The Karen Education Department supplies the curriculum for many community schools in Karen State, Myanmar, enabling mother tongue-based education for Sgaw Karen students. School Committees have become the main mechanisms for local management of these Karen community schools, and are essential for the strengthening and provision of mother tongue education. By supporting mother tongue learning, particularly at primary levels in community schools, the School Committees strengthen access and quality in education for children in ethnic minority communities to obtain the same life opportunities as those in areas where state systems deliver education services. Drawing on information obtained through in-depth research with local actors in different areas of Karen State, this presentation describes community engagement in education, highlights existing mechanisms at the community level for students to access education in their mother tongue, provides insight into the role of communities in education, and identifies factors restricting and enabling local engagement and decision-making.
Introduction and Background

Communities in Karen State are witnessing significant albeit uneven political and social change. The 2012 ceasefire between the Government of Myanmar and the Karen National Union (KNU) has resulted in a more stable situation for communities who had endured over sixty years of armed conflict, displacement and impoverishment. Although the peace process is still in its infancy, the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and increased dialogue between the government and ethnic armed groups do offer some hope of a durable resolution to the long-lasting conflicts in Myanmar and of genuine improvements to the lives of ethnic minority communities. Looking towards the future, further changes and developments can be anticipated with the formation of a civilian government, the continuation of peace negotiations, and increasing discussions around refugee return.

Discussions around education reform and the recognition of ethnic education systems are now central to political dialogue between the Myanmar government and ethnic nationalist groups, as well as being key to the durable improvement of services in ethnic minority areas. Although political discussions between the government and ethnic armed groups have been progressing slowly, and the provision of education has not yet been addressed in detail during the nationwide ceasefire negotiations, the situation for communities on the ground in Karen State is often changing rapidly. Since the 2012 ceasefire, the government has built hundreds of new schools and assigned thousands of teachers to previously inaccessible areas. Many community schools in Karen State have now also been officially registered as government schools.

Education systems in Karen State have been shaped by decades of conflict, competing administrative structures, and the struggle for self-determination of ethnic nationalist groups. In a context in which they received little to no outside assistance, communities rallied to manage and support their schools, thereby playing a key role in ensuring that children had access to education. The Karen Education Department (KED) — which was created at the time of the KNU’s formation in 1947 to oversee education in Karen communities — historically organized the curriculum for many of these community schools, allowing Mother Tongue-Based (MTB) education for Sgaw Karen students. The KED now continues to support education in more than 1,500 schools. A growing proportion of these schools are ‘mixed’ schools, comprising both community and government teachers. At the local level, the current rolling out of state education systems is often perceived as one of the main threats to these ethnic and community education systems.

In line with Myanmar’s Framework for Economic and Social Reform, and as the government works towards the Sustainable Development Goals as well as fulfilling its commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education as outlined in the Incheon Declaration, a focus on community engagement and its role in promoting equitable access is timely. In Myanmar’s evolving political context, an in-depth analysis of community engagement in education is also essential, in order to better inform local and international efforts to support community
ownership and to address needs and obstacles hindering quality and access to education. As stakeholders look towards improving education services for Karen communities, it is crucial to assess existing systems for school-based management, as well as communities’ hopes and preferences for the education of their children. Rolling out programming in ways that are not conflict sensitive and that do not involve key community actors can exacerbate tensions, impacting negatively on the peace process. Conversely, constructive engagement can impact positively on peace building, as well as further strengthening community mechanisms for school-based management. Effective school-based management also has additional benefits for promoting social harmony through outreach and support services to those in greatest need.

Methodology

Drawing on information obtained through in-depth research with local actors in different areas of Karen State, this report describes community engagement in education, as well as factors restricting and enabling local engagement and decision-making. In Karen State’s Mutraw District, research was conducted in areas that have historically been to a large extent under KNU administration and in areas where there are both state and KNU actors. In Dooplaya District, research was conducted in mixed administration areas that comprise multiple political and armed actors, including state actors, the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, the Border Guard Force, the KNU/KNLA Peace Council, and the KNU. Focusing on these different socio-political contexts highlights ways in which socio-political factors can impact on patterns of community engagement in education, as well as on local agency for school-based management and education decision-making.

Discussion and Findings:
The School Committees as mechanisms for community management of local schools

The School Committees have become crucial mechanisms for the local management of community schools and play a key role in coordinating different aspects of community engagement in education. The School Committees are locally grown mechanisms for school-based management. They function as systems to involve community members in problem-solving and decision-making at the local level.

The School Committees are made up of community leaders and members. They are generally seen as representative of the parents and community members, and as having the authority and legitimacy to make decisions, to mobilize community support, and to solve problems for the school. The School Committees in different areas work with teachers, community members, and leaders to manage and support their schools. However, they can also reflect and reproduce existing socio-political hierarchies. School Committee members are generally senior members of the community; they are also typically male. Additionally, there are differences in how the School Committees work with the students’ parents. In smaller village schools, there is generally more parent involvement in the School Committees and in school decision-making than there is in larger and secondary schools. The School Committees can therefore be strengthened in the future to ensure that they are representative and inclusive of all parents and of more marginalized community members.

The School Committees play an essential role in mobilizing and managing community contributions to the schools. They generally set the levels of the contributions that families need to make to the schools; they then collect these contributions before giving them to the teachers or using them to cover school costs and needs. The School Committees are also crucial in promoting access to education at the community level. They encourage community members to send their children to school, and they often play a key role in identifying and seeking out school-aged children who are not in school. By mobilizing community support mechanisms and promoting access to education in these ways, the School Committees have ensured that local schools can provide a basic level of education for populations who would otherwise not have access. Additionally, the School Committees have enabled students in ethnic minority areas to access education in their ethnic mother tongue, thereby promoting quality in access to education.

The School Committees also act as ‘safety nets’ and support mechanisms for families who face difficulties contributing to the schools. When a family cannot contribute to the school, the School Committee acts as a decision-making body, waiving or adjusting their contribution, or finding alternative sources of support for this family. Additionally, some School Committees function as support mechanisms beyond the school — for example, providing financial assistance if a student is sick and requires healthcare but the family cannot pay. The School Committees therefore act as locally grown community support mechanisms, providing ‘safety nets’ for students and their families, as well as mitigating some of the barriers to accessing education that are faced by more vulnerable families.
At the same time, the School Committees function as a key link between the communities, schools, and KED. They report information to the KED about the situation of, needs in, and problems faced by the communities and the schools. By operating as this link between the schools and the KED, the School Committees are integral to the KED’s school monitoring systems. The School Committees also disseminate information and materials from the KED to the schools, enabling communities and their schools to obtain essential resources that help ensure local access to education. In the future, this link can be utilized in a variety of ways to support quality education, information sharing, and teacher support.

The School Committees also have other roles and responsibilities, including: managing and maintaining school buildings and infrastructure; ensuring the security of the students, teachers, and schools; ensuring and monitoring teaching and learning in the schools; developing school plans; and solving problems in the schools. However, and although the KED’s policy states that the School Committees are responsible for monitoring teachers in the schools, they often lack the capacity to fulfill such technical roles. Moreover, because of capacity and power limitations, the problem-solving abilities of the School Committees are often limited to more practical issues to do with the maintenance and daily running of the schools, rather than longer-term planning and strategizing.

The School Committees therefore already function as mechanisms for the local management of community schools. There is definitely room for improvement in the ways that these mechanisms function and in providing School Committee members with the capacity to play a greater role in school-based management. Yet this study found that instead of capitalizing on these valuable resources, current national-level programming is being rolled out in ways that tend to exclude and undermine the School Committees. The School Committees have generally not been consulted or involved in plans to build new schools, to send government teachers to their areas, or to register former community schools. Undermining and weakening these locally grown systems can lead to the loss of essential community-level mechanisms for school-based management, without there yet being alternative systems in place — or plans to develop systems — that are considered by local communities as legitimate and as having the authority to manage and make decisions for their schools.

At the local level, tensions have often escalated — particularly in cases where government teachers have adopted seniority over community teachers and School Committee members who had already been working in the schools for many years. This is resulting in situations where competing management systems are undermining community mechanisms for school-based management and decision-making. Many School Committee members feel that they have no voice and that they are powerless in relation to education plans which are being rolled out in their areas. The lack of clarity in policies and implementation is therefore leading to unnecessary and unproductive conflicts at the school and community level. Failing to work with these key community mechanisms risks further exacerbating tensions and can be detrimental to peace
building at the local level. Through processes of constructive engagement, these negative outcomes can easily be avoided.

The School Committees have the potential to act as key mechanisms in strengthening education services for ethnic minority communities. Looking towards the future of education in Karen State, it is essential to capitalize on and develop these valuable community-level mechanisms. In particular, the School Committees should be strengthened to ensure that they act as participatory and inclusive systems for school-based management, and to enhance their role in promoting education quality and access at the local level. Current resource and capacity limitations faced by the School Committees also need to be addressed. Finally, it is essential to engage constructively with these local-level mechanisms in order to support education systems and programs that contribute positively to peace building efforts.

**Discussion and Findings: Community engagement in education in Karen State**

In a context in which community schools were historically not recognized and received little to no outside support, communities in Karen State have rallied to provide the material and financial contributions necessary for their schools to function. Community members’ contributions to their schools can include: school fees; in-kind and financial contributions to teachers’ livelihoods; and in kind, manpower, and financial contributions to school building and maintenance. Community members typically cover a large proportion of teachers’ livelihoods needs through in-kind or financial contributions. Community in kind, manpower or financial contributions also generally cover most if not all of the school building and maintenance needs. These contributions are commonly linked with strong systems of solidarity and community ownership of local schools. Yet this has also placed additional strain on communities who are already impacted by decades of conflict and impoverishment.

Community members in Karen State are typically not strongly engaged in the pedagogical dimensions of their children’s education. Teachers are commonly seen as solely responsible for the students’ education, with parents’ responsibilities being limited to sending their children to school and providing material support for the teachers and the school. Low levels of community involvement in the pedagogical dimensions of education are linked with high levels of illiteracy in historically unstable and remote communities. However, relatively weak school-community communication and outreach systems also reinforce a situation where community members are not strongly engaged in their children’s teaching and learning.

Community members often attribute a high value to their children’s education. Yet while education can be perceived as a ‘way out’ of the poverty and insecurity that they have experienced during their lifetimes, many parents also see no real value to their children staying in school, since further education and employment opportunities for those who do finish school are limited — and, as a Karen saying goes, “even if you can read and write, you still eat rice.” Nevertheless, community members speak often of the importance of their children being taught
in their mother tongue. They value their community education systems as a way to safeguard their ethnic language, culture, and identity. Community schools are then seen as making significant contributions to local community development and to the preservation of Karen culture and identity.

The current rolling out of state education systems into communities in previously contested areas of Karen State is commonly perceived as undermining community education systems and as threatening Karen language, culture, and identity. Yet state education systems are also seen as providing students with much-needed proficiency in Myanmar language and with increased opportunities for employment and higher education. Additionally, state education systems are often perceived as relieving some of the strain that communities face in supporting their schools. Community members’ preferences for different education systems are then shaped by the values that they attribute to different education regimes, as well as by difficulties currently confronting community education systems — particularly the lack of official recognition for these systems and the burden that communities face in supporting their schools.

Communities visited by the research team in Mutraw District and in Dooplaya District provide contrasting examples of how socio-political factors can impact on community engagement in education. Overall, the socio-political context in Mutraw District — where communities visited by the research team live in more remote areas and/or had historically been to a greater extent under the administration of a single authority, and where populations are relatively unified — can be seen to have contributed to more robust community support mechanisms, greater community engagement in education, and more developed community mechanisms for school-based management. School Committees in Mutraw District have also benefitted from sustained efforts by the KED to strengthen local mechanisms for school-based management, with the KED able to access and work with communities in these areas.

Conversely, the socio-political context in Dooplaya District — where communities visited by the research team live in mixed administration areas, grapple to meet the demands of competing authorities, and are overall more diverse and less unified — can be seen to have contributed to less developed community support mechanisms, weaker community engagement in education, and more fragile community mechanisms for school-based management. Due to the political and conflict situation, the KED has also had less access to communities in Dooplaya District’s mixed administration areas, and has been less able to work with and to strengthen the School Committees.

Additionally, there are a number of common challenges or barriers across different socio-political contexts, which have significant negative impacts on community education systems and engagement in these systems. The lack of official recognition for community education systems creates major obstacles to students accessing education and employment opportunities in Myanmar. This in turn impacts negatively on community engagement in education. Ongoing political uncertainties, poverty, and livelihoods difficulties, lack of education and employment
opportunities, and high rates of parent illiteracy also impede community engagement in education. Moreover, community teachers face a number of difficulties. These teachers struggle to provide quality education and to strengthen school-community linkages in a situation where they are commonly seen as solely responsible for the students’ education, yet where they lack resources and capacity. Community teachers are extremely valuable resources, particularly in a context where trained teachers are lacking. They are also mother tongue teachers and therefore play a key role in ensuring quality in access to education. As such, these community teachers need to be recognized and their roles strengthened in the development of inclusive and equitable quality education for Myanmar’s diverse populations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Looking towards the future, factors currently restricting community engagement in education need to be considered in order to minimize barriers to engagement and to strengthen school-community linkages. Ultimately, efforts to improve education quality and access for communities in Karen State should take into account the values that local actors attribute to different education regimes, as well as limitations and challenges that impede community education systems and engagement in these systems.

To the Government of the Union Of Myanmar:

- Ensure conflict sensitivity in education provision by holding genuine consultations with communities, School Committees, and non-state actors and their education departments
- Recognize and engage with community education systems and actors and develop clear policies and guidelines for the official recognition of community schools
- Commit to supporting alternative or flexible pathways to accreditation and certification for community teachers as well as wider teacher education and management planning
- Develop and roll out clear policies and guidelines for Mother-Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education in government schools
- Create a clear policy on the enrollment of students from community and refugee education systems, to enable these students to access state education systems

To the International Community:

- Recognize the role that non-state actors play in education and continue to provide funding and capacity support to ethnic and community education systems during the interim period
• Support the design and monitor the implementation of coordination mechanisms between the government and ethnic education representatives

• Support programs that further strengthen the capacity of School Committees and that strengthen different dimensions of community engagement in education

For example: also includes programs to support adult literacy, parent involvement, livelihoods training and support

• Provide support to the Myanmar MoE in order to develop, implement, and monitor policies for the enrollment of community and refugee students into government schools

*A full draft of the research report is available here: [http://www.kedktl.org/2016/10/school-committees-and-community.html](http://www.kedktl.org/2016/10/school-committees-and-community.html)

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