

EDUCATION IN MYANMAR

A Concise Abstract of Educational Policy

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A concise abstract of educational policy

In his inaugural speech the newly elected president of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, U Thein Sein, said:

"We need more and more human resources of intellectuals and intelligentsia in building a modern, developed democratic nation. In this regard, a fundamental requirement is development of human resources including new generations who will take over State duties. Therefore, we will promote the nation's education standard to meet the international level and encourage human resource development. Regarding the education sector, the 24 regions for special development have been established with universities and colleges so that local youths can pursue higher education in their regions of states. Rural areas have seen a massive number of basic education schools. In order to promote the nation's education standard to the international level, we will practise free compulsory education system, improve the standards of present universities, colleges, and high, middle and primary schools, provide more teaching aids, sharpen the abilities and improve the socio-economic status of educational staff, and increase the enrolment rates in middle and high schools. In that regard, we will work in cooperation with international organizations including the UN, INGOs and NGOs. We will promulgate necessary laws for private education schools. Moreover, we will provide stipends for higher education abroad and stipends for outstanding students at home."²

These objectives are not new. For decades the motto has been "Building a modern developed nation through education", and the vision was specified as follows: "To create an education system that can generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the Knowledge Age". Many new school and university buildings all over the country show that the ruling circles have been serious about it. As a result of their endeavours they pride themselves for a literacy rate of 94 %.

On the other hand they are heavily criticized for not allotting enough funds and attention to education. Even impartial analysts like Robert Taylor state low educational attainment as "an increasingly serious social, economic, and political problem. More than fifty percent of children do not complete five years of basic schooling, and even those who do may not be able to read and write properly. ... In 1999 a UN survey found the functional literacy rate to be only 53 per cent and case studies from remote areas show figures as low as 10-20 percent."³

So – how is the reality of education in contemporary Myanmar? Let us start with a concise retrospective:

Tradition

Learnedness is regarded a high value. This attitude is rooted in Buddhism which explains ignorance as a major source of sufferings, i.e. being reborn again and again. In 2007 a monk in Mandalay explained to us that the youngsters cannot find the way to salvation if they are deprived of education, and that pleading for better living conditions, which allow kids to attend school properly, was the main purpose of their demonstrations in September. Of course,

¹ Paper read at the research colloquy of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies on 28 July 2011.

² The New Light of Myanmar, 2011-3-31.

³ Robert Taylor and Morten Pederson: An independent report for the European Commission, January 2005.

the Buddhist concept of learning refers to the teachings of the Buddha. But even if it is confined to this end it includes reading and writing skills which are fundamental to any learning. Early visitors to Myanmar noticed with respect the high level of literacy. John S. Furnivall who had studied the Myanma society thoroughly wrote:

Founded on Buddhism as interpreted by the genius of the people its outstanding achievement, unparalleled at any time among any people, was the system of national education on a voluntary basis in the monastic schools where all boys could learn not merely their letters or how to make a living but how to live as members of a national community. [...] This system ensured widespread literacy, mitigated class distinctions by bringing rich and poor together and opened even to the poorest prospects of advancement to the highest posts. Although its primary function was to perpetuate among successive generations the principles of Buddhism, it was one cause for the stability and permanence of Burmese civilization ...⁴

The traditional function of the monasteries is reflected in that the same word is used for monastery and for school:

(ဘုန်းကြီး)ကျောင်း	/(hpoun:dji:)tjaun: /	monastery
(စာသင်)ကျောင်း	/(sathin)tjaun: /	school

Of course, education was largely religious and ethical rather than secular and economic. The overall aim was to make people accept their position in life and the world order as both were the consequences of the karma. The idea that education or rather formal schooling is a preparation for life was introduced into Myanmar only with the coming of the British. The forerunners, however, were of religious kind: Christian mission schools which were allowed to operate freely within the country on the basis of a charter granted by the king in 1813.

Colonial era (1853/1886-1947)

After their conquest the British first tried to utilize the monastic schooling system for their purposes but failed because of the unwillingness of the monks to follow prescribed rules. Around 1870 the first secular schools were established in British Burma, i.e. in the lower part of the country. In order to distinguish them from monasteries they were called "Lokadat Kyaung" – worldly schools with Myanma language, mathematics, geography, hygiene as subjects. The overall schooling system they installed by and by after the whole of the country had become a British colony in 1886 was meant to serve their needs: to produce clerks for the government offices and skilled labour for trading offices, and, of course, obedient subjects loyal to the government. The uplift of the general educational level was more or less a by-product. Three types of schools were to serve the purpose:

- Vernacular schools: instruction in Burmese or one of the recognised indigenous languages; 96 % of all schools;
- Anglo-vernacular schools: instruction in English and Burmese or one of the recognised indigenous languages;
- English schools: instruction in English.

About 96 % of all schools were vernacular schools with Myanma as the medium of instruction and English as a foreign language. Hence, the leavers of these schools had next to nothing chance to gain access to qualified and well paid jobs. These were reserved for the graduates of the English and English-Vernacular schools. The kind of knowledge imparted

⁴ John S. Furnivall, Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma, 3rd edition, People's Literatur Committee & House, Rangoon 1957, p. (h)

was largely not related to the experience and heritage of the people. In his short story "Oil" of 1938 the writer U Thein Pe Myint lets his protagonist lament: "*My son is learning all the wrong things.... It is good that he can read but not when he has to read wrong things and bad things.*"⁵

The same trend prevailed in higher education. By the Rangoon University Act of 1920 the first institutions of higher learning, namely the Judson College and the Rangoon College, were fused to form a residential unitary university for elites. When a small group of indigenous students on the 4th of December 1920 boycotted the university in protest against this act which discriminated Myanmar students the widely held discontentment with the colonial educational policy made it spark the enthusiastic movement of national schools all over the country. The unfavorable circumstances did not allow it to succeed but the idea of an education which is rooted in the own social surroundings and which is aiming at the needs of the nation has persisted since then. All governments after independence have been determined to materialize this vision.

Parliamentary period (1948-1962)

The main educational aims of the Union Government were that all citizens shall get access to education, that the qualified staff needed for reconstructing and developing the country shall be produced, and that democracy shall prevail. In order to achieve these ends the government sought the advice of the UNESCO and studied the experience of developed countries. A special committee was ordered to work out an educational program which reflects history and culture of Myanmar, incorporates progress of modern international education and can come up to the needs of the country. The Welfare State New Educational Plan of 1953 defined the following aims:

- To ensure that every citizen of the Union of Myanmar shall have a basic foundation in the three R's,
- To train an adequate number of technicians and technologists;
- To train and equip young men and women so that they can shoulder their responsibilities as citizens of the Union;
- To eradicate illiteracy and imbue all citizens with the five strengths (National Health, National Education, National Wealth, National Character, and National Unity);
- To perpetuate the principles and practice of democracy throughout the Union.

The intention was to place all schools under central control, to open new schools, to revise all text books and to have new ones compiled, and to train a sufficient number of qualified teachers. Moreover they, decreed Myanmar language as medium of instruction in the schools, planned to introduce compulsory primary education on trial and intended to increase the facilities for technical and vocational training and rearranged the course levels as follows:

- Nursery schools for children aged 4-5 (private provision);
- Primary school (infant class [standard 0] to standard 4);
- Middle school (standard 5 to standard 7) for children aged 5 to 10 years old;
- High school including Agriculture and Technical High School (standard 8 to standard 10) for children aged 13-16 years;
- Vocational and technical institutes and university for young people aged 16 and above.

The Yangon University was restructured, the Mandalay Intermediate College by and by

⁵ Patricia M. Milne: Selected Short Stories of Thein Pe Myint. Rangoon 1975, p. 90.

upgraded to become a university in 1958. The expenditure on education rose from 29,3 million Kyat 1950 to 111,7 millions Kyat 1960, i.e. 2,3 percent of the gross national product.

Yet the good intentions did not or not fully work out due to the civil war and economic problems. The increase of enrolment was neutralized by the increase of drop-outs: only 19 of 100 enrolled kids finished the primary level, mostly for social reasons and because of the insufficient qualification of teachers. The government could not open as many schools as necessary. Remoted areas and particularly hilly regions were unaffected by the plans. As a whole the gap between schooling and life was not bridged. The curricula were only partly revised, and the instruction continued to be examination-centred. The state control of education existed only partly, as there were a considerable number of private schools particularly at the middle and high level (including mission schools). The universities and their affiliated colleges were largely autonomous.

The socialist-minded trial (1962-1988)

The Revolutionary Council which took power after the military coup of 2 March 1962 by and large resumed the progressive educational ideas of their precursors with stronger consistency. Their credo was expressed in the programmatical document "The Burmese Way to Socialism" as follows:

"The Revolutionary Council believes that the existing educational system unequated with livelihood will have to be transformed. An educational system equated with livelihood and based on socialist moral values will be brought about. Science will be given precedence in education.

Our educational target is to bring basic education within the reach of all. As regards higher education only those who have promise and enough potentialities and industriousness to benefit from it will be specially encouraged."

With the resoluteness characteristic of them the military set about to transform the educational system as prescribed. In practice this meant to give priority to science over arts and to professional or vocational training over arts & science.

The University Education Act of 1964 put this intention into action by taking professional departments such as education, economics, medicine out of the University and establishing them as independent institutes. Thus the unitary system of higher education ceased to exist as numerous university-level institutes came into existence. In order to administer and coordinate their work the Office of Universities Administration was formed in 1964 and later renamed Department of Higher Education. Moreover the law prescribed the Myanma language as sole means of instruction also at the university level.

The Basic Education Law of 1966 changed the school structure from 5-3-3 to 5-4-2 thus extending the middle school. With Myanma language as the medium of instruction English was continued as a compulsory foreign language from the fifth standard onwards. The children had to sit for examinations at the end of each standard based on a 'pass-fail' system. For the national examinations at standard 8 two categories were introduced: A-list students could study science subjects at high school and B-list students only arts subjects. Similarly at standard 10 examination A-list students were entitled to apply for subjects with high prestige like medicine, technology etc., and B-list students only for arts&science or for vocational

institutes with low prestige. This resulted in downgrading the importance of art subjects such as history, philosophy, sociology etc., which were considered to be intellectually inferior. In principle this system exists till now.

One of the crucial issues was the existence of private middle and high schools, which the government considered contrary to the objectives. It first tried to integrate them into the system by registration rules, but in the middle of the 1960ies nationalised most of them including the mission schools. Thus the objective to create a homogeneous system of education was materialized – all formal education under state control – and – at least theoretically – equal opportunities for every child. On the other hand, however, the ruling circles were aware that they cannot do without private initiative in order to provide enough facilities. Therefore, 1970 new schools were allowed to register under certain conditions, mostly urban high schools for rich people. In 1972 another form to increase education facilities by using private funds was introduced: the affiliated schools at primary and middle levels. If they abided by the prescribed rules and norms they were officially recognised by the Ministry of Education but remained in the collective ownership of their community. Another way to utilize existing resources has been the cooperation with Buddhist monasteries. For this purpose the Subdepartment of monastic education in the Ministry of Education was established, which together with the Sangha arranged courses in order to train monks as primary teachers. Monastic schools which had themselves registered and followed the official curricula were entitled to government grants.

One field the government scored success was the reduction of adult illiteracy which was prevalent in rural areas, with a predominance of women. The basic principle and strategy of the literacy campaign adopted by the Central Literacy Committee in 1966 was based on the characteristic of mass movement with community participation using local resources on a voluntary basis. In 1969 Meiktila was chosen as a pilot project area. In 1970 the campaign was extended into two more districts, one year later into four more districts and so on. The results got international recognition when the international tribunal of the UNESCO awarded Myanmar of the 'Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Prize' in 1971 and the Noma Prize in 1983 by 1988.

Another trait of the educational policy of that period was the high attention, which was paid to the moral education of the students at all levels. It aimed at inculcating such qualities as love of work, self-reliance, co-operativeness, perseverance, respect for discipline, unselfishness etc. It was mainly to be achieved by practical activities such as the volunteers movement which had helped the literacy campaign to success or the best students movement or activities in youth organizations under the Burmese Socialist Programme Party.

As a whole, however, the objectives aspired to could not be achieved, mainly due to the deterioration of the economic situation, which ultimately resulted in the uprising of 1988. The drop-outs in the primary level remained as high as before. Moreover, the retreat from the world, which to the minds of the ruling circles should help Myanmar to return to her own roots, prevented the influx of world knowledge and caused serious setbacks in contents and methodology. The problem became obvious when Myanma students failed to get admitted to universities abroad because of insufficient command of English language – among them the

favorite daughter of U Ne Win, as the saying goes. Therefore from 1981 onwards English was introduced as a compulsory subject from the infant standard onwards, but too late – there were nearly no teachers left who could teach the language properly.

Market economy and open door

The military authorities which took power again in 1988 work from the model that was created during the period of the Burmese Socialist Programme, adding only minor changes to both the administrating bodies and the educational institutions. The value they attribute to education is reflected in the motto: Building a modern developed nation through education.



For overseeing, coordinating and guiding the educational system the *Myanmar Naing-ngan Education Committee* was established in 1991, headed by the Secretary (1) of the military council. I don't know whether it is continued after the State Peace and Development Council stepped down at the 30th March 2011 but prior to this it laid down the principles of educational policy.

These principles in essence remind to the previous ones just eradicating the reference to socialism:

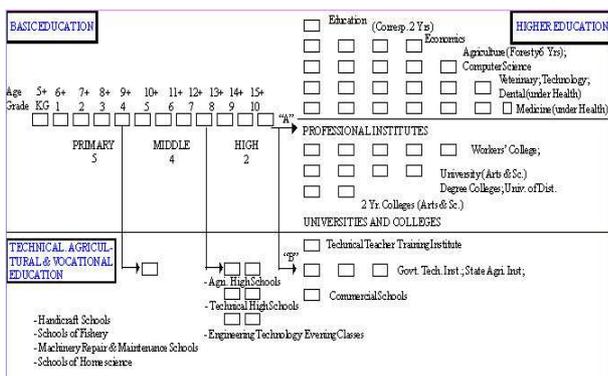
- a) To ensure teacher quality;
- b) To upgrade syllabuses and curricula to international level;
- c) To use teaching aids effectively;
- d) To respect and abide by laws, regulations and disciplines;
- e) To nurture and strengthen patriotism and union spirit.

In order to achieve the aims a 30 Year Long Term Education Development Plan has been implemented since 2001-02 in six phases of five years duration each in both the basic education and the higher education sub-sectors. Currently the second five year plan is being implemented.

In **basic education** the main tasks are

- a) ensuring accessibility to education,
- b) raising the quality of education.

The structure was retained with a few adjustments⁶:



⁶ Myanmar National Commission for UNESCO: Country report. February 1994.

Note: Teacher Training Colleges and Schools are not shown. Institute of Education accepts graduate teachers only. Institutes of Foreign Languages accept only graduates who are in-service personnel.

- Beginning from the academic year 2001-02 suitable primary schools were upgraded to post-primary schools in order to provide opportunities to students who have completed primary education to pursue middle school education conveniently and to increase the transmission rate to middle school. That means, in areas where no middle schools are available primary schools that meet the specifications are permitted to open middle school classes.



Maths in a post-primary school near Nyaungshwe, Shan State, 2006.

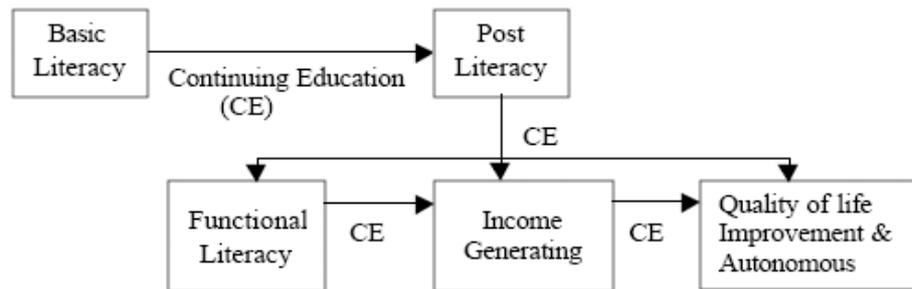
- Starting from 1998 pre-school classes have been opened for acquiring primary education prior to age of attending formal school.
- In order to increase the enrolment rate of primary level students since 1999 the last week of May is designated as Whole Township Enrolment Week, for the success of which responsible persons from state level, regional authorities, education personnel, GONGOs like the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation, Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Associations, local communities and well-wishers collaborate. According to official records the enrolment rate of students aged 5 increased from 91 % in 1999 to 98,13 % 2008. In the framework of the *All School-age Children in School Project* donations have been made by the Ministry of Education, social organisations, local communities and well-wishers. In 2011, too, the newspapers report very good enrolment rates in several greater regions and the donation of text books and learning aids.
- Since 1996 the literacy programmes have been in charge of the Township Nonformal Education Committees. By 2001 they reported a coverage of 259 townships with 450,226 illiterates 277,635 of whom became literate thanks to 80,583 volunteers.

Year ⁷	Literacy Rate
Before 1886	85.0
Colonial period	35.0
1954	63.3
1973	71.0
1983	78.0
1996	83.0
2000	91.0
2003	92.2
2005	94.1
2008	94.8

⁷ Government of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Education: Development of Education in Myanmar, February 2009, p. 6.

New is the focus on continuation as this outline shows: ⁸

Process of NFE Programme



Additional subjects composed of science, moral and ethics, health education, pre-vocational subjects; physical education, aesthetics etc. were introduced.

- The development of morale and discipline now is focusing on patriotism, union spirit and willingness to abide by laws and regulations. For this purpose in 1999 the additional subject "Union spirit" has been added to the study of moral and civics at the basic education level. NFE: Non



„Love your motherland!“

(signboard in the Mon State, therefore in Myanmar and Mon)

- In order to improve the quality of teaching teacher training colleges and schools have been upgraded and pre-service, in-service and refresher courses are being conducted.
- Special attention is paid to the progress of the border regions. Besides further expanding the number of schools the Academy for the Development of National Races which had been established by the previous government in 1964 was upgraded as University. Its purpose has been to train teachers from and for these areas. There is no information available whether it has fulfilled the expectations. Under the SPDC government 27 Nationalities Youth Development Training Schools were opened in order to attain learning opportunities for needy students and 2 special Degree Colleges in Yangon and Mandalay which are to produce state service personnel for development and administration tasks in the hilly regions.
- The state continues to rely on monastic education in order to provide for basic education in areas where no state schools exist or where the parents cannot afford formal schooling. Moreover, in areas of ethnic minorities the monasteries take care of teaching the respective language and literature.

⁸ Aus: www.unesco.org/education/uiie A Review on Adult Education in Myanmar, p. 6. NFE: Non-formal Education.

In the field of **higher education**, too, the inherited structures were retained in principle with some significant changes:

- The old-established universities of Yangon and Mandalay now are reserved for postgraduate courses from honours onwards. Undergraduate education is dispersed to smaller universities or degree colleges mostly in the outskirts of the city or even far away. One of the obvious purposes was to avoid big crowds of politicised university students inside the cities in order to prevent unrest which in the past several times had resulted into closing universities for years. Another reason was to cope with the mass of youth who had passed the tenth standard but could not proceed to universities because these 'rested'.
- The number of institutions – universities, degree colleges, colleges, institutes – increased from 32 in 1988 to 157 nowadays including the areas of ethnic minorities. Most new institutions duplicated existing ones in order to safeguard that in each state and province at least three institutions of higher education exist: an arts & science university or a degree college, a government computer college and a government technological college. Some of the institutions, however, were entirely new: the Universities of Culture in Yangon 1993 and Mandalay some years later, the Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Yangon 1998, the Myanmar Maritime University (upgraded Institute of Marine Technology in Yangon) in Thilawa south of Yangon and the Myanmar Aerospace Engineering University in Meiktila, both in 2004. While the first three follow more or less traditional lines, the latter two have been facilitated with international syllabuses and learning aids and – what's more – are said to apply modern teaching methods supplied by visiting professors from foreign universities to the faculty.



Government Computer College
Hpa-an, Kayin State

- The fragmented organisation which was introduced under the Revolutionary government was continued with 64 tertiary education institutions under the Ministry of Education and the rest under the respective ministries.⁹

<i>Sr.No</i>	<i>Ministry of</i>	<i>1988</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>Increase</i>
1	Education	27	64	37

⁹ Government of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Education: Development of Education in Myanmar, February 2009, p. 13f.

2 Health	4	15	11
3 Science and Technology	-	56	56
4 Defence	1	5	4
5 Culture	-	2	2
6 Forestry	-	1	1
7 Agriculture&Irrigation	-	1	1
8 Livestock-breeding/Fisheries	-	1	1
9 Co-operatives	-	5	5
10 Transport	-	3	3
11 Religious Affairs	-	1	1
12 Progress of Border Areas and National Races	-	2	2
13 Civil Service Selection and Training Board	-	1	1
Total	32	157	125

- Since 1994 the Ministry of Education has offered doctoral courses in the Arts & Science Universities Yangon and Mandalay, later also in the Institute of Economics and the Yangon University of Education. So far there are more than 700 PhD degree holders, most of them in sciences at the Yangon University. In order to have a high output of PhD the period for preparing the thesis was reduced with bad effects on the quality, which anyway is debatable. Yet – the mere fact should not be underestimated: it opens ways to further training and to international cooperation.

Kind of institution

arts & science university, degree college, institute

professional university

college (arts & science)

Degrees conferred

Bachelor up to honors level, Master, M.Research, Diploma

Bachelor, Master, M.Research

- (first two years only)

Arts & Science Universities Yangon & Mandalay, Yangon Institute of Economics, Yangon Institute of Education

Ph.D.

- In order to cater for the needs of those who cannot afford to study away from home the correspondence courses, which started in 1975, have been developed into Universities of Distance Education: 1992 in Yangon, 1998 in Mandalay, under them are 26 regional centres.



Knowledge does not happen to be distant.

They are to become open universities utilizing information technology and multi-media facilities. When the universities "rested" between 1988 and 1991 and between 1997 and 2000, their importance increased considerably.

- A novelty are the Human Resource Development Centres, which have been established with a number of universities and degree colleges during the last ten years. Their task is to provide non-formal job-related education programmes with a wide variety of options in diverse fields such as foreign language studies, computer science, computer engineering, accounting studies, business management, environmental studies, multi-media arts, gemology, cosmetic technology, teaching. They are additional to the regular courses and not free of charge, thus generating income for the university concerned.



- In line with the endeavors to develop human resources is the introduction of e-learning and multi-media classes. In 2006 the equipment of 8,270 schools with multi-media classrooms at all levels was reported.
- English has been re-introduced as the main language of instruction at university and high school levels in all subjects except Myanmar language and literature and perhaps history.

Since market economy was proclaimed, **private schools** are in the rise. Mostly they provide courses in English and other languages, business related subjects, computer related subjects and the like. Among them the vocational training schools have become rather popular with young people, as they attempt to increase their chances of getting a good job in the challenging market. The major career paths for the graduates are tourism, beauty and fashion, nursing and engineering.

Myanma language
English
Mathematics
Chemistry
Physics
Biology
Economics



The courses they offer last between one and four months, and they accept also people who passed the 8th standard only. As long as they are supplementary to formal education the state did neither consider them as interfering with its control of the education system nor did it use them as a pretext to withdraw. Besides them, however, since about ten years International Private Schools have been allowed to function in the country. Their main purpose is to prepare for further learning abroad, mostly Singapore, but via Singapore also Australia, UK and others. The school fees vary from US\$ 100 to 600 for each of the nine months the academic year counts. So far about 100 of these schools exist in the country. However, there was no supervisory body which assessed and evaluated the matters such as the existing curriculum, the yearly examination system etc.. Nobody checked whether the fees are worth paying and whether the graduates really can enrol to the foreign colleges and universities as the Myanmar Weekly Eleven reported.¹⁰ There is to be hoped that the situation will improve when the law on the registration of private schools, which was approved by the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament) during its recent session, becomes effective.



Attempt of an assessment

The short and by far not exhaustive survey of educational policy shows that all governments of independent Myanmar set similar objectives: to establish an education system that is rooted in the own social and cultural surroundings and that can cater for the needs of the nation. The main points defined in the Welfare State New Education Plan of 1953 in essence remained valid through all the different periods though with different wording.

It also shows that none of the governments could fully materialize the intentions due to objective and subjective reasons.

The SPDC government has often been blamed to neglect education. As a proof the critics mostly focus on underfinancing because only a small part of the national income is allotted to education. The survey reveals that the military councils and their successors have been aware of the importance of education for the country's progress. Moreover it shows that in this field which is not ostensibly political they were anxious to study international developments and to adopt whatever has proved successful abroad and suits their own conditions. Even in times of self-imposed isolation under the Burmese Way to Socialism they followed this well-trying

¹⁰ Weekly Eleven, 06.06.2011.

principle: *"In no area, political, economic or other, is the study restricted. What is good and useful for the human society in the Union of Myanmar will be extracted in its essence, adapted and applied."*¹¹, let alone now. What makes the difference is that all the previous governments were accepted and not despised, were not under the steady pressure to prove their legitimacy. This may explain why the former government attached highest priority to various aspects of security like the combat strength of the *tatmadaw* and visible achievements. Thus they preferred to rely more on the construction of new buildings, human resource development centres, multi-media class-rooms and on records of success than on the sustainable change of the living, learning and teaching conditions.

Such an reported success is the enrolment rate of more than 98 per cent. It might be true under urban conditions but not so in rural areas, let alone remote hilly regions where the density of basic education schools is low. Perhaps the statement is based on a calculation as follows: *"The land area of Myanmar is 261,228 square miles, and as there is a total of 40,548 schools in the whole country, the farthest a student has to travel from home to attend school being 1.43 miles, the distance between home and school is within acceptable limits. Therefore, the state has provided adequate accessibility to education."*¹² Even if most of the parents enrol their kids in the infant class it does not mean that they will really attend school. Although nowadays officially only 15 per cent drop out, personal information suggest a much higher rate. Many kids I asked said that they left the school because their parents could no longer afford the costs. Besides the inscription fees which are 100 Kyat for the infant class, but increase with every grade, payments have to be made to several funds. At the primary level it can sum up to about 10,000 Kyat per year. That does not seem high – approximately 10 Dollars or about 10 per cent of the current monthly salary of a school teacher, but for families with low cash income and several children it is more than they can spend. Often the kids are taken out of school before completion, in particular girls, because they must contribute to family income. The situation is even worse with non-state schools in community responsibility. When I travelled in Rakhine State in 2003 I visited three villages of the Chin ethnic group. Each of them had a school and hoped for grants from foreign visitors to repair it or finish construction. In one case the primary school had been provided by UNDP, even with an own well. It was now in the responsibility of the village which had to maintain it and to appoint and pay the teachers. The villager who showed us around said that he would love to send his son to school but his income from making bamboo rafts did not allow the expenditure of about 2000 Kyat per month for this purpose. Another point is that the people particularly in remote villages of hilly areas cannot attach much value to education: why should they spend money on something that does not pay off?

Similarly a literacy rate of nearly 95 per cent suggests that everyone who ever started to learn reading and writing was counted and that remote areas are not included. There is still a long way to materialize the lofty goal of education for all.

In the minority areas the ethnic issue adds to the problem: Any education is done in Myanmar language with Bama background, in the case of monks or thilashin (nuns) as teachers more-

¹¹ The Specific Characteristics of the Burma Socialist Programme Party. Yangon 1964, S. 2.

¹² Government of the Union of Myanmar, Ministry of Education: Development of Education in Myanmar, February 2009, p. 2.

over with the tinge of Buddhist missionary work. Both language and Buddhism are at the centre of controversy: While the central leaders – all Bamar – consider Myanmar as common language crucial for national integration which again is a pledge of independence, the elites of the ethnic minorities dread it as a menace to cultural identity. Under these conditions educational work in these areas cannot be successful. It must be part of an overall solution which comprises socio-economic progress as well as compromises in regard to languages and textbooks. Currently Myanmar is the sole language of instruction like Thai in Thailand. Perhaps in the new parliamentary framework a solution can be found which is in accord with the interests of both the central and local authorities. It could involve the compilation of new textbooks, which cover themes of general interest avoiding Bama-centredness and which at the primary level are written in the local *lingua franca* as well.

Another big hindrance to equal opportunities for all is the tuition system. Tuition has always existed and benefitted those who could pay for it. Within the last decades, however, it has become a must, without which no student can progress. Officially tuition with commercial ends is forbidden but the authorities turn a blind eye on it. The underlying cause is that the salaries of teachers do not correspond with the high moral esteem bestowed on them as one of the five jewels.

In order to generate additional income they started to offer tuition at a broad scale and in order to get enough pupils they often do not teach the full lessons in class any longer. Some years ago two boys who were working in a teashop told me they must get home now for tuition; if they do not attend their teacher will not let them pass the examination even if they can answer satisfactorily. Nowadays tuition penetrates the whole life from pre-school up to 10th standard and even beyond. This can cost from K3,000 to K30,000 per month and even more when the all deciding tenth standard examination is imminent. A friend of mine spent more than 400,000 Kyat on tuition when his eldest son had to sit for the final examination. Raising the salaries of the teachers cannot solve the problem. Actually the salaries had been increased two times within the last ten years, but the prices rose quicker, and those with other than civil service incomes were the big losers. Tuition as way of life apparently resulted from the coincidence of freedom for business in the framework of market economy and insufficient salaries, and it can be overcome only in the course of overall socio-economic development.

The Long-term National Plan for Education identifies as a task "*to establish an education system that will produce persons with all round knowledge, who possess originality, creativity, maturity, analytic skills, ability to grasp and utilize modern technology, ability to fulfill community needs and who possess patriotism, union spirit and civic sense*". This involves the revision and reform of curricula and textbooks which are also defined as a task, above all, however, to revolutionize the contents of teachers' training and the relations between pupils and teacher. Relevant information of the contents and methods of instruction is not available. Personal information suggests that not much has changed yet, namely, that the teacher is an unquestionable authority and that the traditional duties of pupils are still in force:

1. To arise and welcome the teacher when he arrives.
2. To approach him reverently.
3. To imbibe his teachings with complete faith and trust.
4. To serve him willingly and faithfully.
5. To study his teachings assiduously.

They leave no room for developing such qualities as creativity, analytic skills etc., as defined as tasks. Most of the teachers at all levels are captivated in traditional attitudes and methods and not prepared for change. Thus the tradition of unconditional obedience and of the stronger bullying the weaker is ever reproduced. This unpreparedness applies to the university as well: About seven years ago I was invited to take part in an PhD defense. Although I am entirely ignorant of Technical Chemistry I was even appointed a member of the examination commission together with a number of elderly professors. The candidate had researched into methods how rapidly growing trees can be systematically used for producing cheap charcoal. Her findings are very important for combatting deforestation in the hills. She did her job well, but only the head of the department – a professor of about 40 years who had obtained his PhD in Manchester – supported her; the senior teachers found many faults in her thesis because it did not correspond with the knowledge and experiences they had. Another example: In the framework of the DAAD Sandwich programme a PhD candidate of the Myanmar Department of the Yangon University stayed for two years with a linguistic professor in Berlin and studied a special theory in order to analyse the Myanmar grammar in an analytic way. After his return his mentor did not allow him to finish the thesis on these lines, and he had to write a new thesis along the traditional lines of structural grammar.

But there are also institutions where modern outlook prevails often due to international co-operation. One of them is the Yangon Institute of Economics which has a MoU with the University of Kaiserslautern, or the Department of Geography of the Yangon University where thanks to the co-operation with the University Cologne a considerable number of PhD candidates graduated at a high level.

Also the educational institutions of the armed forces are said to have a higher level.

Summing up

Myanmar has a developed and functioning educational system. All post-independence governments including the military ones engaged in establishing it. None of them could achieve the proclaimed basic objectives namely overall access to education and eradication of illiteracy. It is to be stated, however, that during the last twenty years the education system expanded considerably. This does not only apply to the many institutions of basic and higher education that were built but also to the obvious endeavours of the then government to adjust to international standards. The Myanmar Maritime University and Myanmar Aerospace University, the Human Resource Centres and the emphasis on multi-media classrooms as well as e-learning centres are proof to this. Therefore, although the academic standard in state institutions of learning at all levels leaves much to be desired it has been wrong to deny the former government acknowledgment of their efforts and achievements. Rather such acknowledgement would have offered common ground for real well-wishers to help the aspired changes in all areas to come about. The three day National Level Workshop on Rural

Development and Poverty Alleviation in May 2011 indicates that the current government is set to attend to the severe social problems which are root to the deficits in the field of education as well. To encourage such efforts the international community and other people who engage themselves for the democratic development in Myanmar only need to switch their main focus from predominantly political benchmarks to the progress of the country and the welfare of its people. Then the vision and the motto have a chance to come true.

Vision

To create an education system that can generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the Knowledge Age



Motto

Building a modern developed nation through education