the color of their costumes and the dialects they speak. In Myanmar, Black Lahu (Lahu Na) dialects speakers constitute a clear majority of the Lahu population, and Yellow Lahu (Lahu Shi) not only understand Black Lahu, but also have been using it as their only written form.

At the time of the interview (July 2018), and following the MoE's language-in-education policy shift of 2012, the newly created Central Lahu LCC, based in Kengtung, was in the process of drafting textbooks for the teaching of Black Lahu in the government schools (by contrast with the already existing textbooks meant to teach language together with religion at church). However, the chairman of the Lahu LCC mentioned the development of a new Yellow Lahu script in Thailand and the US, where Yellow Lahu are a majority.

According to Bradley (2015) this issue is not new, and has been the object of a great controversy for at least two decades. However, by contrast with less formal teaching within the religious context in different communities, this controversy may become more acute with the necessity to choose which particular language/script should be taught in which particular school[165].

Kadu, Kanan (and Moken): the cases of languages that used to be unwritten

As a last case-study, we present examples of two languages which until recently did not have any written form, but which are now, in response to the national shift in language-in-education policy, increasingly subject to practical and ideological drives towards standardization (see Chapter 5.2).

The Kadu (Asak in their own language) live mainly in Katha District in northern Sagaing Region and to a lesser extent in Kachin State. Estimations of their population range from 30,000 to 100,000, an important proportion of whom speak only Burmese today. Kadu is a Tibeto-Burman language, with three main dialectal variations[166], corresponding to three different areas (Mawteik, Settaw and Mawkhwin), within a region mainly populated by Shans and Bamars (Sangdong 2012). According to the chairman on the central Kadu LCC, two of the dialects are fairly similar, while the third differs more, and is closer to Kanan language[167]. The vigor of the languages also differs from one location and dialect to another, the speakers of Mawteik dialect having largely shifted to Burmese.

Following the announcements of language policy shifts by the Thein Sein government in the early 2010s, local and outsider scholars, both Buddhist and Christian, started to develop different scripts for what had been only a spoken language. Two of these scripts are Roman-based (one of them adding phonetic symbols), another uses modified Burmese characters, and the last one uses its own characters (see Figure 38). The materials developed in each of these scripts seem to be based on different dialects, and the different groups are competing, to some degree, to develop their respective written languages; as of 2019, keyboards have been developed for using at least 3 of these scripts online.

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[165] Interview with two representatives of the *Lahu Culture and Literature Committee*, Kengtung, 2015, 2018.

[166] www.ethnologue.com

[167] www.ethnologue.com

In our interview of June 2019, the chairman of the central *Kadu Language and Culture Committee* was convinced that a single script and written form should be adopted for the Kadu language, but was not yet sure how to bring these different projects together and settle this issue.


Figure 38: Sample text of one of the scripts recently invented for Kadu, from a pamphlet.

The neighbouring Kanan, which constitute a significantly smaller group (population estimations range between 9,000 and 20,000) are still in the process of developing a written language using a script inspired by the Tai Long and Pa-O of Shan State. They hope to be ready to introduce this language in the schools by the 2020-2021 school year. From an internal politics perspective, the Kanan seem to be in an easier situation than the Kadu. This comparative advantage can be explained, to a large extent, by their geographical situation: the vast majority of their twenty-four villages are concentrated in Bamauk township, with little to no dialectal variation, which also enables regular meetings and an inclusive process in devising a written language.

The dilemmas the Kadu face also echo the case of other languages without written traditions, such as the Moken in Tanintharyi Region. As elsewhere in the country, following the adage that "ethnic groups who don't have a written language tend to perish"[168] as an explicit rationale (see Chapter 5.2), a curriculum has been developed, with the involvement of Christian missionaries, in order to teach the Moken language at school, and was recently submitted to the Tanintharyi Region government. However, Moken specialists, such as Jacques Ivanoff and Maxime Boutry[169], have serious doubts on the prospects of resorting to written forms to safeguard what is fundamentally an oral culture. Moreover, new linguistic and political dilemmas seem to be appearing when it comes to Tanintharyi Region's approval of this teaching material[170], notably because of the existence of several dialects (estimations vary between three to six) among a population estimated to be of 2,000–3,000 individuals.

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[168] "ဆလုံဘာသာစကားသင်ရိုး တိုင်းအစိုးရ အတည်ပြု", *Dawei Watch*, November 27, 2018.

[169] Personal communications

[170] "ဆလုံဘာသာစကားသင်ရိုး သဉ္ဆါ၊ ဗျည်း၊ သရ စစ်ရန် တနင်္သာရီတိုင်းသို့ ပြန်ပို့ထား", *Dawei Watch*, May 28, 2019.

Chapter 6:
Developing the local curriculum

The previous chapters have described both the multiple policy shifts aiming at reintroducing ethnic minority languages in formal education, and the challenges that may complicate this endeavor in years to come. In this chapter, we focus on a closely linked (and even largely overlapping) ongoing development, aiming at decentralizing a portion of the school curriculum. The teaching of ethnic minority languages, but also their "culture, arts, traditions and historical heritage", are indeed central components of the local curricula which are in the process of being developed – in the middle of many uncertainties – in the different States and Regions.

1. The local curriculum: genesis, principles, development and expected benefits

In post-SPDC Myanmar, the idea of a shift from an entirely centralized curriculum towards the introduction of some local content across government schools over the national territory can be traced back to at least 2013, during the time of the *Comprehensive Education Sector Review* (CESR, see Chapter 4.1)[171]. This idea may have been, at least partly, inspired by neighboring Thailand, in which the 1999 National Education Act permitted up to 30% of school time to be dedicated to local curricula and "local wisdom", a category interpreted to include ethnic cultures and languages (Premsrirat and Person 2018, Huebner 2019). Other early explicit reference to the idea of a "local curriculum" in Myanmar include a declaration released by the *Myanmar Indigenous Network for Education* (MINE) in June 2014 (Lo Bianco 2016).

From the National Education Law to the Basic Education Curriculum Framework

Article 39 of the 2014 National Education Law (see Chapter 4.2) states that (d) "the curriculum should give the ability to raise each ethnic group's rich literature, culture, arts, traditions and historical heritage along with the values that every citizen should have"; prescribes (f) a "nation-wide curriculum framework and curriculum standards for every level of basic education"; and provides (g) that "there shall be freedom to develop the curriculum in each region based on the curriculum standards mentioned in (f)." The 2015 amendment to this last paragraph (g) removed the term "freedom" but made the article clearer in terms of administrative responsibilities, by replacing "each region" by "in each State and Region"[172].

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[171] According to the comprehensive education sector review phase II (paragraph 93), 20% of local curriculum should be taught in primary school level

[172] (ဆ) "သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်းစံကို အခြေခံ၍ သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်းဖွဲ့ဖြိုးမှုကို တိုင်းဒေသကြီးနှင့် ပြည်နယ်အလိုက် ဆောင်ရွက်နိုင်ခွင့်ရှိရေး"

Based on this legal framework, a *Basic Education Curriculum Framework* (BECF) has thus been developed, in successive versions (at the time of writing the current version is the 6th, some elements presented below may thus change later on). This BECF starts by reassessing the aims of the Basic education curriculum in Myanmar, among which: (b) "Develop "Union spirit" and appreciate, maintain, and disseminate languages and literatures, cultures, arts and traditional customs of all national groups" and (e) "be competent in Myanmar language which is the official language of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and develop their skills in respective ethnic language and English".

The BECF then defines the ten "learning areas" (subjects) taught in Basic education: Myanmar, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Morality and Civics, Life Skills, Physical Education, Art (Performing Art and Visual Art) and Local Curriculum. The latter subject is defined as follows: "Local Curriculum is a period that individual States/Regions, Townships or schools can decide in consideration of their local educational needs." The main contents dealt in the Local Curriculum are "learning ethnic languages, their own histories and traditional cultures, local business situation, agriculture, businesses and basic computer."

The BECF thus explicitly states that administrative levels below the State and Region, such as Township or schools, are relevant to the choices regarding the content of the local curriculum. However, the preponderant role of the States/Regions in this programme is also reaffirmed, in terms of approval ("As the local curriculum is not made by the Union Government and it is rather the contents made in consideration for the local needs, they can be taught with the approval of individual States/Region governments") but also in terms of actually developing the content ("The development of the Local Curriculum including contents, textbooks, teaching and learning materials, pedagogical approaches, evaluation and so on must be taken responsibility by States/Region governments.").

This document then goes on to define the volume of periods for each subject, including the local curriculum, in primary, middle and high schools. The information presented below is still work in progress, and may thus change in the years to come, while the local curriculum is being progressively developed.

In **primary schools**, the local curriculum takes up five periods a week (120 periods per year, over a total of 840 periods in lower primary and 960 in upper primary, equivalent to **about 15% and 12,5% of the teaching time** respectively) and can include, according to local situations: Ethnic languages and their histories, traditions and cultures, local geography and economic situation, as well as Agricultural businesses.

In **middle schools**, the local curriculum occupies 4 periods a week (108 periods per year, over a total of 1080 periods, **10% of the total teaching time**). The local curriculum can include: Ethnic language and culture, Career skills, Basic computer skills, Basic information and communication technology, Agriculture and Home management skills.

Finally, in **high schools**, it corresponds to 4 periods a week (108 periods per year, over a total of 1080 periods, **10% of the total teaching time**) for Grade 10 and 11, and only two periods per week for Grade 12 (**5% of the total teaching time**). Under the current version of the BECF, the possible subjects are identical to those proposed in middle schools.

Developing the Local Curriculum

In February 2017, around the time the NLD government released its version of the National Education Strategic Plan (a plan not drastically different from the previous version released a year before by the Thein Sein administration[173]), a document was sent by the central MoE to the States and Regions, with guidelines on how to develop the content for their respective local curricula. This document starts by reaffirming the central role of the regional governments in this project: "Local curriculum is not developed by the National level; its contents are based on local needs approved by state/regional level government." This role, as well as the involvement of the MoE administration in the project, is then specified by these local curriculum guidelines: "Regional government will do planning and implementation for all process of content selection, textbook development, lesson preparation, including teaching learning material development, assessment. If necessary, they can get technical assistance from Ministry of Education."

This document also prescribes the formation, in each State and Region, of a *Local curriculum implementation teams* (ဒေသသင်ရိုး အကောင်အထည်ဖော်ဆောင်ရွက်ရေးအဖွဲ့), in charge of supervising the project. This team is chaired by the regional Social affairs minister and include other key State/Region level personalities, as well as non-state actors (including but not limited to the LCCs, see Figure 39).

Designation	Title
State/ Division social Minister	Chairman
State/ Division National Races Minister	Co-chair
State/ Division level Education Director	Member
Representatives of University/College	Member
District level Education officers	Member
Representatives of township level education officers	Member
Retired teachers/local experts	Member
State/Division level deputy director	General secretary

Figure 39: The local curriculum implementation team organization, according to the MoE's local curriculum guidelines

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[173] "Reflections on a Debate on Education Reform", Mael Raynaud, *Tea Circle*, April 3, 2017.

These *Local curriculum **implementation** teams* are then in charge of forming *Local curriculum development teams* (ဒေသသင်ရိုးပြုစုရေးအဖွဲ့) "organized with suitable number of education staff and external experts." The members of these *Local curriculum development teams* must present a number of academic qualities and teaching experience, as well as knowledge on local culture and local ethnic languages. In practice, these teams are mainly composed of local MoE civil servants, including headmasters, teachers from the universities and Education colleges, as well as staff from the State Education offices. Following the guidelines set by the implementation teams, and through frequent contacts with the LCCs (to obtain details and documents to be included in the content), these teams are in charge of preparing entirely the local curricula and its teaching: setting its objectives, identifying the contents that link with the objectives, developing the lessons for each grade, identifying the appropriate teaching methods, the types of assessment, developing textbooks and teacher guide, and providing teacher training.

During the firsts Union-level local curriculum development workshops in 2017-2018, five states government (Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Mon and Kayin) have volunteered to pioneer the process, with the assistance of UNICEF. Subjects related to vocational training being scheduled to be taught mainly starting from middle schools onwards, the material to teach ethnic languages, on the one hand and local cultures, on the other, were seen as the priorities.

The development of textbooks for the teaching of ethnic languages was already a work in progress for several years throughout the Union, with the support of actors including the MoE and UNICEF (see Chapter 4.3). The UN agency nevertheless started to provide specific assistance for the development of comprehensive ethnic languages curricula in four of the five selected States, Chin State being the exception because of its particularly complex linguistic situation (see Chapter 5.2).

The second priority, in order to start developing and implementing the local curricula from primary education onwards, was thus to deal with the "local histories, traditions and cultures, local geography and economic situation" in each of the five participating, pilot-project States.

"Local knowledge", a contribution to emerging local political ecosystems?

The development of what is today known as the "Local knowledge" curricula (the Burmese name of the textbooks, after a few changes, seems to be fixed to "(name of the State) ပြည်နယ်ရေးရာလေ့လာ စရာ"[174]) has been influenced by different actors and different understandings of what these textbooks should be, in the five participating States. While many, on an MTB-MLE and language rights argument ground, advocated for the development of this content directly in the different ethnic languages, the local curriculum development team in Chin State, confronted to the great language diversity of their region, rapidly finished a first draft of their local knowledge textbooks, in a language that everyone could understand, Burmese.

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[174] These textbooks had different, provisional, names at the beginning of the process, such as *XXX ပြည်နယ်အကြောင်း သိကောင်းစရာ and XXX ပြည်နယ် ရိုးရာယဉ်ကျေးမှုသမိုင်းနှင့် ဒေသပထဝီဝင်*

As the *Local curriculum development teams* regularly shared their experiences throughout the process, notably trough workshops organized by a senior Burmese education specialist working specifically as a "local knowledge" consultant for UNICEF, other arguments for the development of these textbooks in Burmese (as opposed to ethnic languages) emerged. Indeed, developing these curricula in all the local languages, in addition to the challenges regarding which particular language/dialects should be selected (see Chapter 5), could mean that each group compose textbooks dealing with its own conception of the relevant local knowledge. This situation could, for instance, lead to Mon children learning only Mon history, Pa-O children learning only about Pa-O culture, and so on, with possibly in each case an uncurbed ethno-nationalist perspective on those matters.

Rather, the choice was thus made to compose a single "local knowledge" curriculum for each State involved in the project, in the national language. This option, in combination with the teaching of ethnic minority languages as subjects, presents in our opinion a significant benefit: it implies that all the local stakeholders sit around the same tables, and find compromises regarding what the children should know about their State/Region, its cultures and histories.

These projects include, first and foremost, the representatives of the different LCCs in the participating states, who, in contrast to their previous work solely oriented towards their own community, have been learning to work together and collaborate through regular contacts and meetings. Even more decisively – and while different ethnic groups, States and Regions present different levels of complexity in that regard – the education branches of some of the armed groups (also known as Ethnic Basic Education providers, EBEP, see Introduction) are participating to the project.

In Mon and Kayin States, notably, the *Mon National Education Committee* (MNEC) and the *Karen Education Department* (KED) have been directly involved in the project, as members of the *Local curriculum implementation teams*[175] (see Figure 40). This type of inclusive process has not been possible in other situations, including in Kachin State, where the *Kachin Independence Organization* (KIO)'s Education department and other locally influential organizations did not directly take part in the project[176].

While many uncertainties remain, at the time of writing, regarding the Local curriculum in general and these *Local knowledge* textbooks in particular (see Chapter 6.2), our interviews with the MoE also suggest that this material intended to all students within a State/Region, regardless of their ethnicity, could be, later on, translated into the relevant ethnic minority languages, if necessary.

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[175] Interviews with LCCs, MoEA, MoEA, as well as civil society organizations, Moulmein, Hpa Han, August 2019.

[176] Interviews with LCCs, MoEA, MoEA, as well as civil society organizations, Myitkyina, July 2019.

Mon state minister of social affairs	President
Minister of natural resources and environment (in charge of Mon ethnic affairs)	Vice president
Minister of Pa-O Ethnic affairs	Vice president
Minister of Kayin Ethnic affairs	Vice president
Minister of Bamar Ethnic affairs	Member
Deputy speaker of the Mon State Parliament	Member
Mon State Education officer (MoE)	Member
Representative of the Mon LCC	Member
Representative of the Kayin LCC	Member
Representative of the Pa-O LCC	Member
Representative of the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC)	Member
Representative of the Karen Education Department (KED)	Member
Rector of Mawlamyine University	Member
Headmaster of Mawlamyine Education college	Member
Representative of Mawlamyine Technology University	Member
Mon State Ethnic Affairs Officer (MoEA)	Member
Four representatives of the ethnic nationalities affairs committee of the Mon State Parliament.	Members
Representative of the Computer University	Member
Representative of the Agriculture University	Member
District/Township Education officers	Members
Deputy Mon State Education officer	Secretary

Figure 40: Mon State Local curriculum implementation team

Regardless, in our opinion, the very process of developing these *Local knowledge* textbooks (in Burmese) does constitute, in itself, a tangible practice of decentralization. This process indeed implies frequent interactions, exchanges, cooperation and compromises between multiple local actors, including regional governments, the State / Region representatives of the MoE, literature and culture committees, local scholars, and in some instances, local armed groups' Education branches.

Many challenges remain regarding the inclusion of ethnic minority languages and cultures in formal education. These challenges include mistrust and tensions between the stakeholders, which remain strong in some States and Regions and, more specifically, the bridging between the MoE and the EBEPs education systems (see Introduction). However, processes such as the development of these local curricula are liable to constitute crucial steps in terms of practicing decentralization and building constructive work relationships, contributing to the emergence of local political ecosystems in the different States and Regions.

Local knowledge for which grades?

For the primary level, the local curriculum guidelines sent by the MoE in 2017 prescribes that ethnic minority languages should be taught from Grade 1 to Grade 3, while the subjects composing what is today known as *Local knowledge* (history, culture, customs, economics, agriculture…) should be taught in Grade 4 and 5 (see Figure 41). However, throughout successive meetings of the curriculum implementation teams sharing their experiences and perspectives with the national consultant in Yangon, a slightly different framework emerged, aiming at teaching both subjects concomitantly. The *Local knowledge* curricula for the five "pilot" States have indeed been developed (so far up to Grade 3) to be taught two periods a week, while the three other periods of the local curriculum would be dedicated to the teaching of ethnic languages (see Figures 42 and 43).

Several States have thus developed their own local curriculum framework, following this model and textbooks have been composed accordingly. These frameworks also offer alternatives subjects for schools and children who do not wish to teach/learn an ethnic language (an issue discussed in Chapter 6.2). However, at the time of our last interviews (September 2019), discussions were still ongoing between the curriculum implementation teams of the five pilot States and representatives of the central MoE, the latter apparently favouring a return to the original framework.

Content of the local knowledge textbooks

Through multiple meetings, with the shared experiences and feedbacks of the five local curriculum development teams and the advices of UNICEF's national consultant, the general guidelines of the 2017 MoE's document regarding the content ("Histories, culture and custom of local ethnics, local economic situation, agricultural activities/business that related with local need") have evolved into a more specific *Local Knowledge* framework, which is similar from one State to another.

The four main themes are: ယဉ်ကျေးမှုနှင့် ရိုးရာအမွေအနှစ်များ (Cultural and traditional heritage); ဒေသသမိုင်း (Regional history); နေရာဒေသနှင့်ပတ်ဝန်းကျင် (The region and the environment); သဘာဝအရင်းအမြစ်နှင့် စီးပွားရေးလုပ်ငန်းများ (Natural resources and economic activities). The five "pilot" States have followed this general framework, with slight adaptations to address their specific needs and challenges. Figure 44 shows, for instance, the details of the themes and lessons of Kachin State's local curriculum from Grade 1 to Grade 3.

Learning Areas	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
Local curriculum	5 teaching period per week; should not exceed 120 hours a year				
	Ethnic Languages			- History, culture and custom of local ethnics, - Local Economic situation, - Agricultural activities/business that related with local need	

Figure 41: Original framework of the MoE for developing the local curricula

Learning areas	Subjects	Number of periods per week				
		G1	G2	G3	G4	G5
Main learning area, compulsory for everyone	Local knowledge	2 periods per week				
Choice between (1) and (2), depending on schools (in consultation with the MoE's administration)	(1) Ethnic Languages	3 periods per week				
	(2) Agriculture, Protection of natural environment, Drug issues, Handicraft, traditional sport, songs, local handicraft…	3 periods per week				

Figure 42: Framework developed in the five pilot States for their local curricula[177]

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
National curriculum: **Myanmar, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies** **Morality and Civics, Physical Education, Art**						
Ethnic Languages			**Local Knowledge**			

Figure 43: Weekly schedule from Grade 1 to Grade 5, according to the Local curriculum framework developed in the five pilot-States participating to the local curriculum.

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[177] This table is made from the frameworks of Kayah State and Mon State, both in their 2019 versions. There is in fact small differences between the two frameworks, notably in the content of the teaching for schools which do not teach ethnic minority languages (2), an issue which is discussed further in Chapter 6.2.

Themes	G1	Periods	G2	Periods	G3	Periods
Cultural and traditional heritage	Ethnic groups of Kachin State	4	Costumes of the ethnic groups	5	Traditional festival of the ethnic groups	3
	Traditional foods of the ethnic groups	3	Ingredients of traditional foods of the ethnic groups	4	Cooking techniques of the ethnic groups	4
	Traditional objects and utensils of the ethnic groups	3	Utilization of some instruments of the ethnic groups	3	Tools used by the ethnic groups for agriculture	2
	Traditional musical instruments of the ethnic groups	3	Traditional musical instruments of the ethnic groups (gong)	3	Traditional musical instruments of the ethnic groups (drum)	3
Regional history	Captain Thura Bwe La Hsaung Kyan, (Three times winner of Thura title)	3	Second Lieutenant BGM Thura Agudi	3	Duwa Kayeinaw, parliament MP	3
	U Sai Htein Lin	3	Sao Phaman Aung Milar Shika Tai Khamti	3	Colonel Ati	3
The region and the environment	Rivers, streams, lakes and waterfalls around us.	3	Famous rivers, lakes and streams of Kachin State	2	Indawkyi lake	2
	Hills, mountains plains and valleys around us	3	Famous mountain ranges of Kachin State	3	Mont khakaborazi	3
	Wards, villages and towns around us	3	About your township and district	3	Towships and Districts of Kachin State	3
	Wild animals	3	Wild animals of Kachin State	3	Hukaung Valley Wildlife Sanctuary	2
	Natural reserves	3	Natural parks of Kachin State	3	Hponganrazi wild life Sanctuary	2

Natural resources and economic activities	Fruits and plants produced regionally	3	Agricultural activities and cultivated plants	3	Grapefruits and oranges	4
					Household cooking activities	3
	Flowers that can be grown in Kachin State	3	Plantation and gardening activities	3		
					Weaving Mills	2
	Vegetables that can be grown in Kachin State	3	Forests	2	Household activities	3
			Products from the forest	3		
	Plants that you can encounter in Kachin State	3			Mining products (amber)	3
			Mining products (jade)	3		
	Various mining products that you can encounter in Kachin State	3				

Figure 44: Details of the lessons for the local curriculum of Kachin State[178]

Towards teaching Local knowledge curricula?

After successive drafts of the Grade 1, 2 and 3 textbooks, taking into accounts shared experiences as well as the common guidelines and suggestions of the national consultant and improving the visual aspect of the content, these five curricula have been presented to the public of their five respective States, in the city halls of their capital. Such public consultations were organized in December 2018 in Loikaw[179], in March 2019 in Hpa-An[180], in May 2019 in Moulmein and Myitkyina[181].

These public meetings, chaired by the regional chief ministers, were attended by all the actors involved in the development of the local curricula, as well as the relevant civil society organizations, notably those active in the field of education in the respective States. In most cases, the *Local Knowledge* curricula were presented along with the ethnic minority languages curricula, also developed with the support of UNICEF for each of the participating States (see Chapter 4.3). According to our interviews (composed mainly but not only of actors directly involved in the

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[178] Spelling mistakes are likely to be found in this table, especially regarding proper name, transcribed from ethnic minority languages, to Burmese, and then English.

[179] "ကယားပြည်နယ် ဒေသသင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်း ချပြဆွေးနွေးပွဲ ပြည်နယ်ဝန်ကြီးချုပ် ဦးယ်လ်ဖင်းက်ရောက်", *Myanmar digital news*, December 10, 2018.

[180] "ကရင်ပြည်နယ်ရေးရာ ဒေသဆိုင်ရာ သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်း မိတ်ဆက်", *Kayin Information Center*, March 26, 2019.

[181] « မွန်ပြည်နယ်တွင် ပထမတန်းကို ဒေသဆိုင်ရာသင်ရိုးပူးတွဲသင်ကြားနိုင်အောင် ဆောင်ရွက်ထား », *Mon News Agency*, May 20. Education meetings were held in Hakha, notably in December 2019, but while language-in-education issues were discussed, it is not clear if the Local Curriculum was included in the meeting.

project), these meetings were overall successful, yielding both compliments and constructive criticism from the public.

At the time of writing, some of these curricula, notably for Kayah, Kayin[182] and Mon State[183], have been officially approved by their respective regional government, and should be in the process of being approved by the MoE and the *Myanmar National Curriculum Committee* (MNCC). In fact, State/Region government approval appears to be critical[184], since members of the central MoE and MNCC often do not feel capable of evaluating the content of the textbooks, most clearly when it comes to ethnic languages, but also, to a lesser extent, regarding local knowledge[185]. Since 2019-2020, the periods for the teaching of the local curriculum (1 out of 8 daily periods) is also included in the schools' timetables, and often used to teach ethnic minority languages (see Chapter 4.3).

However, at the time of our last interviews (September 2019), the central MoE apparently was not comfortable with the framework developed by the States and Regions (as opposed to the original framework, see Figures 41 and 42), and the idea of teaching the *Local knowledge* curricula as early as Grade 1 in particular[186]. The main argument is that G1 children are too young to study this type of content. The *Local knowledge* curricula are also perceived as a sensitive issue, in the context of multiple controversies regarding different component of national/ethnic identities (see Chapter 6.2) and ahead of elections in which political parties formed in reference to an ethnic identity are likely to play a major role.

While the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs seems to favor a rapid implementation of the *Local knowledge* teaching, other actors suggest a more cautious approach and reckon that pilot projects should be conducted first. It was thus not clear at the time of the interviews if these five curricula will actually be used in 2020-2021, and if yes, at which level exactly. Some of the textbooks produced within the local curriculum project, both for *Local knowledge* and the teaching of ethnic minority languages, actually have the term "level" (1,2,3) instead of "grade" (1,2,3) on their cover. This slight modification seems specifically aimed at introducing flexibility, allowing these textbooks to be studied in different classes, depending both on final decisions in terms of curriculum framework and on the specific situations (notably in linguistic terms) of different schools.

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[182] "ကရင်ပြည်နယ်ရဲ့ ဒေသဆိုင်ရာ သင်ရိုးသစ်ကို ပြည်နယ်အစိုးရ အတည်ပြု", *7 days News*, July 28, 2019.

[183] "မွန်ပြည်နယ်ရေးရာ လေ့လာစရာသင်ရိုးသစ် အတည်ပြု", *Hinthar Media*, August 9, 2019,.

[184] For a discussion of the issue of the appointment of chief ministers, see Raynaud (2019).

[185] Interview with UNICEF's National consultant for local knowledge textbooks, also a member of the National Education Policy Commission

[186] Interviews of Deputy Director generals of different departments of the MoE, including Basic Education and Education Research, Planning and Training

2. Structural challenges to the development and implementation of the local curriculum

When reflecting on the challenges encountered in the process of composing the local curricula in general and the *local knowledge* textbooks in particular, the actors involved in the process in the five pilot States often mention the limitations in terms of timeframe and resources, as well as their lack of experience in designing a curriculum, despite the involvement and support of the MoE and UNICEF[187]. The necessity to take into account, along the road, the choices made in other States, in order to maintain a sense of coherence of the overall project, while leaving enough leeway to the local curriculum teams in each State, was seemingly an additional difficulty[188]. Finally, in the whole context of the current hesitations regarding the use of the *Local Knowledge* curricula described in previous section, as well as of uncertainties regarding the broader decentralization process, the level of financial involvement of the State/Region governments, notably when it comes to printing and distributing the textbooks, remains unclear, despite their political centrality in the process of developing the local curriculum.

In this section, we are focusing on more structural challenges to the development of the local curricula, namely the teaching of ethnic histories and other sensitive topics, as well as the prospects of developing the local curriculum further, to other States and Regions, and to higher levels of schooling.

Teaching ethnic histories in Myanmar

As argued elsewhere (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012) the teaching of history, together with the use of ethnic languages in formal education, are the two most sensitive and contentious aspect of ethnic minority demands regarding formal education in Myanmar (and arguably elsewhere). A parallel between these two aspects, both understandably perceived as vital for the survival of ethnic identities, was for instance visible in an intervention of Daw Khin Si Thu, representative of Loikaw in the Union parliament, who stated in August 2019, in the course of an argument for the inclusion of "real" ethnic minority history in formal education, that she was "very worried that the ethnic groups will disappear with the disappearance of their history" ("(…) သမိုင်းကွယ်ပျောက်သလို လူမျိုးကွယ်ပျောက်သွားမှာကို အရမ်းစိုးရိမ်ပါတယ်။"), a formula echoing the more common "ethnic groups will vanish if their written language disappears" ("စာပျောက်ရင် လူမျိုးပျောက်မယ်") discussed in Chapter 5.2[189]

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[187] This theme, which came up often during interviews, is also mentioned, for instance, in "မွန်ပြည်နယ်ရေးရာ လေ့လာစရာသင်ရိုးသစ် အတည်ပြု", *Hinthar News*, August 2019.

[188] Interviews with actors involved in the Local curriculum in the five participating States, as well as "A Panel Discussion on Local Curriculum Development in Myanmar.", *The Inclusion, Mobility, and Multilingual Education Conference – Exploring the role of languages for Education and development*, UNESCO, Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education working Group, Bangkok, September 2019.

[189] "လူနည်းစုတိုင်းရင်းသားများ၏ သမိုင်းသင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်းတွင် ပြဌာန်းရန်တိုက်တွန်း", *DVB*, August 15, 2019

Successive governments in Myanmar, like in many countries around the world, have used schooling, textbooks and history curricula in particular for nation-building purposes, promoting a concept of national identity relying increasingly on heroes, golden eras and national enemies tightly linked to a Burman historical perspective. Famously, under previous military regimes, the successive historiography of three great kings (usually Anawrahta, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya) presented these figures as the "unifiers" of what would become Burma/Myanmar. These great kings have featured prominently in the textbooks (and elsewhere), with their successive empires presented as early forms of today's Union of Myanmar (Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012, Salem-Gervais 2013).

While this process is often described as a central aspect of a "Burmanization" ideology and policy, less frequent are the acknowledgement of similar, almost mirroring, processes in the education systems set up by the ethnic armed groups. This type of Ethic basic education providers (EBEPs) have often done exactly the same, indoctrinating "their" children in schools with their respective narratives, heroes, enemies and golden eras. Unsurprisingly, these visions of the past are totally antagonistic to one another, almost like a photography and its negative, one camp's heroes being often, precisely, the other camp's villains (Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012, Salem-Gervais 2013).

In the post-junta context, the new national curriculum which is being released year by year since 2017, while making very significant steps in terms of shifting away from rote learning pedagogy, has been described as, so far, still largely "Bamar-centric" (Metro 2019). This is particularly noticeable when it comes to history, with an emphasis on the great kings (other role-models include Aung San and U Thant), which does not constitute a significant departure from the previous curricula, apart from the addition of more colorful illustrations (Salem-Gervais 2018c, see Figure 45).

These discussions regarding the content of the history textbooks also echo much more prominent debates regarding historical symbols and heroes, some of which have grown into major controversies in the different States. These controversies include the naming of the bridge between Mawlamyine and Bilu island in Mon State, the erection of Statues of General Aung San, notably in Kayah, Kachin and Chin States[190], and the celebrations of the anniversary of the death of Saw Ba U Kyi as a Karen martyr[191].

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[190] "Statues building spree tarnishes Aung San legacy", September 26, 2019.

[191] "Karen Martyrs' Day Case Shows Ethnic Rights in Retreat Under Present Myanmar Govt", Nyein Nyein, The Irrawaddy, September 19, 2019. "Marking the Death of a Karen Revolutionary Leader", Wei Yan Aung, The Irrawaddy, August 12, 2019.
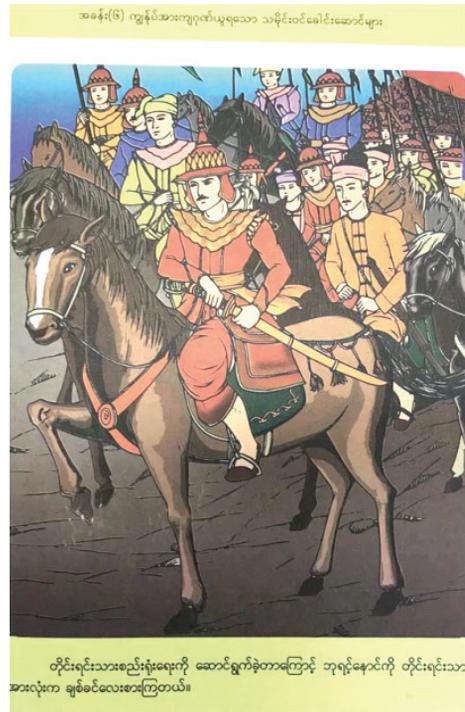
Figure 45: King Bayinnaung "loved and respected by all the national races, because he achieved their unity", new Social studies (national) curricula, Grade 2.

The local curriculum and local histories

As far as the Education sector is concerned, the local curriculum is often perceived as a tool to balance out the overall syllabus in this regard, by including a complexity of details about ethnic minorities and their histories which would be difficult to manage in the national textbooks[192]. However, including these ethnic identities and histories in the local curricula sometimes proves to be more complex than it seems. In national debates, ethnic identity claims tend to antagonize with the majority Bamar identity, denouncing its predominance as "Burmanization" in a classic center-periphery model. However, the local curricula switch the geographical scope of the playing field from the boundaries of the Union of Myanmar, to those of the different States and Regions. Other antagonisms, fault lines and disputes, conflicting narratives held by opposed ethno-nationalist perspectives also exist within these smaller geographic and administrative entities. In some cases, reconciling them is all the more difficult as those groups are in close contact which each other and possess an history of fighting and distrust.

Early versions of the local curriculum guidelines circulated in 2017 also suggested the choice of local (ethnic) role-model personalities (ဒေသအတွင်းရှိ စံပြပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များ, translated by "ideal people"

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[192] Interviews with the national consultant for local knowledge, Yangon, August 2018, January and August 2019.

in the English version of the document) to be included in the history sections of the textbooks. While terminology has evolved, this approach does remind the above-described prominence of the great kings in successive national curricula, and can be traced back in Myanmar to colonial and subsequent *National Schools* textbooks of the 1920's and 1930's, with their *Myanmar Heroes* (မြန်မာသူရဲကောင်း[193] Salem-Gervais 2013, 2018c).

According to our interviews in the five "pilot" States, the regional history sections (ဒေသသမိုင်း) were the most problematic to develop in the *local knowledge* textbooks and it is the sections which differs the most from one State to another in the final drafts. No "ideal people" are to be found in Kayin State, for instance. Actors involved in the development of the *Local knowledge* textbooks in that State mention that preliminary meetings of the *Local curriculum implementation teams,* aimed at deciding which topics should be included in the textbooks, have rapidly shown that the choice of role model personalities would be contentious, not only with the central government, but also between different groups of Kayin State. Some wanted to include Saw Ba U Kyi and general Bo Mya, others insisted on the inclusion of Thamanya Sayadaw or Myaing Kyi Ngu Sayadaw. Some of these historical figures are polarizing since they are directly linked to conflicts and tensions, both between Karen armed groups and the Myanmar army, and between different Karen armed groups, such as the KNU and the DKBA. After several somewhat agitated meetings, the decision was made to abstain from including any of these role models.[194]

In Kayah State too, different groups have different perspectives on the same historical figures: out of a first list of 50 local role models proposed by the members of the local curriculum committee, only 5 have made it to the final draft of the Grade 1 to Grade 3 textbooks. The representatives of the various LCCs involved often regret not having been able to include some of their historical leaders, but also relate that the experience helped them understand the sensitivity of these issues and the actual meaning of making compromises in order to compose textbooks acceptable by all. Some of the LCC representatives hope to be able to include those historical figures later on, either in higher Grades' *Local knowledge* textbooks, or in lessons of their particular ethnic language curricula.

Other interviewees report smaller difficulties in finding compromises between ethnic groups. In Mon State for instance, where ancient history and the mention of Suvarnabhumi are likely to prompt debates between the Mons and the Pa-O, the local curriculum team had to discuss the matter and find ways to present these topics in a compromising manner, avoiding hurting any sensibilities. The *Mon State local curriculum team* ended-up avoiding role-model personalities. The history section focuses on the flags and symbols of the ethnic groups, their festivals, ancient cities and their histories, famous pagodas, museums and ancient buildings[195].

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[193] See for instance U Po Kya 1927, U Thein Maung 1933

[194] Interviews with members of the Local curriculum development team, Kayin State, August 2019.

[195] မွန်ပြည်နယ်ဒေသ သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတော, Mon State MoE and Mon State government, march 2019. Interviews with members of the Local curriculum development team, Mon State, August 2019.

In Kachin State, more than diverging perspectives regarding historical figures, debates have focused on similarities regarding material culture. Groups having similar "traditional" weapons, musical instrument or cooking recipes, for instance, had to discuss and find compromises to overcome arguments regarding who "got it first" or "invented it"[196].

The production of the local knowledge curricula in general and its history sections in particular can thus be analyzed with two opposed perspectives. On the one hand, this process forces the actors involved to discuss and make compromises, actively participating to the creation of local political ecosystems. However, on the other hand, the overall approach is still based, to a significant extent, on the recognition of discrete ethnic identities, through historical figures, thus not answering yet the calls to teach history with an emphasis on the fluidity of ethnicity, as a departure from essentialist approaches (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012, Metro 2013, Salem-Gervais 2018c, Thant Myint U 2019).

The local curriculum beyond primary schools and the importance of teacher training

One of the strategies suggested by the national consultant for the local knowledge textbooks in order to overcome disagreements and shortcomings of the textbooks, is that these curricula remain a "living material" which could be modified in the successive editions, if needed. However, while participants of these projects in the five pilot Sates are proud of their accomplishment, from the 2017 MoE's guideline to the finalization of drafts textbooks for Grade 1 to 3 in 2019, they are also aware that the most challenging parts are yet to be tackled.

Indeed, avoiding sensitive aspects of history tends to be easier when writing textbooks for lower primary students than at higher levels of schooling, which requires more texts and details in each lesson. Furthermore, the compromises made for these lower primary textbooks precisely involved leaving aside some politically sensitive issues. These topics are thus likely to be brought up again by the various local stakeholder when composing textbooks for higher levels of schooling.

One option, if State/Region level compromises cannot be found, would be to use the ethnic languages textbooks for higher primary and middle schools for that purpose, although this would require a good deal of vigilance towards possibly conflict-sensitive content. Another suggestion made by the national consultant for the *Local Knowledge* curricula is that the teaching of this content could be done in link with the national curriculum, in order to offer different focuses and perspectives on specific issues. Metro (2013, 2019) also suggests, for middle and high schools history classes in Myanmar in general, a departure from the reader-style material toward the study of primary sources in the classroom, followed by discussions which could include multiple outlooks on particular characters and events.

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[196] Interviews with members of the Local curriculum development team, Kachin State, June 2019.

As far as the local curriculum is concerned, these suggestions and prospects all raise the issue of the training of teachers in charge of these *Local knowledge* classes. These teachers will indeed be at the frontline when it comes to fulfilling the shifting priorities of an education system which is now expected to encourage both "critical thinking" and the inclusion of ethnic minority identities. While affirmative action policies are being implemented to encourage the nurturing of local ethnic language teachers (see Chapter 4.4), teaching the *Local Knowledge* curricula requires teachers with not only a good knowledge of their respective regions, but also a level of training allowing them to handle potentially complex questions on sensitive topics, (ethnic identities first and foremost) in the classroom. This necessity thus strongly suggests both the opening of specific trainings for these teachers in the Education Colleges of each State and Region, and, more generally, a shift towards a more fluid conception of ethnic identities in the teaching of history.

Another challenge for the development of the local curriculum beyond primary school deals with ethnic minority languages. As discussed in Chapter 5.1, as a general rule, the more a school is located close to a main road or an urban area, the higher the ethnic diversity in that school. This gradient is to a significant extent correlated with levels of schooling: while there may be a primary school in a remote village, children are more likely to have to commute to their schools, or to find a way to board nearby, at higher level of schooling (see Figure 46).

Yet, the 2017 MoE's local curriculum guidelines include the possibility of teaching ethnic minorities' languages up to high school. This option constitutes a historical opportunity for ethnic minority languages development, but also creates challenges. Firstly, different languages present different degrees of standardization and different scopes. Unlike groups with a well-developed written language such as the Mons or the Shans, some smaller groups are likely to face difficulties composing curricula reaching middle and high school levels. Secondly, the greater ethnic diversity in secondary education is likely to considerably complicate the logistics of making all the relevant languages available in middle and high schools.

Various prospects and challenges: other States/Regions, schools without ethnic minorities

While virtually all schools around the country now have the daily period for the local curriculum in their timetable, States and Regions are at very different stages regarding the development of their respective teaching material. At the time of our interviews, there was no signs of beginning of the local curriculum development in Rakhine and Shan States. While both States are experimenting protracted conflicts, the case of Shan State seems particularly challenging due to its sheer size, ethnic diversity, administrative complexity (5 of the 6 Self-Administrated Zones are located in Shan State), number of active armed-groups and lack of trust between the stakeholders. In this regard, the strategy of UNICEF and actors involved in the Local curriculum at the national level seems to be the carrying out of the project in the "pilot-States," in order to motivate actors of other States and Regions to emulate these achievements later on.
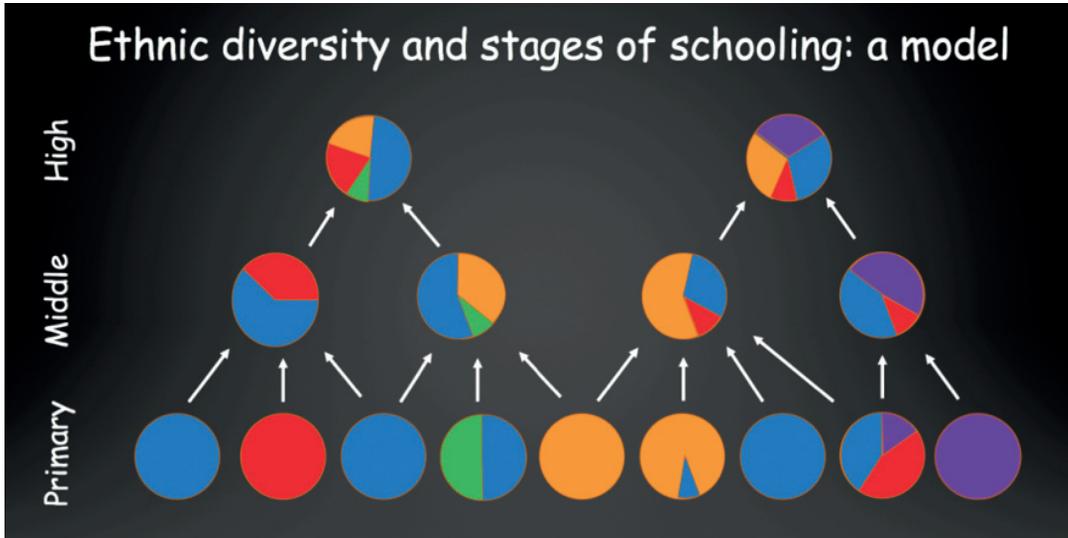
Figure 46

Another matter is that of the development of the local curriculum in the Regions, as well as, more generally, in all schools, including in the seven States, where ethnic minority languages will not be taught (either because of the absence of ethnic minority children or, on the contrary, because of too much diversity, see Chapter 5). Proponents of a MTB-MLE system have at times criticized the local curriculum using an argument that has long been used to justify the absence of ethnic languages in the schools: the idea that teaching these subjects creates an extra burden for ethnic minority children[197]. Producing relevant and useful content to fill this daily period in all schools across the country, including those where ethnic minority are not taught, is thus crucial to the success of the overall project.

At the time of writing, some of the Regions have taken decisive steps towards creating their local curriculum, such as linguistically diverse Sagaing Region, which has formed its *Local curriculum implementation team* in September 2019 in the government office of Monywa. At the same period, during our interviews, the matter was also in the process of being discussed in Yangon Region. Developing the local curriculum content takes time and these Regions will not be ready before 2020-2021, at the very best.

In the meantime, schools which do not teach ethnic minority languages across the country have been instructed to use the daily period reserved for the local curriculum for a variety of activities, depending on the needs of children, school location and setting, regional specificities, and the creativity of the teachers in each school. These activities can include (preferably somewhat local) games, sports or songs, cultivation of local plants in school gardens, or classes on topics such as

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[197] "ပညာရေးစနစ်သစ် �‌ဘာတွေ မျှော်လင့်နိုင်မလဲ", *DVB Debate*, July 28, 2019.

local customs, health or natural disasters[198]. The local curriculum guidelines also specify that visits to museum, libraries, historical or remarkable places and building could be part of the local curriculum.

The local curriculum framework developed by the *Mon State local curriculum team*, for instance, as of 2019, specifies that from Grade 1 to Grade 5, in the cases of schools / students not teaching/ learning ethnic minority languages, these subjects can be replaced by "Agriculture, Protection of the natural environment, Knowledge regarding drugs and Arts and handicraft". A similar document for Kayah State provides the possibility of teaching "Basic local agriculture and cattle farming skills; Protection of the natural environment; Traditional sports, songs and tales; Ethnic languages riddles and sayings; or Traditional musical instruments".

Ethnic languages and *Local knowledge* being seen as the priorities, the material to teach the above-mentioned topics has yet to be developed. Yet, the local curriculum development teams of some States, such as Kayah State, already have started to plan what they want to teach, in middle and high schools, within the local curriculum. In middle school, as an alternative to ethnic languages and in addition to *Local Knowledge*, these topics include Basic computer as well as Information and Communication Technology (ICT, in addition to the ones already mentioned for primary level). According to these (provisional) guidelines, students in high schools of Kayah State will not learn ethnic languages or *Local Knowledge*. The local curriculum at this level will include four topics for all students: Human rights and duties of a citizen; Basic computer and Information and Communication Technology (ICT); Vocational training; and Basic English.

Practical knowledge and skills have indeed been thought to be an important component of the local curriculum, since its inception. Subjects including ICT and Vocational trainings (which should be linked to local economic activities) should be offered at higher level of schooling, and as alternatives to ethnic languages in middle schools. Interrogated regarding the implementation of these higher levels of the local curriculum, MoE officials envision the formation of Local curriculum sections in each State and Region, following the *Local curriculum development teams*, which would include specialists of vocational training and life skills, in charge of producing and updating content for these subjects.

The development of the local curriculum is overall still at its early stages, and many questions remain regarding these prospects. The administrative level(s) in charge of deciding which content should be available in which school is not totally clear yet. Below the State/Region which are emerging as a critical level for the production of content, the school (rather than the district or the township), in many regards, appears to be the most pertinent decision-making level regarding which content is relevant to teach. However, schools in urban environments, which are likely to be attended not only by students of multiple ethnicity but also by children who do not wish to learn ethnic languages, may constitute significant challenges. Other questions and uncertainties include the consequences, notably in terms of preparation to the job market, of having students receive more technical and vocational training while others study predominantly ethnic languages. Could this prospect play a significant role in widening the gap between urban/Bamar and rural/ethnic children?

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[198] "ဒေသသင်ရိုးကိုတကယ်အားကိုးပါရစေ", *Dawei Watch*, August 1, 2019. "သက်ဆိုင်ရာတိုင်းအစိုးရ နဲ့ပူးပေါင်းပြီး ဒေသသင်ရိုး ရေးဆွဲ သင်ကြားပေးရမည်", *Kumudra News*, June 10, 2019.

Chapter 7:
Conclusion

This report has described the multiple challenges in terms of integrating ethnic minorities languages and cultures in government schools, as well as the significant developments, especially since the 2017-2018 school year, towards that aim. Dozens of curricula have been, or are in the process of being, developed. Recent policy shifts aim at training more local teachers, able to use ethnic minority languages in formal education, through measures that could be seen as positive discrimination. Local curricula aiming at integrating both ethnic languages and "Local knowledge" (history, geography, culture, customs…) of the different States and Regions are in the process of being produced. These developments should be closely monitored in years to come to assess if the MoE's policy actually delivers on its promises. Including ethnic minority languages in formal education has the potential to bring multiple benefits, in terms of preserving ethnic minority cultures, improving access of these populations to education, and fostering "national reconciliation". More specifically, these reforms are contributing to the emergence of local (State and Region in particular) political ecosystems, a critical step towards taking on the great political challenges the country has been facing since its inception (see the Executive summary for an abstract of this work).

Despite these encouraging developments, at the time of writing, and on the brink of elections that have the potential to increase the influence of "ethnic" political parties, especially in the subnational parliaments, the process of introducing ethnic minority languages and cultures in government schools remains challenging. More specifically, many uncertainties remain, regarding topics such as the development of the Local curriculum throughout the country and at higher levels of schooling, the future of the relation between EBEPs and the MoE, the teaching of ethnic minority languages in schools located in multiethnic urban settings, or the process of thoroughly deciding which forms of which particular languages are going to be available in schools.

We do believe, still, that the current evolutions of the language-in-education policy is liable to be the beginning of a historical shift, within the framework of a broader and indispensable decentralization process. However, we are also convinced that the argument according to which the more ethnic minority languages are present in formal education, the more there will be, mechanically, benefits in terms of (1.) preserving language diversity (2.) reducing the "language barrier" for ethnic minority children and (3.) fostering national reconciliation, needs to be qualified.

As we hope to have shown in this report, there are currently multiple, practical, ideological, and political drives towards the standardization of ethnic minority languages at play in Myanmar. This process of discretizing, formalizing and standardizing languages so they fittingly correspond to a list of ethnonyms, entails major tradeoffs in the three above-described dimensions: (1) Standardizing, by definition, means a reduction in diversity; (2) Standardization often means that the children are taught a language which is substantially different from their actual mother-tongue, and from anyone's mother-tongue in some instances; (3) These languages and identity

issues are particularly sensitive in contemporary Myanmar, notably through the volatile and contentious space of public debate that is social media. As much as a more inclusive language-in-education policy does offer unique leverage towards "national reconciliation", the diverging views regarding the choices of "common" languages corresponding to various ethnonyms and nationalist projects, as well as the philosophical contradictions underlying standardization processes, may contribute to the shaping of shifting antagonisms.

Most likely, these issues are, to a large extent, temporary symptoms of a historical phase of language and identity renegotiation, in a post-cold war fashion, after decades of military rule under which these projects were often frozen, or at least largely kept within communities. But at the same time, the overall political culture, largely rooted in colonial understandings of *race*, pushing towards equating ethnonyms, languages, territories and political prerogatives, may well prove to be an enduring obstacle to long-lasting peace.

At a practical level, many questions are largely unanswered regarding the decentralization process in Myanmar, notably in the realm of education. Decentralization in itself is not a panacea, and deeply complex questions will need to be answered, at different administrative levels, including by schools in many instances. Nevertheless, a shift away from the monolithic education system fashioned by successive military governments appears utterly indispensable, and this well beyond the limited topics discussed in this report. Yet, the teaching of ethnic minority languages and cultures as well as the nurturing of local teachers who can speak ethnic minority languages in primary schools is without doubt the most obvious aspect in which decentralization of education is needed, and is indeed taking place.

Following the 2014-15 Education law, the State and the Region have become critical political and administrative levels in this process. Subnational governments in particular play a central role in the reforms documented in this report, most often under the leadership of the minister of social affairs of a given State or Region, and in cooperation with the civil servants of the education department of their respective State or Region as well as civil society organizations representing dozens of ethnic nationalities.

The authors do not deny the fact that actual decentralization still remains limited, in the field of education as well as in other fields. First and foremost, education largely remains the responsibility of the Union level, and specifically the Ministry of Education, as it falls under Schedule Two of the Constitution. Critically, with Chief Ministers being appointed by the Union Government, the extent to which subnational governments can actually make decisions independently of the center, remains limited. Second, budgets covering education matters largely remain under the control of the Ministry of Education, in Naypyidaw.

Yet, the regional ethnic affairs ministers' budget often contributes to support the programs of the literature and culture committees, including the training of teachers and production of ethnic language curricula, and there has been anecdotal initiatives from the regional governments, notably in Mon and Kayah[199] states as well as Yangon Region[200], to support to a greater extent these activities.

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[199] "Gov't provides fund for development of ethnic literature curriculum" *Kantarawaddy Times*, August 30, 2018.

[200] "ကျောင်းတွင် သင်ကြားမည့် ကရင်စာသင်ရိုးစာအုပ်ကို အစိုးရဘတ်ဂျက်ဖြင့် ထုတ်ဝေမည်", *Karen Information Center*, June 4, 2019.

However, the Union administration (through the MoE, and to a lesser extent the MoEA, and with the participation of UNICEF) is still in charge of the two main items of expenditures regarding the teaching of ethnic languages and cultures: the teachers' salaries and the printing of the textbooks.

Decentralization, in other words, is a work in progress, a process, far from perfect, that is bound to continue to elicit frustration on the part of many, in Myanmar.

Other demands regarding the decentralization of the education system include further decentralization of the curriculum and deconcentrating certain functions, such as teacher's appointment (a prospect that would make the administration much more reactive, but which may also entail corruption issues). Solutions are also yet to be found regarding demands such as adapting the school calendar so it takes into account climate differences throughout the country (see Figure 47, regarding Chin State).

- Mommy, how come school isn't closed when it's raining so much, here in the mountains?

- Well, my little boy, only if we obtain the right to self-determination, which is called "federalism", will we be able to close schools during dangerous rainy seasons and instead, open them for summer.

A little bit of empathy, please.

Figure 47

As frustrating as the process may be, it is the firm belief of the authors that decentralization is well underway, and that it generally goes in the right direction, with the potential to indeed bring about solutions to issues that have plagued Myanmar for decades.

If decentralization is a process that is slow, frustrating, but real, it is also supposed to lead to the adoption, one day, of a federal system, an objective shared almost universally, at least in public discourse, in Burmese politics, today.

Developing a system that would be federal in addition to being democratic, starting from the decades of highly centralized military rule that ended only in 2011, could hardly be an easy and fast process. Realistically, building a strong, efficient and democratic federal system will take many more years, even without considering the challenges of the peace process.

The institutions of such a system, at all levels of political decision and administration, are in the course of being built, and nowhere as much as in the process of decentralization. Education, and indeed the space afforded to non-majority identities, cultures, histories and languages, are arguably the most essential field where the political future of Myanmar is defined.

Which is why, beyond strict educational concerns, the authors put such emphasis on the fostering of local political eco-systems. Ministers in subnational governments, MPs in their associated parliaments, civil servants at the State or Union level, but also actors in the peace process, civil society organizations, and the media, all need to work together, at the level of their respective State or Region, to build not only an education system, but forms of governance, that are gradually decentralized, to the point of seeing a federal system become possible.

In this context, and only a few months ahead of an all important general election, it was encouraging to see that the representatives of Ethnic Political Parties that were interviewed all showed a very strong interest in the issues discussed in this report. Like so many others in Myanmar, however, their vision of the issues at hand, and their proposed solutions to them, were not always completely convincing, with a focus on "ethnic rights" and the defense of their particular ethnic identity, and a tendency to overlook more practical challenges. This, in a country where local activists often decry the lack of a proper platform that would be offered by any party, in recent elections, is hardly surprising.

Regional politics, as decentralization deepens, are bound to prove to be as complex, as contentious, and arguably even more based on identity, than national politics. This report documents issues within each of the States and Regions studied, particularly in terms of competing identities and their political claims, which should be of concern to everyone who cares about the future of Myanmar, the authors included.

As seen in the introduction, the question being raised, in fine, at the Union level, with regards to democratization and with regards to education, is the question of what the country known as Myanmar really is, fundamentally. Such question has remained largely unanswered, since Independence.

With decentralization, and possibly one day with a federal system, the multiple fundamental questions raised, such as what is Chin State? What is Kachin State? What is Shan State? (and so on so forth) may prove at least as difficult to answer.

Language-in-education reform, this report argues, will be one of the most difficult, but also one of the most important process in answering these questions.

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