ETHNIC LANGUAGES AND EDUCATION DECLARATION

MYANMAR/BURMA INDIGENOUS NETWORK FOR EDUCATION

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I. PREAMBLE

(1) The Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education was established during an Ethnic Education Seminar convened by the Karen Teacher Working Group as part of the Eastern Burma Community Schooling Project, between 12-14 February 2014.

(2) The seminar was attended by sixty four people from 22 organisations interested in education and language rights, with twelve ethnic national groups from across Myanmar/Burma represented. By the end of the seminar, participants reached a consensus on this Declaration that covers ethnic education and language rights and propose a language policy for implementation in Myanmar/Burma.

(3) The groups represented were:
   (1) Mon National Education Committee, MNEC
   (2) Karen Education Department, KED
   (3) Karen Teacher Working Group, KTWG
   (4) Karen Women’s Organization, KWO
   (5) Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity, KRCEE
   (6) Karenni Education Department, KnED
   (7) Kayan New Generation Youth, KNGY
   (8) Rural Development Foundation for Shan State, RDFSS
   (9) Shan Women’s Action Network, SWAN
   (10) Shan State Development Foundation, SSDF
   (11) Organisation of Wa National Social Affairs, OWNSA
   (12) Pa-Oh Literature and Culture Committee
   (13) Akha Literature and Culture Committee
   (14) Pa-Oh Monastic Education (Hopone)
   (15) Shan Education Networking Group, SENG
   (16) Lahu Women’s Organization, LWO
   (17) Ta’ang Student & Youth Union, TSYU
   (18) Kachin Independence Organisation Education Department, KIO-ED
   (19) Kachin National Education Committee, KNEC
   (20) Eastern Naga Development Organization, ENDO
   (21) Spring of Love (Akha)
   (22) Wa Youth Forum

(4) In this Declaration, MINE recognises the importance of multilingual education in Myanmar so that the diverse ethnic nationalities can maintain their mother tongue, but also prosper in the wider society and in the regional and global community by learning the language of the Union and English.

(5) MINE agrees with UNESCO’s three guiding principles held in its Education in a Multilingual World (2003) paper, namely:
   • “mother tongue instruction” to improve the quality and outcomes of education by building schooling on the knowledge and experience of learners;
   • “bilingual and/or multilingual education” to promote social and gender equality in public education;
   • “intercultural education” to encourage understanding between various population groups.

In this Declaration, MINE describes the current situation of schooling for Indigenous children and youth in remote, ethnic nationality areas of Myanmar/Burma and then sets out a framework of recommended actions to be taken.
II. CONTEXT

(6) The over 60 million citizens of Myanmar live in one of the world’s most diverse countries. *Ethnologue* estimates there are 116 living languages in Myanmar representing five language families:
- Sino-Tibetan,
- Austro-Asiatic,
- Tai–Kadai,
- Indo-European,
- Austronesian.

(7) Some of these languages are listed as being endangered but the majority are vigorous and “safe” languages. (Lewis, Simons and Fennig, 2013) However, there is a danger that some Indigenous languages in Burma will become extinct. (LoBianco, 2013a)

(8) Although there are a lack of current and reliable figures pending the results of the recent census, it is estimated that over one third of the population speaks a mother tongue other than the language of the Union, Myanmar.

(9) Despite this, Myanmar language has the institutional support of the education system and national laws, and is used as medium of instruction in the national education system throughout the country, even in areas where primarily indigenous languages are spoken.

(10) The schooling situation in Myanmar/Burma is complex and as diverse as its ethnic make-up. The government school system exists in some but not all ethnic areas, usually in or near to towns.

(11) Schooling in remote areas, where available, is mostly run by the community, religious institutions or non-state actors.

(12) Where there has been conflict with the Burma Army, there are less likely to be government schools, although this is changing during the current transitional/ceasefire period as more government schools are opened.

(13) In territories administered by ethnic non-state actors, the language of instruction and the texts used are usually in the local mother tongue language. Otherwise, the language of instruction and the texts are in Myanmar.

2.1 Global Situation

(14) Over the past decades, there is growing international consensus towards indigenous rights in general and indigenous education rights in particular.

(15) The United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* states that Indigenous people should be able to practise their cultural traditions and use their languages in education and should not be forced into assimilation (Article 14 UNDRIP, 2008).

(16) The *Barcelona Declaration on Universal Linguistic Rights* under UNESCO supports all language communities to:
- maintain their languages,
• educate their children, and
• develop their culture.

2.2 Regional Situation

(17) In the *South East Asian Economic Outlook* by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2012) Myanmar lags behind other ASEAN states in trade, health and education as one of the poorest countries in the region.

(18) ASEAN has adopted a language policy making English the official working language of the Association. In 2014, Myanmar takes the rotating chair of ASEAN. For the people of Burma this means that English is becoming even more important. For ethnic minorities this means knowing at least three languages, the mother tongue, Burmese and English, and sometimes the dominant ethnic language in their areas also.

2.3 National Situation

(19) The current Constitution of Myanmar in Chapter 1 at Clause number 28.C, “The Union shall implement free compulsory primary education.” This principle is a basis for future development of education language rights for Indigenous people in Burma. However, the current Constitution does not protect the right to a culturally sensitive education in the “mother tongue”.

(20) Myanmar’s Ministry of Education has adopted *Education for All Action Plan (2003-2015)* aimed at implementing the Millennium Development Goal that every child in the world should “complete a full cycle of basic education of good quality”.

(21) As part of Myanmar’s overall “reform agenda” in the past years the Government adopted Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) so that education can raise the “overall level of social and economic development in the country, with a focus on human development”. (Lo Bianco, 2013b).

(22) The Ministry of Education stated goals are:
• to develop an education system that promotes a continuous learning society responsive to this needs and challenges of this era
• to ensure that Myanmar’s development and modernization is based on a strong education system

(23) For these goals to be achieved, these achievements to be made, education for indigenous groups also needs to be prioritized and urgent action needs to be taken.

(24) While the rate of literacy worldwide is increasing, the literacy rate in Myanmar has been decreasing. This is especially true in indigenous states of Myanmar where the literacy rate is decreasing more rapidly than in Burman ethnic inhabited areas and in the large cities like Yangon and Napyitaw.

(25) The current government education policy and curricula are based on Myanmar language. Indigenous students in government schools who don't speak Myanmar as a first language struggle to succeed at school.
(26) Children learn better when taught in their mother tongue. Furthermore, as the government curriculum reflects the social and cultural values of the Burman majority, Indigenous children are further estranged from curricular content, already made inaccessible because of language barriers.

(27) The National Network for Education Reform (NNER) shares this view. On February 1st, 2014 after its ‘Ethnic Language Teaching’ seminar, NNER stated “children’s mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in order for ethnic children to be effective in their studies and balance the teaching of national and international language skills (NNER Report #4, Chapter 12). MINE strongly endorses this point made by NNER.

(28) On March 18th 2014, the Ministry of Education released its draft National Education Law in daily newspapers. On March 28th, NNER released a statement disagreeing with a number of elements in this draft law.

(29) While the bill contains some possibilities for local language, literature and culture inclusion in schools, control over basic education remains at the central level. Decentralisation is essential to ensure that key decisions such as for language of instruction and local curriculum, can be made locally so that schooling is responsive to the needs of the children and communities it is meant to serve. The Bill also lists Myanmar as the language of instruction at every school level. If passed in its current form, the Bill will deny indigenous children a quality education by removing their right to access education in their own mother tongue.

2.3.1 Language of instruction

(30) Indigenous languages are often not permitted to be spoken in the classroom, taught as subjects at school or used as languages of instruction in government schools.

(31) While permission has been given to teach local languages out of school hours in a few limited areas, for most Indigenous students in government schools, learning a curriculum whose content is outside their lived experiences and delivered in a language in which they lack fluency is difficult.

(32) When a child speaks their mother tongue at home and must use Myanmar language at school, this is a disadvantage for their learning. Many Indigenous children do not want to go to school or do not progress as well as a result.

(33) Children learn much better when taught, especially throughout the primary level, in their mother tongue.

2.3.2 School Texts

(34) Government school textbooks are not produced in mother tongues and are not culturally relevant to Indigenous children. History and culture is taught from a Myanmar/Burman perspective. Burman cultural traditions are taught in place of local ones. School children are not taught a range of historical perspectives and cultural traditions that are at play in their lives outside of schools. This devalues indigenous children’s cultural identity and limits the potential to understand and appreciate Myanmar’s diversity.

2.3.3 Quality of education
(35) Classrooms nationwide lack adequate teaching materials and school facilities. This is even more acute in remote areas. Nationwide, there is also a lack of teaching skills and knowledge that encourages teaching by rote and rigid adherence to curricular texts. Again, this situation is more pronounced in Indigenous areas where inexperienced government teachers lacking local knowledge, language and relationships rely on linear applications of the curriculum without the capacity to adapt it to meet the learning needs of students.

(36) The current system does not adhere to child-centered approaches (CCA) and as a result limits the development of students’ critical thinking skills.

2.3.4 **Lack of skilled teachers**

(37) The number of qualified, and even unqualified, teachers is insufficient for large numbers of students resulting in very large classrooms sizes.

(38) This problem is worse in remote ethnic areas. There is also a shortage of government teachers who can speak ethnic languages in ethnic areas and schools. There is a government internship program, where many teachers come to rural areas for practice and to gain a promotion. When Government teachers are sent to local and ethnic areas they don’t understand the languages and culture of the communities, and this results in difficulties for communities, the teachers and a poor quality of education for the children. Teachers must understand the language and the culture in the areas they are working.

2.3.5 **Indigenous languages and scripts**

(39) Throughout the country there is a plurality of competing and co-existing languages being used in every day life.

(40) This reality, in itself, puts greater stress on smaller language groups needing to cope with larger, more widely used, local languages in their areas as well as Myanmar, the language of the Union. Government institutions and services that only accept the use of Myanmar reinforce the preference and prominence of Myanmar language over other languages. This makes government services inaccessible to many people at the same time diminishing the value of local languages. In this way, Indigenous languages are left to be spoken only at home or in the village with parents and elders. This puts ethnic languages in further danger as they are designated to family and village but not for society at large.

(41) Where Indigenous scripts exist, it is the older generation, and to a much lesser extent the youth, who is usually literate in them.

(42) The shift from traditional institutions to formal education means that schooling has taken prominence in terms knowledge transmission to the younger generation. This shift means a change in the content and process of knowledge transmission away from local knowledge and language. Many teachers do not know local languages and scripts and this makes it difficult to be able to teach the children. People need support in language planning to achieve multilingualism in school so children can be educated and languages properly supported.
3. PRINCIPLES

(43) In the UNESCO position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World* (UNESCO, 2003), there are three guiding principles:

- “mother tongue instruction” to improve the quality and outcomes of education by building schooling on the knowledge and experience of learners;
- “bilingual and or multilingual education” to promote social and gender equality in public education; and
- “intercultural education” to encourage understanding between various population groups.

(44) MINE supports these principles and recognises that for indigenous language and culture to survive and for indigenous peoples to prosper, education must be mother tongue based, particularly in the early years of schooling.

(45) It is very important, because students require a multilingual education studying at least three languages, the mother tongue, Myanmar and English beginning with mother tongue facilitating second and third language learning.

(46) Mother tongue instruction fosters better learning outcomes for students, as well as better social and cultural outcomes. Research shows the best language to use for minority children is the mother tongue (Kosonen, 2005; UNESCO, 2003; World Bank, 2005), and the evidence from Sri Lanka shows that teaching in the mother tongue improves the literacy of girls, rural students, minorities and the poor (Lo Bianco, 2011).

(47) MINE recognises the importance of multilingual education in Myanmar so that the diverse ethnic nationalities can maintain their mother tongue, but also prosper in the wider society and in the regional and global community by learning the language of the Union and English.

(48) Given the recent history of conflict between the Government of Myanmar and ethnic nationality groups, promotion of indigenous languages, identities and cultures through the education system is one of the best ways to ensure peace in Myanmar's future.

(49) MINE is calling for national language policy of multilingualism in which children learn their mother tongue, English and Myanmar as a minimum in schools.

(50) MINE is calling for a language policy that ensures that the mother tongue is the language of instruction in early childhood and early grades of school with Myanmar language taught as a subject.

(51) Gradually Myanmar language can be included as a language of instruction, but mother tongue should be maintained as language of instruction in some subjects. Then when the child is literate in the mother tongue, Myanmar and English can also be added.

(52) MINE also supports intercultural education as a way of fostering understanding and peace between Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups. This Declaration supports the effort to promote culture and language diversity, with equal treatment of every ethnic language, and education success for all children.
4. GOALS and OBJECTIVES

(53) MINE calls for the following goals to be included within Myanmar/Burma’s national education policy:

- The right to mother tongue education in the earliest years of schooling and continued throughout education.
- The right to learn the Union language of Burmese equally well with the main community of the Union for equal rights to citizenship.
- The right to learn English as the international language and the main language of ASEAN.
- National language planning to promote preservation of ethnic languages and cultures and peach in Myanmar.

(54) The diversity of Myanmar’s indigenous groups and their unique situations, means that there should be language and education planning at the top and local levels, with principles that are shared across the country adopted nationally, but then adapted to take account of local differences and needs.

(55) The principles of national language planning should engage the entire national community to promote ethnic rights, economic development and peaceful co-existence.

(56) The use of mother tongue should be allowed not just in education, but also at all levels of society. This will encourage inclusion and common citizenship, ensuring space for the rights of indigenous people.

(57) Planning needs to capture the diversity of mother tongues in some areas where schools will require instruction in multiple languages. While challenging, the Indian model demonstrates that it is possible to have a functioning classroom where two or more languages of instruction are used. This requires multi-lingual teachers, most likely from the local area, who, where necessary, are supported by local language assistants ensuring that all children can learn in their mother tongues.

(58) If the current education policy persists, Indigenous youth will become increasingly marginalised, if not excluded, from accessing a quality education that is the right of every child of Myanmar. A mother tongue based, multilingual education policy is an inclusive one promoting the ‘Education for All’ policy adopted by the Government of Myanmar/Burma.
5. ACTION
(59) The Government of Myanmar and civil society are working towards wide reaching reforms to education throughout the country. MINE calls for the following actions to be considered and entrenched in national education policy reforms.

5.1 Teaching and Learning
- Improve quality of education through access to mother tongue based, multilingual education
- Local level planning to ensure instruction is available in all students mother tongues
- Support for use of teacher assistants and teaching aides to help students learn Burmese and maintain their mother tongue as they study the national curriculum
- Link English teaching to mother tongue and Myanmar language
- Support training for teachers in ethnic nationality areas in at least three languages – mother tongue, Myanmar and English
- Culturally appropriate education inclusive of local epistemologies, histories and cultural traditions/practices
- Develop an inclusive national curriculum promoting Myanmar’s diverse ethnicities, histories, languages and cultures
- Improve teacher capacity through pre-service training and continual professional development for Indigenous areas
- Increase support for and employment of local teachers who can speak and teach Indigenous mother tongue
- Increase learning of Indigenous languages by teachers and recruit native language speakers into teacher training programs
- Develop child-centred learning practices and improve teaching methods in government schools
- Urgent requirement to increase teacher salaries to improve commitment to and quality of teaching while reducing the practice of bribery of students

5.2 Research
- Research to support best practices of mother tongue based multilingual education and language planning
- Establish a national research committee including ethnic representatives and ensure that language policy is one of its priority research areas
- Include the perspectives, stories and achievements of ethnic nationalities in the history curriculum
- Promote research to support the special needs of smaller language groups and vulnerable language communities
- Research to facilitate language planning on Indigenous language scripts and vocabulary development
- Research on common forms of language within existing Indigenous groups and in local areas with diverse languages
- Research exploring strategies of creating opportunities to apply mother language widely in daily life

5.3 Assistance to individual languages
- Fund oral history research and the revitalisation and preservation of Indigenous languages in cooperation with older generations
- Assistance for language planning on script and terminology to permit mother tongue teaching across a variety of subject areas
• Support to maintain and promote local names (towns, territories, etc) to strengthen local history and identity

5.4 Advisory Structures
• Form a board of linguistic experts to advise Indigenous education groups
• Advisory structures should include ethnic representatives
• Initiate and support Literacy and Culture committees to develop mother tongue languages

5.5 Ethnic Education Systems
• For the short to medium term at least, maintain existing community and ethnic nationality schools and do not replace them with government schools
• Encourage collaboration between community and ethnic nationality schools and school systems and the government school system to improve education delivery. Recognise and support community, religious and non-state actor administered schools
• Allocate budget for teacher stipends and teaching & learning materials for community, religious and non-state actor administered schools
• Support for school management and data collection for community, religious and non-state actor administered schools
• Support for local mother-tongue based curriculum development

5.6 Higher Education
• Indigenous study departments should be established at university level
• Create and support a Department of Indigenous Linguistics and Philosophy
• Create Bachelor and Master’s degree programs in linguistics for speakers of indigenous languages
• Grant the right to and encourage publication of indigenous literature

5.6 National Curriculum and Local Flexibility
• A multi-cultural national curriculum promoting harmony amongst all people of Myanmar/Burma and respect for different ethnicities, language and cultural traditions
• Central government to provide only guidance and standard setting with increased management and decision making authority at the State and local level. Decentralisation of authority over education to the State and local levels so that curriculum and teaching practices are applicable to the local context
• Allowance for and inclusion of local curriculum within the national curriculum (for example, 60% national and 40% local)
5 REFERENCES

IP&EM, (2012), Statement of Indigenous Peoples & Ethnic Minorities of ASEAN, Promote and protect rights to land, territory, resources and development of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in ASEAN.


