

Learning for All Meeting –
Country Paper of the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar
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Background and Context

After a transition to civilian rule in 2011, Myanmar is embarking on a period of extensive political, economic and social reform under the leadership of President Thein Sein. The Government has consistently prioritised education reform as a key element of its overall socio-economic development strategy, and a Government-led Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR), endorsed by the President, is currently underway.

The CESR is a critical first step towards delivering improved education outcomes, through improved policy and planning based on up-to-date data and in-depth analysis of the current situation. The CESR, supported with coordinated technical expertise from over 15 Development Partners, strives to:

- a. Develop a knowledge-base on the strengths and challenges in the Myanmar education system and identify areas for reform;
- b. Support and contribute to the development of evidence-based policies, legislation and education sector improvements; and
- c. Develop costed education sector plans.

Phase I of the CESR (the 'Rapid Assessment') is complete and has been consulted on widely. The critical constraints identified for this discussion paper are drawn from the findings of the Rapid Assessment Report.

Concurrent with the CESR process to develop a long term strategy for education reform, the Government is also focusing on the importance of delivering tangible results in the immediate term, and is moving forward with a number of 'quick wins' aimed to make rapid improvement to education outcomes for Myanmar children. The education budget has tripled since 2010, free text books and exercise books and some money for stationery are being provided to all primary school children, teacher salaries have greatly increased, and a major school grant and student stipend program is being implemented to ensure that appropriate inputs are provided to schools and help address equity issues, as well as support a decentralisation agenda.

While political commitment to address education issues is strong, there are many constraints to achieving universal primary education. The most recent MDG Report for Myanmar (final draft, 2013) notes that while the country is on track to reach its youth literacy target for MDG2, progress towards UPE has been slow, with only 75 per cent of pupils starting Grade 1 reaching the last grade of primary (Grade 5). For MDG3, the Report notes that gender parity has been more or less achieved in primary education, across socioeconomic groups and between states and regions. However, secondary education needs to improve in terms of participation and equity, underlining the challenges that remain for the country to achieve the MDGs for education and EFA goals by 2015.

While significant political progress is being made towards reaching a national cease-fire to end long-standing conflict with all armed groups, sustaining delivery of education services to children in conflict-affected areas remains challenging. At the same time, it is recognised that education has the potential to play a key role in building sustainable peace in Myanmar.

Constraints

While the CESR has identified a broad agenda for education sector reform at all levels, three overarching and inter-linked constraints represent key leverage points for effecting change across the system: (1) education financing; (2) legislation and policy framework; (3) institutional and human resource capacity.

- **Constraint number 1 – Education Financing**

- Description of the constraint

While the government budget for education has grown rapidly in the last two financial years and the trend is likely to continue it will take time to reach the level of other ASEAN nations, and the global benchmark of 20 per cent of the national budget. Compared to the 2011-12 budget, spending on education doubled in 2012-13, then tripled in 2013-14.

Additional resources both financial and human are needed to effectively deliver on policy objectives. Dialogue and coordination between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance (budget department) to forge closer links between planning and budgeting could also be strengthened, and policy focusing on learning outcomes will be essential to establish linkages between increased spending and improved education outcomes.

Increased government resources also need to be equitably targeted, and translate into reduced cost burdens for poorer families, to minimize out-of-pocket expenses incurred from informal and other fees, and stimulate demand for education.

- Preferred solution and impact on the relevant constraint

Analytical work is underway to inform the ways forward to address education financing issues. The CESR chapter on education financing draws on findings from the recent World Bank-AusAID supported Public Expenditure Review (PER) and aims to review education budget and spending, cost per student at different levels of education, policy changes, and the expenditure management process. The PER report raises the question of whether, and how, increases in education spending can lead to improvement in learning outcomes.

The Government has outlined an ambitious Public Financial Management (PFM) reform agenda, noting challenges in the current PFM system such as lack of budget credibility; limited budget comprehensiveness and transparency; loose linkages between planning and budget allocations; and unclear accountability and tracking of budget expenditure. A corresponding PFM plan has been developed by the Ministry of Finance to address these issues. As a key cross-cutting issue, implementation of PFM reform will have a positive impact on social service delivery, including education. In the education sector specifically, the CESR Rapid Assessment Report highlights that additional resources are necessary, though not sufficient, to achieve stronger results. More strategic and efficient budget execution, as well as stronger links between planning, budgeting and monitoring are also key to ensuring that increased resources translate into improved learning outcomes for children. Striking a sustainable balance between investment and recurrent costs is also a priority.

To address these issues, in the final stage of the CESR, the analytical work conducted will inform development of prioritized, strategic Costed Sector Plans, together with a robust Performance Assessment Framework, which outlines policy, strategy, and institutional goals, targets, and outcomes indicators, as well as a financing plan. If commitment to the process remains strong, these documents will clearly articulate the results the Ministry of Education intends to deliver in order to achieve balanced sector development over the shorter and longer term. The Plans will also reflect national development priorities in line with the National Comprehensive Development Plan (2012-2020), 20-Year Education Plan, as well as national and international commitments on education and other rights.

Crucially, the Plans will also quantify the level of investment required to deliver these results, and so will form a powerful advocacy tool to inform dialogue between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance on government budget allocation for the sector. Clarity over the results that will accrue from increased investment in education will also strengthen advocacy within Parliament for approval of increased resources for education.

A clearly articulated plan also provides a clear set of priorities around which development partners can align their external support, and acts as a tool for mobilization of additional resources to fill funding gaps identified.

Ensuring that the Plans are developed through participatory approaches in line with the Government's 'people-centred development' approach articulated in the Nay Pyi Taw Accord, the localized version of the Busan Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, will also build consensus, legitimacy, and buy-in. This will ensure that the Plans reflect the voices of the people, as aspired by the government and meet the needs of the country at this time of rapid and dynamic change.

- Feasibility of implementation

With the economy predicted to grow at up to 8 per cent over the next decade¹, the case for increased government investment in education should be strong.

For improved efficiency, development of the PFM reform plan is underway, and development of Costed Sector Plans for the shorter and longer term, mandated under Phase 3 of the CESR, are on track for completion in 2014. The continuing commitment of all parties, particularly on Public Financial Management and strengthening linkages between policy-based planning in the education sector and the national budget process, will be essential for successful implementation. Continued technical assistance from Development Partners will also be required. As the CESR Rapid Assessment has revealed a wide-ranging agenda for sector reform, difficult choices and trade-offs will also need to be made regarding prioritisation and sequencing of the Plans, to ensure that they are credible, strategic, and results-focused, with a realistic funding gap.

Implementation feasibility is also closely linked to the need for a guiding policy framework, as well as absorption, institutional and human resource capacity, as outlined below.

- **Constraint number 2 – Improved policy and legislation framework**

- Description of the constraint

A key challenge identified in the CESR Rapid Assessment Report (2013, draft) is a lack of overarching legislation for the education sector as a whole, including non-formal education, to coordinate different education sub-sectors and enable the effective implementation of policies. Also noted is the lack of a comprehensive and inclusive policy framework for achieving Education for All, and improving learning outcomes for all groups across the whole sector.

Developing legislation and policy is essential to guide planning, implementation and monitoring for results, and building of a common vision among all related Ministries, Parliament, and the public and development of a new education legislation is currently underway led by Parliament. A robust framework will articulate the agreed goals of education, the results it is expected to achieve, and the roles and responsibilities of all parties engaged in ensuring delivery of these results.

- Preferred solution and impact on the relevant constraint

A key recommendation of the CESR Rapid Assessment Report is development of an overarching education law to ensure that rights to education are guaranteed under the law, in line with the Constitution of 2008 and international conventions Myanmar has committed to, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Report also advocates for development of a national, comprehensive and inclusive education policy, which would be holistic, rights based, in line with Myanmar's national and international commitments, and with a strong focus on equity to ensure that all children, youth and adults in Myanmar are able to enjoy their rights to a quality education, regardless of gender, ethnicity, social or economic status, geographical location, religion, disability, or other attribute.

The policy should also address disparities concealed by national averages, such as those between states and regions; urban and rural areas; high and low income families; and conflict-affected areas, addressing both supply and demand side issues. The policy should also focus on building the skills needed for a market economy, as well as emphasize the measurement of learning outcomes so that the effectiveness of education investments can be readily assessed.

¹ ADB Study (2012) cited at <http://www.adb.org/countries/myanmar/main>

Key thematic areas for specific policy development also identified include: inclusive education; non-formal education; and language of instruction. Given the very complex linguistic diversity in the country, development of a language policy which meets the aspirations of all national races is a key priority.

- Feasibility of implementation

On the legislation side, Parliament has already initiated dialogue with the CESR team to explore how the CESR can inform development of the draft Education Law. Closer collaboration between Parliament and the Ministry of Education will help strengthen the drafting process. Development Partners have also indicated their willingness to provide technical assistance to support the development of legislation and comprehensive policy for the education sector, including support for stakeholder consultations on the drafts, dissemination, and monitoring.

For education policy, the CESR Rapid Assessment Report maps out a proposed process for development of a national and inclusive policy for education in Myanmar. This would need to be informed by all the ongoing analytical work of the CESR, integrated into the Costed Sector Plans as they are developed, as well as underpinned with adequate budget allocations. As indicated above, advocacy for funding to ensure implementation of the policy will be strengthened through dialogue on the Costed Sector Plans.

Feasibility of implementation of new policy is also dependent upon absorption, institutional and human resource capacity, as outlined below.

- **Constraint number 3 – Institutional and human resources capacity**

- Description of the constraint

The needs across the education sector identified in the CESR Rapid Assessment are profound. The Report makes over 95 recommendations across sub-sectors such as early childhood development, basic education, technical and vocational training, higher education, teacher training, language policy, and curriculum, which involve the engagement and coordination of 17 Ministries in order to implement.

The capacity of the Ministry to absorb increased resources; cope with the rate of change; implement reforms with quality, and efficiency; and deliver effective results is needs to be rapidly developed.

There is much to be done at all levels, and capacity development takes time. Across all sectors, pressure from the highest levels to deliver wide-reaching reforms at a rapid pace, as well as growing demands from civil society, however, are creating institutional and human resource challenges for the Ministries to translate the reforms into sustainable and effective results.

For example, implementation of the planned restructure of the basic education system from a 5:4:2 to a 5:4:3 model, plus a preparatory year of Kindergarten will have significant implications for capacity building in terms of physical, institutional, systems, curriculum, and human resource development.

As the country develops, education personnel, who previously had limited access to new information and what was in their textbooks, now have to change their mind sets and attitudes, and learn more skills and subject knowledge to foster students with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary for the 21st century.

The government has a plan to upgrade the current one or two years of pre-service teacher education by transforming it to a four-year course. This will require intensive and long-term investment in human resource development, not only for the basic education sector but also in the higher education sector.

The dialogue on the decentralisation agenda launched as part of the reform process is also gathering momentum, and will require significantly increased staffing, institutional and systems development, as well as new technical and administrative skills to implement effectively.

- Preferred solution and impact on the relevant constraint

For the Ministry of Education to deliver on the new initiatives sustainably, a more systematic approach to capacity building is needed, which focuses on institutional and systems strengthening, as well as individual training.

To address the issues, a Capacity Gap Analysis is needed, to quantify the capacity development needs implicated in the reform agenda, not only in the Ministry of Education, but across all Ministries involved in education delivery, including the capacity to coordinate. The analysis will inform development of a coherent Capacity Development Plan which is systematic, demand-driven and government-led, and supports implementation of the policy initiatives embedded in the Costed Sector Plans. The Plan can also help articulate clear roles, responsibilities and accountability lines within and between Ministries for more efficient and effective decision making. It will also outline the coordination structures and mechanisms which are essential for streamlining collaborative efforts and leveraging results among the different agencies.

- Feasibility of implementation

Analytical work is already underway in Phase 2 of the CESR to assess the feasibility of scaling up and institutionalising pilot initiatives and looking at the institutional and capacity development implications, as well as additional funding required.

Development of an appropriate incentive system to reward agents of change will be key to success, as well as building administrative flexibility in managing resources to address capacity gaps once they have been identified.

Conclusion

Implementation of Myanmar's ambitious program of education sector reform will require increased resources, both domestic and external; an enabling legislation and policy environment; as well as an extensive and systematic capacity development programme. With a coordinated approach between all government agencies and Development Partners, it is hoped that these three constraints can be addressed, to create an education system that will generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the Knowledge Age and contribute to the building of a peaceful, modern and developed nation.