



MYANMAR Country Report

Language Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative



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Myanmar Country Report: Language, Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative

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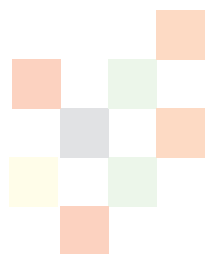
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Myanmar

Country Report

Language, Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative

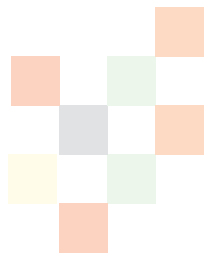


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This paper contributes to PBEA Programme's global outcomes 2 and 5: to increase institutional capacities to supply conflict-sensitive education; and to generate and use evidence and knowledge in policies and programming related to education, conflict and peacebuilding, respectively.

We have been honoured to partner with the University of Melbourne in this endeavour, especially with the paper's author, Prof. Joseph Lo Bianco, who is an established expert in language and literacy education, and his university colleagues, Yvette Slaughter and Andrew Schapper, who provided valuable technical assistance in editing the research paper.

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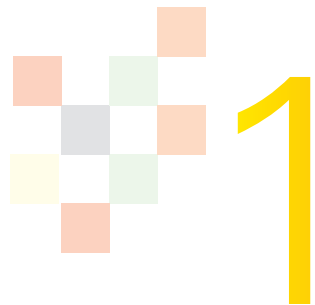
Acronyms



ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CESR	Comprehensive Education Sector Review (Myanmar)
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
EAPRO	East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (UNICEF)
LESC	Language, Education and Social Cohesion (EAPRO)
MINE	Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education
MLE	Multilingual Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPT	Naypyidaw
PBEA	Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy Programme (UNICEF)
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund (formerly United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund)

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Executive summary

The EAPRO LESC Initiative was a component of UNICEF's Learning for Peace, Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA) Programme, a four-year global initiative (2012–2015/16), funded by the Government of the Netherlands and designed to strengthen resilience, social cohesion and human security, to encourage practical interventions to alleviate conflict and advance peace through the education sector, as well as to support research into conflict analysis and information about education and peacebuilding. The overall vision of PBEA is to strengthen policy and resilience in society, to foster social cohesion and human security in countries at risk of conflict, experiencing conflict or recovering from conflict.

The research and activities of the LESC Initiative, designed and implemented by Prof. Joseph Lo Bianco, of the University of Melbourne with the support of the Myanmar Country Office of UNICEF and three country-wide partners, the Pyoe Pin programme of the British Council, the Nyein (Shalom) Foundation and the Thabyay Education Foundation, alongside a large number of local education, civil society and culture and language associations across states and districts, examined the role of language policy and planning in education reform and peacebuilding. The key approach was participatory action research, a method of working which makes use of deliberative processes to foster a culture of dialogue to help solve problems in education.

At the heart of Myanmar society is a very complex sociolinguistic profile, comprising more than approximately 135 spoken languages (Bradley 2015), along with sign languages, dialects and foreign languages (Bradley 1997; Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013). The nature of cross-language bilingualism/multilingualism, and knowledge of foreign languages, knowledge of and use of 'proximal' languages (Chinese and Indian languages), are distributed in a highly variable pattern following the urban/rural divide and shaped by education levels, occupation and mobility. As part of a general national reform agenda whose principal aim is to raise economic and social development, Myanmar has embarked on a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) to transform its education system.

An overarching objective of the LESC Initiative has been to foster a coordinated and comprehensive, evidence-based approach to tackling problems in languages education, some of which have been controversial for decades. This has involved early childhood education, primary schooling and post-primary education, all cognisant of the sociolinguistic and ethnic diversity of Myanmar's population and its diverse ethno-linguistic groupings. The LESC activities have utilized concrete methods of language planning to support multilingual education in ethnic minority languages, in Myanmar (also known as Burmese) and in strategic foreign languages.

The findings and proposals arising from the LESC Initiative in Myanmar have been informed by rich, participatory research and fieldwork activities. These include a large number of bilateral meetings and

focus groups, interviews, consultations and Facilitated Dialogues with many hundreds of individuals belonging to over 150 organizations, institutions and governmental departments across the country (see Appendix 2 for a listing of many of the participating organizations).

The above process represents a complex, multi-layered and long-term process of action-situated research, whose aim has not been restricted to generation of knowledge, but has extended to supporting local people and agencies in their reform agenda promoting peaceful coexistence after many decades of continual conflict. This has required engaging a range of mechanisms and concepts that more broadly inform and shape the research procedures being undertaken, for example, field testing the viability and feasibility of likely recommendations before proposing them. In conceptualizing this range of collaborative and participatory activities the chief researcher has drawn on a range of language planning and policy concepts, itemized below and discussed throughout this report:

- i. Language status planning (supporting local actors)
- ii. Identifying language problems and seeking solutions (in research or dialogue)
- iii. Training in language planning
- iv. Public education on contentious issues
- v. Mitigating conflict (through Facilitated Dialogues and mediation)
- vi. Writing guidelines and developing theory and understanding
- vii. Document analysis

This report provides an overview of the LESC Initiative in Myanmar, with a special focus on Mon state. An extended discussion and analysis of the overall work of the LESC Initiative in Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand is available in a separate publication: Lo Bianco (2015) Synthesis Report Language, Education and Social Cohesion (LESC) Initiative in Malaysia Myanmar and Thailand, UNICEF, EAPRO, Bangkok, Thailand.

1.1 LESC activities: Facilitated Dialogues

The essential aim of 'Facilitated' Dialogues is to support groups debating, or contesting social issues to canvas policy alternatives, especially when these are the cause of conflict, tension or policy paralysis. Facilitated Dialogues have been developed in accordance with approaches to decision-making that are influenced by 'deliberative democracy', which stresses the process of decision-making as much as the final result. These are part of a surge in thinking about the limits of policymaking as it has been practiced for many years in which policy is left exclusively to public officials or technical experts without involvement from key community stakeholders. Four Facilitated Dialogues were conducted for the Myanmar LESC Initiative, in Mae Sot (Thailand), Mawlamyine (two Facilitated Dialogues), and Naypyidaw. These dialogues were designed and facilitated by Prof. Lo Bianco and have led to a major extension of the LESC Initiative in Myanmar, when from late 2014 the UNICEF Myanmar office commissioned him to lead the preparation of a 'peace promoting national language policy'.

1.1.1 Language Policy Forum, Eastern Burma Community Schools. Mae Sot, Thailand, 12–14 February 2014

The Mae Sot Facilitated Dialogue was attended by 68 representatives from 22 organizations representing



12 different ethnic groups. The participants explored a range of fundamental challenges, including what communities envisioned for the educational and economic future for their children, their languages and their culture, and their participation in Myanmar society. The Dialogue was conducted in six languages and was highly innovative in its methods and successful in its outcomes (Michaels 2014).

Many significant achievements emerged from the Mae Sot Facilitated Dialogue, beginning with the issuing of *A Declaration of Ethnic Language and Education*, drafted during the gathering, accompanied by a press release issued shortly after the meeting, declaring the launch of a new organization, the Myanmar/Burma Indigenous Network for Education (MINE). The press release introduced MINE as an advocacy and action group for indigenous communities, and described its mission and petitions on behalf of Myanmar's many indigenous groups.

Some months later, building on the sense of agency fostered during the Dialogue and the skills and knowledge of language planning and policy mechanisms they acquired, MINE members released a bilingual English/Myanmar document, *Ethnic Languages and Education Declaration*, on 15 June 2014. The document "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" (Appendix 5, p. 2).

A long-term working plan based on ongoing language planning and policy work and regular meetings was also developed and released, focusing on advocacy for mother tongue education; multilingual education; decentralization of educational decisions; intercultural education; policy decision-making and participation; and all inclusive education.

1.1.2 Language, Education and Social Cohesion Facilitated Dialogue. Mawlamyine, Mon State, Myanmar, 27–28 May 2014 (36 participants)

The Facilitated Dialogues conducted in May and November in Mawlamyine, Mon State, focused on the specific sociolinguistic and education challenges of the state. The main and important outcome was a widespread agreement that a specific state language planning and policy process would be beneficial for the four main ethno-linguistic populations of Mon State (Mon, Pa'oh, Karen and Burmese speakers and learners). The unique grouping of languages, the specific educational setting with its mix of school systems and monastic education provision, and the relatively compact dimensions of the State suggested that this could become a model of participation based 'bottom up' language policymaking. Some difficult issues needed to be resolved in the Dialogues and so two teams of local writers, policy and technical in nature, were formed. These met on a regular basis to develop the outline and priorities of the policy.

Both Mawlamyine Dialogues had the intention of exploring alternatives to the mandated use of Myanmar as exclusive medium of instruction in state schools. Participants in the Dialogues and the writing teams were drawn from a wide range of interested organizations, including government officials, researchers and academics, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), representatives from minority language and culture groups, women's organizations, community development and non-formal education structures as well as ministerial participation from the state parliament. An outstanding achievement resulting from the Facilitated Dialogues and extensive commitment and work of those involved was a fully developed consensus, despite considerable initial misgivings among some, and commitment towards the adoption of a comprehensive multilingual language policy for the State. Participants shaped the future

development of the policy by writing a 'Mon State language policy preamble', developed initially at the May 2014 Dialogue and elaborated upon during the second, more technical Dialogue and extended by the writing teams.

1.1.3 Language, Education and Social Cohesion Facilitated Dialogue. Naypyidaw, Myanmar, 29–30 July 2014 (26 participants)

The key objectives of the Naypyidaw Facilitated Dialogue were to provide a national perspective to discussions of language policy emanating from local levels as in the Mon State Dialogues discussed above. The July Dialogue comprised 26 representatives from a wide range of organizations and included senior government officials from Planning and Training, Education, and Social Welfare departments; language committees, and parliament; researchers and academics; CSOs, including language and literacy groups, ethnic organizations and educational committees, as well as representatives from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The facilitator provided research evidence on language learning and education from different parts of the world and models of provision for complex multilingual sociologies similar to the Myanmar setting. From these perspectives, inputs and recommendations from participants discussion focused on questions of social cohesion; skills and competitive exams in modern education; employment issues and external trade as linked to language policy; service delivery in health and legal domains; and issues of international connections and relations concerning language needs. These discussions formed the basis for the facilitator to propose a series of 'principles' to guide language policy writing across Myanmar.

A significant outcome from the Naypyidaw Facilitated Dialogue was the persuasion of public officials that a comprehensive multilingual language policy could be prepared in a collaborative way, with significant national benefits in the education of minority children, improved social cohesion and greater impact on peacebuilding through relationships between all sectors of society. Significant work was undertaken to achieve the drafting of a set of policy principles and a preamble for a Union-wide language policy.

1.2 Processes for alleviating tension and conflict

Although language status and language education can often be a cause of tension and a threat to social cohesion, one of the major outcomes of the LESC Initiative has been to highlight how language questions are also a doorway to the resolution of social conflict, even when such conflict is not directly associated with questions of language. In effect, language is more amenable to resolution than other causes of tension such as religion, ethnicity and socio-economic disparities. Language-based tensions are more amenable to dialogue-based resolution when this is supported through local and relevant international research and exploration of practical school models of Multilingual Education (MLE) (For a wider discussion of the link between language and conflict see Lo Bianco 2015, *Synthesis Report on the LESC Initiative in Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand*).

The process for alleviating misunderstanding, frustration and anger which often arises in contest over limited resources in education and language settings can be alleviated by exploring viable and transferable models of practice from other settings, and through local innovation. Significant progress was made across State-level, as well as Union-wide contexts in Myanmar, confirmed by the extension of the initial LESC Initiative,



the large number of participants engaged in exploring alternative courses of action, the collaborative nature of these discussions, and the extremely positive evaluations given by participants of the outcomes of the Dialogues. All this confirms that language problems and conflicts can be relieved through focused and well-prepared interventions, particularly when framed in the general interest of enhancing social cohesion, resilience and fostering national unity. The Facilitated Dialogues and other activities undertaken in Myanmar have shown an extremely high level of success in addressing these by a method of examining realistically achievable objectives against policy declarations and education documents and by exploring areas through which language issues and tensions can be accommodated and facilitated.

1.3 Outcomes

There is considerable evidence from the LESC research that supports the notion that language status and language education contribute to tension and sometimes conflict, at both a societal and educational level (Lo Bianco 2015). The LESC Initiative has shown that language policy processes can play a vital role in generating understanding of the perspective and position of one group of stakeholders for the views of others, and even as far as full consensus, trust, and collaborative approaches to decision-making and enactment, which can lead to greater educational outcomes for children and improve social cohesion. The content and process of language problem alleviation, however, is dependent on focused and well-prepared interventions and research-based guidance, negotiated through guided discussions and collaborative processes of decision-making. In particular, the organization of the forum of safe, but guided discussion through the Facilitated Dialogues:

- allowed for constructive and positive relationships to be formed between many stakeholders (several of these have linked senior policy officials to indigenous community representatives for the first time);
- established a dialogue space where MLE was discussed (these discussions were framed as problem-solving through evidence and comparison of available models to support local innovation);
- created a sense of ownership and agency around languages and education (this is clear from the enthusiasm of participants to continue discussion, their active engagement with follow-up activities, their flow on discussions within their own communities; their contribution of new ideas and their evaluations and rankings of the various activities in confidential evaluation processes);
- stimulated a demand for policy development on the part of government (this has led to the shared convening of an international conference on language policy and peacebuilding in Mandalay, February 2016); and
- moved past acrimonious debates beyond past entrenched positions and towards constructive and deliberated common ground around education law reform and multilingual provision in education.

1.4 Recommendations

The most important outcomes emerging from the LESC Initiative are for the preparation of a peacebuilding and social cohesion promoting national language policy for Myanmar and for the holding of an international conference on language policy in multilingual and multicultural settings in Mandalay in February 2016. The first of these outcomes can now build on a set of shared, agreed and endorsed principles known

as the Naypyidaw (NPT) principles (see 6.3.1) which are the basis for the preparation of both state level and national language policy, while the conference has seen extensive collaboration across Myanmar society, from official to local levels, and across all ethnic groups, to jointly plan a new set of language understandings for the country and new policy settings for their cultivation and management.

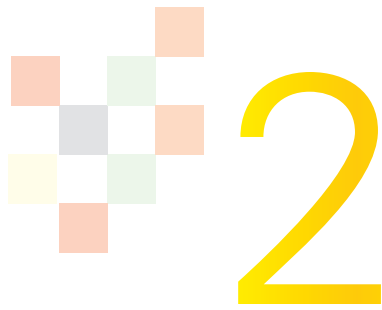
Building on the initial inputs of the LESC Initiative the main outcomes of these new initiatives should include:

- The development of Union level language policy
- The development of several state level language policies coordinated with the Union level policy through the NPT principles (see 6.3.1)
- The development of model policies for other states and districts of the country based on the above
- Integrated implementation plans at state and Union levels, responding to a series of identified language and communication challenges
- A suite of integrated policy documents, envisaged to consist of two volumes
- Documented outcomes from the conference, and
- Other publications and information provision, including research reports, language maps, and other material as required.

1.5 Further developments

The proposal to extend the original LESC Initiative, based on the recognized success of the initial LESC project in Myanmar, was submitted to UNICEF in late 2014 and accepted in early 2015. A key objective of the LESC extension is the preparation of a peacebuilding and social cohesion promoting national language policy for Myanmar, which itself will consist of three key components:

1. Development of the language policy principles (NPT principles, see 6.3.1) through consultation with the relevant working groups and the incorporation of feedback and questionnaire feedback and the adaptation of these at state and locality levels.
2. Dialogues and consultations – this component of the project will involve carrying out
 - a. Facilitated Dialogues in a number of states
 - b. Union-wide Facilitated Dialogues; the first to seek feedback and discussion of draft principles for language policy and their endorsement and a second dialogue to discuss, modify and endorse the final policy draft
 - c. Field trips at the state level for policy input negotiations
 - d. Consultations in relation to a special needs component to the language policy.
3. The commissioning of four specialist inputs to inform the above steps through detailed papers written by experts on a sociolinguistic map of the languages of Myanmar, English and its role in Myanmar society, special needs and inclusive education provision, as well as a case study and photo essay of MLE practices in Myanmar.



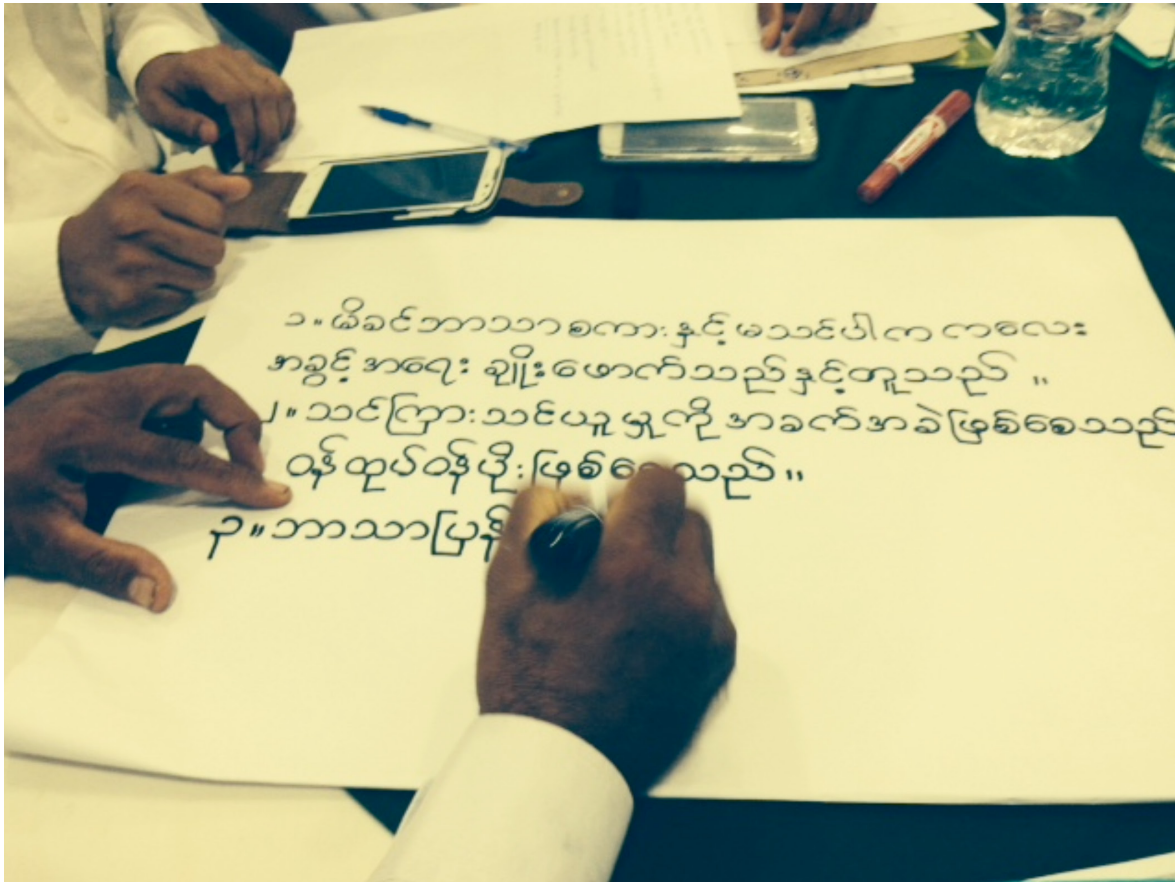
The UNICEF Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA) Programme and the LESC Initiative

The Peace, Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA) Programme is a four-year global initiative (2012–2015/16) funded by the Government of the Netherlands and designed to strengthen resilience, social cohesion and human security, to encourage practical interventions to alleviate conflict and advance peace through the education sector, as well as to support research into conflict analysis and information about education and peacebuilding. The overall vision of PBEA is to strengthen policy and resilience in society, to foster social cohesion and human security in countries at risk of conflict, experiencing conflict or recovering from conflict.

The focus of PBEA is twofold: first to encourage practical intervention (tools and methods) to alleviate conflict, and second, to support research into conflict analysis (increasing understanding of the ways in which education can hinder or support social cohesion). The overall vision is to strengthen policy and resilience in society, to foster social cohesion and human security in countries at risk of conflict, experiencing conflict or recovering from conflict. The strategic result and primary objective is to improve the lives of children in conflict-affected contexts.

An overarching commonality for the LESC Initiatives is research exploring policy and planning, current practices and prevailing attitudes and values related to language throughout education systems. The aim of this research is to understand language issue and problems in their context in civil society, public policy and the labour market so far as these condition and shape language and ethnicity issues and to develop pragmatic intervention tools to alleviate conflict, introduce more effective and widely supported policies and thereby improve the lives of children and communities.

In 2012, UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) commissioned a desk review of existing documents on the relations between ethnicity (especially ethnic minorities), education (policies and practices related to minorities and minority languages) and social cohesion/peacebuilding in three countries – namely Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. Specifically, the desk review explored work on MLE and mother tongue-based education; policies and practices relating to ethnicity and education; as well as views and opinions of key stakeholders at national and local levels (see Lo Bianco 2015 for a detailed description of this activity).



*Facilitated Dialogue, Mawlamyine, May 2014
Credit: J. Lo Bianco*

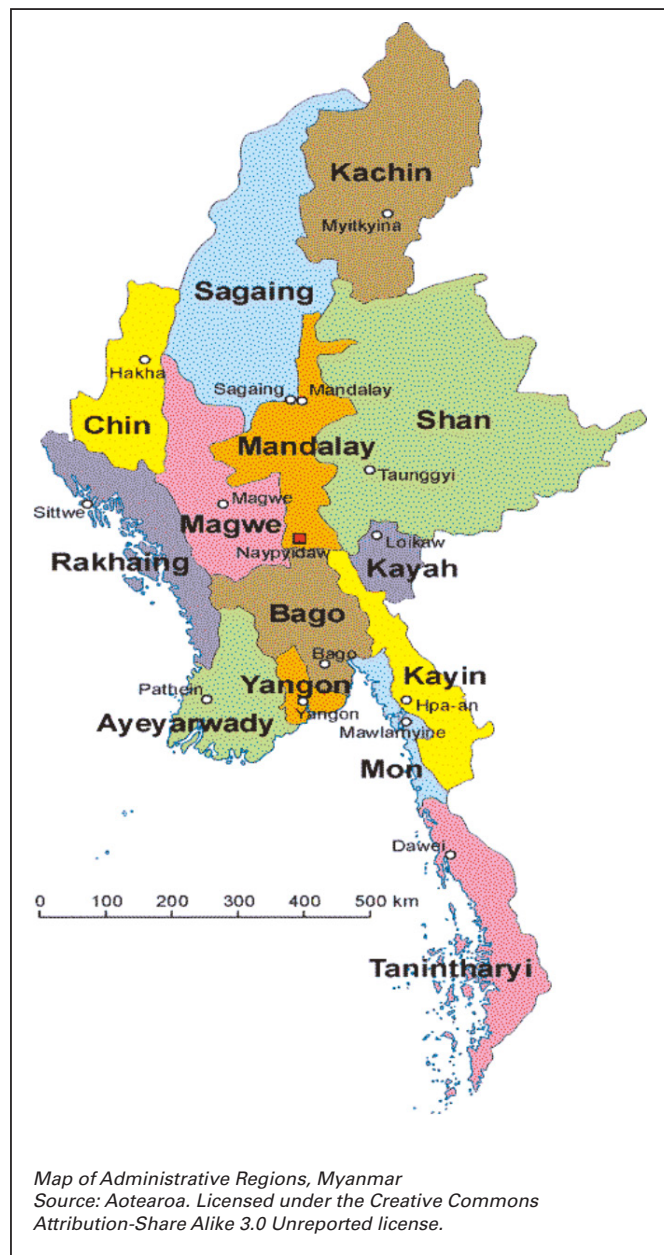
Building on this initial work, the LESC Initiative has involved an in-depth study of how language policies and practices in education can promote social cohesion in Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. A key assumption of all this work has been the imperative to make language policies responsive to local contexts and purposes, with the aim of improving the lives of children and the wider community, to foster social cohesion and harmony in place of tension, and to improve national communication. These goals are also linked to national economies, since literacy, education and language capabilities support innovation in technology, economic productivity and competitiveness. To this end, in conjunction with UNICEF country offices and relevant governmental agencies, context-specific aims were identified in each country.

Language and conflict

In highly multilingual and multiethnic Myanmar, language status and language education are often a cause, but also a consequence of tension. The sociolinguistic profile of Myanmar is very complex. The nation is divided into seven states and seven regions. Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan states are all largely populated by their corresponding ethnic identities, although there is significant overlap between the states. By contrast, the regions – Ayeyarwady, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Yangon – are populated predominantly by ethnic Burmese. The major ethnicities in Myanmar are Burman (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Indian (2%) and Mon (2%). Based on a ruling by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, there are 135 official ‘national races’ in Myanmar.

The correspondence between the 135 ethno-linguistic groups, the official ‘national races’ of Myanmar, and its languages is very complex. As part of the process to support a peace promoting and social cohesion enhancing language policy detailed research examination of this connection is being assembled. At present it can be stated that there are some 135 languages, but by some estimates 116 languages.

Around 78 per cent of people speak Tibeto-Burman languages, 10 per cent speak Tai-



Kadai languages and 7 per cent speak Mon-Khmer languages. There are seven main 'ethnic' language clusters in Myanmar. These include Chin, Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Kayin (Karen), Mon, Rakhine and Shan, spoken by a combined number in excess of 23 million people. These ethno-linguistic groups are predominantly based in, but not limited to, their correspondingly named State administrations. Other important immigrant languages in Myanmar, many of which are the languages of descendants of colonial administrators, include Chinese, Malay, Bengali and Sylheti, Hindu/Urdu, Tamil, Bisu, Eastern Tamang, and Iu Mien (Bradley 2015; Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013; Watkins 2007).

Another group of about 11 languages can be identified with speaker populations exceeding 100,000 each. Within this great diversity exist a large number of nested dialects and many highly variable multi-literate realities, including many languages lacking orthographic standardization. The nature of cross-language bilingualism/multilingualism, knowledge of foreign languages, and knowledge of and use of 'proximal' languages (Chinese and Indian languages) are distributed in a highly variable pattern of such as the urban/rural divide, as well as being shaped by differing education levels, occupation and mobility (Bradley 1997; 2015; Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013).

The national language, Myanmar, is represented across the national territory, claiming 32 million speakers but with highly variable rates of knowledge of its standard forms and literacy. The Burmese script is used to write Myanmar language, Karen languages and Mon, which is a member of the Mon-Khmer group of Austroasiatic languages spoken in Myanmar and Thailand (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013). Myanmar is the sole language of government administration and the mass media and overwhelmingly the language of instruction for education. However, exceptions do exist for medium of instruction for schooling including the use of English and Chinese in private schools and the use of mother tongues in certain local contexts. The Myanmar Language Commission, a department of the Ministry of Education, is responsible for the development of Myanmar. Broadly speaking, a distinction can be made between the ethnic Burmese situated in the central areas of Myanmar who are predominantly monolingual, and the multilingual and ethnically diverse peoples in the border areas, many of whom also know Burmese/Myanmar language (Bradley 2015).

There are two important tensions which characterize the sociolinguistic profile in Myanmar. The first is the drive to establish and maintain a Burman nationalist identity liberated from all colonial ties and foreign interest. The second tension derives from the position of the plethora of minority languages in relation to the notion of a singular Myanmar nation and the majority Burman ethnic group who comprise around 68 per cent of the population (Watkins 2007). Language and ethnicity have been central to violent civil conflicts in Myanmar's recent history. Such conflicts have often arisen in response to attempted creation of a singular Myanmar identity by centralized military governments. Ambiguity towards the notion of a singular Myanmar identity can be explained, in part, by the boundaries of the countries of the region only being fixed during the British colonial period. Many of the ethnic and linguistic groups exist inside and outside the country, divided by the artificial imposition of national boundaries (Watkins 2007).

Many decades of civil war and open conflict have been linked to demands by what are called 'national races', the main indigenous/ethnic populations seeking various measures of autonomous governance, with grievances linked to language and culture (Ganesan and Hlaing 2007). Denial of language and ethnic rights by successive military governments has resulted in intergenerational educational and economic



inequalities and disadvantage for many of Myanmar's minorities (Callahan 2003; Lall, and South 2014). Aye and Sercombe (2014) identify an overarching national policy of 'Myanmarization', or the enforcement of a single national identity, of the large and geographically distinct main ethnic clusters. This has been reinforced through constitutional measures, but recent developments have achieved some recognition of a pluralist vision of the nation, and recognition of sub-national languages, a process in which the LESC Initiative has played a significant role.

3.1 Language rights

Although English became the official language of Myanmar during British rule, indigenous groups were all allowed to speak and learn their languages. During this time, writing systems for many languages such as Chin, Kachin and Lahu were developed by missionaries. The first constitution of the Union of Burma (1947) guaranteed that all citizens could practise their own cultures and religions. Public schools taught in some of the major ethnic languages such as Chin, Karen, Kayah, Mon and Shan, but some Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches taught in some of the smaller ethnic languages (Hlaing 2007).

In 1962, Burmese became the only language of instruction for university and pre-university classes (except for English language classes). However, there was some allowance for the teaching of minority languages at the early primary level, with the Ministry of Education publishing textbooks in a small range of minority languages up until the early 1980s. While the government was not against ethnic minorities possessing multiethnic identities, they were opposed to activities that impacted negatively on the national unity they were striving to create. As a result, by the 1980s many schools had stopped teaching in minority languages, owing in part to the complexities surrounding language, identity, compliance, a lack of education finances and an inability to staff the programmes. In some instances though, local officials were willing to continue to work for education in minority languages, along with some Christian schools and Buddhist monasteries. Some public schools in more remote areas continued to use the mother tongue as the language of instruction (Hlaing 2007).

In areas of insurgency, called 'liberated areas' by insurgents, but 'black areas' by the Myanmar government, schools continued to teach in the minority languages. Myanmar has been taught as a second or foreign language, often presented and viewed with enmity (Hlaing 2007). However, language planning in highly multilingual contexts is complex and changes at a societal, as well as a governmental level, require the reinterpretation of language and identity in constantly evolving contexts. Hlaing (2007) notes that the National Council for the Union of Myanmar (NCUB), which consists of Burman, Kachin, Karen, Rakhine, Shan and other ethnic groups, currently use Myanmar as their language of communication. While there is a desire among these communities for English to be an official language as it is viewed as neutral, this option is severely limited by the lack of English skills and trained English teachers in Myanmar.

Although there has not been a blanket prohibition of the teaching and promotion of minority languages in Myanmar, many ethnic groups are inhibited by the government's lack of support for their languages and the decline of the education system, which has crippled mother tongue education across the country

(Hlaing 2007). A key objective of Myanmar's ethnic minorities is a greater share of the revenue, as well as the government allowing mother tongue education and the integration of local languages into government communications, place names and official documents (Della-Giacoma and Horsey 2013). As discussed below in 3.3, the legal framework for minority languages has been tolerating but ethno-linguistic conflict has persisted.

3.2 Multilingual Education (MLE)

Education is not only a fundamental human right, it is also hugely important in alleviating and preventing poverty, increasing health, political participation and social tolerance. Equitable universal education is thus a key goal of creating a fair, healthy and socially inclusive world. As the *Education for All Global* undertaking emphasizes, "education enables people to escape from the trap of chronic poverty and prevents the transmission of poverty between generations" (UNESCO 2014, p. 144). Moreover, there is a strong link between education and healthier populations due to a range of factors including the willingness to seek professional help in health issues, including vaccinations, and awareness of basic health standards in relation to the transmission of, and protection from diseases. Perhaps most importantly for Myanmar and the LESC Initiative, education has been shown to be instrumental in promoting tolerance and social cohesion (UNESCO 2014).

In multilingual societies, the question of language of instruction becomes all the more pertinent. In attempting to redress educational inequities, language issues are invariably raised, as language can function as a means of exclusion. Students whose home language is different from the language of instruction face a difficult challenge of partaking in schooling in their second language. Indeed, schooling in an unfamiliar language partially accounts for the "comparative lack of academic success of minoritised and indigenous children" (Ball 2011, p. 24). With regards to social cohesion, the exclusion of learners' native tongues can also lead to feelings that their cultures, histories and customs are not valued in education environments. This creates a divide between minority and majority languages and the respective cultures that these languages both reflect and shape.

From a practical side, teaching early learners in unfamiliar languages presents difficulties for teachers and other students. Significant time can be wasted trying to convey the most rudimentary literacy skills at the expense of children's learning capacities. This can disadvantage the entire classroom, as the communication difficulties inhibit children learning in their second language (L2), and prevents adequate attention and development for children learning in their first language (L1) (MLE WG 2013).

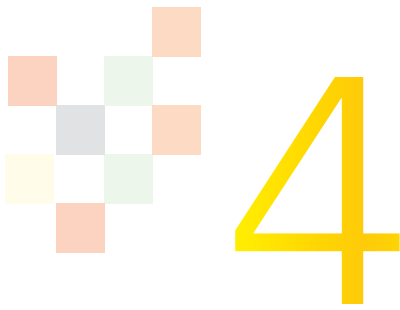
Large-scale research studies and case studies have shown that mother tongue learning programmes that support transitional approaches to national language acquisition can lead to significantly better educational outcomes for minority children (e.g., Chumbow 2013; Taylor and Coetzee 2013; SEAMEO and The World Bank 2009; UNESCO 2006, 2007, 2008). However, mother tongued-based education is not without significant challenges, as recognized throughout these reports, including political, pedagogical, resourcing and financial impediments. Movement towards a consensus around MLE is in and of itself a complex process in any nation, and is an issue that forms an important focus on the LESC work in Myanmar.



3.3 Legal framework

Since independence in early 1948, every Constitution has recognized rights for national races, including the indigenous ethnic minority groups. In the 1948 Constitution, these rights included non-discrimination and the presence of local national ethnic group members in a national political Chamber of Nationalities with over half of the members representing five ethnic States, as well as others from ethnic groups in two States designated subsequently. In the 1974 Constitution, more specific provisions for mutual respect and development and use of ethnic languages, traditions and customs were included and the 2008 Constitution, this was extended to language, literature, fine arts and culture (Bradley 2015). The 2014 National Education Law and the 2015 Ethnic Rights Law use and development of ethnic groups' languages, literature, culture, art, traditions and historical heritage are supported. In the former case the LESC Initiative played a constructive role in several meetings with the drafting committee of the law.

Myanmar language (Burmese) has always been the official language and the main medium of education, government and the justice system (1948 Constitution Article 216, 1974 Constitution Article 102 and 152(b), and 2008 Constitution Article 450). English was co-official from 1948, English was demoted in 1974 and in 1974 and 2008 the use of ethnic minority languages as a supplement to Myanmar in the justice system and education was permitted, greatly reinforced by the 2014 education law.



LESC in Myanmar

4.1 LESCS and the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR)

LESC research and intervention activities have taken place in the context of the Government of Myanmar initiative, supported by diverse Development Partners, to undertake a CESR as part of a general national reform agenda whose principal aim is to raise economic and social development. An overarching goal of this process and related reform agendas currently underway is to foster the development of a “*modern developed nation through education*” (Myanmar Ministry of Education, vision statement, 2004) and the wider 30 Year Long Term Basic Education Development Plan, 2001–2031. Critically relevant are the overarching constitutional provisions for the national language, for multilingualism and for the distribution and outcomes of education provision, and employment and economic opportunity.

The CESR processes and its reports are identifying a detailed account of all aspects of educational practice and policy, from which areas of needed reform and improvement can be identified. The achievement of Myanmar’s education and social goals, including the Myanmar application of the Millennium Development Goals, will be influenced by the quality, comprehensiveness and credibility of the CESR and the recommendations it provides for productive policy development.

The *CESR Review, Phase 1, Rapid Assessment Reports* (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of Education 2013) have provided a comprehensive overview of education legislation, basic education, non-formal education, early childhood care and development, teacher education, technical and vocational education, higher education, education funding, stakeholders, and textbook publishing and distribution. CESR Phase II is building on and adding to the recommendations of Phase I. The CESR arises in a situation in which central government control of educational curriculum is strongly entrenched in the 1948, 1974 and 2008 constitutions, with the Ministry of Education in complete control on a nationwide level, the only exceptions being higher education institutions run by other ministries, such as the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of the Interior.

The 2014 education law is a major step forward, arising partly from CESR as well as other influences, devolving some curriculum control to lower administrative levels including the central Divisions, the seven ethnic States, and the self-administered areas designated for certain other ethnic groups (Article 44). It also not just permits but supports the introduction of ethnic languages into education, starting at the earliest level and gradually being extended upwards, with majors in ethnic culture, history and literature, though not languages, planned for universities (Article 42(b)). Nevertheless, the default medium of education is still Myanmar, though since 2014 English and ethnic minority languages (Article 43(b)) are also permitted, the latter only alongside Myanmar at basic levels. The examination system and



approval for non-government schools and higher education institutions remain under central control, and the vast bulk of primary, secondary and higher education is carried out in government schools.

Since the British period, education has consisted of one year of pre-primary education followed by 10 standards from beginning primary to final secondary level, each assessed by centrally set examinations; progress to the next standard is only possible after passing the examinations. This often means that children in remote areas and children from ethnic minority backgrounds whose mother tongue is not Myanmar language need to attempt a particular standard more than once before they can pass. It is particularly problematic that it is believed there were quotas for passing Tenth Standard, the normal entry qualification for higher education, determined centrally according to the capacity of higher education institutions rather than the actual level of student performance in the Tenth Standard examinations. Thus Myanmar is quite unlike India, China and many other neighbouring countries, which have positive discrimination to increase the number of ethnic minority students who can progress to higher education, through entry quotas and/or through bonus marks on examinations (Bradley 2015).

The 2014 education law proposes to increase the duration of secondary education by two years, which will require substantially increased resources for schools and potentially create a two-year gap in students qualified to start higher education. Apart from the brief Japanese interlude in the early 1940s, since 1885 English has been the main foreign language in the education system, with co-official status from 1948 to 1962 and reintroduced as a possible medium of education, alone or in combination with Myanmar, from 2014 (2014 Education Law, Article 43(a)). Standards of English declined after 1948, and especially after 1962, but are again improving. Many other foreign languages are taught in higher education, with varying success, and in private institutions.

4.2 A conceptual outline

As noted above, the Myanmar sociolinguistic profile is very complex, comprising spoken languages (accompanied by an unknown number of sign languages), within seven main 'ethnic' language clusters – Chin, Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Kayin (Karen), Mon, Rakhine and Shan – spoken by more than 23 million people and distributed predominantly within correspondingly named State administrations (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013; Bradley 2015). Another group of about 11 languages can be identified with speaker populations exceeding 100,000 each. Within this great diversity there are a large number of nested dialects and many highly variable, multi-literate realities, including many languages lacking orthographic standardization (Burling 2003). The national language, Myanmar, is represented across the national territory, but with highly variable rates of knowledge of its standard forms, and of its literacy.

The nature of cross-language bilingualism/multilingualism, and knowledge of foreign languages, knowledge of and use of 'proximal' languages (Chinese and Indian languages), are distributed in a highly variable urban/rural pattern and shaped by education levels, occupation and mobility. A true sociolinguistic profile needs to be sensitive to levels and distribution of sign languages, communication systems for the language disabled, and other communication questions that impact on access to education or training, and prospects of access to remunerated employment.

The LESC Initiative has taken a comprehensive, language planning approach, involving early childhood education, primary schooling and post-primary education, aiming to offer concrete methods of language planning to support MLE in ethnic minority languages, in Myanmar (national language) and in strategic foreign languages (i.e., English as primary grade subjects, and as medium of instruction in grades 10 and 11) guided by the following principles:

- Language and literacy education must be integrated. This implicates a wide range of matters including medium of instruction; the relation between first, second and additional languages; the linking of literacy and curriculum content; pedagogy; notions of bilingualism and conceptual development; identity and interculturalism; transition points and sequencing in multilingual curriculum, etc.);
- The beginning point is to explore outcome proficiency skills desired by the community of interests (speaker groups, policymakers, researchers, etc.) in relation to the likely communicative outcomes from current provision with proposals for overcoming gaps and deficiencies identified;



Facilitated Dialogue, Mawlamyine, November, 2014
Credit: J. Lo Bianco

- The work has been sensitive to questions of literacy, concept development and school participation; equity and access; dropout and discontinuation and re-entry possibilities; identity and citizenship; and economy and labour market questions;
- The approach has been guided by principles of effective language outcomes; language rights and opportunities; social cohesion and national unity in the context of the recognition of diversity and pluralism; and the opportunity for all, mainstream and minority populations alike, to gain the spoken proficiency, literate and cultural knowledge and skills to support equal opportunity and full participation in national life;



- A priority for exploration is a shift from English to bilingual (Myanmar/English) medium of instruction in mathematical and science subjects in upper secondary grades; this too, and related questions of assessment, training and materials development, should comprise part of the comprehensive approach.

(See Appendix 1 for a full copy of the original concept note for the LESC Initiative in English and in Myanmar).

The LESC Initiative in Myanmar has been informed by participatory action research and fieldwork activities involving over many hundreds of individuals belonging to some 200 organizations, institutions and governmental departments across Myanmar. (See Appendix 2 for a list of many of the offices and organizations involved in the LESC Initiative in Myanmar. In some instances, multiple personnel from an organization participated in various aspects of the initiative.)