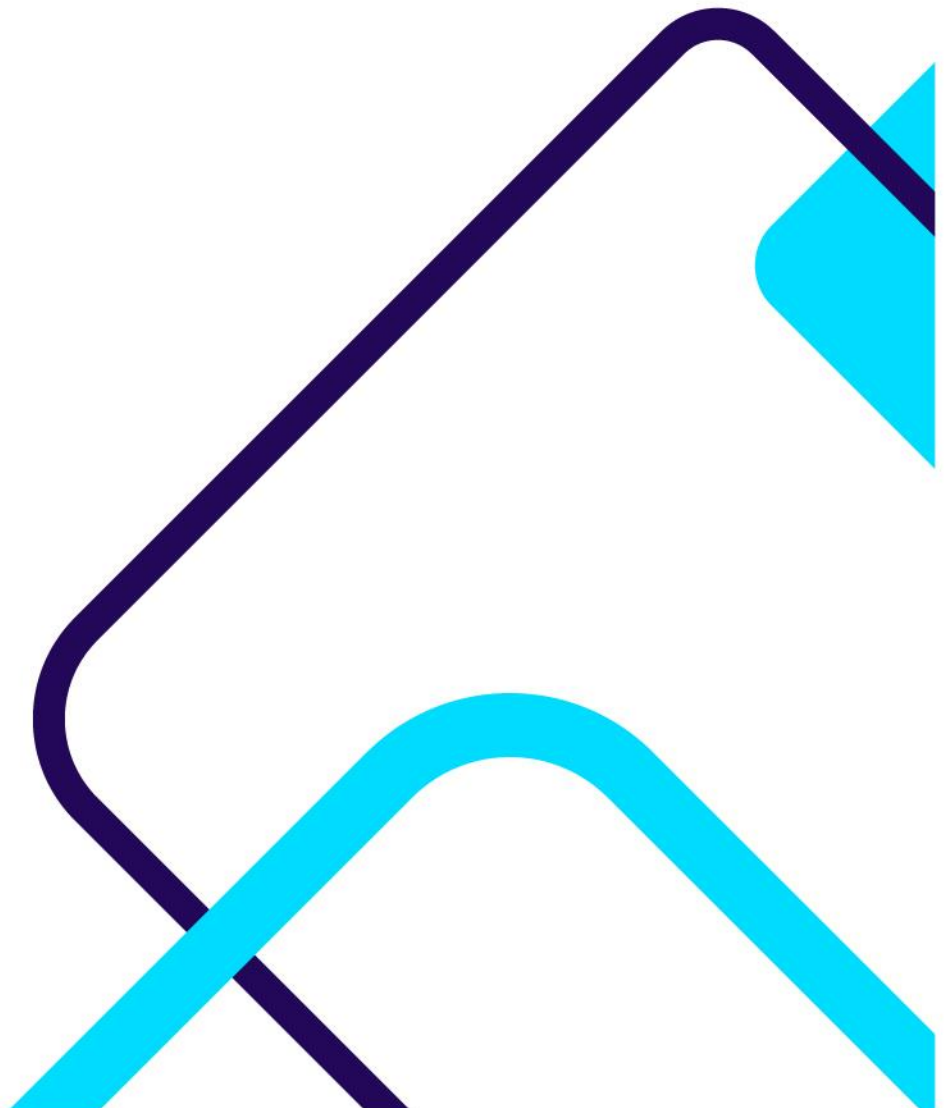# Empowering Myanmar's Youth

Exploring the impact of non-formal education on peacebuilding and social change

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List of acronyms

NFE	Non-formal education
INGO	International non-governmental organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
MYEN	Myanmar Youth Empowerment Network
GED	General Educational Development
SAC	State Administration Council
IDP	Internally Displaced Person

Abstract

Non-formal education (NFE) has a long history in Myanmar as a traditional form of education, and today supported by civil society entities including non-governmental and community-based organisations. In the 2010s Myanmar underwent significant socio-political changes, resulting in improved living conditions and recognition of the importance of NFE. However, challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup, generating armed conflict alongside martial law, conscription and airstrikes, have hindered progress, caused widespread unrest and impacted various sectors including education. Despite these challenges, NFE has continued to evolve to meet changing needs and has played a crucial role in empowering youth. However, there is a need for updated research to inform issues facing NFE initiatives, ensuring NFEs' effectiveness and impacts on youth education and development in Myanmar's changing context.

Therefore, with an objective of filling these gaps, this study explored various NFE forms, examined their contribution to youth empowerment and the challenges to their sustainability. Using a qualitative approach involving 142 participants, and covering 54 NFE programmes throughout Myanmar, the findings emphasise the crucial role of NFE in advancing sustainable peacebuilding endeavours. These efforts cover addressing issues such as gender-based violence, discrimination, fostering religious harmony, and facilitation participation in peace conferences. Moreover, NFE is identified as a catalyst for driving social change through education, environmental awareness, humanitarian aid, mental health support, and combating harmful stereotypes amidst challenging circumstances. Additionally, the study sheds light on significant barriers, including security concerns, policy and regulatory constraints, economic hardships, financial obstacles to accessibility and sustainability, exacerbated by political instability and limited resources. The insights gained suggest the need for collaborative efforts among NFE education providers, local and international organisations, aid agencies and other donors to enhance the effectiveness and strengthen the sustainability of NFE initiatives in Myanmar.

Keywords: Non-Formal Education, Youth Empowerment, Peacebuilding, Social Change, Adaptability, Conflict, Sustainability, Community Development, Covid 19, 2021 coup, Myanmar

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that education plays a pivotal role in empowering and unlocking youths to their full potential to navigate challenges, be resilient, and contribute to social change efforts and peacebuilding processes in their communities. Non-formal education (NFE) complements formal education by providing practical skills, increasing self-confidence, and reducing unemployment (Rosu, 2014). One significant point about NFE is its flexibility and adaptability, which is not limited by age restrictions or rigid formal structures. According to Shah et al. (2020, p.2) NFE is 'not constrained by age or an excessive formalism and plurality of objectives, purpose, and meaning.' However, the certifications or credentials obtained through NFE may not hold the same official status as those in formal education. International Standard Classification of Education discussed this feature of NFE by stating that NFE mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognized as formal qualifications by the relevant national educational authorities or to no qualifications at all (UNESCO, 2011).

This study is part of the broader "NFE for Youth-Led Change" research project between the University of Leeds and the British Council, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, that explored how the British Council's NFE programmes empower young people to drive change in their communities. The research included global knowledge exchange workshop and feasibility studies on Youth Connect programmes in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, building on our Next Generation research. The Myanmar-specific study was commissioned separately by the British Council to examine the various forms of NFE in Myanmar and its impact on youth empowerment, peacebuilding, and social change efforts.

NFE in Myanmar has existed since the days of Myanmar Kings, and one traditional type is monastic education. In addition, the Ministry of Education, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and other voluntary education providers have been actively operating NFE activities in Myanmar.

Countrywide research analysing NFE in Myanmar was carried out by Daw Win Win Myint and Daw Lai Lai Yu in 1992 which focused on the NFE programmes of the Ministry of Education and other ministries. In this research, the need for a comprehensive national training system was emphasized that integrates formal, informal, and non-formal components, involving all stakeholders and addressing attitudes towards education to ensure broader participation.

However, Myanmar has undergone significant socio-political changes since then. People started to experience a political and economic transition in 2011, characterized by the lift of sanction, economic reform and greater stability (World Bank, 2014). There was a significant reduction in the poverty rate, improving the lives of citizens. In addition, the education landscape in Myanmar has evolved considerably, with a growing recognition of the importance of non-formal education in addressing the diverse educational needs of the population. However, education in Myanmar have faced significant hurdles due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has further been exacerbated by the coup in 2021. The coup has resulted in widespread civil unrest, economic instability, and a humanitarian crisis, with significant impacts on various sectors including education, healthcare, and governance.

NFE has also evolved during this period, adapting to the changing context and fulfilling the needs of access to education. Given these changes, there is a pressing need for updated research on NFE sector, which reflects the current context. A comprehensive understanding of NFE initiatives should encompass a wide range of providers beyond governmental bodies.

This includes initiatives implemented at the grassroots level by local communities, as well as programmes developed and delivered by various civil society and non-governmental organizations operating in the country.

According to Grizelj (2017), youth in Myanmar played numerous instrumental supportive roles in both formal and informal peacebuilding contexts. They were engaged in youth groups or organizations that focus on philanthropic works, capacity building, leadership development, community issue awareness, and promoting interfaith peace and religious harmony. NFE played a substantial role in empowering youths by promoting knowledge, skills, and confidence to become active participants in contributing to their society. The current instability in Myanmar following the 2021 coup, however, presents significant security risks for young people, affecting their overall well-being and development. While there have been studies conducted on NFE programmes, there is a notable scarcity of literature that specifically addresses the effectiveness and impact of these initiatives on youths within the current nationwide context. This gap in research limits our understanding of how NFE programmes are tailored to address the unique needs and challenges faced by young people in Myanmar today.

The ongoing crisis following the coup imposes challenges on the sustainability of NFE initiatives in many ways. Research carried out by Han Ko Lin (2023), which explored the educational challenges and expectancy of non-governmental Education leaders from Kachin State and Shan State in Myanmar, discussed the challenges faced by those leaders: lack of qualified teachers, language barrier, lack of infrastructure and financial resources, and high dropout rate. Overcoming methods, and opportunities the education leaders from these regions are seeking were also explored in this research. However, the regional coverage of this specific finding is limited to just two states, Kachin and Karen, which inadequately reflects the broader regional landscape within Myanmar. Myanmar has rich ethnic diversity, unique socio-cultural complexities and varying political landscapes and instability present across different regions. The current instability facing the community imposes significant hindrances to youths' access to education. These challenges extend to non-formal education (NFE) initiatives aimed at youth empowerment, limiting participation of youths in NFE programmes. This necessitates a more comprehensive research approach to capture the diverse challenges and dynamics affecting NFE initiatives in Myanmar.

Hence, this study aimed to fill these gaps by examining (a) the various forms of non-formal education (NFE) operated by non-state actors present in Myanmar which investigated the problems or themes each NFE programmes focus on, in response to the needs of the community in the changing socio-political context. The structure, delivery methods, target beneficiaries, and key stakeholders of NFE programmes were also investigated. Additionally, (b) it sought to identify the significant contributions of these NFE programmes to youth empowerment. This also looked into how NFE programmes are enabling youths to adapt to social changes in times of conflict and repressive situation and participate in peacebuilding and social change efforts. Finally, (c) the study investigated major issues concerning the sustainability of these initiatives, including the challenges they face and the mitigation efforts implemented by the programmes. Thus, the research will provide a source of evidence base that could provide information for developing strategies to provide youths with opportunities for learning and growth. The deep insights into the NFE programmes' contribution and challenges will provide policymakers, education providers, and stakeholders with a more nuanced understanding of factors surrounding NFE programmes, and enable them to initiate

interventions to tailor programmes that could address the needs of the communities more effectively by providing relevant education efforts.

The existing context of Myanmar and its education

Myanmar-an ethnically diverse country, which is home to 135 ethnic groups- has faced decades of widespread poverty, ethnic tensions, and political instability. Throughout its history, Myanmar has been characterized by authoritarian and illiberal political regimes, which have stifled the advancement of representative governance and restricted opportunities for economic development (Simpson & Farrelly, 2024). From 2011 to 2019, poverty reduction efforts gained momentum due to economic reforms and the lifting of sanctions, with the average economic growth at '6 percent per year' (The World Bank, 2023).

During this period, the country has also been making efforts to improve access to quality education for students at all levels which was well documented in the National Education Strategy Plan 2016-21 (Ministry of Education, 2016). In November 2019, Myanmar launched its first 'Alternative Education Subsector [Policy] Framework', which provides alternative education initiatives aimed at children and youth who have experienced difficulty accessing formal education, including children and youth living in remote areas; children and youth in conflict- and disaster-affected areas; children and youth on the move; and children and youth with disabilities and chronic health problems (UNICEF Myanmar, 2019). NFE programmes are also actively expanding access to education nationwide through diverse initiatives and formats, such as community-based learning centres and vocational workshops. In 2008, the Non-Formal Primary Education Programme (NFEP)[1] was launched with the support of the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, NGOs, and other donors. The Myanmar Youth Empowerment Network (MYEN)[2] is also functioning with a network of 10 experienced CSOs based in remote or conflict-affected parts of the country delivering a variety of educational and social development initiatives.

The country has made significant progress in expanding access to education and its effort to empower youths through education. Youths can be the powerful engine for change when they are equipped with the right skills, provided with decent work, and are encouraged to engage in decisions that affect their lives (Lwin, 2019). Youths in Myanmar engaged in a range of activities which included participation in youth groups or organizations dedicated to philanthropic efforts, capacity-building initiatives, awareness raising, and promoting interfaith and religious harmony (Grizelj, 2017).

However, they have faced significant disruption in their education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflict and political crisis following the coup in 2021. Public schools were closed for an extended period, resulting in substantial learning loss (Roy et al., 2023). The coup led civil servants from diverse sectors including healthcare, education, and various

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[1] NFPE programme, a fast-track programme completing the primary education in two years (consisting of two levels, level 1 and 2), with the aims to offer a second chance of education to OOSC (10 – 14 years of age) who cannot complete the primary education, and provide basic education to the children who have never attended the school. https://myanmarlrc.org/en/nfpe/

[2] MYEN is a network of diverse local organizations across the country to use the skills, insight, and passion of local changemakers to improve the personal, social, and economic prospects for Myanmar's youth, with the support of British Council's Youth Connect programme.
https://www.britishcouncil.org.mm/programmes/society/myanmar-youth-empowerment-network

government departments and agencies to join protests to form the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Several officials of the Ministry of Education and public-school teachers joined the Movement. The military reacted harshly by hunting down and imprisoning the protestors. Teachers and educational department personnel participating in the CDM face constant danger, with many forced to hide in remote villages to evade arrest (San, 2021).

Even though the military government attempted to reopen the schools, the number of students returning to school was relatively low as suggested by the widely mentioned news media. The younger generation in Myanmar, having witnessed advancements in education, employment, and civil society during the pre-coup reform period, became determined to prevent the military from reclaiming power by creating peaceful protests against the military regime. These responses of civil servants and youths demonstrate their commitment to defending democratic values and human rights. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that there is a destruction in the functioning of essential services, including education in this period. The harsh reaction of the military such as arrests and intimidation of peaceful protestors including teachers, further jeopardizes the stability of the education system.
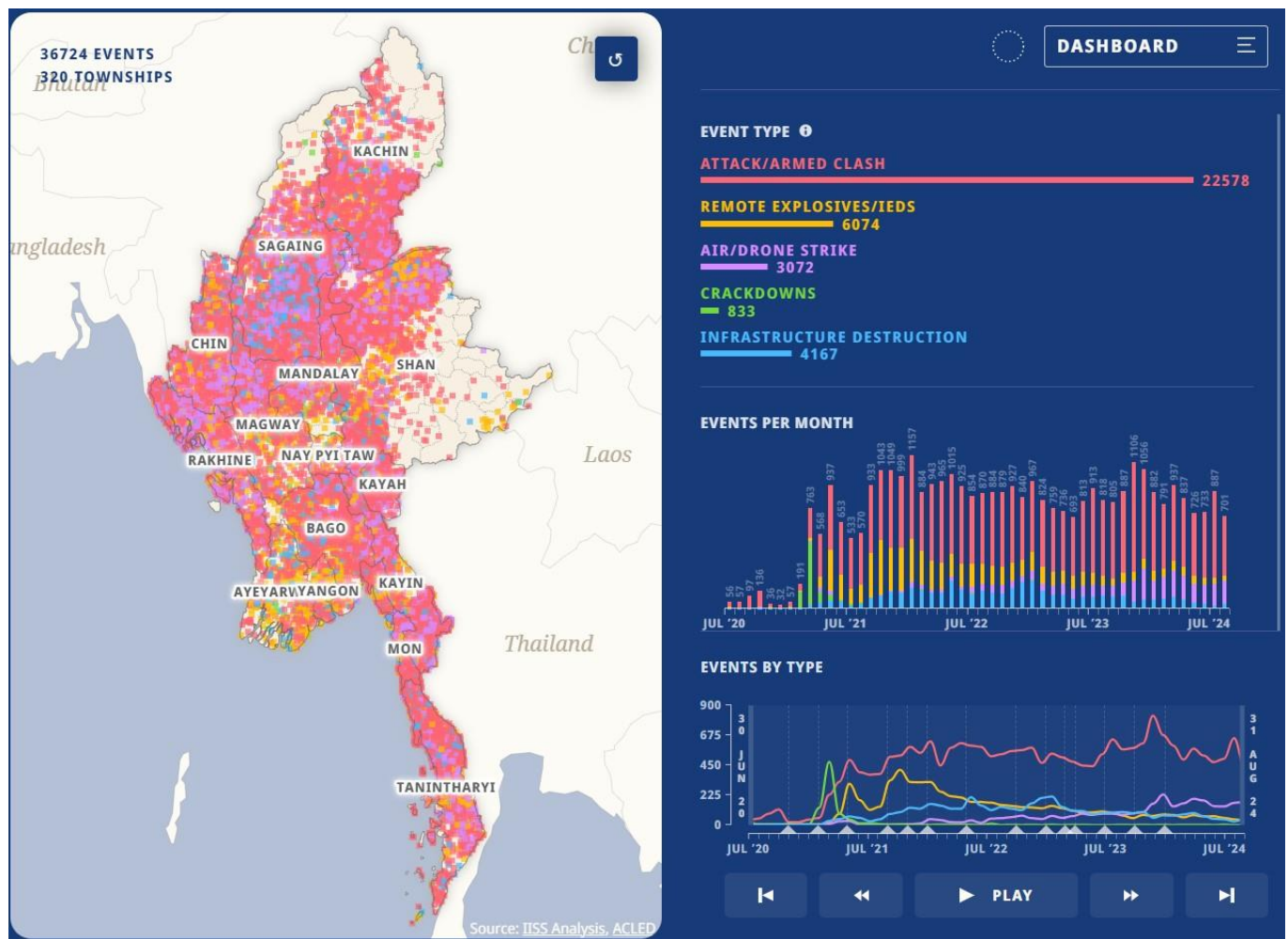
Figure 1: *Violent events in Myanmar (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Myanmar Conflict Map. Retrieved December 20, 2024)*

According to IISS Myanmar's conflict mapping, by December 2024 a total of 36724 violent events were recorded across 320 townships (see Figure 1). Regarding the impact of these

on education, immediately after the coup, between February and May 2021, Insecurity Insight identified 102 incidents of violence against or obstruction of education in Myanmar, including occupation and raiding of schools and universities, arrests of teachers and students, and the presence of explosive devices, with a significant number of incidents attributed to Tatmadaw soldiers and associated police forces. Such instances continue throughout the country, and the situation escalates with instances of airstrikes on schools causing the deaths of students and children. This further highlights the violation of the fundamental right to education. The security threats create fear and insecurity among students, parents, and educators, making it difficult for children to access education safely.
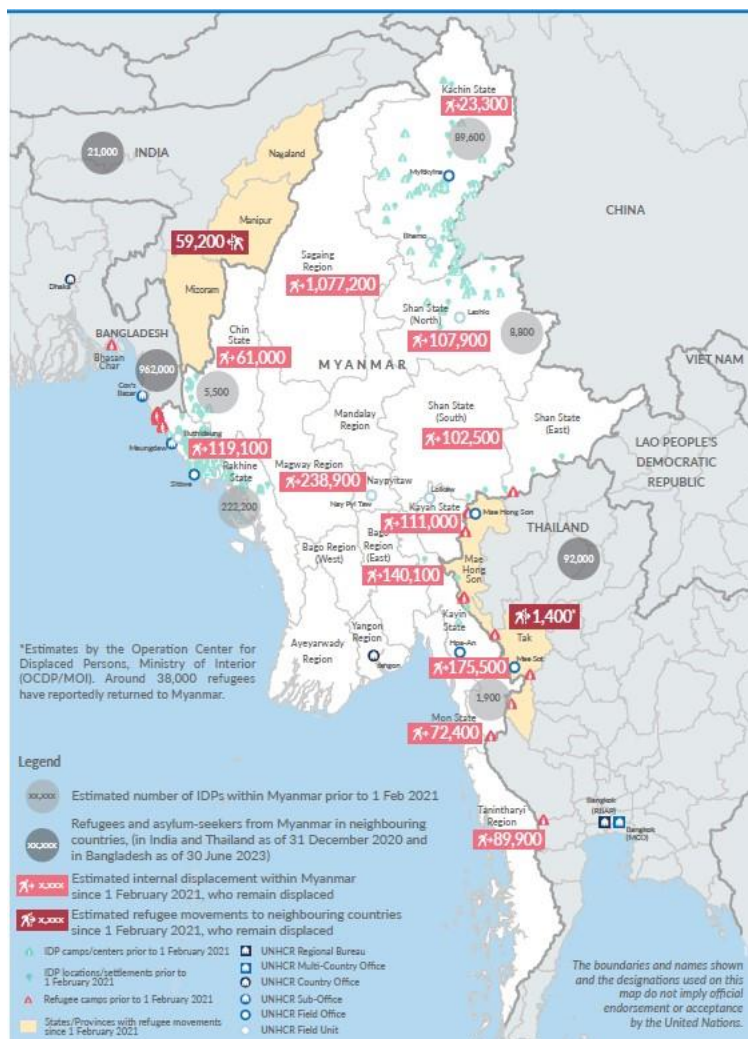
Figure 2: *Displacement in Myanmar (Myanmar Emergency Update, 1 January 2024 UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP). Retrieved April 26, 2024.)*

At the end of April 2024, more than 2.8 million were estimated to be displaced nationwide, among whom over 2.5 million have fled due to conflict and insecurity following the military takeover in 2021 (UNOCHA, 2024 & UNHCR, 2024). As stated in the report 'Conflict, Education, and Displacement', displacement poses significant challenges to education, including limited access, disruptions in continuity, and difficulties in finding quality educational opportunities (Dryden-Peteron, 2011).

Research consistently shows that an increase in poverty also has a detrimental impact on education. The 2021 coup has had severe negative impacts on the country's economy, pushing nearly half the population into poverty and erasing years of progress (Thein & Gillan, 2024) hindering access to education for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In the research 'Impact of Poverty on Education and Success', Briana Normandian (2022) discussed that poverty perpetuates a cycle of limited access to resources and opportunities, resulting in inadequate education, diminished job prospects, and increased susceptibility to criminal activities.

The current situation in Myanmar has created numerous challenges for the education sector, significantly impacting both education providers and students. As a result of these challenges, accessing education becomes increasingly difficult for students. This disruption in education interferes with youths' academic, personal, and professional development. Non-formal education in Myanmar replaces/complements formal education, and they are functioning to guarantee the right to access education for all. NFE programmes provide a flexible, responsive education that is better suited to the unique needs of students in time of crisis, and enables them to continue education, and/or to build necessary life and professional skills (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies [INEE], 2020).

This study seeks to identify the role of NFE in its contribution to youths in continuing education and building the necessary skills to adapt to the changing circumstances in times of conflict and repressive situations. The implications surrounding NFE initiatives critically influencing their implementation, and the approaches they are taking to remain relevant and sustain their contribution will also be investigated. This will provide valuable insight for educators, policymakers, and organizations engaging in the youth education process to make efforts to help NFE initiatives enhance their impact and effectiveness in empowering youths and promoting resilience.

Methodology

To explore the role and implications of NFE in Myanmar, a team of 18 researchers conducted the study in 14 states and regions throughout Myanmar. With the close guidance of three lead researchers, two regional researchers in the Bago region and one researcher in each of the other regions took the roles of regional researcher, contributing to the completion of this research project. Training on each stage of the research; literature review, research questionnaires, data collection, data analysis, and report writing were provided by the lead researcher. Following the well guided structure of the research process, regional researchers respectively conducted data collection in all states and regions. Data analysis mainly involved qualitative content analysis. With thematic, narrative, and content analysis, data were carefully analysed to identify recurring patterns and themes. The themes and codes of the data were predefined, with a codebook guiding the coding process of the data analysis stage, and the emerging codes were updated in a timely manner. After the comprehensive completion of data analysis and coding processes, regional researchers proceeded to the finding and discussion part of their research. Each region came up with regional reports, which the lead researchers consolidate into a unified document.

Review of existing literature was done prior to data collection and throughout the research process to clarify concepts, study the existing context and identify gaps in knowledge based on previous studies and observation. The research employed a qualitative research method. The data was collected applying semi-structured and in-depth interviews with personnels engaging in NFE sector. The interview sessions were conducted with education providers, stakeholders, current students and alumni. The non-formal education providers selected for this study have a minimum of three years' experience in the field, demonstrating a deep understanding and expertise in the subject matter. Their extensive experience enables them to offer insights into patterns and trends within their regions over time, thus enhancing the credibility of the data and facilitating a more thorough analysis. Youth agencies play a crucial role in providing information about young people's experiences with NFE and assessing the effectiveness of the training and education they receive. Similarly, stakeholders involved in collaboration with NFE initiatives focused on peace and social change contribute valuable perspectives due to their close connection to the community. Their participation ensures a more inclusive research process, amplifying diverse voices and providing deeper insights into the impact of these initiatives on individuals and communities. Moreover, they can pinpoint areas for improvement or adjustment to enhance contributions to peace and social change efforts.

In selecting participants, the research team employed a purposive sampling method. This method was deemed most suitable for recruiting participants with extensive experience in youth empowerment activities and alternative education programmes. Purposive sampling intentionally targets individuals who possess deep knowledge of the research topic. In cases where initially identified participants withdrew or were unavailable, the researchers utilized snowball sampling, wherein participants assist in identifying other potential participants.

The research team employed an interview guide consisting of three sections and a total of 10 main questions, supplemented by follow-up inquiries for each section. These sections encompassed: (a) the various forms of NFE initiatives in Myanmar, including their structures, problem-solving approaches tailored to local contexts, delivery methods, and target beneficiaries; (b) the significant contributions of these NFE programmes to youth empowerment, particularly in peacebuilding and social change efforts; and (c) the study of

major issues pertaining to the sustainability of these initiatives, including challenges faced and mitigation strategies implemented. This study focused on NFE initiatives catering to youth aged between 16-30 across Myanmar.

A total of 142 interviews were conducted: with 54 main education providers, 22 stakeholders, 48 alumni students, and 18 current students (See figure 1). In terms of gender distribution, 64 males, 76 females, and 2 identified as other genders participated. Regarding the educational background of overall participants, 13% held master's degrees, 43% Bachelor's degrees, 30% had completed undergraduate studies, 6% held diplomas, and 8% completed high school. Ethnic representation encompassed 24% Burmese, 19% Karen, 11% Chin, 10% Kachin, 9% Mon, 5% Pa Oh, 4% Rakhine, 2% Kayah and Dawei, with 1% belonging to other ethnic groups while participants' ages ranged from 17 to 62 years.

Research interviews were conducted both online, via the Zoom Meeting Platform, and in person. To ensure security and privacy, all communications employed end-to-end encryption, and data were stored securely in cloud storage. Before commencing interviews, researchers obtained full informed consent from participants, clarifying their right to withdraw from the project at any time if they felt uncomfortable or insecure.

The study encompassed a total of 54 different NFE programmes in Myanmar, breaking down as follows:
- 7 programmes focused on education and academic support
- 8 programmes centred on career development
- 4 programmes dedicated to civic engagement and community service
- 2 programmes rooted in faith-based education, and
- 2 programmes dedicated to the arts.

Additionally
- 13 programmes combined education and academic support with career development
- 4 programmes combined education and academic support with career development with civic engagement and community service
- 6 programmes combined career development with civic engagement and community service
- 4 programmes combined career development with mental health and emotional well-being with conflict resolution and peacebuilding
- 2 programmes combine education and academic support with civic engagement and community service
- 1 programme combined career development with civic engagement and community service with mental health and emotional well-being with conflict resolution and peacebuilding,
- 1 programme combined education and academic support with mental health and emotional well-being with conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
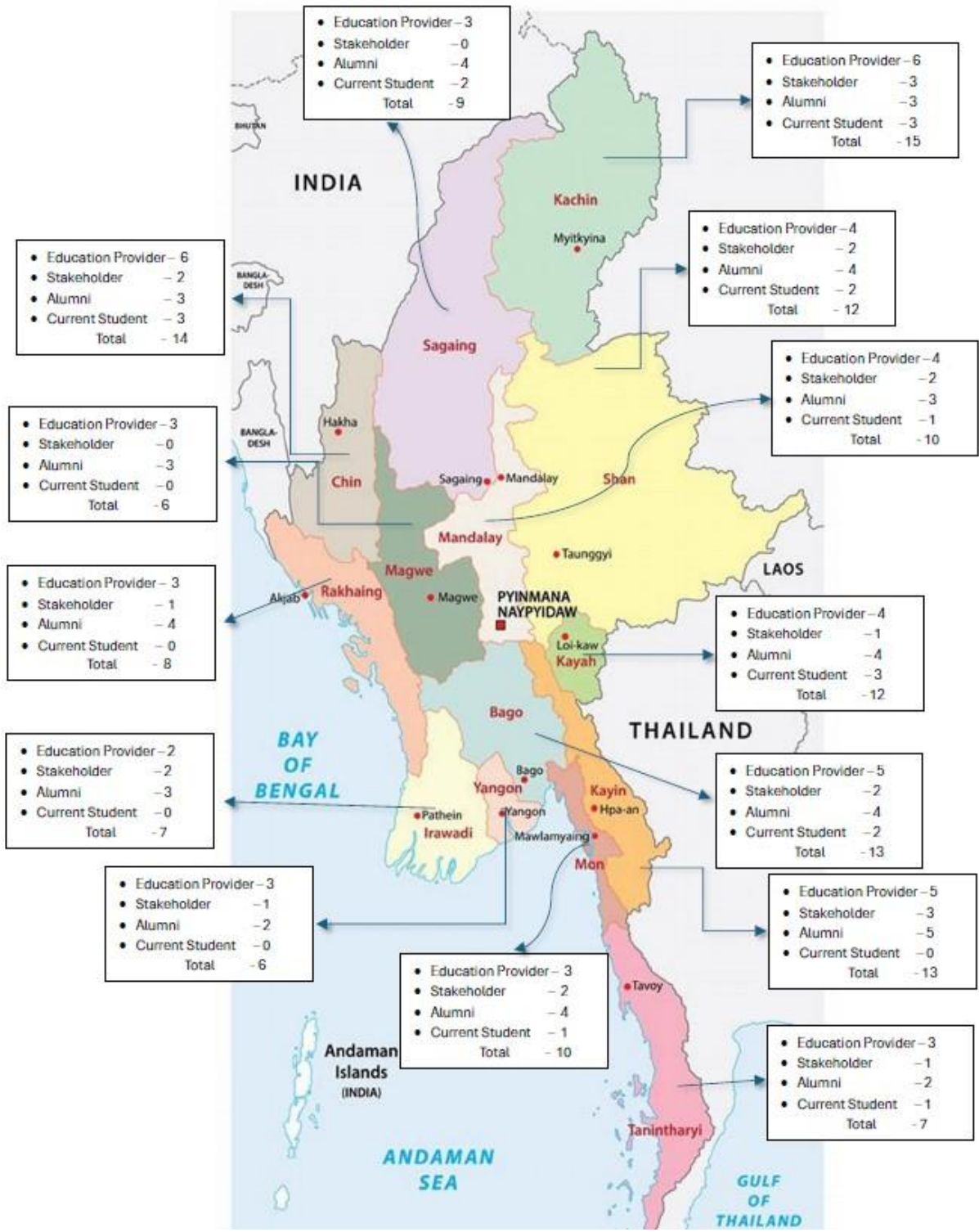
Figure 3: *Participant coverage by region*

While gathering primary data for this research, researchers encountered numerous challenges that required careful management to ensure the safety of both participants and researchers. Due to security concerns imported by political instability and its threats, there were some restrictions that limited the full achievement of targeted number of interviewees and various types of NFE programmes. Many targeted interviewees and NFE programmes refused and cancelled the invitation to contribute to this research to safeguard both their

personal and organizational safety, opting to maintain a low profile. Some participants residing in conflict-affected regions expressed concerns about potential accusations of illegal activities or security risks. As a result, researchers paid special attention to communication methods and data storage to mitigate these risks. In instances where questions deemed potentially insensitive to participants were omitted to prevent emotional harm.

Additionally, scheduling interviews proved challenging due to difficulties faced by both participants and researchers with internet connectivity and access to electricity throughout the data collection period. Furthermore, online interviews were hindered by slow internet connections, posing challenges during discussions with participants. To safeguard research participants' and organizations' safety, this report structures withheld their names and other official displays.

Key forms of NFE in Myanmar

Non-formal education has existed in Myanmar since Myanmar's pre-colonial monarchy, contributing to the high literacy rate in the country before the British colonization. After independence, efforts to eradicate illiteracy among the people were brought about through the mass education movement, which included non-formal education activities undertaken by various non-governmental organizations (Win Myint & Lai Yu,1992).

According to the Education Policy and Data Centre (2008), it was found that non-formal education is a complement to formal education, which encompasses a wide array of activities, including alternative primary schools, youth training, literacy programmes, and professional education. It serves as an important complement to formal education, helping to fill gaps and reach populations that formal systems may not. NFE programmes in Myanmar offer educational opportunities to individuals from various backgrounds, imparting them with the skills and knowledge needed for personal and professional growth, and empowering them to make meaningful contributions to their communities.

NFE in Myanmar

In Myanmar, various forms of non-formal education are currently functioning. It is found that NFE initiatives contributed to this research are provided by various actors: CSOs/CBOs, Faith Based organizations (Monastic schools, Churches), and community-based voluntary teacher groups. In addition, there are also individual education providers who are voluntarily providing specialized education initiatives with the support of stakeholders such as donors.

The findings of the research revealed that there is a diverse range of educational activities offered by NFE programmes, and these educational activities are provided with different objectives. For a better understanding of NFE available, they are categorized into 7 groups according to the form of education delivered and their objectives. This categorization allows for a more organized and systematic examination of the different types of NFE initiatives in the country.

Education and academic support

NFE initiatives that provide education and academic support mainly bear the objective of enhancing access to quality education within communities. These initiatives offer courses aimed at equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge to get access to formal education or higher education, covering subjects such as English, Computer Skills, and other preparatory courses to help students succeed in specific tests like the GED and IELTS. Furthermore, some monastic schools use the formal state curriculum in their programme, offering an alternative pathway for individuals to access formal education. Libraries offer books, digital access, and spaces as a form of support. Some programmes also provide support by eliminating financial barriers through providing education free of charge, supporting transportation allowance to get to the education centre and data allowances for joining online courses. Additionally, in some programmes, students are provided with accommodation and food allowances during their studies. Furthermore, providing information about courses and scholarship opportunities available in their networking organizations and writing alumni recommendation letters for applying for scholarships or jobs are additional supports NFE initiatives offer.

Career development

Programmes that cater to career development in Myanmar offer technical skills[3] to start a business, and soft skills[4] to effectively programmes aim at empowering youths to become self-sufficient and successful in their chosen careers and help solve their socio-economic hardship in the current situation. These programmes provide training in areas such as resume writing, interview preparation, languages, accounting (LCCI), communication skills, leadership skills, business management, social enterprise (SE), project cycle management (PCM), computer, AutoCAD, and other digital literacy trainings enabling participants to pursue their career goals with confidence and resilience. Some initiatives also offer teaching training (Diploma in TESOL and Diploma in TLC) to equip educators with the skills and knowledge to excel in the classroom in which subjects like teaching methodologies, child development, educational psychology, and teaching skills are covered. Additionally, some programmes deal with the problem of unemployment by giving vocational training through which participants are prepared to initiate their own domestic business. Such vocational trainings involve sewing, embroidery, bakery, drinks and winery, jams, soaps, bamboo crafts, natural fertilizers, agriculture, livestock, welding, and machine repair.

Mental health and emotional well-being

In Myanmar, there is a pressing demand for mental health and emotional well-being support, particularly exacerbated by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and political turmoil following the coup. Research indicates that there are initiatives that recognize these needs and incorporate actions in their programme to address them. An education provider from the Karenni region explained that providing a space for youths to gather together and learn something that would distract them from the pressing situation for a while is part of their objective. Activities NFE initiatives incorporated include trainings such as music classes on skills that require concentration and creativity like embroidery. Some initiatives include topics like self-awareness in their programme. In addition, programmes support their participants mentally by including counselling sessions and integrating sports activities, chess, and music that help reduce stress and give a sense of achievement.

Civic engagement and community service

In this study, civic engagement and community service is one of the most common themes among NFE initiatives. The primary goal of these programmes is to empower young individuals by offering awareness-raising activities and skill-building sessions, enabling them to become agents of positive change in their community. Programmes promote civic engagement by providing training and including community engagement activities in their structure. These programmes raise social awareness in areas such as gender, sex

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[3] Technical skills refer to the abilities and knowledge age required to perform specific tasks or use specialized tools and technologies effectively. Examples include: computer literacy, operating machinery, software development, vocational skills

[4] Soft skills refer to interpersonal skills and personal attributes to effectively interact with others and navigate various social and professional situations and daily challenges. Example soft skills are: communication skills, leadership skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, teamwork and collaboration skills, cultural competence and diversity awareness, financial literacy, health and wellness etc.

education, environment, health, media literacy, child -related issues, selected based on community needs and contextual relevance. Youths are also equipped with essential skills such as Research Skills, Community Development, and Project Cycle Management, enabling them to effectively drive change within their localities. The research found that initiatives also promote cultural enrichment in terms of courses that teach about ethnic language and history.

Training sessions covering topics related to rights and laws are found within this form of education. One education provider exposed that their programme aims at empowering youths to contribute to building a federal state in the future. The programme encompasses topics such as federalism and versions appropriate to Myanmar, rule of law, constitutionalism, judicial independence, land and natural resources, democracy, international law (human rights, criminal and humanitarian forms), and international courts. Education providers also include topics about social justice and equity in their programmes. Programmes cover topics about rights such as human rights and labour rights. These are included in the programme to empower and inspire youths to contribute to development in their community.

Conflict resolution and peacebuilding

In the participating organizations of the research, there are very few programmes for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. According to one respondent in the Mandalay region, one initiative offers peace training, while others incorporate activities related to conflict resolution and peacebuilding into long-term programmes. These activities include integrating discussion sessions on conflict and peace into subjects like Social Science and Civic Education, inviting speakers such as political figures or activists for sessions, and facilitating debates on relevant topics.

Faith based education

In religious oriented NFE organizations like monastic schools, religious studies are included. A monastic school that provides a three-year diploma programme to empower youths with self-skills includes the study of the teachings of the Buddha, known as Dhamma. Similarly, a theological education initiative in Mon State provides comprehensive religious education, blending lectures with practical training to prepare individuals for leadership roles within their religious communities, thereby fostering spiritual growth alongside community service.

Arts

In addition to the above-mentioned groups of NFE forms, the research also found an initiative that offers youths opportunities to learn music. An initiative in the Chin region provides a diploma in music course where playing instruments like keyboard, violin, and guitar is taught. A programme from the Kachin region also offers Bachelor of Arts degree specializing in music studies, which is offered by a Christian Religious Organization in Myitkyina. While some programmes concentrate solely on delivering a single type of education, such as vocational training in soap making, others offer a broader range of educational opportunities. For instance, a participating organization based in Shan State empowers youth by integrating different forms of education such as courses on

promoting civic engagement, alongside with computer courses. The research reveals that numerous actors are engaged in the NFE sector, ranging from individual teachers, who volunteer to deliver education in collaboration with stakeholders, to various organizations and institutions. Different forms of education are observed in diverse settings, tailored to the specific goals of each programme and aimed at meeting the needs of individuals within society.

NFE programme structures

The landscape of non-formal education (NFE) initiatives in Myanmar is characterized by a diverse array of structures. While some programmes embrace a flexible approach, accommodating the evolving needs of participants, others adhere to project based programmes that take a stricter structure. In addition, some NFE programmes take regular recurring structure with a set of activities. This diversity underscores the adaptability of NFE to cater to the diverse educational needs of individuals and communities.

Flexible NFE programmes

The research found that there are programmes that take a flexible structure, which often offers short-term courses or training sessions that can be easily adjusted to accommodate diverse learning needs and community demands. Programmes take such flexible structures to provide education in a manner that is convenient and accessible to participants, without rigid constraints on duration or content.

For instance, in Shan State, an initiative offers debate training programmes to empower youths with critical thinking and strong communication skills. The programme's twice-yearly sessions teach how to construct persuasive arguments supported by facts, promoting reasoned dialogue instead of conflict. Students will also develop confidence in public speaking. Participants receive certificates upon completion. Additionally, they provide environmental training, fostering a sense of environmental responsibility, and teacher training, aimed at enhancing pedagogical skills. The training programmes typically range from 5 to 10 days in duration, catering to diverse learning needs and schedules.

Similarly, such flexible structure is also found in Myanmar Women Programme in Mandalay, which prioritizes enhancing women's participation and influence in both community and workplace settings. It specifically addresses gender dynamics within educational environments, seeking to make a positive social impact by empowering individuals and communities through education. The flexibility of the programme's course structure ensures inclusivity and accessibility for participants from diverse backgrounds. For example, the programme evolves to meet the unique needs of different cohorts. Cohort-specific approaches are tailored, such as providing specialized content for nuns in one cohort and emphasizing inclusive classroom practices in another. Duration varies accordingly: in-person trainings usually take 3-4 days and online courses last more than 2 months. Outcomes may also vary due to factors like project nature, funding availability, and ongoing enhancements to the course curriculum.

Project-based NFE programmes

Most project based NFE programmes have defined duration and end once the project objectives are achieved and switch to a different programme. The focus of these programmes is on achieving specific outcomes within a predetermined timeframe, and they are often related to addressing specific needs or challenges in the community.

As an example, a four-year education project in Mandalay is functioning to facilitate the re-entry of out-of-school children into classrooms while ensuring those already engaged in labour activities can thrive academically, which implements the project with a three-phase-a-year structure.

An NFE organization in Magway runs programmes that take similar structure. Programme durations varies depending on the specific projects granted, with personal development workshops spanning 4 to 5 days, language courses lasting 5 to 8 months, and vocational training programmes running for approximately 4 to 5 months per batch.

However, the nature of specific timeframe for running programmes can be controversial in their effort to empowering or addressing needs of the community. A participant and stakeholder from the Rakhine region exposed a concern on such programmes as for example, some programmes are quite illogical. As they are project-based, they gave trainings like Welding within one month. A compressed timeframe leads to rush learning and this may not allow students to fully grasp the intricacies of the skills. In vocational trainings like this which are potentially hazardous and therefore require proper training and precaution knowledge. Otherwise, such rushed trainings might put participants at risk of accident.

Regular NFE programmes

Regular programmes or continuous programmes usually have a recurring curriculum and set of activities. These mainly involve certificate, diploma and bachelor courses, which are prevalent in the form of civic engagement and community service, and career development and vocational training.

Certificate programmes mostly offer training on more specific topics. These include Computer, Language Courses, Civic Engagement, Human Rights, Gender, Project Cycle Management, Business Management, and vocational training. These courses span from a few days to 2-6 months.

Diploma programmes usually span from 1 year to 4 years. These courses typically follow a structured format, offering theoretical knowledge and essential skills initially, followed by a 3-month to 2-year internship depending on the programme. For example, in diploma programmes around civic engagement and community development, the initial studies incorporate practical training involving service learning and mini-community projects and undergo internship by the end of the programme. These programmes cultivate youth not only with academic knowledge but also with experiential learning opportunities, enhancing their prospect not only academically but also professionally. Programmes in Chin State, Kayah State, Shan State, Kachin State, and Kayin State take this structure.

Bachelor's degree programmes usually take 3 to 4 years. Specialization of studies ranges from Education Studies, Development Studies, Business Studies, Political Sciences, English, and Music. These programmes take a similar structure as diploma programmes, which deliver a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical activities in initial studies, and end with an internship period. A 3.5-year-long bachelor's degree programme available in the Kachin region initiates with a six-month intensive pre-class that prepares students with basic skills

and knowledge, followed by 3 years of study focusing on the specialized subject. By the end of the programme, students undergo one month's internship upon completion.

NFE programme certification

According to the research, most short NFE programmes do not offer any certificate upon completion, while others offer a certificate. However, a programme from Mandalay region that focuses on empowering and developing leadership skills among adolescent girls aged between 12 and 18 does not provide any certification upon completion even though the programme spans two years with activities conducted once a week. Instead, the programme gives alumni ID for networking opportunities. Internship opportunities are also provided in this programme for alumni ID holders.

Some programmes confer either diploma or bachelor's degrees upon completion. However, concerns arise regarding the accreditation of these degree programmes, particularly in terms of recognition by the formal government and the potential for creating job opportunities outside civil society organizations (Jangma, 2020).

An NFE organization in Shan State which provides a two-year-long Diploma in Social and Development Studies programme, integrates courses from Payap University[5] covering topics such as organizational development and social enterprise, offers students certificates from that university along with the diploma degree offered by the organization. In a follow up interview with an education provider of this programme stated that:

> *'Even though the government does not recognize the diploma degree of our programmeme, the students of our programme(alumni) are recognized and accepted by the civil society organisations and we can say that it is accredited in NFE sectors'.*

The same participant also discussed their programme's actions to ensure recognition in the broader context:

> *'We are trying to work in partnership with Payap University and Chaing Mai University7 to allow our students to continue their studies after two years, but we are only initiating and it is in the ongoing process'.*

Partnership with reputable universities enhances the credibility and recognition of the programme offered by the organization.

The research indicates that even though the degrees offered by NFE programmes are recognized in certain domains, concerns about the accreditation of degree programmes persist. However, education providers are making efforts to enhance recognition across diverse fields, with a commitment to providing educational opportunities for students.

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[5] Payap University is a liberal arts and pre-professional school located in Chiang Mai, Thailand. It offers a range of degree programmes, including a doctoral degree in peacebuilding, master's degrees in various fields, and bachelor's degrees in communication arts, information technology, and more. https://wp.payap.ac.th/about-us/

Mode of delivery

The mode of delivery depends on the nature of the programme, project requirement, target beneficiary, and several contexts including the political setting - which is the most influential in Myanmar. Education may be delivered either in person or online or a combination of both.

Most of the NFE initiatives initially conducted their programmes face-to-face. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic required the adoption of virtual platforms such as Zoom for delivering education, thus becoming an alternative mode of delivery.

After the 2021 coup, some organizations have transitioned their programmes entirely to online platforms due to security concerns stemming from political unrest. An organization based in Yangon that gives training on community leadership and research shifted to online mode during the Covid-19 pandemic and has continued with this approach following the coup:

> *'Because of the security concern, we only run online. In order for students to be able to join online classes, supports such as electronic equipment, power banks and data fees are provided.'* (An education provider, Yangon region)

Some programmes have to adopt online teaching depending on the surrounding context accordingly, making it a hybrid of both in person and online components. A current student of an NFE programme in Chin region mentioned the approach their programme is taking:

> *'It depends on the situation. Last time, we had to attend through online platforms because of the political instability. But it has only been a week so far. Most of the time, we have to attend in-person.'*

This model is useful given the ongoing local armed conflicts, which affect physical gatherings and necessitate a flexible learning environment for safety and continuity.

Even though online learning allows educators and students a safer learning experience, and enables learning to continue uninterrupted, online learning may lead to decreased student engagement compared to in-person learning. Frequent shortages in electricity and internet access worsen the situation by disrupting the learning experience and creating frustration among students and teachers. A former student from the Karen Region said that:

> *'Because the programme I attended was an online programme, I did not have the opportunity to learn the academics such as academic reading and writing, research subject detail and community development that I expected because of the difficulty of the internet, and I only got 60 percent.'*

Educators are aware of this downside of online education and many NFE organizations in this research prioritize in-person modes of delivery whenever feasible. To facilitate participation, students who are not from the programme's location are offered accommodations, food allowances, and other necessary supports to enable their attendance.

Paid vs. unpaid programmes

Non-formal education is often provided based on the right of access to education for all. Most NFE initiatives, according to the research, are run by non-profit organizations, and with the

common aim of enhancing access to quality education, they mainly focus their efforts on providing free access to quality education for people of all ages and backgrounds.

For some initiatives with limited funding, maintaining continuity in their contribution imposes a challenge for their sustainability. These initiatives cope with these challenges by operating both paid programmes at affordable prices and unpaid programmes. An initiative in Mandalay offers courses like Japanese language skill and Young Learners English at affordable rates, while sustaining non-profit branches through income generated from mentioned classes and continues doing vocational training and career development. An NFE organization from Karen State that doesn't run its programme with donor contribution takes the same structure, relying on participant's contributions.

Participants also pointed out the fact that receiving free access to education influences the mentality students have about the education they are receiving. Students tend to value less the education they receive, and this has consequential problems concerning commitment and respect either to the programme or trainer. An NFE provider in Magway responded that:

> *'It is a paid class, but we offer free access to those who totally cannot afford it. We need to be cautious about making it free of charge as some young people tend not to value it'.*

A similar response was given by an education provider from Rakhine State, stating that not having a personal financial investment in their education, and depending on full scholarship opportunities will reduce students' effort in their studies. For this reason, they designed the programme as a paid training model to ensure that students value the education received and show respect to the trainers. However, free education was provided to individuals from marginalized groups and those facing financial difficulties, highlighting the educators' commitment to inclusivity and addressing socio-economic disparities.

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Target beneficiaries and accessibility

In Myanmar, non-formal education programmes are designed to meet the diverse needs of specific target beneficiaries, ranging from youths seeking vocational training to individuals aspiring for higher education and employment opportunities.

Vocational courses in Myanmar often cater to youths who haven't completed their matriculation exams, providing them with practical skills and training for various occupations or professions. On the other hand, programmes (mostly diploma programmes) that involve intricate theoretical understanding and need a basic understanding to grab the contents of the curriculum target youths with specific levels of education background and include criteria regarding this in their selection process.

Similarly, initiatives focused on women empowerment target young girls, aiming to equip them with skills and knowledge to thrive in their communities. Agricultural training programmes tailored for individuals working on farms, offer techniques and practices to enhance productivity. Additionally, courses in computer literacy, English language

proficiency, and preparatory studies cater to youths aspiring for higher education, preparing them for academic pursuits. Meanwhile, job preparatory courses, such as CV writing and interview skills, are designed for individuals gearing up for employment opportunities.

An ethnic based education programme that focuses on Mon youths, therefore, provides for all Mon youths who apply and meet the criteria and who pass the application process. The reason for choosing only Mon is to prevent inconvenience in communication. Every Mon Youth from different parts of Myanmar can be a candidate, and there is no gender or religious limitation.

Apart from targeting groups under this specific nature of needs and programmes, NFE programmes accept all individuals regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, social status, and other backgrounds. However, there are limiting factors for NFE in providing complete access to education for everyone.

The primary obstacle is ensuring that the programme accommodates individuals with disabilities and other special needs. A respondent who provides library service in Dawei stated:

> 'The library of our centre provides various kinds of books such as BL (Boy Love) fiction… we do not have books for the visually impaired people as those books are not easily available in the markets in Myanmar.'

A teacher from the Chin region also stated:

> 'As this is a non-profit organization, we have very limited financial resources. We therefore cannot provide proper service for people with disabilities.'

Another hurdle is the programme's accessibility to people from remote regions. Even though respondents mentioned that their programmes accept beneficiaries from diverse regions more as they switch their outreach strategies, there still are limitations. This used to be in-person visits to target locations and sharing information. Now, it also utilizes online platforms like Facebook and relies on alumni networks to spread the word. However, this cannot assure accessibility to youths from areas where there is no internet access, and from very remote areas that the programme cannot reach. Some programmes are not accessible to most of the youths due to geographical context. For instance, in Rakhine State, since most of the programmes, according to research participants, are based in urban areas.

> 'It is difficult especially for the Muslim community to travel due to security checkpoints'.

The situation is now true to most of the youths in Myanmar, especially because of the impact of political instability, and policy and regulatory environment.

The composition and framework of NFE initiatives can influence educational accessibility, particularly for groups not directly associated with specific activities. A visible example is found in a monastic school in the Bago region. Buddhism is prominently promoted towards students and it sometimes adversely impacts the access to education for students from different religions. A teacher from that school explained the decline in the enrolment of individuals from different religions in their monastic school:

> 'The reason may be because this school is a monastic school, and therefore every child has to pay homage to the Buddha, or at least attend the Homage. …………… For Muslim

kids, it is quite not convenient. However, we make it flexible for all students as we also have Chinese, and Shan students as well.'

This highlights a socio-cultural challenge wherein cultural norms and practices associated with a particular religion or belief system can unintentionally exclude or marginalize individuals from different religious or cultural backgrounds.

To conclude, some NFE programmes are designed with specific target beneficiary groups depending on programme objectives or nature, which justifies their exclusion of other groups. However, NFE programmes still encounter obstacles in achieving inclusivity within their target groups. These factors can range from logistical challenges, such as financial limitations to secure necessary resources and location accessibility, to socio-cultural barriers, such as unintended religious-cultural exclusivity. The challenges are exacerbated by instabilities arising from the 2021 coup. As a result, while NFE programmes are attempting to meet the needs of individuals in the community within the scope of their capacity, they may still struggle to fully accommodate and engage all potential beneficiaries, thus hindering their overall effectiveness and impact.

Local context and NFE

NFE initiatives acknowledge the crucial role of local context in shaping the design and implementation of educational programmes. The local context encompasses various socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors that influence the educational landscape within a specific region. These factors significantly impact the planning, execution, and outcomes of NFE programmes.

The research found that some NFE organizations design their education programme in response to the urgent needs of the community. According to UNICEF's Mine Action in Myanmar Factsheet for the first quarter of 2020, Rakhine State has experienced a notable surge in instances of individuals being affected by landmines or other explosive remnants, accounting for nearly 60% of the total victims during this period (UNICEF, 2020). For this reason, an NFE initiative in Rakhine State gives Mine Risk Education, in addition to their vocational training programme. This indicates the NFE initiatives' commitment to addressing the immediate threats to the safety and well-being of the local population.

A similar regional context driven NFE programme can be seen in the Thanintharyi region. The military coup in Myanmar in February 2021 has led to ongoing displacement. Thousands are fleeing into neighbouring countries, and over 1.9 million are internally displaced (UNHCR, 2022). The recent Military Conscription Law exacerbates the migration rate. As Thanintharyi region is joined to Thailand to the east and south, an organization in the Thanintharyi region delivers 'Wisdom for Migrants' sessions to empower migrants with knowledge and skills to navigate their circumstances effectively.

In addition to above mentioned urgent needs of the community, it is also found that NFE initiatives also focus on the long-term needs of the community. An NFE programme in Rakhine State, where agriculture is a primary economic activity, sees the needs of the community and provides training for agriculture. Farmers in Rakhine State are facing losses due to low paddy prices and rising costs, prompting the need for solutions like extending support services, certifying seeds and agricultural inputs, and implementing fair pricing for rice (Dapice and David, 2017). An education provider mentioned the widespread use of chemical fertilizers and tractors and the consequences:

'They use fertilizers and ploughs in the farm which cost them a lot, ……soil degradation leads to more cost. Using traditional ploughing systems as using cows gives natural fertilizers, and this will cost less and create more jobs.'

It can be seen that the education providers see the negative impact of soil degradation on agricultural productivity and farmer livelihood in their region. In addition, traditional ploughing systems are perceived to be more cost-effective and sustainable than modern techniques and has potential for job creation. Their programme give training on making agricultural products such as producing natural fertilizers, organic farming for smart farms, and business management. This will empower local farmers with skills and knowledge to diversify their income stream while maintaining environmental sustainability.

Rakhine State has been so poor, leading to young Rakhine leave the state and go elsewhere (Dapice and Davie, 2017). An education provider in the region also stated that there is very little education opportunity and job opportunity in their region. For this reason, their programmes offer courses such as English, Computer, Leadership Skills, Business Management, and Project Cycle Management to empower youths to be able to access higher education either locally or internationally, and to get job opportunities in development sectors. In addition to this, the programmes also incorporate vocational courses related to agriculture and handcrafting for individuals in the community to become more self-sufficient.

The motivations for launching NFE programmes are also connected with problems around influences of technology and cultural shifts. One community organization in Maubin, Bago region, aimed to provide Technical Skills, Digital Literacy, and Leadership Skills in the NFE programme to empower young women because women are more vulnerable than men to becoming victims of cybercrime in social media. Moreover, it is also found that parents' unconventional beliefs that the use of mobile phones will disadvantage young women. An education provider of this organization also stated:

'Sometimes the atmosphere in young people's lives makes them depressed rather than uplifts them with their words. Thus, the majority of our activities deal with encouraging young people to make a place for them.'

Providing training on digital literacy and leadership skills to young women will empower them to navigate the digital world safely and confidently. Additionally, such programmes promote a more positive view of technology among parents by demonstrating the positive impact of technology and education on women's empowerment.

In regions where higher education opportunities are limited, NFE programmes play an important role in filling the gaps by addressing these educational needs. A research participant who attended a programme offered by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) mentioned:

'They had a chance to study political science, which was unavailable in Kachin State's public universities. The reason for this decision was the limited availability of school choices in Kachin. Additionally, the programme offered majors that were not available in government schools. One particular attraction for me was the availability of Political Science, a major I was interested in'.

The participant went on to say:

'The programme included intensive training for six months before commencing academic studies, and it took 3 years to finish the college programme. NFE programmes serve as alternative pathways for people to pursue their interests and contribute to personal development.'

The findings of the research suggest that NFE programmes focus not only on delivering educational topics based on the lasting community needs but also on responding to the immediate needs of the community. Local factors shape the form and target beneficiary of a programme. By recognizing and considering these local contexts, NFE initiatives tailor their programmes to meet the specific needs and circumstances of the community. This approach enhances programme relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability, ultimately contributing to positive educational outcomes and community development.

Key stakeholders

Stakeholders play an important role in implementing an NFE programme by shaping its design, creating positive impacts, ensuring the diverse needs of the community are met, and creating positive social change. The research found that the key stakeholders of NFE in Myanmar are diverse. These involve religious organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs, CBOs, NGOs), government agencies and local authorities, parents and alumni, and businesses.

It is found that some programme need to work closely with local religious organizations such as monasteries and churches. According to most of the interviewees, religious organizations contribute to NFE programme in terms of funding, hosting service-learning activities, providing resources such as venue for programme activities, networking opportunities, and food and accommodation for students. In Myanmar, it is commonly said that monks are 'powerful' as they possess the ability to positively influence the society they live in (Gil, 2008). An education provider from the Rakhine region noted that:

'As our activity is non-profit, we have difficulties in managing the cost of living during the programme. We explain our difficulties to religious leaders and request contributions either from the monasteries or from the religious followers in the village.'

This highlights the importance of coordinating with local religious institutions for sustaining the programme.

Religious organizations are also found to be in partnership with NFE initiatives. An education provider from the Bago region stated that the programme's activities had to be reported to the church committee on a monthly basis as the programme was jointly conducted with the church. This also suggests the role of religious institutions, as a stakeholder and partner, in maintaining accountability and transparency of a programme.

In addition to religious institutions, civil society organizations or non-profit organizations in the community (CSOs, NGOs, CBOs) also play as key stakeholders in NFE programmes. These organizations are important for programme funding, developing curriculum, capacity building, networking, and improvement.

According to research findings, it is found that some NFE initiatives rely on other organizations for technical support such as teacher training and curriculum development. As an education provider in Chin State explained:

> '*Regarding the subjects delivered by the programme, we request curriculum support from an organization in Yangon.*'

Furthermore, NFE initiatives collaborate with such organizations to conduct trainings and workshops for students. Collaboration with such organizations also involves providing capacity development training for teachers and staff. An education provider from Hakha, Chin region, maintained that they invite resource persons from these organizations as guest speakers as part of their programme activities. The same participant also noted that churches, nursing homes, and orphanages were very supportive of hosting service-learning activities.

A respondent who participated as a stakeholder of NFE initiatives from the Kachin region responded that they collaborate with NFE organizations to offer soft skill training, business courses for producing local products, and vocational training. Their organization also facilitates internships as a job provider, enabling students to make informed career choices. The participant shared the perspective that alumni of the NFE programme are familiar with the terminology and the working environment, making it very effective for their organization.

An education provider from Shan State also highlighted the importance of collaboration with their partnering NFE initiatives for the development of their programme. She maintained that as part of an education foundation, the five NFE organizations from different regions regularly meet online to exchange information and idea and foster continuous programme improvement. Such engagement between similar organizations can enhance effectiveness and impact of their initiatives.

However, an education provider in the Mandalay region mentioned that they noticed a decrease in active CSO networks due to various reasons, including some going low-profile. The current political environment imposes pressure on CSOs. On 28 October 2022, the State Administration Council (SAC) enacted the Organization Registration Law (ORL), which mandates registration for all associations regardless of size or location, under penalty of criminal sanctions (International Center for Not-For-Profit Law [ICNL], 2023). This suggests a challenging operating environment for CSOs in Myanmar, with increased regulatory scrutiny and pressures contributing to a decline in their activity levels and network engagement.

NFE programmes also work with government institutions to sustain their programmes. These include requirements of the regulatory environment. An education provider from Taungoo, Bago region, stated government institutions as important stakeholders of their programme by responding:

> '*As our online school is a pre-school, we have to deal with and report to the Ministry of Social Welfare Relief and Resettlement for the extension of license every 3 years. I am trying to establish a private primary school, so I have to deal with the Ministry of Education for registration.*'

In addition, a similar requirement necessitates NFE initiatives to work with local people and authorities. After the coup, the SAC revived the Ward or Village Tract Administration Law which requires citizens to report overnight guests to authorities, and residents will face a fine

or imprisonment if they do not follow the law (Burma News International [BNI], 2022). An education provider in Bago region noted that:

> *'We have to get on well with the local stakeholders for reporting overnight houseguests.'*

It can be seen that the regulatory context surrounding the NFE sector influences the type of stakeholders they engage with.

Some initiatives receive support from local authorities by engaging effectively with them. One service provider from the Rakhine region highlighted the need to engage with local authorities as follows:

> *'We make sure to raise awareness among the local authorities (Village administrators) and parents about our project. Once they understand what we're trying to accomplish, they end up contributing a lot.'*

Other stakeholders like parents and alumni are also vital in implementing the programmes. Engaging with parents through providing awareness is also beneficial for the programmes. One service provider from the Rakhine region highlighted the need to engage with parents:

> *'We also give short trainings to parents. When they are empowered, we can foster community participation.'*

These groups of stakeholders also support financially for ongoing initiatives. An education provider from Mon State mentioned that their alumni from abroad and students' parents donate money for the programme. Working with alumni of the programme also involves getting feedback and data from them which provides insights into the success of the programme and makes improvements. An education provider from the Karenni region stated:

> *'We did an alumni impact survey in 2021, mainly about how much they have improved after joining the programme.'*

It can be seen that interacting closely with parents and former students is also beneficial for evaluating the effectiveness and outcome of the programme and maintaining relevance and sustainability.

Businesses are also found important stakeholders in some NFE programmes. The sponsorship of these institutions helps relieve the financial burden and supports the implementation of the programme. As an example, an education provider from the Bago region described their experience as:

> *'We have delivered essential courses related to small domestic businesses sponsored by Coca-Cola. There are many short courses as well.'*

Engaging with stakeholders enhances the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of NFE initiatives. However, according to one education provider, it is found that NFE initiatives still struggle to closely interact with potential stakeholder because of the priority stakeholders place depending on the local context of the country. An education provider from the Karenni region mentioned that only around 30% of the collaboration from stakeholders was received. Others stated that there were more important areas to prioritise.

Overall, the research found that different stakeholders contributed to the implementation, development, and sustainability of NFE programmes in different ways. The choice of

stakeholders an organization engages with depends on the nature of the programme and the surrounding context of the programme. Effectively collaborating with relevant stakeholders helps NFE initiatives ensure the smooth implementation of the programme and maintain effectiveness. However, the existing instability is found to be a barrier for total collaboration with stakeholders.

Major contributions of NFE to youth empowerment in Myanmar

Non-formal education (NFE) programmes have emerged as a powerful tool for youth empowerment, providing diverse skills, knowledge, and opportunities that extend beyond the scope of traditional formal education. These programmes not only equip young people with practical skills for employment and entrepreneurship but also foster personal growth, leadership, and a sense of social responsibility through offered curriculums encompassing career development, civic engagement and community service, conflict resolution and peace studies, and arts. This section delves into the contribution of NFE to youth and youth utilizations for their personal growth and community development.

NFE programmes serve as a transformative platform, equipping young individuals with essential practical skills for real-world application. These skills, including leadership, effective communication, interpersonal abilities, public speaking, and facilitation are crucial for personal and professional growth. They foster confidence, enhance teamwork, and prepare youth for diverse career paths and community involvement.

Additionally, NFE programmes empower youth with diverse skill sets such as research, proposal writing, English proficiency, media literacy, accounting, financial management, natural resource management, project cycle management, and learning strategies. Plus, they also offer vocational skills covering welding, electronics, baking, sewing, vehicle maintenance and repair, and organic farming. Mastery of these skills not only enhances academic and professional prospects but also enables young people to manage projects efficiently, make informed decisions, enhance career advancement, and contribute positively to society.

Moreover, NFE programmes provide youth with knowledge in civic engagement including politics, governance and public administration, human rights, CEDAW, the history of Burma, and law. This knowledge is vital for developing informed and responsible citizens who can actively participate in democratic processes and advocate for social justice.

Further, NFE programmes offer education on sex education, gender issues, environmental awareness, economics, community development, social enterprise, and mental health and emotional well-being. Understanding these areas is essential for fostering inclusive, sustainable communities and promoting overall well-being. These topics equip youth with the awareness and skills needed to address contemporary challenges, support gender equality, protect the environment, and drive economic and social innovation.

By integrating these diverse skills and knowledge areas, NFEs help graduates gain the confidence and competence to apply their abilities in access to further studies, networking and employability, social change and adaptation, and peacebuilding initiatives.

Further studies

NFE programmes are recognized for their effectiveness in providing students with practical skills and knowledge, preparing them for further academic pursuits, reflecting the core mission and vision of the programmes.

The avenues for advancement span from bachelor's to master's degrees, and other short term exchange programmes, encompassing both local and international educational pathways. However, it is not accessible to all NFE graduates. The feasibility of accessing higher education largely centres on students' well-tested educational and experiential backgrounds and their aspirations for personal growth and development. Specifically, while graduates of vocational programmes choose to pursue advanced studies to enhance their career prospects, a significant proportion of graduates from other NFE programmes express a strong desire to continue their education abroad, often through scholarship awards. Educational institutions from Magway region and Karenni state reported that several graduates from their programmes have been awarded full scholarships, pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees abroad. Similarly, an education provider from shan state noted that two of their graduate students have received full scholarships to participate in academic exchange programmes abroad, ranging from one to two months.

Furthermore, this study uncovers the support mechanisms in place to facilitate NFE graduates' transition to higher education abroad. NFE programmes offer essential support services, including mentorship and guidance in essay writing, and provision of recommendation letters aimed at enhancing success for students seeking to pursue further studies internationally.

This approach underscores the commitment of NFE programmes to empowering their graduates and facilitating their academic and personal growth beyond the confines of formal education.

Networking and employability

NFE programmes create professional networks and prepare youth graduates to get access to job opportunities through service learning (internship programmes) and career development subjects. After training, young people are able to use their skills in their community, start businesses, improve networking, get better jobs, and keep learning and gathering more experiences.

Such programmes also extend the professional networks aimed at preparing graduates to the readiness of employability. Most NFE programmes span a duration of three months, during which participants engage in community development projects with specific timelines set by the school. Additionally, there are opportunities for volunteering with the school arranging placements for those interested. Some NFEs offer a six-month internship directly within the school followed by an internship at a non-governmental organization (NGO), with the school providing funding for the NGO internship.

During these internships, students are tasked with implementing their own projects, applying the skill acquired throughout their training. Upon completion, youth utilize their newfound skills to access networks and secure employment in fields aligned with their interests such as NGOs, international NGOs (INGOs), community-based organisation (CBOs), and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Through community service-learning activities, participants connect with stakeholders, local and international organizations, and authorities, building confidence and leadership skills.

These networking opportunities are crucial as they open doors to job opportunities. The hands-on approach extends to fieldwork in villages where participants directly contribute to fulfilling basic needs within the community.

NFE programmes are particularly effective in fostering employability. Graduates are continually hired after internship Programmes due to their well-tested qualifications such as proposal and report writing, monitoring and evaluation, and their strong work ethic. Their proficiency in English, communication, leadership, and community engagement further enhances their employability. One participant specifically highlighted that the expertise gained from NFE enabled him to secure a position as a Monitoring and Evaluation officer with an NGO dedicated to community development projects in Rakhine state. He emphasized the practical application of skills acquired through the program, particularly in writing proposals that successfully secure funding from international donors:

> *'Through the skills and knowledge gained from NFE, along with their additional support like networks, I have successfully secured funding for a humanitarian aid project proposal, providing foods, water, clothes, and mental health support to residents in conflict affected areas. Furthermore, I have now transitioned into the role of a Monitoring and Evaluation Officer within my organization where I intern.'*

NFE programmes also offer job opportunities within the school for graduates. This research found that five out of the interviewed youth participants secured positions such as program assistants, teaching assistants, subject teachers, and student affairs coordinators at the same NFE institutions where they studied. These opportunities are typically based on the students' qualifications, interests, and passion for promoting the program's mission and fulfilling its needs. For instance, one graduate from Mon State was hired as a Mon language teacher, where they now guide junior students and teach the Mon language along with personal development skills. This not only benefits the students but also reinforces the graduate's own skills and dedication to community service.

Together with the above, NFE programmes further empower students to secure sustainable job opportunities through grant-funded projects after graduation. Youth alumni receive international funding for projects addressing environmental issues, gender inclusivity, research, and language programmes targeted at local communities. For instance, three youth participants secured grants for an environmental awareness project, training local residents on plastic management, global warming prevention through green projects such as planting trees and reduced logging, and passing these practices to future generations for a better environment, while six participants received funding to conduct gender discrimination awareness training. Plus, alumni with research backgrounds accessed grants for community problem-solving through research projects. Furthermore, four youth recipients were granted funding to offer English language programmes to young people in their respective regions. These examples underscore the transformative impact of NFE programmes, highlighting their effectiveness in fulfilling career aspirations and empowering individuals to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

NFE programmes that offer vocational training empower youth graduates to start their own business and secure employment by applying skills and knowledge received from training. Graduates venture into various fields such as electrical work, welding, sewing, beauty salon, and vehicle repair, and organic farming, while youth recipients from Japanese language training shared their experience of gaining employment opportunities in Japan with

programme support and agency contacts. One alumni student from Magway Region described his experience:

> '*After completing the vocational training, I am able to establish my own business offering designer, makeup, and sewing training to my clients. This venture has enabled me to generate a higher monthly income, allowing me to better support my family financially.*'

After completing basic vocational training, participants receive ongoing support tailored to their interests and performance. For example, education providers provided that if a participant excels in basic training and expresses continued interest in the field, the organization offers advanced courses as a next step. This effort enables more career advancement for students. However, not all participants from the basic level may qualify for or have the opportunity to attend the advanced training.

The programmes also conduct regular monitoring visits every two months to assess the outcomes of the training and engage in focus group discussions with participants. These discussions delve into the participants' business progress and identify any additional support needed. Subsequently, the organization uses this feedback to customize future programme designs and provides targeted assistance to those in need. These supports include offering guidance on entrepreneurship, including tips on starting and managing businesses, sourcing materials, and effective customer communication. The provider ensures that graduates can navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship successfully.

Overall, NFE programmes significantly contribute to the personal and professional development of youth, equipping them with the confidence, competence, and connection needed to succeed. NFEs play a vital role in shaping a generation of capable and proactive individuals ready to make meaningful contributions to their communities by creating new networks and fostering employability.

Social change and adaptation

Non-formal education programmes have demonstrated a remarkable ability to empower youth and foster their capacity to adapt and to drive social change, particularly in the face of challenging circumstances such as conflicts, instability, and repressive situations. By prioritizing practical skill development, experiential learning, and personal growth, NFE programmes equip participants with the tools necessary to navigate complex social landscapes and contribute to the betterment of their communities through civic engagement and community service and conflict and peace education. These efforts empower young individuals to become responsible citizens and enable youth in fostering for social change by sharing and applying their skills and knowledge to local residents through sectors such as education, environment, mental health support, and addressing harmful stereotypes.

Armed with skills and knowledge acquired from NFE, youth graduates are motivated to share their skills and knowledge with young generations among their communities. Youth recipients also highlighted the valuable benefits of participating in a Non-Formal Education programme. Initially, the individual anticipated solely improving their English proficiency upon completion. Having acquired this diverse skill set, the individual applied their knowledge by returning to their community as a teacher at a local school. They also shared their skills and knowledge by teaching English to junior teachers and students, thereby empowering them. Furthermore, they organized a summer English course in their village, demonstrating a commitment to

community development and education by providing opportunities for over 50 students to learn English at the village organized in a monastery.

Another participant reflected on her experience with NFE, highlighting a significant boost in confidence. She dedicated her time as a volunteer teacher, imparting basic English skills to students in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Simultaneously, she fulfilled the role of a finance officer within the same camp, showcasing her multifaceted contributions to community development. These specific examples illustrate the tangible impact of the NFE programme on individual empowerment and community engagement within the context of Rakhine State. She proudly acknowledged:

> *'It was a great pleasure and accomplishment to volunteer for children in IDP camps. I truly valued my efforts in teaching English skills and promoting mental well-being. I believe that this experience exemplifies how NFE empowered me to care for others socially.'*

Notably, one youth recipient from Shan State shared his leadership achievements, attributing them to the skills and knowledge acquired through NFE. Upon joining NFE, he discovered a youth empowerment programme tailored to address the challenges encountered by young people in rural areas, particularly limited educational opportunities and economic constraints. In this programme, he introduced alternative education in organic farming and sustainable marketing, along with other skills relevant to their cultural background. These encompassed basic research skills, learning strategies, conflict resolution, peace studies, gender sensitivity, English proficiency, basic economics, training of trainers (TOT), financial management, and environmental awareness. Through his efforts, he significantly impacted the education sector by equipping young people with both soft and hard skills, empowering them to effect positive changes within their communities. Recognizing the importance of effectively including rural youth, he implemented strategies such as offering monetary incentives to encourage fellows' participation. This approach not only piqued their interest but also provided tangible benefits while they acquired valuable knowledge and in-demand 21st-century skills. To ensure the programme's sustainability and meet the educational needs of youth, he expanded the network to collaborate with international and local organizations, government agencies, and funders. By showcasing the programme's impact and demonstrating a talent for long-term community development, he successfully secured funding and support, ensuring the programme's growth and continuity:

> *'I joined the NFE programme with a passion to return to my community and provide more educational opportunities for youth who lack access to education, much like me. So, after completing my personal growth journey, I was able to establish a diploma programme, creating an educational platform in rural areas. My programme has produced 60 graduate students, who are now utilizing their skills in various areas of interest, serving as change makers. For instance, 60% of my students can run their own businesses, continue to further studies, access to jobs like in NGOs, community and private school.'*

NFEs effectively empower individuals to apply their environmental knowledge to inspire and lead community-based conservation efforts. It showcases how the individual applies their understanding of environmental issues to educate and inspire positive action within their community. They emphasize the detrimental effects of excessive plastic usage on climate change and take practical steps to address this issue. Leading by example, two youth alumni from Mon and Rakhine States, who also work as volunteer teachers at community schools after completing NFE programmes, organize weekly clean-up activities with their students,

promoting environmental stewardship and fostering habits of plastic reduction. This initiative extends beyond the classroom as students share their newfound knowledge and habits with their families, amplifying the impact on the community:

> *'Utilizing my understanding of environmental issues, I educate others about the effects of plastic overuse on climate change. I guide my students in weekly street clean-up efforts to promote environmental health and combat climate change. As a result, my students develop habits of reducing plastic consumption, which they then pass on to their families, fostering a community-wide commitment to sustainability.' (Alumni student, Mon state)*

To further enhance their knowledge and advocacy, the young individuals participate in a Global Warming campaign organized by a partner programme. Through this experience, they deepen their understanding of the factors contributing to global warming and the associated environmental challenges that threaten human well-being. This commitment to continuous learning and active engagement underscores their dedication to environmental conservation and sustainability.

The NFEs empower youth into driving social transformation and adaptation. These initiatives are instrumental in cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills among participants, enabling them to challenge entrenched norms, embrace diversity, and advocate for positive changes within their communities. This research found that youth recipients have a strong desire to initiate social change within rural villages, driven by the observation that traditional customs and habits are still deeply ingrained in these communities. They highlighted the potential conflict between the younger generation, with its modern mindset, and older individuals adhering to traditional values.

With a desire to bridge this gap, three youth alumni expressed their motivation to bring about reform by raising awareness or implementing interventions, starting from the grassroots level in villages. This indicates a recognition of the importance of addressing societal issues at their roots and a commitment to instigating positive change from within the community itself. One participant from Dawei township articulates a profound understanding of social change, viewing it as an ongoing evolution encompassing shifts in social norms, cultures, and belief systems. She underscores the necessity for societies to progress and adapt to contemporary ideas and lifestyles, ultimately striving towards a more advanced and improved future:

> *'I want to shift the mindset of the folks in my village, like debunking harmful stereotypes. It is essential for them to understand that their perspective is not always the right one and that people's ways of life are constantly changing from time to time.'*

Inspired by their experiences, two youth participants from Mon and Rakhine States actively organized and led initiatives to positively shift their villagers' mindsets and harmful stereotypes. Through activities such as delivering speeches, initiating projects, and fostering dialogue, they successfully promoted inclusivity, understanding, and social change within their communities. As a result, they were able to create a safer and more harmonious society, significantly reducing domestic violence and gender discrimination.

Youth graduates also serve as volunteers for community development, especially in conflict areas. Leveraging the newfound abilities they acquired from NFE, youth actively participate in humanitarian aid projects aimed at addressing food security in conflict-affected regions. Furthermore, they take on the role of providing mental health awareness to local residents in refugee camps, demonstrating their commitment to community welfare.

One example involves a graduate who gained access to office employment opportunities through acquired computer skills. Additionally, she generously provides free computer training to local youth while also conducting awareness sessions on mental health and offering psychosocial support to those profoundly affected by armed conflict in Karenni State, many of whom have lost their homes or parents. However, challenges like current political issues make it hard to fully achieve these goals. On this account, a stakeholder with experience in community development initiative said:

> *'As for social change initiatives, I can attest that youth participants in NFE programmes were actively working towards positive transformations in their communities. They are collaborating with various organizations such as CSOs, NGOs, and CBOs. However, given the current political climate, engaging in community development activities has become quite sensitive, as authorities may perceive it as a precursor to civil unrest.''*

Moreover, the programmes empower youth to promote social change through responsibility and accountability in governance and public administration. Youth alumni become more active in educating local people about the important role of elections, encouraging them to make informed decisions when selecting their respective candidates. One former student shared their experience of informing initiative, saying:

> *'I took part in raising awareness about the election within the community, and it had a positive impact because of my involvement.'*

In conclusion, the transformative impact of non-formal education programmes on youth empowerment and social change in Myanmar is crucial. NFE graduates have consistently demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to driving positive change within their communities. By equipping them with practical skills, critical thinking abilities, and a deep understanding of social issues, these programmes have fostered a generation of leaders who are prepared to tackle the complex challenges faced by their societies.

Peacebuilding initiatives

Non-formal education programmes have emerged as a vital tool in promoting peacebuilding efforts. NFEs remain dedicated to equipping graduates with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to indirectly contribute to peacebuilding, even if they don't explicitly label themselves as such, still have a positive impact on reducing conflicts in gender-based violence and promoting harmony in the religious sector through discussion and awareness training with targeted audiences.

Youth recipients shared the definition of peacebuilding, emphasizing that peacebuilding refers to the process of creating sustainable peace in societies that have experienced conflict or violence. It involves gender-based violence, discrimination, rape, etc. It can be solved with a range of activities aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting reconciliation, fostering social cohesion, and building institutions that can effectively manage disputes and prevent violence from recurring. After NFE, a youth recipient who works in advocating for women's rights and is planning to implement a community project focused on eliminating discrimination against women and girls, actively engage in various initiatives aimed at protecting vulnerable populations. With these efforts, she takes a gentle approach to peacebuilding, starting with basic steps and involving diverse participants. This includes understanding oneself, exploring identity, and fostering respect for diversity to promote

peaceful coexistence, while she doesn't directly discuss peace, he subtly introduces its concepts. She actively engages in peacebuilding initiatives, raising awareness on women's rights, child protection, and facilitating peace dialogues within villages:

> 'After completing the NFE programme, I transitioned into a role as a project assistant with a CSO, where I contributed to addressing community issues. One of my notable accomplishments was securing funding for a project aimed at raising awareness about women's empowerment, women's rights, child protection, and gender-based discrimination. The project proved highly effective, as evidenced by the positive feedback we received from participants.'

Another notable peacebuilding initiative of youth graduate from Shan State noted that:

> 'Utilizing the skills and knowledge acquired through NFE, I successfully conducted an awareness training session on domestic violence and gender discrimination for a group of 60 villagers in rural areas. Their response highlighted the importance and relevance of addressing such issues within their community.'

Practical experiences and knowledge gained through NFEs equip youth with essential interpersonal skills and problem-solving abilities, encouraging their active involvement in addressing religious harmony. This active engagement is exemplified by alumni from youth development programmes, who actively participate in addressing community problems, including religious conflicts, through established communication channels and interfaith initiatives in Bago region. Exposing youths to practical experiences of addressing community problems creates an opportunity for youths to learn from the practical experience and improve their interpersonal skills at the same time.

In addition, two young graduates successfully implemented a peace initiative addressing religious harmony through a research project. Their work brought young people together to promote peace in their community by connecting and organizing young people with their religion and promoting understanding of religious conflicts through talk shows and discussion activities:

> 'After the NFE programme we joined, we successfully conducted a research paper focused on religious conflict studies in Sagaing. Using research findings, we organize motivated young leaders locally and discuss with religious leaders to give awareness training about how to build a peace mindset to local people.'

Moreover, the transformative impact of NFE programmes is evident on individual graduates participating in democratic transition. An education provider highlighted that alumni students actively participate in peace conferences such as the Pinlong conference and political debate session, contributing to peacebuilding efforts before the 2021 coup.

These observations demonstrate how NFE programmes are creating leaders who can help their communities live together peacefully. NFEs are making a substantial impact by helping people become peacemakers in their communities, making society more united and understanding.

Sustainability of non-formal education

This research examines several key factors impacting the sustainability and development of NFE programmes. The findings from interviews with education providers working in youth empowerment programmes shed light on critical factors influencing the implementation, operation, and sustainability of NFE programmes. Mitigation practices NFE programmes are taking to adapt and address these challenges will also be discussed in this part.

The impact of Covid-19 led to the closure of programmes during the health pandemic. In the present circumstances surrounding Myanmar, the local context presents significant hurdles intensified by the interplay between political issues and economic crises. These factors mutually exacerbate each other, magnifying their effects on communities. Programme operations, particularly for organizations operating on income generated from their affordable programmes rather than external donor support, are notably affected. In times of instability, such programmes encounter significant disruptions, impeding their sustainability. Consequently, education suffers, evidenced by school closures and restricted access to learning opportunities. Furthermore, fear-based participation complicates matters, with safety concerns deterring engagement in educational activities. Additional hindrances emerge, including disruptions in programme continuity and apprehension due to potential investigations by authorities.

Political instability

The most prominent challenge all NFE initiatives are facing is the political instability triggered by the military coup in Feb 2021. Political factors can be both mediators and obstacles to the long-term viability of NFE initiatives. Some of the participants pointed out that partnerships with governing authorities can make programme operations easier in a stable political environment. However, programme delivery can be disrupted and resource access can be restricted by political unrest, conflict, changes in policy and regulatory environment, and financial difficulties, which present serious challenges to sustainability.

Following the Feb 2021 military coup, ethnic armed organizations joined forces against the junta, leading to armed conflict in various regions of the country. The situation escalated into a civil war and over 1.96 million were displaced within Myanmar (UNHCR, 2024). The political situation has triggered problems and challenging issues for NFE programmes.

According to Human Rights Watch (2021), it was reported that sections of the Law Protecting the Privacy and Security of Citizens 2017 were arbitrarily suspended after the 2021 coup. This removal of basic protections includes the right to be free from arbitrary detention, and the right to be free from warrantless surveillance and search and seizure. Warrantless searches are a challenge in implementing programmes both for teachers and students. Frequent investigation in in-person training is discussed in most of the interviews. An education provider from Mon State exposed her experience when she encountered searches while she was delivering the training. Such actions disrupt programme operations and jeopardize safety. As a result, some initiatives have been forced to temporarily suspend their programmes, while others have had to modify their programme structures. A participant from the Thanintharyi region revealed that:

'Despite focusing on safe topics in our training and programmes, we could face potential accusations from military groups for seemingly misguided reasons. For instance, our leadership training could be misconstrued as empowering youths in inappropriate ways. Because of the current unpredictable situation, we can't guarantee how far our programme will be able to continue in the future.'

The activities of the NFE programme are often disrupted by such warrantless investigations, causing fear in trainers and participants. Some initiatives even have to suspend their programme when there is a serious security threat facing the members. An education provider, Bago region, noted that:

'We have to cease the implementation in the current situation or else I would have been in jail by now. In the current situation, we have to stop delivering those trainings and courses as our founding members are running away, being detained, and moving to another country for their safety. We cannot implement the programmes as usual, only a few trainings and courses being delivered online currently by changing the topics into politically neutral ones.'

Traveling in an unstable context also poses a security risk for education providers and participants when they have to commute to training locations. Because of security checkpoints, transportation takes longer than usual. At times, when participants must travel through conflict-affected areas, the risks escalate, resulting in the postponement of programmes. An environmental awareness trainer from the Ayeyarwady region shared that:

'As a trainer, I have concerns about the investigation from SAC while traveling for the project. Recently, there was a project that was postponed due to recruitment problems.'

This observation was reinforced by an education provider from Shan State, who explained:

'The youths who want to come to our learning hub centre have worried about their road security. Due to this fact, most of the youths are afraid to come. Without the participation of youth, how can we sustain ourselves?'

It is found that NFE programmes are taking their utmost action to adapt to the challenges imposed by the political situation. For programmes that involve camping and accommodation in dormitories, additional safety measures have been implemented, including establishing rules regarding late-night outings, reducing outdoor and community visit activities, and maintaining a low profile. One education provider from Chin State mentioned:

'The school has implemented strict time limits for non-necessary movement. The military service and local political climate have impacted the school, causing it to stop programme operations.'

In addition to these measures, some programmes tend to avoid delivering training on topics that are sensitive to the current political context. However, despite these efforts, programmes still encounter challenges when activities involve youths gathering in large groups. Maintaining a low profile is another measure most initiatives use to adapt to this challenge. Two service providers from Rakhine State reported that they adapted to the situation by introducing their programme as an English class to local authorities and communities. Even though NFE initiatives were publicly inactive, they were still committed to their contribution to youth development. As an education provider, Thanintharyi Region noted:

'We have to operate all of our programmes with low profile because they (the military group) would do whatever they want to us even though we are serving the community legally as an education institution.'

Instability creates worries and hinders students from getting access to programmes. These concerns are heightened by the ongoing armed attacks and bombings occurring across the country. Following the military coup, there have been over 300 bomb attacks in various cities in Myanmar, resulting in serious damages and death tolls (Radio Free Asia [RFA], 2021).

A teacher and founder of an English language school in Taungoo underscored the profound influence of these threats and political factors on programme sustainability as follows:

'I think the political situation will be the most influencing one. There is a school guarded by SAC soldiers and a public area where demonstrations supporting SAC frequently take place in my neighbourhood. If there is a bomb explosion near our school, parents will be worried about their children's safety. Sometimes, we don't know whether to open the school or not in those situations and it is still a concern for us. Another thing is we cannot extend and invest many resources in our schools due to the current uncertainty.'

Political unrest disturbs NFE programmes in streamlining the administration of programmes. As maintaining security is a priority concern of NFE programmes, these instances highlight that sustaining relevance and effectiveness have to take a back seat.

Airstrikes and security in NFE programmes

Instances of airstrikes have been reported in recent years, causing damage to schools, churches, and nearby homes. These instances impose security threats to the NFE programmes, especially in areas like Sagaing, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Chin, where local defense forces have been notably active. A participant from Karenni described the risks they are taking in their operations of NFE programmes:

'The students live together at a community centre and it is really dangerous because of the strict security, safety, concerns and air strikes.'

In 2023, the military junta fired three heavy artillery rounds at Mai Ja Yang, a town near the Chinese border, located within a region historically controlled by the Kachin Independence Organisation (BNI, 2022). A Kachin education provider described how it affected students:

''We recently had a bomb attack while students were taking exams in Mai Ja Yang.'

A similar danger is found in the interviews with participants in the Chin region. Airstrikes and arson attacks by Myanmar forces have led to hundreds of deaths and driven tens of thousands of Chin civilians from their homes and livelihoods (Edwards, 2024):

'We've been hearing gunshots and bombs every day. The programme is running amidst these conflicts. Students are joining the programmes in fear. Of course, students who came from other regions would have more worries.'

This emphasized the serious safety risks faced by NFE programmes in unstable regions and underscored the importance of tight security measures to protect students and staff, thereby ensuring the continuity of these programmes.

A programme from Kachin region shared their proactive measure regarding these threats. An education provider of the programme stated that they needed to hide or relocate during bomb attacks, digging bunkers as a precautionary measure, providing first aid training in case of war, and seeking help from local authorities. These programmes have been maintaining the role of ensuring access to education by fulfilling the educational needs of the community they serve. Some education providers also shared their plan for this political situation was to engage the students through online education. However, frequent power cuts, unstable internet connectivity, or internet shortages in the region can also pose significant obstacles to the effectiveness of online education initiatives.

As some NFE programmes continue to operate amidst heightened fear and uncertainty among students, it sheds light on the resilience of both the programmes and the individuals they serve in the face of adversity. While effectiveness may be compromised to some extent, programmes maintain their role of providing education in response to community needs. The critical safety challenges encountered by NFE programmes operating in unstable regions emphasize the necessity for implementing measures that ensure safety of students and staff while maintaining the impact of NFE programmes in times of conflict and repression.

Policy and regulatory environment

The policy and regulatory environment has also become a critical challenge for NFE programmes after the 2021 coup. Clear legal mandates, supportive policies, and regulatory frameworks can provide a foundation for programme stability and growth. Conversely, ambiguous laws, regulatory barriers, and legal uncertainties pose challenges to NFE initiatives, complicating issues related to funding, accreditation, and programme oversight.

In the challenging landscape faced by NFE programmes, their operational risks have become increasingly apparent. The Organization Restriction law enacted in October 2022 by the State Administration Council (SAC) lead many civil society organizations (CSOs) maintain a low profile, and under the current regime, freedom of assembly is only permitted for groups affiliated with and supportive of the regime (ICNL, 2023). Activities of NFE initiatives are significantly hindered by constant monitoring and restrictions imposed by military authorities, limiting the scope of group engagements. It is also found that some donors are unwilling to fund or support organizations that work for or collaborate with the current SAC:

> *'Due to the political situation, the donors don't want to join hands with the military, if the programme would like to work together with the military, the donors cut the donation or support.'* (An education provider, Mon State)

This poses additional pressure on NFE programmes amidst the struggle in such political instability. Additionally, martial law has been enforced by Myanmar's military government after the coup and it has been imposed in a total of 50 townships across Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Mon states, as well as in Yangon and Mandalay regions. (Maung, 2023).

According to a voluntary education provider from Magway region who offers sewing classes in the evening as the participants work in the daytime and finish their work only after 5 p.m. It was observed that these participants are unable to continue their participation due to safety concerns stemming from the declaration of martial law.

The Ward or Village Tract Administration Law was also revived after the coup. Such laws create logistical barriers such as transportation constraints and further deter in-person training sessions, especially programmes that require accommodating students overnight, particularly in unstable environments.

The Mandatory Conscription Law that the military recently imposed in mid-April 2024 caused fear and desperation among youths and parents, leading many to seek ways to flee their homes. All men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27, are required to serve at least two years under military command (Zaccaro, 2024). The current military service law affected youth aged 18-35 and hindered their participation in NFE programmes.

As all NFE programmes are aimed primarily at educating young people, this law has a significant impact on the beneficiaries of NFE programmes and hinders young people's access to education. Because of this law, parents of young students fearing for their children's safety are facing a situation where they dare not allow their children to continue attending the programme. According to a leader who led an NFE programme from Karen State:

> *'Started from the coup, the biggest hurdle for their programme right now is the political instability and the conscription law issued by the military. As a result of this, there are cases where children attending our programme are taken away because their parents are not confident. It is also due to the situation that our side of the programme cannot take full responsibility for the safety of the students.'*

The statement also suggests that there are security concerns present that hinder the programme from assuming full responsibility for student safety.

In addition to security concerns, individuals involved in some NFE programmes, including students and staff, are encountering mental health challenges after experiencing security-threatening issues because of the conflicts and instability. It is found that some students are unable to cope with such situations, leading to dropouts from school:

> *'After implementation of Conscription Law by Junta, some students are dropping out of school due to mental health issues and the pressure and some are feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope with the situation.'* (An education provider, Karenni region)

NFE initiatives are taking different approaches to adapt the situation and sustain their operations. Some programmes are considering altering their target beneficiary groups that are not in the age limit of military conscription law. In addition, some programmes completely shift their location to a safer place and carry on their activities, either targeting the same beneficiaries or a different group.

However, these actions raise questions concerning the education and necessitate several additional actions to be taken. Shifting the target participants may cause mismatch between the programme content and the needs of participating groups. This will require altering programme activities and content to accommodate the needs of the new participants. Financial needs will become an important hurdle for initiatives to overcome to implement the programme.

Financial challenges

The economic situation of the country is also a concerning factor for the sustainability of the programmes. The inflation rate in Myanmar rose to 28.58% in the second quarter of 2023, from 27.5% recorded in the first quarter of the same year. This compares to under 1% in the first quarter of 2021 (Trading Economics, 2024). The huge rises in basic commodity price impacted the operation of NFE programmes in many ways.

Vocational training demands more aid compared to other programmes and is the most affected because of financial difficulties. In addition, demand for vocational training also increases in the community to adapt to economic shocks. Outdated vocational training materials and a lack of comfortable training space could further hinder the learning experience.

Additionally, inflation adds to the financial shortage problem that NFE programmes have been experiencing in programme operation. Some programmes have already been struggling to accommodate with adequate resources such as classrooms, learning area, and teaching aids that are necessary for learning. Frequent mention of limited operation area was found during interviews with education providers. An alumnus of a Bachelor's degree programme from Kachin region also described her experience:

> 'I found that the facilitation was not sufficient, particularly in the computer science major. While all students had access to computers, there were limitations in practical applications.'

Addressing the problem of such resource shortage gets harder when it is exacerbated by the inflation problem. Limited learning resource and insufficient teaching aids can cause limited curriculum coverage, lack of hands-on activities, and reduced participant engagement and consequently interfere with participants' ability to acquire new knowledge and skills effectively.

The NFE programmes, which provide students with residential accommodation for students, encountered food and commodity resource constraints due to political instability. These programmes struggled with the increased cost of food commodities resulting from the dramatic increase in the inflation rate.

An NFE programme from Shan State that provides accommodation and meals for students encounters a similar struggle with financial constraints. Despite donors increasing funding for scholarship allowances, it remains insufficient to keep pace with the rising costs. The programme addresses this by buying and storing rice for a few months' use. Managing expenses by choosing more affordable options is also an additional approach. The respondent also stated:

> 'Suppose we could use A-grade cooking oil before, we have to choose grade B right `` now.'

Addressing budgetary constraint by choosing lower-quality ingredients can pose risks to the health of the students in the long term. This challenge is more severe in programmes that do not have regular funding supports.

One of the significant challenges commonly cited by every participant is funding constraints. Most of the participants reported a lack of consistent and long-term funding sources. An education provider from the Magway region discussed the decline in donor support as they turn their focus on humanitarian aid in conflict-affected areas, which makes it difficult to sustain programme activities and provide free education to youth. When there is no regular donor for non-profit NFE programmes, sustaining the programme becomes a challenging task:

> 'We are encountering a major challenge around our financial situation. We have to work and prepare year by year. We are not able to accumulate funds for regular sustainability.' (Education provider, Rakhine region)

For some programmes, as discussed in Section 3.1.2, donors' requirement of not having to be in connection with the SAC also fuels the financial burden.

A founder of a monastic education programme, and a Buddhist religious leader, from the Bago region shared how they mitigate the problem of financial constraint by effectively engaging with stakeholders. By leveraging external support and adopting innovative fundraising strategies, the programme strives to ensure continued operation:

> 'Thanks to the Japan-Myanmar Shanti Organization, we were able to build two school buildings… I've been renting out the storage rooms in our schoolyard to raise money for about three years. It's been enough to keep our school running smoothly so far.'

Income generation is also shared as an effective way for NFE initiatives to be self-sufficient. One of the agriculture focused NFE providers from Kachin region shared their plan for financial independence, stating:

> 'We sell seasonal and organic products from our farm, generating revenue to support our centre. Furthermore, we offer rental services and engage in agricultural activities to manage and maintain a steady income for the sustainability of our centre.'

Income generation activities help NFE initiatives sustain their programmes by providing a source of revenue to cover operational cost, expand their programme offerings and reduce dependence on external funding. However, generating income sometimes necessitates capital or resources, which makes it difficult for some NFE programmes to establish a business. Furthermore, staying committed to the mission and value of the NFE programmes while financially sustaining the programme through income generating activities can be challenging for NFE initiatives.

Staff retention and quality of education

The shortage of qualified teachers is frequently discussed among research participants. It is found that financial constraints make it difficult to provide adequate financial support to existing staff, and hard to attract and retain qualified staff with a long-term commitment especially when they are facing economic challenges because of political unrest. Adding to the problem of financial constraint, the political context intensifies the challenge of qualifying teacher shortage in the NFE sector:

'We have some challenges regarding resource persons and our capacity to recruit skilled personnel is limited by our budget constraints' (Education provider, Thanintharyi region)

'Financial limitations hinder attracting and retaining qualified staff for long-term programme development.' (Education provider, Shan State)

In Kachin State, teacher shortage is exacerbated by educators seeking opportunities abroad after the military coup. A similar case is also reported by the educator from Karen State:

'For our programme, we don't have much funding therefore, we can't recruit and retain quality teachers in our programme. Therefore, teachers have to leave the school every year, and this year 12 teachers left, so we are facing more difficulties.' (Education provider, Karen State)

An education provider from Kachin region stated that the programme adopted online platforms for remote teaching to partially solve the problem of ensuring expertise in programme delivery. However, the challenge of financial constraint, intertwined with the threatening political context, creates a scarcity of human resources, which is a serious problem in sustaining the delivery of NFE programmes. The inability to recruit and retain quality staff impacts on the effectiveness by compromising the quality of instruction, programme delivery, and participant engagement.

Economic hardship and programme accessibility

Economic hardships further impact programme participation, as prioritizing basic needs often leads to the postponement of education and engagement in day-labourer work. Participants also reported that in some communities, most potential students of their programme are supporting their families working, which deters them from participating in NFE programmes. Managing time for training in working hours is a considerable challenge for NFE programmes in the recruitment process. Time constraints present a barrier to NFE programmes. In the face of economic hardship following the 2021 military coup, the need to support their family financially takes precedence over education:

'Most of the people in our community work in agriculture. Some students wanted to attend but the parents did not allow their children to attend because they needed to work in agriculture.' (Education provider, Shan State)

Even alumni of NFE programmes recognize the difficulties with funding and suggest service providers look for more grant opportunities. One alumnus even added that youth in Rakhine region could not afford the NFE programme financially if the programme could not provide scholarships. Therefore, the NFE programme needs to be able to provide scholarships for youth so that they can access the programmes. 'Only when youth can access and join the programme, such a programme will be sustainable,' added the alumnus.

NFE initiatives suffered from the economic downturn following the military coup, adversely impacting the quality of service received by beneficiaries and hindering the programmes' ability to address community needs. Having to engage in labor work acts as a barrier to accessing education, making it more challenging to recruit students unless NFE programmes receive enough funding to relieve the burden of students.

Other factors influencing NFE programme sustainability

In addition to political instability and financial hardships, the sustainability of NFE programmes in Myanmar is also influenced by cultural factors, participants' perceptions, and technological advancements.

Cultural norms, traditions, and beliefs present barriers to NFE implementation, particularly when they conflict with modern educational approaches or gender equality principles. Strong community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and local ownership can enhance programme relevance, acceptance, and sustainability.

For instance, the research found that some communities have cultural beliefs that make discussions about sex education and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) inappropriate. Due to these cultural beliefs, community members resist participating in or allowing their children to participate in sex education training programmes. This requires the community to struggle to gain the support of the community. If the programme cannot engage the community effectively, NFE initiatives will have to struggle to continue in the long term. An education provider discussed that some elderly people were opposed to giving training on such topics:

> *'They even said that it drives their children to be curious even though they were not curious before. Therefore, it is difficult to organize or arrange the training...'* (Education provider, Mon Region)

Some NFE initiatives respond to challenges by engaging closely with stakeholders, including parents. Collaborating with these stakeholders involves providing training and awareness, inviting religious leaders to specific training sessions (e.g., social cohesion), and seeking protection and endorsement from local authorities:

> *'We make sure to provide training and raise awareness among the local authorities about our project. Once they understand what we're trying to accomplish, they end up contributing a lot.' (Education provider, Rakhine State)*

There is also some perception among some students that free education programmes are of lower quality. They tend to value these programmes less than paid classes, as discussed in 1.4 Paid vs. Unpaid Programmes. Negative perceptions about free education can devalue NFE programmes in the eyes of community members, both the community and students may be less likely to engage in the programme's activities and advocate for its continuation. Some NFE programmes design their programme to be paid classes while maintaining accessibility to the programme for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Setting strict requirements in the application process is also reported to be an effective way of ensuring participants are truly willing to participate in the programme. This helps filter out individuals who may not be genuinely committed to fully engaged in the programme.

Moreover, technological advancements and the influence of social media presented challenges for education providers. Familiarity with digital advancements facilitates NFE initiatives in communication, collaboration, and networking with stakeholders and learners. It will enable NFE programmes to stay relevant to changing needs and preferences. Information sharing will also be made effective.

A disabled vocational training provider from the Magway region, who provides sewing training noted her struggle to keep up with IT modernization, online marketing strategies, and modern customer service practices, impacting their income, product sales, and student demand:

> *'As I am not quite familiar with the current technological advancement, I go with the traditional way of marketing……. There is a drop in the number of students'* (Education provider, Magway Region)

Overall, NFE initiatives are encountering challenges in sustaining their programmes. The research findings suggest that the current political dynamic in Myanmar creates several issues that hinder the operation of the programme in many ways. While some initiatives have taken proactive measures to adapt and maintain resilience in the face of these challenges, issues such as ensuring the safety of staff and students, financial hardships, and retaining qualified personnel continue to pose significant hurdles. These challenges make it increasingly difficult for NFE programmes to deliver quality, relevant educational services that effectively address the needs of the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research highlights the vital role of NFE in Myanmar, serving as a complementary pathway as well as alternatives to formal education by offering diverse learning opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings. NFE programmes exhibit adaptability and responsiveness, providing tailored experiences that address the unique needs and interests of learners who may not thrive in conventional educational environments. These initiatives serve as catalyst for personal and professional development, equipping individuals with essential skills and knowledge for various aspects of life.

Despite the evident benefits of NFE in promoting inclusivity and enhancing overall educational experiences across all segments of society, challenges persist in achieving complete inclusion. While NFE initiatives effectively address local needs, demand, and interests, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness in addressing community needs, limiting factors are growing especially after the coup that hinder comprehensive inclusivity. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders emerge as essential for the successful implementation of NFE programmes, facilitating programme sustainability and enriching initiatives with diverse expertise and perspectives.

The research highlights the transformative impact of NFE programmes across Myanmar's regions and states, illustrating their various influence on individuals, communities, and society at large. Through firsthand accounts and relevant quotes from participants, the discussion captures the authentic voices and experiences of those directly impacted by these educational initiatives, highlighting their significance in empowering youth for peacebuilding activities and fostering social cohesion among youth.

Despite facing challenges such as political instability and resource constraints, some of NFE programmes demonstrate resilience and potential for continued contribution to Myanmar's educational landscape and broader societal development while many NFE programmes had to shut down. Proactive measures described in recommendations to address these challenges and leverage strengths, such as targeted skill development and community engagement, are essential for sustaining the impact and relevance of NFE initiatives in facilitating a culture of peace and social cohesion among Myanmar's youth. Overall, while obstacles exist in maintaining the contribution of NFE initiatives, proactive steps are being taken by some programmes to mitigate these challenges, demonstrating a commitment to ensuring their continued effectiveness and impact.

Recommendations

The insights accumulated from the research on NFE resource provision and strategies for overcoming challenges in hard-to-reach areas are invaluable assets for guiding programme implementation and development. NFE is crucial for providing learning opportunities to those often excluded from the formal education system. To enhance NFE effectively, providers, local CSOs, community-based organisations, international organisations, donors, and academic institutions are advised to adopt a comprehensive strategy focusing on the following areas:

1) Financial Support: International Organisations such as donors and academic institutions should provide financial support to local NFE initiatives to ensure programme sustainability. This includes:

- Offering scholarships to students from underserved communities to encourage participation in NFE programmes.
- Improving infrastructure to accommodate students with impairments.
- Making staff retention efforts to sustain their programmes.

2) Technical Support: Technical support is crucial for sustaining NFE programmes. NFE providers, CSOs, and international organisations should contribute to providing technical support, including:

- Prioritizing mental health support for education providers and students due to the current unstable context.
- Enhancing the skills and capabilities of educators and facilitators through comprehensive teacher training and professional development opportunities.
- Developing curriculum modules that reflect the local context and distributing teaching materials to local contexts and languages to enhance relevance, accessibility, and learning experiences.
- Collaborating with international accreditation bodies to secure accreditation in the higher education sector.

3) Partnership Building: Building partnerships is fundamental to the success of NFE programmes. NFE initiatives, CSOs, and international organisations should focus on:

- Addressing weakened participation and collaboration of stakeholders in education programmes.
- Creating networking events to broaden collaboration opportunities among networks.
- Promoting local wisdom through webinars with local resource persons to encourage stakeholder's participation.
- Fostering and expanding partnerships with reputable academic institutions to ensure the recognition and long-term success of non-formal higher education programmes.

4) Alumni Support: Alumni of NFE initiatives often lack opportunities to apply the skills and knowledge they have gained. NFE providers should consider expanding their programmes to support alumni by:

- Creating and offering small grants, networking grants, job opportunities, and further study opportunities for alumni students.
- Providing training in employability skills.
- Offering internship opportunities for alumni.

5) Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E): Implementing robust M&E mechanisms is essential to assess the effectiveness of NFE programmes. This involves:

- Conducting regular impact assessments to identify areas for improvement.
- Establishing feedback loops in involving stakeholders to ensure programmes are continuously refined and improved based on real-world experiences and needs.
- Allocating sufficient time for comprehensive training and skill development in project-based vocational training programmes to ensure the safety and well-being of participants while maximizing programme impact and effectiveness.

6) Mitigating Security and Safety Issues: Security and safety issue is one of the crucial challenges in sustaining NFE programmes especially in conflict affected areas. To mitigate these challenges, NFE initiatives should collaborate with

- Governing authorities as necessary and strengthen collaborative partnerships with NGOs, academia and businesses to leverage expertise, resources and learning opportunities.
- United Nations Office for Disaster Risks Reduction (UNDRR), Mine Advisory Group (MAG) and etc. to provide risk awareness trainings in conflict affected areas will help NFE initiatives to respond securely in hazardous situations.

Implementing these recommendations will enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of non-formal education programmes in Myanmar, eventually contributing to broader educational and socio-economic development.

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