

Educational change in a protracted refugee context

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The provision of education in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border has evolved over 20 years, adapting its purpose, expanding its reach and improving its quality and relevance.

Throughout this time, political uncertainties, protracted and constant refugee flows, and a changing policy environment have affected refugees' access to education, the quality and relevance of the education they receive and their ability to use the skills and knowledge acquired for income generation and community development.

In this article, we look at education provision in the seven predominantly Karen refugee camps. The Karen Education Department (KED), which is linked to the Karen National Union (KNU¹), plays a role in policy making and implementation in these camps. The education system is funded by a range of organisations and implemented by local NGOs (eg the Karen Women's Organisation and the Karen Youth Organisation) and international NGOs (eg ZOA Refugee Care and International Child Support).

There are approximately 115,000² residents in the seven predominantly Karen camps, about 54,000 of whom are children and young people. There are roughly equal numbers of men and women in the camps, whose populations range from about 4,000 to 45,000. The diversity in geographical location, population density, population groups and community organisational abilities pose distinctive challenges to providing and coordinating relevant and good quality education across seven widely spread camps.

The Royal Thai Government (RTG) has overall authority over the refugee camps and it enforces policy and implementation. It allows international and local NGOs to provide resources, services and capacity building to support education in the camps.



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Range of educational services

The general education system consists of nursery, primary, secondary and post-secondary schools. The RTG's policy on education in the camps only allows education up to the post-secondary level as security concerns prohibit anyone from leaving the camps to pursue their studies.

The school curriculum is approved by the KED and textbooks are constantly being updated and made relevant to the camp environment. Children study three languages (Karen, Burmese and English), science, maths, geography, social science and health.

Registration figures, however, show that about 18% of the children in the camps were not attending primary

or secondary school in the 2007-08 academic year. The more than 1,500 teachers are paid meagre wages. They also face noisy and overcrowded classrooms, few resources and mixed ability classes. Many of them strive to teach well but are constrained by lack of experience and know-how.³

Learning programmes are provided for adults and young people who are not attending school. These include courses in literacy (Skaw and Pwo Karen), languages (English and Thai), vocational skills (such as agriculture, sewing and cooking), crafts (soap-making and knitting) and community skills (HIV, mine risk, domestic violence), and limited general education in night schools. Participants gain valuable skills and knowledge but the opportunities for refugees to earn a livelihood with these skills are sorely lacking. The Thai government refuses to allow them to leave the camps and the

camp economy is too small to support such a large number of tailors, welders and cooks. However, in 2007, after concerted lobbying, ZOA Refugee Care – in partnership with UNHCR – received approval from the RTG to begin an unprecedented pilot project allowing 80 refugees to set up agricultural activities just outside Mae La refugee camp and to sell their products in a market outside camp. The involvement of Thai Ministry of Education (MoE) vocational colleges as well as the participation of local Thai villagers has contributed to the RTG accepting this new initiative.

From emergency to protracted refugee context

After years of trial, error and practice, educational services

Secondary school student in Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp, Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand.

are now provided in a relatively effective and efficient manner, with high levels of commitment and involvement from the camp communities. However, NGOs have worked according to a traditional basic service delivery approach, despite the fact that the refugees have been living in the camps for many years. This situation now requires longer-term development and educational strategies which emphasise enhanced quality of education and sustainability over basic service delivery.

The provision of basic services such as school construction and school supplies, however, cannot be neglected, because refugees live in camps where there is minimal interaction with local Thai communities and travel outside the camps is forbidden. Consequently, they are fully dependent on external organisations for even the most basic forms of support. To complement this basic service delivery, more resources have had to be made available for longer-term interventions in educational content areas such as teacher training, curriculum and materials development, and capacity building of education management staff.

The focus on these long-term capacity-building initiatives at the camp level serves the dual purpose of addressing both educational quality and sustainability. Progress can be made on further improving the quality of teaching and learning through new and innovative interventions that are increasingly delivered in partnership with specialised institutions and individuals, including the MoE. Sustainability in a protracted refugee context is a complicated issue, as the refugee context is not meant to be sustainable. In contrast with the KED, whose institutional future is highly uncertain, those actors currently playing a role in education management at the camp level are likely to be similarly involved in community education management in the future, whatever that future holds: repatriation to Burma, resettlement to a third country or integration into Thai society. That is why educational NGOs have shifted their approach from a restricted focus on building the capacity of

KED as an institution to a multi-level capacity-building approach with a stronger emphasis on strengthening capacities at the micro (camp) level.

Resettlement

The resettlement of an increasing number of refugees to third countries has had a major impact on camp communities and the education system in particular. Among the refugees opting for resettlement is a disproportionate number of better qualified people, including education workers. Although resettlement can offer excellent opportunities, it does make the implementation of educational activities in camps particularly complicated. It is difficult for NGOs to continue programme implementation at existing quality levels as many educational staff members are leaving the camps during training or just after having been trained. A completely new and inexperienced group of education workers has to be trained quickly in order to ensure the continuation of service delivery, with the risk that they too will leave in the short- to medium-term.

Possible initiatives to consider in order to address these concerns include:

- the establishment of 'crash courses' in teaching skills so that new teachers can start classroom teaching as quickly as possible
- complementing the existing cascade training model with a more direct NGO presence in the camps, such as field-based trainers providing intensive ongoing support and coaching to new and inexperienced teachers
- an intensification of recently established peer training mechanisms.

Apart from trying to adjust existing programmes to deal with the impact of resettlement, NGOs have also been looking to establish new activities for refugees planning to resettle in order to better equip them for life in a Western country. Examples of this are the vocational training and non-formal education projects established by ZOA Refugee Care. Discussions are taking place with the Thai MoE and other local service

providers to set up short-term courses to prepare refugees for jobs – such as in the catering and care sectors, where reports from resettled refugees indicate that employment opportunities are more likely to be – and to provide them with recognised certification. It has also set up an English learning programme in all camps to provide refugees with basic English skills for resettlement. Interest and participation in the newly established programme are very high.

Policy change and advocacy

If the RTG is unwilling to allow refugees to engage in economic activities or to access services outside the camps, the current mechanisms of service provision and the lack of sustainability of interventions will remain. There are some signs of changes in its approach, however. The RTG is gradually accepting that the refugee situation is likely to continue for the foreseeable future and the MoE, in particular, appears open to improving the educational opportunities of displaced persons as part of its commitment to achieving Education for All (EFA) goals.

NGOs along the border have responded by complementing their roles of 'basic service providers' and 'capacity builders' with a third role as 'lobbyists and advocates'. They are actively working to influence decision making within the RTG so as to improve the quality of life of refugees in the areas of education, training and livelihoods. In such lobbying and advocacy activities, a special focus on the further opening up of the camps is needed, to ensure that refugees can leave the camps to benefit from educational opportunities and/or to allow new educational opportunities to 'move into' the camps.

Currently, the KED uses its own curriculum, which is predominantly based on the Burmese curriculum but which has adopted many components from curricula from other parts of the world. This has resulted in a curriculum lacking coherence among grades and subjects, lacking relevance to the local context and often lacking quality. Additionally, the curriculum is not accredited; when students finish their education they receive a certificate that has no value outside the camps. Based on initial discussions with

the MoE, there now seems to be a willingness to identify options for certifying the camp curriculum while keeping as much of the current local content as possible. This is a highly politicised process, with sensitivities among both the RTG and the refugee communities. However, the refugees now have opportunities that were previously out of reach.

Recent discussions have also been held with the RTG to consider options for refugees to access higher education opportunities. An initial eight refugee students are to be permitted to study in Thai universities, paving the way for other refugee students in the future. Access to distance education in the refugee camps is more complicated, as more players are involved and

RTG approval for internet access is required (a politically sensitive issue). Advancement on this front is expected to take more time and to require continued lobbying by NGOs and other actors.

Conclusion

Individuals and organisations working along the border are striving to provide relevant and good quality education within considerable policy and practical constraints. Given the protracted nature of the situation, however, it is now increasingly necessary to work beyond the relief model and to make strategic decisions based on developing the camp communities and their education system. Moreover, it is imperative to work proactively, lobbying and advocating for educational rights and

provision, and linking this directly to policy changes in Thailand.

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1. www.karen.org/knu/knu.htm.
2. TBBC Burmese border refugee sites with population figures: January 2008 www.tbbc.org/camps/populations.htm.
3. Oh, S-A, Ochalumthan, S, Pla Law La and Htoo, J. (2006) 'Education Survey 2005', Thailand: ZOA Refugee Care. www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=2020.