Myanmar’s Education Reforms

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Introduction

A policy window for change

The landslide election victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015 offered a window for change – a so called ‘policy window’ (Marshall, 2000) – to lead Myanmar’s reform process according to the original NLD values that included a left-leaning view of social justice and the empowerment of the poorest and most disadvantaged communities as a part of the political and economic transformation of Myanmar.¹ This book, written from mid-2019 to mid-2020, is a snapshot taken towards the end of the first five years of NLD rule, evaluating the progress made, nevertheless casting an eye on the future of Myanmar beyond the 2020 elections.

The reality on the ground after almost ten years of reforms – five years under President Thein Sein and almost five years under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi – does not point to a social justice agenda. The most marginalised remain at the fringes. A recent report by the Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU) on vulnerability bears out how the reforms are failing the wider Myanmar population and exacerbating inequalities (MIMU, 2018). This multi-sectoral review holds that Myanmar’s success in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) largely depends on how well the government targets the poorest and most marginalised in society. In its summary findings, the report points to the urban–rural differences as follows (MIMU, 2018: 2):

Stark disparities were found in living conditions and economic freedoms between the residents of urban and rural areas: 72% of rural villages are not electrified and persons in rural areas have markedly lower access to safe drinking water and sanitation; educational outcomes vary significantly and secondary school attendance in rural areas is half of that in urban areas.
Figure 0.2 Map of Myanmar. Source: CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.
With regard to health, the report again shows the stark disparities that are not being alleviated by the reforms (MIMU, 2018: 3):

There are wide geographic, ethnic and socio-economic disparities; infant mortality rates are highest in the districts of Labutta in Ayeyarwady and Mindat in Chin, whereas Magway, Sagaing and Tanintharyi have particularly high early years mortality rates. Children in rural areas are more likely to be chronically undernourished (32% stunting) than those in urban areas (20%).

With regard to education the report finds (MIMU, 2018: 3):

Literacy is particularly low in Shan State which accounts for 18 of the 19 townships countrywide where more than half of children have never attended school; Mongkhet township is especially prominent with 85% of children never having attended school. Other townships with particularly high numbers of persons with no education are in Kayin, Magway and Rakhine. Children from rural families, poor or otherwise disadvantaged groups are less likely to transition from primary to secondary education, or to complete their secondary education.

Much of this is of course the legacy of decades of junta rule, yet the decade of reforms could have made a significant difference if development priorities had targeted the most vulnerable – the poor and conflict-affected communities.

In part, the types of development being prioritised is due to the international aid and development community, whose philosophy comes from a neo-liberal tradition, and who are driving the reform process. This has resulted in too much being changed at once, with tight targets exceeding the capacities of local departments and organisations. It has also resulted in large development contracts being awarded to Western firms who have little knowledge of Myanmar rather than supporting bottom-up grassroots civil society and local NGOs who understand the local context. The kind of development taking place is nevertheless also due to the gap between NLD policy and priorities, between what was promised and what this first NLD Government is actually delivering. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has changed the tune of the government, asking local people to look to each other for help and support rather than to the state (McCarthy, 2019).

While the reforms have not yet resulted in Myanmar adopting an overall market approach to public services, including education, the
Myanmar Government ministries are adopting other aspects of neo-liberalism – including the vocabulary of efficiency and effectiveness. The ‘market’ is being looked at to offer choice to the urban middle classes. Some reforms are being rolled out to improve the lives of the majority rural and poor population by improving the quality of the government services, but Myanmar’s first democratic decade has seen a dramatic increase in the inequalities between urban and rural, middle classes and poorer sections of society. This is disappointing to many Myanmar citizens who had put all their hopes into Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD Government. They had not expected much from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) Government led by President Thein Sein that ruled from 2011 to 2015 that was largely viewed as no more than a political vehicle for the military. There was a clear expectation that once the NLD obtained power, the country would be governed in a manner that would strive to bring equality and justice to all. People did not use the term ‘social justice’, but in effect that is what they were referring to when speaking about access to education and health and public services, no matter where they lived and from what ethnic group they originated.

Today, the NLD has been in power for almost five years and people across the country complain about having been let down. Some look for excuses, for example, that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has not had a free hand in governing the country, but must constantly appease the military. Yet many know that the military contingent in parliament is not preventing Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from delivering on their hopes. In fact, there was more than hope, rather the many promises in the 2015 NLD election manifesto that all reflect the issues that one would group under ‘social justice’, even if this exact term was not used.

One of the overall promises in the NLD election manifesto (priority 3 of 4) was: ‘To change the lives of our people, the NLD will strive for a system of government that will fairly and justly defend the people’ (NLD, 2015: 4). With regard to ethnic affairs and peace the NLD promises ‘solidarity with all ethnic groups’ and ‘principles of freedom, equal rights and self-determination’ (NLD, 2015: 5). This is also reflected in the section in the Constitution (NLD, 2015: 6) where the NLD promises: ‘to guarantee ethnic rights’ and ‘to defend and protect the equal rights of citizens’. In particular, the NLD mentions agricultural workers (NLD, 2015: 11) and states that ‘farmers’ rights and economic well-being must be secure’. Workers (NLD, 2015: 14) are being promised the following:
• ‘We will establish opportunities for workers to develop their skills and expertise.
• We will implement policies aimed at ensuring that workplaces are safe and fair for all, and that workers receive an appropriate salary.
• No worker should be discriminated against, and every worker should receive equal compensation for equivalent work.
• Every worker shall have the right to freely establish and be part of workers’ organisations that protect their rights and benefits.
• We will end all forms of forced labour.’

In order to secure these opportunities for workers and agricultural workers, the NLD promises to: ‘strive to establish access to electricity in all areas, both urban and rural’ (NLD, 2015: 19) and the urban poor, many of whom are migrants from conflict and disaster areas are promised to be rehoused: ‘We will establish, as quickly as possible, a programme for the rehousing of homeless migrants, who have moved to the cities as a result of natural disasters, economic opportunities, and land confiscation’ (NLD, 2015: 25). Women are also promised equality (NLD, 2015: 22):

• ‘We will strive to ensure that existing laws are implemented effectively so that women in all sectors – whether government, business, or social – have equal rights with men.
• We will take action as necessary to end the persecution, insecurity, violence, and other forms of harassment and bullying suffered by women.
• We will work to ensure that female workers receive the same compensation as their male counterparts for equivalent work, and that there is no gender discrimination with regard to workplace promotions.’

And most importantly for this book, with regard to education (NLD, 2015: 15), the NLD promises the following:

• ‘We will prioritise the needs of schools in less-developed areas where schools currently lack necessary facilities and equipment, in order to make middle school and high school education more accessible to all.
• For the improvement of the quality of life of people with limited educational qualifications, we will establish opportunities for
further education through programmes for continuing basic middle and high school study, and in-school and out-of-school vocational training opportunities of equivalent standard.

• We will establish effective education services that do not place a burden on parents and communities.’

As can be seen from the above, the 2015 election manifesto did indeed promise social justice, despite the absence of this term. The social justice framework cuts across the various chapters, as education is a key element if one is to build a just and equal society, and it is crucial for other reforms to succeed. The fact that the promises made by the NLD go well beyond the education sector strengthens the case this book is making.

After the manifesto, the election: November 2015 – Myanmar’s first free and fair election since 1990

On Sunday 8 November 2015, Myanmar went to the polls with more than 90 parties contesting seats for the two houses of parliament as well as the 14 state and regional assemblies. Despite the large number of parties, all eyes were on the opposition NLD and the regime USDP. The NLD swept the polls. In order to control the government, the NLD needed 67 per cent of the seats (or 329 seats), as 25 per cent were allocated to unelected appointees of the military; but the NLD did far better than this, winning almost 80 per cent of elected seats. Crossing this threshold meant that Myanmar could become a very different country – it offered a policy window to transform Myanmar. The losing military-based USDP was bitterly disappointed with the result, yet despite this, neither the military nor the USDP tried to hinder the transfer of power in any way.

The elections were followed by an almost three-month transition period during which time the old government was still in power. The new parliament convened only after the old parliament dissolved on 30 January 2016. The NLD’s first task was to select a new President, as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the NLD, was barred by the constitution from the position due to her having sons with British citizenship. To circumvent this restriction, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi declared that she would be ‘above the president’ in all the decisions – a promise she has kept. In any event, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s close childhood friend Htein Kyaw was appointed to the presidency and the post of ‘State Councellor’ was created for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.
The challenges faced by the National League for Democracy (NLD)

After winning the election, the NLD’s first challenge was to develop cordial relations with the military. Myanmar has mainland Southeast Asia’s largest standing army, and the constitution guarantees their place in parliament, and together with their control over key ministries they remain significant stakeholders in the political system. The NLD had to find a way to cooperate with the Chief of Staff as well as the military members of parliament (MPs). The NLD’s campaign pledge to alter the Constitution, and in particular change Article 436 which ensured a veto by the military for any constitutional change, was likely to bring the party into conflict with the military leadership, and as such it was quickly shelved.

The second major challenge was to rule and administer the country. The NLD did not do much in this regard between 2012 and 2015 as they had only 43 MPs. With the exception of wanting to change the constitution, the NLD campaign was devoid of clear and detailed policy priorities, keeping things rather general and focusing on promising major changes. As seen above, the NLD manifesto did, however, promise to govern the country on the lines of social justice, promising to represent the poorest and most disadvantaged in society.

The main challenge facing the new Myanmar Government at the time of the transfer of power was addressing the country’s ethnic and religious tensions. An ultra-nationalist Buddhist movement led by monks — called Ma Ba Tha (‘Society for the Protection of Race and Religion’) had gained traction since 2012 and had been fuelling anti-Muslim sentiment across the country. Ma Ba Tha’s influence not only resulted in four ‘race and religion protection laws’ being passed in 2014 (which clearly discriminate against Muslims), it also resulted in Muslim electoral candidates not being able to contest seats in the election, and not one of the 1,051 NLD candidates was a Muslim. The result has been a parliament without a single Muslim MP, despite about 4 per cent of Myanmar’s population identifying as Muslim. At the time of the elections in November 2015 (and in the subsequent four years), the NLD did not speak up for the disenfranchised Rohingya for fear of being branded a ‘foreigner friendly’ party.

Another challenge to unity and fairness included the representation of ethnic people, as around 38 per cent of Myanmar’s population are ethnic minorities and there are a large number of ethnic political parties. In 2010, the ethnic MPs formed the first legal opposition to the USDP.
dominated parliament. Despite local ethnic leaders’ misgivings (Lall et al., 2015) the NLD fielded candidates in all ethnic majority areas. Consequently, many locals feared the vote would be split, leading to an end of the vibrant ethnic politics that had been an unforeseen result of the 2010 elections. After the ballots had been counted, it was clear that the NLD had displaced most of the ethnic parties. The main reason for this result appears to be that a large number of ethnic parties had been created to contest the 2015 elections, but subsequently, the ethnic electorate seems to have decided that if the country was to change, a united vote for the NLD was going to be more powerful than many small ethnic parties with little mandate. The lack of a clearly defined ethnic voice in parliament was, however, to have grave consequences for equal representation. The NLD has always maintained that democracy is their first priority and ethnic grievances can be addressed later. Given the protracted peace process with the ethnic armed groups, a sizeable ethnic representation would have been essential so as to represent the ethnic civilian voice.

At the time of the electoral win in November 2015, euphoria across Myanmar’s electorate was high. The results that they had been denied in 1990 came through 25 years later. People expected the NLD to transform the country. However, in the past five years there have been increasing voices of discontent, and at the time of writing – as the NLD is completing its fifth year in power – the overall mood across Myanmar has changed from hope to resignation. The list of challenges confronting the government seem almost unchanged from when the NLD took power, with the country’s progress seemingly stalled, stuck in quagmires for which there are no easy solutions.

The key issue remains the stagnant peace process, and more specifically how to link the wider reforms and the peace process. The lack of decentralisation means that ethnic states still do not have the required mandate to engage with issues specific to their state or their ethnic groups, which is underpinned by the lack of ethnic voices in parliament and in wider politics, as mentioned above. Whilst the NLD does have ethnic MPs in certain areas, they have not been able to speak up specifically for local and ethnic issues as ethnic parties had done in the past.

Other problems include the lack of freedom of expression for the press, the lack of decentralisation of power (even within ministries), and stagnating economic growth that rather than delivering inclusive development is widening the gap between urban and rural, rich and poor. Ministries are working towards change according to strategic
plans that they have co-developed with development partners, however, many have reached a point where they cannot take any more capacity building, nor spend the aid money that has been allocated to drive change. While ministries are supposed to drive change in all sectors, the lack of agency they are allowed at different levels means the direction of instructions remains top-down, begging the question of how Myanmar will ever move to a more participatory administration. The lack of agency is also due to the deep mistrust the NLD holds of the civil service: ‘due to the military background and loyalties of many bureaucrats’ (Stokke et al., 2018: 12). The role of the international community is not blameless in these developments, as the lack of coordination between development partners means that ministries are pushed and pulled in different directions, and those most senior (such as director generals) have to cope with unbearable workloads to try to keep all the funders happy.

A defining feature of Myanmar’s reform journey has been the contestations over narratives and understandings of citizenship and national identity. There has been a growing sense that Buddhism as part of the national identity has served to discriminate and divide rather than unite. An increasingly large number of citizens within the Buddhist ethnic groups (i.e. not only the Bamar) equate citizenship with religion, or seem to think that in order to be a Myanmar citizen one must also be Buddhist (Lall et al., 2014). This religious nationalism that reared its head earlier this decade has not been dealt with carefully, and has alienated other groups with different religious identities. Debates in the press and social media have been galvanised by the crisis in Rakhine that has pitted Buddhists and Muslims against each other, however, the issue is central across ethnic states as well. It has of course also deeply affected Myanmar’s image abroad as countries that have supported Myanmar’s transition have turned to castigating the government for not doing enough for the Muslims in northern Rakhine. At the heart of this issue is Myanmar’s decades of unequal treatment of ethnic groups, a clear social justice issue.

At this point in 2020, just before the next elections, it is therefore pertinent to ask about the NLD’s vision for the reform process. It is unclear what is driving the choice of priorities. Coming from a left wing political tradition that espouses the state’s responsibility towards its citizens through the provision of public services underpinned by social equality, the NLD’s key promise was to deliver reforms and social justice if it came to power. Some change is indeed evident, but the country is not united in these changes, and a relatively small urban elite is benefitting far more from the reform process than is the wider population. In fact, Daw Aung
San Suu Kyi has asked citizens to rely on themselves rather than look to the state (McCarthy, 2019).

As seen above, there is a widening gap between rural and urban Myanmar, at social, economic and political levels. Inflation has made the income divide between the urban middle classes and rural poor much starker. Land is now at a premium, so the agricultural poor are losing their livelihoods to development schemes, not least due to the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that are being created to bring more foreign investment to Myanmar. Social justice has not been sufficiently part of the reform agenda, despite it being promised as a pillar by President Thein Sein in his inaugural speech in 2011, reiterated in his 2015 New Year message and then taken up as an NLD campaign pledge. The only difference with ‘before’ is that now those who have been wronged can protest, so there are loud and visible protests about land ownership and other social justice concerns. This widening gap and the trajectory Myanmar is on raises questions about the commitment to social justice that the NLD chose as a basis for its political mandate.

**Social justice in a neo-liberal era**

Myanmar is of course not alone and the global context shows that inequality has been on the rise. Brown and Lauder pointed out that since the 1970s, the income share of the richest 20 per cent of the world's population as compared to the poorest 20 per cent of the world’s population increased from 30:1 to 61:1 (Brown and Lauder, 2003). Alvaredo et al. in ‘The World Inequality Report’ (Alvaredo et al., 2018) note that inequality has increased everywhere in the world despite substantial geographical differences, with the richest 1 per cent twice as wealthy as the poorest 50 per cent. This widening gap, both within countries and between countries, raises global questions around equality and social justice. There are broadly two opposing policy views regarding social justice – one emanating from social democracy based on social relationships and the needs of people within a community, and another, neo-liberal view that believes that social justice can be achieved through market individualism where people get what they deserve, rejecting any redistributive notions. The two positions represent very different, contrasting views of the world and Rizvi and Lingard in their epic book on globalisation remind us that (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010: 158) ‘... market individualism and social democracy rest on very different
understandings of the nature of the relationship between justice and the market. Hatcher puts it bluntly (Hatcher, 2001: 58):

… the starting point has to be the recognition that there are two distinct logics at work. One is a logic of education, based on social and individual need, and notions of equity and democracy. The other is a logic of business, whose bottom line is profit. Not everything business wants to do is incompatible with education interests. But the logic of business is incompatible with the logic of education.

The path of social democracy and redistribution marked the post-World War II (mostly Western) world. At the core was the state’s responsibility to provide equal public services – including education – to all its citizens, although more recently the neo-liberal vision of market-based social justice has dominated. It is argued that the marketisation of society has influenced all spheres of life, including education, and this has led to profound changes in the nature of social relations, in particular, the narrowing of the notion of ‘student’ into that of consumer, and a concomitant commodification of the learning experience (Giroux, 2004). The emphasis on competition and increased performance means increased surveillance and evaluation, which has led to the development of national curricula, national testing regimes and managerialist systems of performance evaluation which have eroded teacher’s professional autonomy (Apple, 2004).

At the heart of a neo-liberal system is the changing nature of the state from a provider to a regulator (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Wrigley, 2007). Consequently, neo-liberalism is not about lessening state control, but rather represents a new form of state involvement. As the market logic is extended to the public sector, the state becomes a regulator rather than a provider of such services, with the state being instrumental in facilitating the market to take on these responsibilities. As such, the state uses the market as a new control mechanism. Whilst there is a general withdrawal of the state, it is not in the arena of control, but rather in its position as the entity responsible for safeguarding all citizens, especially the weaker sections of society, a key socio-democratic function of the state. Globalisation has ensured that these notions have influenced the development and aid agenda, with aid agencies exporting these notions to the Global South (Lall and Rao, 2011).

Reforms pushing public services to adapt to markets have been particularly supported by the growing middle classes in middle income
and poorer countries, as they tend to benefit most from policies of choice and have the ability to buy themselves out of the public system to the detriment of the poorer and weaker sections of society (Hill and Rosskam, 2009: xvii). Globally, the middle classes have been seen to access the lion’s share of opportunities that have come with the new economy, using education as a key cultural resource.

The new economic realities across the developing world have led to increased disaggregation, deregulation, commodification, emphasis on measurable outputs, managerialism and accountability. Neo-liberal market-orientated reforms have affected education at all levels in developed and developing countries. In many countries, primary and secondary education have opened up to the market allowing new private providers to offer educational services, competing with public education provided by the state. This has brought with it a new education discourse which changes the aim of education and is developing a society which is adapted to the new knowledge economy both at domestic and international levels. As Gamarnikow notes:

In the social democratic era, education was constructed as a public good and a collective form of welfare provision, a key element of Marshall’s social citizenship (Marshall, 1950). In the current neo-liberal era, by contrast, policy discourses construct education as a positional good for individuals, and as the site for human capital formation for the globalised economy. What has not changed is the importance ascribed to education. (Gamarnikow, 2009: 158)

There have been similar effects in the higher education (HE) sector: marketisation across the sector has made performance and accountability cornerstones of HE policies today. The pressure to increase the number of students, account for how time is spent and the general concern with national and international rankings are all effects of the changing understanding of the aims of HE. The role of the university is no longer that of a public interest institution, but that of a site of ‘knowledge production’ in light of the economic imperatives of the ‘knowledge economy’. As academics are ranked according to the number of their publications, their universities compete internationally for those students who will bring in the highest fees.

The central question in all this concerns the role of the state, and what role it has to play in ensuring a socially just society. Those concerned with equality and social justice in education have voiced concern about the changing discourse on social justice with the ascendance of the neo-liberal
paradigm in education, pointing to widening disparities between social
groups while emphasising emerging and deepening inequalities as a
result of new state policies and programmes. There has been a significant
volume of research (as well as official statistics) that show that groups that
experience discrimination and disadvantage because of identities of race,
caste and ethnic identity show lower participation and achievement rates
in schools and HE (Lall and Rao, 2011).

Regimes of competition that include standardised testing of high
skills (within and across nations) are becoming widespread as nations
strive to make their school systems more efficient in order to gain a
competitive edge in the global market for education and labour. The
growing preoccupation with testing and competition and the resulting
narrowing and fragmenting of the larger objectives of education leads to
the neglect of inclusive cultures and practices.

The purpose of education reforms

Education reforms in developing countries are often ‘pushed through’
as part of a wider reform process, one underpinned by an international
development agenda spearheaded by international agencies such as
the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The
Washington consensus ensured for decades that inefficient public systems
that were attempting to serve poor communities across developing
countries had to change their funding models to achieve ‘fiscal reforms’.
The dominant Western economic perspective on education reform (Wolf,
2002) focuses on its role in producing future benefits, largely drawing
on human capital theory (Hanushek, 2013; Sweetland, 1996). Whilst
research has begun to highlight the limitations of the human capital
theory approach (Brown, 2001; Marginson, 2019), many fundamental
questions about the role of, and alternatives to, human capital theory
remain unanswered (Kapur and Crowley, 2008). What is increasingly
clear is that the perspective of human capital theory and its role in driving
the comparative advantage in the global economy as part of many a
national education policy does not allow for all groups to benefit equally.
Often these neo-liberal reforms pay lip-service to social justice, mainly in
terms of expanding provision for hitherto excluded groups. However, the
increasingly differentiated systems of education, the spread of for-profit
schooling and tight controls and accountability structures, along with the
standardised assessment practices that schools are being drawn into have
grave consequences for the purposes of education and social justice.
Why ‘social justice’ as a basis to review education reforms in Myanmar?

As noted above, despite important improvements across the globe that include better living standards both in the Western and the developing world, there are enduring problems including a rising gap between the poor and the middle classes; social class and ethnicity still largely determine life chances and political influence is polarised according to wealth and class. Education has been heralded as a panacea to resolve inequalities and deliver more socially just societies across the globe. It is thought that education will empower any individual to rise to his or her full potential and to break free from poverty and inequality. However, in order for education to deliver such outcomes, the education system itself needs to offer not only equality of access and opportunity (quality) but also equality of outcome and condition. Education delivered in public schools by poorly trained teachers in rural or remote areas cannot compete with education delivered by high-end urban private schools because the conditions are vastly different.

Education reforms in developing countries therefore need to go beyond the access agenda propagated by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and beyond the quality agenda propagated subsequently by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in order to consider how those most disadvantaged can attain equal outcomes to the more privileged with regard to future opportunities and equality of conditions. Policies for distribution and redistribution are necessary but not sufficient. Recognition is also important. Taylor et al. reminds us that any policies for educational justice have to deal with a complex web of issues that go beyond access and equity (Taylor et al., 1997: 151):

... but also [include] issues of identity, difference, culture and schooling. That is, the way things are named and represented, the manner in which difference is treated and the way in which the values and norms which govern life in schools are negotiated and established. These are all matters central to the concerns both of social justice and education.

The MDG proposal of a way forward to deliver a more socially just world was based on the distributive paradigm that focuses on resources – essentially on ‘who gets what?’ It can be argued that this model drew undue attention to the allocation of education. Education was seen
as a social good and it was access to that social good and the resources
given to it that were important. Social justice was therefore furthered
by more equitable access. This paradigm, however, was never sufficient
to capture the complexities of injustice. Content and quality were
overlooked. Realising that just getting more children into classrooms
and ‘giving everyone their due’ did not actually raise their achievement
levels brought about the debate of quality that underpins the SDGs.
An argument emerged that: ‘the how much cannot be separated from
the what’ (Connell, 1993: 18). The 17 SDGs and in particular goal four,
‘quality education’, place quality and content at the heart of the agenda,
while the SDG agenda also promises to address ‘intersecting inequalities’
as the goals are interrelated.

For social justice to truly underpin the governance of education
and public services, relational justice is a better model. This refers to the
power structures within society both in terms of how people interact
with each other at a micro level, how individuals connect with wider
society, as well as the macro socio-economic relations that: ‘are mediated
by institutions such as the state and the market’ (Gewirtz, 1997: 471).
Particular policies that target particular groups are known as ‘politics
of identity’ and risk becoming deterministic. On the pathway to social
justice we should not and cannot ignore differences within groups. What
needs to be developed is a system that stresses: ‘balancing the rights
and freedoms of individuals to pursue their own interests with an equal
interest in the rights and interests of the community’ (Olssen et al., 2004:
235). The first step in this direction is to understand how the education
reforms promote (or not) social justice through a theoretical model.
One such model is Iris Young’s ‘five faces of oppression’ that includes
consideration of exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural
imperialism and violence (Young, 2005). When examining education
reforms these factors identified by Young can be used to assess how the
education policies support, interrupt or subvert:

- exploitative relationships within and beyond educational institutions
- the processes of marginalisation and inclusion within and beyond
  the education system
- the promotion of relationships based on recognition, respect, care
  and mutuality or produce powerlessness for education workers and
  students
- practices of cultural imperialism – and which cultural differences
  should be affirmed, which should be universalised and which
  rejected?
These questions will form the basis for the analysis of the various education reforms that have been undertaken by the Myanmar Government since 2011, but in particular since the NLD took power in 2016. The lens of social justice (Taylor et al., 1997; Gerwitz, 1997; Connell 1993) is used throughout these chapters to engage with a critique of the reforms undertaken over the past decade and the outcomes as they are visible today, just a few months before Myanmar is due to go to the polls again. The basis for the critique is what Marshall terms a ‘policy window’, a space that opens because of a change in the political stream (a change in administration, a shift in parliament or national mood); or it opens because a new problem captures the attention of policy-makers (Marshall, 2000; 127).

Taking a comprehensive view over 16 years, this book argues that the 2015 elections represented a policy window for the NLD that could have set Myanmar on a social justice trajectory, but that this policy window has been missed. It argues in particular that despite the education reform priorities espoused by the NLD Ministry of Education (MoE) explicitly advocating greater equality and equity, Myanmar has missed an historic opportunity to use the education reform process to engage with deep-seated social justice issues, both in terms of granting more equitable long-term outcomes to poorer sections of society as well as rectifying existing inequalities between the majority Bamars and ethnic nationality communities.

The book’s aim is to review the education reform process as an example of policy reform and draw out the lessons learnt for Myanmar’s Government and citizens, as well as for the aid and development community who have underpinned the reforms. Although locating itself in the education reform process, this book addresses interests beyond education, as education links in with many of the other reforms such as the peace process and economic and labour reforms. In doing so, the book aims to give voice to those most implicated in and affected by the changing landscape of Myanmar’s education and wider reform process. This is important because these voices of students and their parents of all ethnic backgrounds, as well as those of teachers, student teachers and university staff engaged in education are rarely heard. Yet if readers (some of whom might be policy makers) are to understand what has been successful (or not) and why, it is important to look at the effects of the reforms on the ground and how ordinary lives have changed – or not. The book also engages with the voice of key policy makers in Myanmar and their views on the transformation of their country.
Why education?

Education is at the heart of Myanmar’s transformation. The education story does not start with the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) in 2012. It starts in 2005–6 when different civil society groups saw education as the principal way in which to bring about change to the country’s military dictatorship from within. Lall charts how Myanmar came to start a domestically-led transition from military dictatorship to a more participatory system between 2005 and 2010, resulting in an NLD Government between 2015 and 2020 (Lall, 2016a). It is clear that education was a catalyst for the movement of new civil society organisations that emerged and pushed for change.

After the 1988 and 1990 student protests, the universities had largely been closed. Undergraduate provision had been moved outside of the cities into remote areas and distance university education was encouraged, officially to enable the poorer students to study at home, but mostly to avoid students from getting together and becoming politically active. A whole generation was not able to access education beyond the metric examination and the quality of government education overall, and the quality of tertiary education particularly, had fallen dramatically over the decades of isolation due to under-investment and a lack of contact with the outside world.23 The generation that was the last to complete their university education before 1988 realised that they had been the lucky ones, and that those who came after them would not have access to a comprehensive form of HE. Now in their 40s or older, some started to think about how the country could and would be able to change, and how a growing number of uneducated young adults in the population would make change ever more difficult. Some joined together to form civil society organisations (CSOs) to develop education programmes for the middle classes to compensate for the decade long closure of key universities prior to the 2010 elections (Lall, 2016a). In the mid-2000s, these organisations were supported by mostly German political foundations, and together with Myanmar Egress (ME), the most significant civil society organisation to emerge in 2006 to support the change process, have been pivotal in the country’s reforms. ME was made up of a group of friends who had managed to complete their studies prior to 1988 and understood the transformative power of education. Their view was that if change was going to come to Myanmar, it was only going to occur by expanding the space from within, and not through either a revolution (as had been attempted in 1988) or through pressure from the outside (as the sanctions had been attempting since the 1990s).
The idea of an institution that would serve as a training institute, a think tank, a liaison office for reform-minded military government officials and as a catalyst for change can be credited to Dr Nay Win Maung, a medical doctor who had left medicine first for business, and then left business for journalism.24

The main aim of ME was first and foremost the training and education of young adults – the generation that had not had the chance to go to university, and those who could be catalysts for change. A series of courses was developed by ME ranging from a few days to six months to educate the youth about basic economic and political concepts and prepare them to vote in the 2010 elections.25 Education was at the core of Myanmar’s local move to engender change and it was these types of classes conducted by civil society that brought young people together, not on the streets in protest as in 1988, but binding them together with the aim of jointly transforming their country. ME was also used to create political space and develop a political and social identity amongst the young middle class Myanmar citizens who had missed out on ‘proper’ education. The idea was to recruit those who were enthusiastic, even if they had limited skills and few qualifications, and develop them into change agents. There were mostly three types of students – those who wanted to continue with their studies, those who wanted a career change, and those who were already working as NGO workers or activists. Recruitment happened through the networks of students who had completed the course, snowballing the number of applications. In the end, the number of students wanting to enrol far exceeded the number of places and all candidates had to be interviewed for the final selection. Some of the graduates of early courses then joined ME as staff for research and training.

Education – as can be seen from the above – is much more than what happens in schools and universities. It is at the heart of the political process in Myanmar. It is what has been at the origins of all the student protests that brought the country to a standstill in 1988 and 1990, and what pulled the country out of its stasis before the 2010 elections. It is therefore right that the country’s transformation, especially since 2015, is reviewed in light of the education reforms that happened across the various education sectors – formal and informal – and by using education as a platform to give voice to the Myanmar people across the country who are living the change process. To successfully undertake this, a lot of primary data is required. The section below reviews the primary qualitative and quantitative data sets that have been collected through fieldwork across the whole of Myanmar.
Introducing the data that underpins this book

Based on 16 years of engagement, and over 10 years of (education) data collected in Myanmar across the whole country, this book gives a holistic view of both government and non-government education sectors, the reform process and how the transition has played out across schools, universities and wider society. This book refers to secondary sources, however, at the heart of the narrative are 13 large education studies that were conducted between 2010 and 2019. This book also draws on information gathered across three other very large studies, one on young people’s views on citizenship, another on the peace process, and a third on ethnic political parties.

Data for Chapter 1 on the background of education before the reforms started was collected as part of a 2012 study entitled ‘Teachers’ Voice’ (Lall et al., 2013). Data was collected in 19 schools (most were government schools, but there were a few monastic and two private schools) in the Yangon Region. Of these, four were primary level, seven were middle, and eight were high schools. Surveys were conducted with 308 teachers (out of 443 working in these schools). Follow-on in-depth focus groups with 84 teachers and interviews with 16 head teachers were conducted so as to get a comprehensive view on issues including the curriculum, the examination system, teacher salaries, teacher training and teaching methods. Schools were deliberately chosen so as to reflect the diversity of education institutions. Schools that agreed to take part were urban and suburban, and based in both middle class and poor areas. The aim of the project was to inform the incoming government of the on-the-ground needs and challenges faced by teachers in light of the expected reforms. The research was the first project of three conducted as part of the research training of research staff whilst supporting the establishment of a research centre at ME. Both the research centre and the research were funded by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung Foundation from Germany and the EU as part of a large capacity building project.

Data on the education reforms in basic education and other education sectors, including the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) and the Education Promotion Implementation Committee (EPIC), were collected by the author whilst holding the position of Education Advisor for Fragile States for AUSAID (now Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – DFAT) between 2012 and 2014, and being part of a team supporting the CESR that was led by the Myanmar MoE. This also included work on education in ethnic and conflict-affected areas that involved the organising and leading of two ground breaking ethnic
education workshops in Yangon with representatives of all Ethnic Armed Organisation (EAO) education departments, workshops that have fed into the chapters on ethnic education.

More data on how the reforms were being carried out in the field were collected in 2013 as part of the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) funded and American University-led ‘Mon State Situation Analysis (SITAN)’ (Mehta et al., 2014), that examined decentralisation issues in the service delivery of education. This project included detailed discussion with MoE officers at State and Township levels. There was further engagement with the Union MoE through a series of two-day workshops and seminars between 2018–9 for the director generals and their deputies supporting reforms (funded by the Danish International Development Agency – DANIDA and delivered through the UCL Institute of Education).

The primary data for Chapter 3 on monastic education emanate from two large studies conducted in 2011 and 2016. Both studies were funded by the Pyoe Pin programme, a British Council (BC) supported programme that became an independent entity in 2018. The first was research conducted on child-centred teaching and learning methods in monastic schools across Myanmar. This involved fieldwork in 11 schools in three divisions – Ayeyarwady, Yangon and Mandalay (as regions were then called) in 2010, as well as conducting a workshop for stakeholders. The second focused on non-state education across Myanmar (not only monastic schools) leading to an advocacy policy paper in 2016. This involved fieldwork in Yangon, Northern Shan and Karen States.

Data for Chapter 4 on HE is taken from the BC funded project ‘Supporting the Transformation of Higher Education in Myanmar’ in 2018. Though not based on research, this allowed engagement with 11 Myanmar universities from across the country in developing leadership capacity through a series of four one-week-long intense training modules, workshops and two conferences. The project also involved supporting the development of a new government institution for HE (National Institute for Higher Education Development) that is to take on the future training of senior university staff in light of the reforms.

Chapter 5 on teacher education draws on three BC funded projects; a review of leadership needs for head teachers across Yangon in 2013–4; the baseline research for the Connecting Classrooms pilot project involving 15 schools across Yangon, Mandalay Region and Mon State; and a project surveying 2,000 teacher trainees over two consecutive years (2014–6) regarding the attributes and motivations of those who
become teachers. Data were collected in all Myanmar education colleges (20 at the time) around the country and two batches studying in two different year groups that were compared with each other.

The data for ethnic education were collected during fieldwork undertaken between 2011 and 2019, primarily in Karen, Mon, Kachin, Shan and Rakhine-populated areas. The first round of data collection (together with Ashley South) was in 2011–2, funded by the Open Society Institute, focusing in particular on mapping ethnic minority education systems in Mon and Karen States, where interviews and focus groups were conducted with 93 people across 8 locations, including in jungle and conflict-affected areas. Communities were accessed through local colleagues who have been instrumental in delivering education services in hard-to-reach places. Most meetings were held in schools, but in some cases respondents preferred to meet at sites where they felt less exposed to scrutiny. All interviews were conducted in the local language with a trained translator. Further data collection (funded by USAID as part of their transition support programme, together with Ashley South) happened between 2014 and 2016 across 10 locations in Mon, Karen and Kachin States, and neighbouring China and Thailand, in both government and EAO-controlled areas. This included interviews with 150 people and 30 focus groups conducted with 8–10 participants each, as well as larger meetings with stakeholders from EAOs, ethnic education departments, political parties and local civil society actors who were contacted through the EAO education departments and education Community Based Organisations (CBOs). In addition, teachers, parents and students at ethnic schools were either interviewed or took part in focus groups. All meetings were conducted either in the local language or in Burmese with the help of a trained translator. Subsequently, the findings were validated through a series of five workshops in Mon and Kachin States conducted around four to six months after the original fieldwork had taken place. The workshops included state education officials so as to better understand how the Myanmar Government was developing education policy in ethnic areas. A further set of data comes from 28 interviews we conducted as a part of a Pyoe Pin-funded research project in 2016, which investigated the funding and teacher training challenges faced by non-state education institutions. This last round of data collection focused on ethnic education providers in very hard-to-reach areas, including northern Shan State where conflict is ongoing. In that setting, it was too dangerous to meet parents, so only teachers and other official stakeholders were interviewed.
What the book covers

Chapter 1 reviews the state of education prior to the 2010 elections, including the period under military rule, including issues pertaining to textbooks. The chapter then looks at the limited changes that took place between 2000 and 2012, including the rise of a parallel system of private education as an alternative for the urban middle classes, which began to divide society into those who could afford to buy services and those dependent on what the state provided. Drawing on original interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) data in 19 Yangon schools in 2012 just prior to the start of the education reform process, it reflects the voices of teachers who were asked what they felt were the priorities for education reform, revealing the tension between the weighty curriculum and the examination system with improving teaching methods in the classroom – particularly Child-Centred Approaches (CCA) to teaching and learning. The chapter then engages with the challenges faced by the teachers in the public education sector in terms of teacher salaries that are too low for daily living (and the related problem of tuition that is used by teachers to compensate for the difference); teacher-to-student ratios that are overly large (especially in primary schools, and even more so in rural and remote regions); the lack of classroom materials and teaching aids; and societal pressure for teachers not to marry so they can dedicate their life to society. These pressures have made teaching an increasingly unattractive profession. The chapter sets the scene for the social justice issues that the education reforms have promised to address, in order to understand how far the post-2012 changes have actually made a difference in the Myanmar government school classrooms.

Chapter 2 details the effects of the reforms in basic education by introducing the education reforms that started in the second half of 2012 under the Thein Sein Government, including the CESR, and the role played by the aid agencies. The chapter engages with the tensions between the various stakeholders including the MoE (which remained quite detached between 2012 and 2015), the CESR, the Parliamentary Committee lead by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National Network for Education Reform (NNER), a civil society-led consortium campaigning for more radical education reforms. It explains why President Thein Sein brought in EPIC to side-line the influence of the international development agencies, and how all of this resulted in the National Education Sector Plan (NESP)
 and the New Education Law. The chapter also looks at the student protests of 2015, their demands based
on social justice, and their engagement with the government leading to limited changes in the New Education Law.

The second part of the chapter engages with the NLD Government’s development of the education reform process, including the continuity of policy by largely accepting the NESP unchanged. Priorities for education remain access, quality, curricular reforms and teacher training reforms, thus addressing a few issues faced by Myanmar’s poor, yet not engaging with the issues associated with ethnic and linguistic diversity that have resulted in a largely inequitable education system. As of this point, all chapters will contrast education policy and the education experience on the ground. The chapter draws on original data collected during training sessions and meetings with the MoE between 2012 and 2019.

Chapter 3 considers monastic education. Myanmar’s education system has historically been closely linked with Buddhism, and Myanmar traditional values reflect Buddhist values of service to the community. Society supports monks and monasteries through donations as part of their religious duty, and monasteries have been the main vehicle for inclusion in education by offering schooling to poor and disadvantaged children. This chapter engages with the role of monasteries in bringing about change in the classroom, even before the government reforms began. Whilst monastic schools have always catered to the poorest and the most disadvantaged of society, their relative independence and status outside of the purview of the MoE allowed them to pioneer the CCA in their classrooms. Phaung Daw Oo, the largest monastic school in the country, based in Mandalay, is led by Sayadaw U Nayaka who can be credited with bringing large-scale change to teaching methods across all monastic schools by founding a centre for monastic teacher training that was supported by local donors as well as international aid money. Drawing on original interviews and FGD data of monastic teachers collected in 2010 and 2016, the chapter looks at how CCA spread across monastic networks and the role of both local and international teacher training agents across the country. In the end, it was monastic schools that led the way in reforms that affected teaching methods beyond monastic schools, especially CCA in the classroom, with the state sector following suit a few years later. The chapter discusses how children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were ultimately subject to better teaching practice than those at government schools because of the work pioneered in Phaung Daw Oo. The chapter draws on original FGD data with parents whose children attended these schools, and their views on the role of monasteries in educating Myanmar society. Lastly, the chapter describes the role of monasteries in maintaining ethnic nationality
languages and culture, especially in Mon, Karen, Shan and Pa-O societies through summer school language and literature programmes; a theme that will be considered again in Chapter 6 on ethnic languages.

**Chapter 4** reviews the state of HE. The quality of HE has deteriorated sharply in Myanmar since independence, prior to which Rangoon University was seen as a leading higher education institution (HEI) in the region. The chapter gives a snapshot of Yangon and Mandalay Universities in 2005 and 2006, when the author was teaching there during the summer months, before moving on to the main HE reform agenda, including the development of the National Institute of Higher Education Development (NIHID) that is due to start training senior academic staff across the HE sector. The chapter engages with the vexed issue of decentralisation including the rotation of staff appointments, the changing role of research and how universities are starting to engage with issues of access and quality, and designing their own curriculum. The chapter contrasts the views of leading academics on the purpose of HE and its reforms, contrasting neo-liberal views that have emerged through the engagement with Western aid and development agencies with more traditional Myanmar views based on Buddhist values.

At the time of writing, access to HE, although almost free and despite the presence of over 150 institutions across Myanmar, is only accessible to a small number of mostly middle class students, with the poorer students enrolling in one of the world’s largest (and possibly the worst) distance HE system. The chapter discusses the issues of limited access of ethnic minority young people due to severe language disadvantage that emanates from their lack of access to basic education, and how this is something with which most Myanmar universities, including those based in ethnic states, do not have the capacity to engage.

**Chapter 5** reviews the issues faced by student teachers and teacher educators across the 20 education colleges in Myanmar, drawing on original survey data collected in the midst of the reform process. It engages with the views, hopes, challenges and fears faced by those who want to become teachers. It explains the special challenges faced by the very few ethnic nationality teacher trainees who manage to get into the education colleges. The chapter also looks at the reforms of teacher education that started with the BC funded ‘English for Education College Trainers’ (EfECT) project that focused on upgrading teacher educators’ English and teaching methodology. At the time of writing, the curriculum for teacher education is being reformed, yet this is not in sync with the curricular reforms of basic education, as these are supported by different aid agencies with little, if any, communication or coordination.
The chapter discusses the tensions that arise from these uncoordinated efforts to improve education across Myanmar.

Chapter 6 discusses Myanmar’s struggle with ethnic and linguistic diversity. Despite the reforms, education has remained highly centralised, with only Burmese being allowed as a means of instruction. Policy under the NLD Government has not changed much. While ethnic minority languages are now allowed as ‘classroom language’ to help explain concepts when necessary, mother tongue-based multi-lingual education (MTB-MLE) is not presently Myanmar education policy, marginalising ethnic hopes and concerns. The only concession from the government has been the introduction of a ‘local curriculum’ (LC) of one period a day in Kindergarten (KG), Grade 1 and Grade 2 that is locally developed and can be taught in an ethnic language. The development of this LC and its roll-out is haphazard and uneven, privileging larger, more organised ethnic groups. This chapter engages with the often overlooked voices of minorities within minorities regarding their views on language, education and Language of Instruction (LoI), and how this shapes their relationship with both the more dominant ethnic groups as well as the ruling Burman majority. It argues that whilst all minorities within minorities consulted as part of fieldwork research in 2018, work hard to preserve their ethnic language and culture, they all argue that they want Burmese to remain the main LoI. Many emphasised that Burmese was the essential language for their children to be able to get good jobs and bring their families and communities out of poverty. The communities therefore do not support an MTB-MLE system and prefer multilingual local teachers who can explain the Burmese textbooks to their children.

The chapter also engages with a potential solution to the need for more ethnic nationality teachers in government schools. It looks at the alternative teacher education college established by the Pa-O to specifically train those ethnic nationality candidates that failed to get into the education colleges. The lack of ethnic teachers is a serious issue for ethnic nationality children who cannot understand Burmese, so the training of such teachers by an ethnic organisation is an interesting alternative solution to the problem. Based on original data collected at this college in Shan State, the chapter explains how despite its recognition by the government authorities, this college is not able to fulfil its mission as its teachers are sent to work in ethnic areas where they do not speak the local language, defeating the original purpose of its creation.

Chapter 7 discusses the structural challenges in alternative systems run by EAOs and uses the education systems under the authority of four major EAOs to discuss the relationship between ethnic nationality
communities and the state. Drawing on data collected (between 2011 and 2018) in schools under the New Mon State Party’s (NMSP) Mon National Education Committee, the Kachin Independence Organisation's (KIO) Education Department, the Karen National Union's (KNU) Education Department, and the Revolutionary Council of Shan State's (RCSS) Education Department as well as their administrations, the chapter discusses the issue of recognition of alternative and separate education systems that have in effect been filling the gap for education provision in remote and conflict-affected areas for the Myanmar Government. Whilst addressing the language issue (also discussed in Chapter 6) is a key part to finding a sustainable resolution to armed conflict, the chapter engages with the key problems of recognition of EAO authority in education in areas under their control, and how the issues of the peace process, language policy and federalism are inextricably intertwined with each other.

The book is essentially about the Myanmar education reform process and how this is affecting key stakeholders and the wider population. Therefore, the conclusion returns first to the NESP Mid Term Review and its assessment on what has been achieved with regard to equity. It is clear that the MoE and the wider government understand that there are wider issues of social justice at play that are not being resolved through the education and wider reform processes. In light of the 2020 elections and the path Myanmar has chosen through the lenses of education and ethnicity, the conclusion asks – ‘What future for Myanmar's youth?’

Areas that are not covered by the book include disability and inclusive education, vocational education and education for out-of-school children, and recent developments in private education. Disabled people are largely invisible in Myanmar society, and disabled students are not often seen in schools. While this is a key issue of social justice and equality, the invisibility of the less able means that there was not enough available data, and writing anything substantial on this problem would be virtually impossible. Vocational education and the education of out-of-school children, although now part of the education reform process through its inclusion in the NESP, was until recently quite separate from the formal education sector. This again has meant a lack of substantial data, making its inclusion in the book impossible. The focus being on the effects of the government reforms, the book also does not cover Chinese schools (some of which exist in Shan State close to the border, for example, in the Wa Autonomous Region) as well as in cities such as Yangon and Mandalay, nor other religious schools
and HEIs – such as those run by the Baptist or Adventist churches, nor any religious education institutions catering to the Muslim population, that remain largely unaffected by the government reforms. Lastly, a separate book could be written on the rise of the private parallel system that has increased so dramatically over the past decade. The early development of this sector is covered in Chapter 1. However, the book’s focus means that the more recent rise of the private education sector, still a largely urban phenomenon serving the middle classes and the rich, is less relevant. Given that much of the private education sector is not recognised by the government, it is also not included in the reform processes and remains a separate, parallel, largely business orientated development.

Notes

1 Although she is no longer on the website, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was a honorary President of Socialist International, a worldwide organisation of social democratic, socialist and labour parties. The NLD’s first election manifesto of 1989 focuses on democracy, but has strong sections on farmer, student and labour unions as well. The NLD might have reinvented itself, but its roots lie on the left side of the political spectrum.

2 The Norwegian Government’s commissioned Political Economy Analysis states: ‘Myanmar is a new place for many donors that have entered the country since 2011. Many of them have little experience and poor understanding of how to address the opportunities and challenges that have emerged from Myanmar’s democratic opening. Insufficient country knowledge on the part of development actors is a risk that can potentially do harm.’ (Stokke et al., 2018: XX).

3 It has to be said that the NLD is not supportive of CSOs and local Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) receiving aid funds to undertake development work, and prefer international funds to be received by the government so that the programmes can be controlled. This is in stark contrast to the government under President Thein Sein (2010–5) who allowed CSOs and local NGOs to receive donor funds and to run programmes as they saw fit (Lall, 2016a).

4 Over the 15 years that the author has been speaking with ordinary Myanmar people across the whole country – most of whom she met (parents and teachers) through her education research, as well as many young people through her work on citizenship and many ethnic respondents/members of armed groups through her work on conflict and the peace process.

5 The 25 per cent military seats in parliament are there to stop the constitution from being changed. They make sure the Tatmadaw leadership has a free hand in dealing with ethnic conflict and border affairs the way it sees fit. To date, they have not stopped any policy that focused on issues of health, education and access to public services.

6 The 2015 NLD Manifesto was also very much in tune both with the anti-colonial cries for economic justice espoused in the pre-independence period that were taken up by the post-independence governments, as well as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s accusations that the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government had made economic inequalities worse during their rule, due to their socio-economic mismanagement.

7 This chapter will not try to engage with the semantics of the terminology in Burmese and how the terms were used, as this will detract from the core aim of the book, which is to engage with the education reforms. The issue at heart is that the NLD as a political party promised a Myanmar version of social justice and the wider electorate understood this promise.

8 It has been argued that the 2015 elections cannot be considered fair and free as 25 per cent of seats in all legislative assemblies were reserved for the military. See Tonkin for more on the 1990 election (Tonkin, 2007).
He was replaced by President Win Myint on the 30 March 2018, after President Htein Kyaw resigned ‘to take rest’. [1](https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/president-u-htin-kyaw-resigns-u-win-myint-tipped-as-replacement).

Despite their constitutional mandate neither of the two presidents seem to have had much say in any of the government’s policy making, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has kept control of the government. The post of ‘State Councillor’ was specially created for her – it does not exist in the Constitution. The creation of this post shows the power of the NLD, whose majority in Parliament meant that they were able to override the 25 per cent military vote who were opposed to the creation of such an official position.

It is estimated that non-Burman communities make up around 30–40 per cent of the population including Shan 9 per cent, Karen 7 per cent, Rakhine 4 per cent, Chinese 3 per cent, Indian 2 per cent, Mon 2 per cent, and other 5 per cent. [2](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html).

With the exception of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) and the Arakan National Party (ANP).

Informal discussions with ethnic nationality NLD MPs in NPT in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

The most famous cases being the two Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were detained in Myanmar on 12 December 2017 for reporting on the killings of Rohingya men. They were freed as part of an amnesty in May 2019.

Economic growth – but not inclusive and sustainable development. Myanmar has seen an economic liberalisation and opening that has been followed by increased investment in key sectors, above all in natural resource extraction. The lack of redistributive mechanisms and the continuing cronyism hinder inclusive growth and sustainable development. (Stokke et al., 2018: xviii).

An example of this is the peace process versus reforming the constitution. The NLD decided to give constitutional change another push despite the peace process being stuck. It proved to be a fruitless battle with the military MPs, not unlike what occurred at the end of 2015.

The social democratic framework as the foundation for governance was also the basis for India’s development, as well as a number of other post-colonial developing countries.

Quite a lot has been written about how teachers have been affected by neo-liberal education reforms. However, the Mike Apple reference of 2004 shows that this is nothing new.

There are of course other models and theoretical frameworks for social justice, but this one focuses on structures rather than individuals, encapsulating much of the social justice issues in Myanmar. In the last two chapters that focus on ethnic education issues, another social justice model – Novelli et al.’s ‘4 R framework’ of redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation (Novelli et al., 2015) – is used in addition to Young’s ‘Five Faces of Oppression’ model (1990 and 2005), since Novelli et al.’s model links in with peace and reconciliation issues, that are particularly relevant in light of Myanmar’s peace process.

Young’s ‘Five Faces of Oppression’ is a model cited in much recent literature pertaining to oppression, and first appeared in Iris Young, 1990, ‘Justice and the politics of difference’: 

**Exploitation** (the transfer of the fruits of labour from one group to another, as, for example, in the cases of workers giving up surplus value to capitalists or women in the domestic sphere transferring the fruits of their labour to men); **Marginalisation** (the expulsion of people from useful participation in social life so that they are ‘potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination’); **Powerlessness** (the lack of that ‘authority, status and sense of self’ which would permit a person to be listened to with respect); **Cultural imperialism** (stereotyping in behaviours as well as in various forms of cultural expression such that the oppressed group’s own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life). **Violence** (the fear and actuality of random, unprovoked attacks which have ‘no motive except to damage, humiliate or destroy the person’).

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As the MoE’s NESP 2016–2021 notes in its Executive Summary (7): ‘Quality, equitable and relevant education is essential if we are to provide our children with new knowledge and competencies, creativity and critical thinking skills and cultural and ethical values that will enable them to excel in their chosen careers and contribute to Myanmar’s socio-economic development in the 21st century.’

In Myanmar, ethnic minorities prefer to be referred to as ‘ethnic nationality communities’ or simply ‘ethnic’. They reject being labelled as minorities.
More on the student protests in Chapter 4.

More on Dr Nay Win Maung, his life and work in Lall (2016a).

As detailed in Lall (2016a), the military regime had announced elections as part of their ‘roadmap to democracy’ in 2004. However, no one knew when these elections would be held and it was clear that the process would be tightly controlled.

There was not enough funding for the research team to collect data outside of Yangon.

In 2018, the author was the Lead Consultant at Covenant Consult for the World Bank and the Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC) working across all ethnic states and leading a team of 12 international and Myanmar specialist consultants. Data from this project (Informing Partnerships between Government and Ethnic Basic Education Providers – MEPP) has not been directly used in this book, however, the views from respondents in that project are reflected in Chapters 6 and 7. In 2019 and 2020, the author was an advisor to the Department for International Development (DFID) funded Myanmar–UK Partnership for Education (MUPE) project that involved data collection across the various departments of Myanmar’s MoE. Data from this project has not been directly used for this book, however, the views from policy makers and development partners in that project are reflected across the volume.

Renamed ‘National Education Strategic Plan’ (thus still ‘NESP’) by the NLD government after 2016.

The author was special education advisor to AUSAID in Myanmar at the time, therefore accessing both the MoE and CESR staff as well as the international agencies.

Author was part of a small team training the NIHED senior trainers, and supporting NIHED in its first HE training of 11 universities.

Who took part in a training programme co-led by the author.

This is a double disadvantage as HE is supposed to be in English, and the books are in English, even if the actual teaching is in Burmese. Many ethnic nationality students are unable to matriculate because of their poor levels of Burmese, making it impossible for them to access HE. Those who do make it then find that course materials in English present a double challenge.

Using any ethnic language in the classroom effectively would require recruiting local teachers, or teachers who have learnt an ethnic language. According to UNICEF, 70 per cent of teachers working in ethnic areas do not speak local languages (Joliffe and Speers, 2016: 37).

Maintained a ceasefire with the government since 1995.

Which saw its 17-year ceasefire collapse in 2011.

Both EAOs agreed to sign the 2015 ‘Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement’ (NCA), following decades of armed conflict.

There is a substantial MoE report on education of out-of-school children, but internal MoE politics in 2018–9 means that there is now not so much focus on the issue, as (allegedly) the MoE does not wish to acknowledge the fact that this problem exists. (From personal interviews with a number of development partners in the summer of 2019.)