Myanmar's Civil Society - a Patch for the National Education System? The Emergence of Civil Society in Areas of State Weakness

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Studie

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Abstract

Civil society groups are among the most important private actors to fill some of the gaps that exist in Myanmar's education system. As the state-run education system deteriorates, civil society actors develop alternative approaches to teaching and the provision of basic education materials. As its subtitle suggests, this article argues that even though the military regime of Myanmar is highly authoritarian, spaces for civil society actors do exist within two areas of state weakness: firstly, within various sectors of the weak welfare state; and secondly, within some of the negotiated spaces of relative ethnic autonomy in ceasefire areas. Against this backdrop, the emergence of civil-society-based self-help groups in the education sector provides but one specific example of a larger trend that is taking place in present-day Myanmar: The military regime has started to tolerate certain civil society activities in areas of tremendous welfare needs that the government is unable or unwilling to deal with itself.[1] (Manuscript received February 1, 2007; accepted for publication March 27, 2007)

Keywords: Myanmar, civil society, education system, military regime, development cooperation, state failure

The Author

Jasmin Lorch is a doctoral candidate at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. In June 2005 she graduated in political science from the Freie Universität Berlin. The findings of both her MA thesis and her articles on civil society in Myanmar rest upon her own research trips to the country in the summers of 2004 and 2006 and in early spring 2007. Her PhD focuses on the question of what kind of state constitutes what kind of civil society, using Bangladesh and the Philippines as case studies. Specifically, it seeks to analyse the effects of state weakness on national civil societies by means of comparative analysis. Contact: j.lorch@gmx.de

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Studie

Myanmars Zivilgesellschaft – ein Lückenbüßer für das staatliche Bildungssystem? Die Entstehung von Zivilgesellschaft in Bereichen schwacher Staatlichkeit

Jasmin Lorch

Abstract

Zivilgesellschaftliche Gruppen gehören zu den bedeutendsten nichtstaatlichen Akteuren, die einige der zahlreichen Lücken, die in Myanmars Bildungssystem existieren, notdürftig schließen. Während das staatliche Bildungssystem zusehends erodiert, entwickeln zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure alternative Ansätze der Selbsthilfe, um Grundbildung zu vermitteln und unentbehrliche Lehrmaterialen bereitzustellen.Wie der Untertitel dieses Artikels impliziert, argumentiert die Autorin, dass trotz der Repressivität des autoritären Regimes in Myanmar in mindestens zwei Bereichen, in denen der Staat schwach ist, Handlungsspielräume für zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure existieren: erstens in verschiedenen Sektoren des versagenden Wohlfahrtsstaates und zweitens in einigen der ausgehandelten Autonomiegebiete der ethnischen Minderheiten. Vor diesem Hintergrund stellt die Entstehung zivilgesellschaftlicher Selbsthilfeinitiativen im Bildungsbereich nur ein Beispiel für eine allgemeine Entwicklung dar, die gegenwärtig in Myanmar stattfindet: Das Militärregime hat begonnen, in Bereichen, in denen enorme Wohlfahrtsdefizite herrschen, welche die Regierung selbst nicht zu beheben in der Lage – oder willens – ist, zivilgesellschaftliche Selbsthilfeaktivitäten zu tolerieren. (Manuskript eingereicht am 01.02.2007; zur Veröffentlichung angenommen am 27.03.2007)

Keywords: Myanmar, Bildungssystem, Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, Militärregime, Staatszerfall, Zivilgesellschaft

Die Autorin

Jasmin Lorch ist Doktorandin an der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Im Juni 2005 absolvierte sie ihre Diplomprüfung in Politikwissenschaft an der Freien Universität Berlin. Sowohl ihre Diplomarbeit als auch ihre Beiträge über Zivilgesellschaft in Myanmar basieren auf ihren eigenen Forschungsreisen im Land, die sie im Sommer 2004 und 2006 sowie im Frühjahr 2007 durchführte. Ihre Doktorarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Frage, welche Art von Staatlichkeit welche spezifischen zivilgesellschaftlichen Konstitutionsformen begünstigt. Fallstudien – und Vergleichsfälle – sind Bangladesch und die Philippinen. Im Zentrum der vergleichenden Analyse steht dabei die Frage nach den Auswirkung von schwacher Staatlichkeit auf die Konstitutionsformen nationaler Zivilgesellschaften. Kontakt: j.lorch@gmx.de

1 Introduction

Since the military takeover in 1962, Myanmar has remained one of the world's most repressive regimes. A popular uprising led by the country's students in 1988 was brutally suppressed and the military has tried to preserve its control ever since. Consequently, the results of the 1990 election, in which the opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory, were and remain ignored. However, in spite of this lasting political stalemate at the level of high politics, some promising social dynamics are taking place at the grassroots level: Civil society has begun to re-emerge in authoritarian Myanmar (e.g. South 2004, Heidel 2006, ICG 2001). While it is has long been assumed that the strong military regime of Myanmar does not allow any room for manoeuvre, spaces for civil society actors do exist within at least two areas of state weakness: Firstly, within various sectors of the weak welfare state; and secondly, within some of the negotiated spaces of relative ethnic autonomy in ceasefire areas (Lorch 2006a). Against this backdrop, the emergence of civil society-based self-help groups in the sector of education provides but one specific example of a larger trend that is taking place in present-day Myanmar: The military regime has started to tolerate certain civil society activities in areas of tremendous welfare needs that the government is unable or unwilling to deal with itself.

An analysis of both the *constraints* and the *enabling factors* for the development of civil society in Myanmar is fruitful for the international community with regard to possible policy options. While the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has developed a policy of "constructive engagement" based on non-interference, non-discrimination and consensus, the USA since 2003 has implemented a policy of comprehensive economic sanctions (Burma Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003). In view of the lasting political stalemate situation it seems clear, however, that neither ASEAN's constructive engagement approach nor the US sanctions regime has led to substantial political reform in Myanmar. The European Union (EU) has also opted for a policy of coercive diplomacy and sanctions. However, according to the EU Council Common Position of April 2006, it allows for both humanitarian aid and development aid in certain circumscribed areas (EU Council Common Position 2006/318/CFSP of 27 April 2006).

The EU Council Common Position thus reacts to the severe humanitarian crisis that is nascent in Myanmar. For years it has been assumed that about 40 per

cent of the population live below the poverty line (Steinberg 2001:46). Epidemics like HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria are on the rise. Other humanitarian emergencies such as child malnutrition also seem to be steadily increasing. The national crisis in the above-mentioned fields of health and development is severely aggravated by the failure of the state-run education system. Indeed, in some rural areas government schools do not exist at all. Moreover, aid workers and experts active in the country assume that due to poverty more than 50 per cent of all children drop out of school before they even finish the primary level. While the humanitarian and social need for aid has been acknowledged in principle, critics still argue that it does not reach the people and bring relief but rather strengthens the military regime and therefore inhibits political change (ICG 2002a; ALTSEAN Burma 2002:9; 31-52). In this sense, the development of civil society in Myanmar has to be discussed in relation to the broader picture of the debate on humanitarian aid for the country. If it was possible to identify local civil society actors in Myanmar this would help international donors, since those domestic groups could be engaged as partners regarding the delivery of humanitarian aid.

The education sector constitutes a particularly attractive field of possible future engagement for international actors: If the international community could engage with civil society actors in Myanmar's education sector, this could be a starting point for gradually changing the country's authoritarian political culture. Moreover, for the EU it would also be politically relatively uncontroversial to engage with civil society actors in the education sector. According to Article 5 of the EU Council Common Position, projects and programmes in the areas of good governance, capacity building of civil society, health, environmental protection and education are off the ban of development aid. Against this backdrop, the article focuses on an analysis of what room for manoeuvre is available for civil society actors in the education sector and how this can be strengthened. After providing an overview of the multifaceted spectrum of civil society initiatives in the field of education, the author tries to answer the question of whether civil society has the potential to patch up Myanmar's education system. Unless otherwise indicated, the findings presented in this article rest upon the author's own research trips to Myanmar in the summers of 2004 and 2006 and in early spring 2007. In most cases sources of information have been made anonymous in order to protect the people interviewed.

2 Conceptualising Civil Society under Authoritarian Rule: Towards a *Relational Understanding*

Research into civil society developments in authoritarian Myanmar requires a particularly sound theoretical conceptualization. The more so as the concept of civil society is itself deeply contested, most notably because it has both descriptive as well as normative dimensions (Guan 2004:1). Conventional definitions of civil society have laid emphasis on its normative dimensions deriving from democratic theory. In this sense, civil society is closely associated with a sphere autonomous from the state and the market. Civil society associations are defined as being characterized by voluntary participation, tolerance, discursive procedures of decision-making and horizontal networks. Correspondingly, they are assumed to generate mutual trust and democratic values and to consequently promote democracy (for an overview see Edwards 2004). However, such definitions of civil society have often been criticized as being inapplicable to non-Western cultural and national contexts (e.g. Lewis 2001)[1].

In order to describe civil society in Southeast Asia and its emergence under authoritarian rule, it is more useful to emphasize the empirical analytical dimensions of the concept (Wischermann 2005:203; Croissant/Lauth/Merkel 2000:10). Used in a primarily analytical way, any definition of civil society has to take into account the specific political and cultural context in which it operates. A *relational approach*[2] seems a fruitful approach to this endeavour, as it consequently relates civil society to the scope of action it has. A democratic constitutional state is the *conditio sine qua non* for an autonomous and democratic civil society to flourish. In Myanmar, however, civil society emerges in the context of authoritarian rule, which has profound consequences for the way it is able to constitute itself. The cases of Vietnam and China have shown for example that in authoritarian regimes that try to penetrate the social sphere, civil society organizations can hardly achieve extensive autonomy of action (Heng 2004:145ff.). In contrast, civil society actors frequently have to maintain functional ties with members of the ruling establishment – or even let themselves become partially co-opted by the latter (Yang 2004:13f.; Perinova 2005:6ff.; 28). If one wishes to study the genesis of civil society under authoritarian rule, defining it as a sphere that is

1 Lewis refers to this critique, but he doesn't share it.

2 For a more extensive elaboration on the *relational approach* see Lorch 2006a and 2006b.

completely autonomous from the state and the market therefore misses the point. In this sense, it is more useful to define civil society as a specific *type of action and interaction*. According to this definition, civil society activities are characterized – not only, but mainly – by self-organization and self-reliance, by their operating in the public sphere, by using discourse as a means of resolving conflicts, by tolerance of heterogeneity and pluralism, by their differing from violence and war, and by their pursuit of the collective good (Gosewinkel/Rucht/van den Daele/Kocka 2003:11).[3] Defined as such, civil society is neither strictly confined to any specific sector of society at large, nor will any real civic organiation have all these ideal type characteristics. While the main characteristic of civil society groups is the specific *type of action and interaction* they practise, their degree of formality and their institutional forms may differ considerably. In this sense, there are multiple examples of civil society associations such as advocacy groups, registered charities and developmental NGOs, but also informal community self-help groups and faith-based organizations (LSE 2004).

Likewise, this understanding of civil society allows for an analysis of its *dark sides* (Lauth 2003:22). Civil society in authoritarian states is likely to mirror features such as hierarchy and exclusiveness. Similarly, vertically structured relationships as well as religious and ethnic cleavages in society as a whole are bound to be found in civil society organizations as well (Croissant 2000:360; Howell 1999:17). In other words, apart from the dominating *type of action and interaction* defined as being the main characteristic of civil society, other modes of action and interaction – such as hierarchical procedures of decision-making or exclusiveness and intolerance towards outsiders – can also prevail within specific civil society organizations. When looking at voluntary civil society groups which are based on faith or ethnicity – such as Christian church organizations or ethnic culture groups – this aspect becomes particularly evident. While these groups might practice a certain degree of tolerance among their own membership and dedicate themselves to the collective good of their respective communities, they might at the same time be exclusive towards or even discriminate against members of other religious or ethnic groups.

[3] Author's translation.

3 The Scope of Action for Civil Society in Myanmar: Locating Gaps in the Authoritarian System

Any analysis of the scope of action available to civil society actors has to take into account both the *constraints* and the *enabling factors* that could potentially create a suitable environment for civil society activities.

There can scarcely be any doubt that there are considerable structural impediments hindering the emergence of civil society in Myanmar (Steinberg 1999; Liddell 1999). Since the crackdown on the popular demonstrations that took place in 1988, the *Tatmandaw*[4] has been expanded (ICG 2002b:1-5). Intelligence capacities to spy on the population have also been enhanced and modernized (Ball 1998:91-125). Moreover, Liddell has described the *legal constraints* on civil society in Myanmar by saying there is "no room to move" (Liddell 1999:54). The development of free and independent civil society associations is restricted by the lack of fundamental civil liberties (ibid.). Moreover, all publications are subjected to strict censorship (ibid:59) and to counter attempts at individual expression the regime controls an extensive propaganda machine including newspapers and television channels.

Nevertheless, in spite of all these *constraints*, civil society-based self-help groups have been emerging in areas where the authoritarian state is weak or failing.[5] Where the state fails to provide essential governance services such as basic welfare, civil society actors try to develop alternative self-help approaches to tackle the needs of their respective communities.

3.1 Enabling Factors for Civil Society – Areas of State Weakness

Modern definitions of the *state* attribute three core functions to it: firstly, to provide for the security of the population and control the state's territory; secondly, to provide for the welfare of the population, which includes state activities in various sectors such as the economy, labour, health, education and the environment; and thirdly, to generate legitimacy, allow for popular participation and establish a democratic constitutional state (Schneckener 2004:12-14). If the state fails to perform these functions other actors can move into the gaps that exist.

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4 Myanmar's army (Selth 1995:237).

5 Regarding the categorization of Myanmar as a *weak state* see e.g. Karetnikov (2004:49); Pedersen, Rudland, May (2000) and Englehart (2005). Will categorizes Myanmar as a "weak or failing state" (Will 2004).

While Rotberg especially refers to warlords and other criminal non-state actors (Rotberg 2004:6ff.), Risse also identifies economic actors, NGOs, family clans and other local groups that practise alternative forms of governance in sectors of state weakness or failure (Risse 2005:8-12). Some of these groups account for civil society actors in line with the definition which forms the theoretical basis of this article. This pattern of civil society emerging in gaps which are left by the state is highly relevant for Myanmar, where the state apparatus fails with regard to many of its core functions. And it is in these gaps that the national civil society has been re-emerging in recent years.

The state of Myanmar can be considered as being particularly weak with regard to the core function of providing for the welfare of the national population. The severe humanitarian crisis provides bitter evidence for this failure of the welfare system. Furthermore, certain ethnic minority areas are not under the direct control of the central state, which limits its territorial power monopoly. Since 1989 the regime has concluded ceasefire arrangements with most of the armed ethnic resistance groups, thereby granting them some degree of autonomy. As a result, some room for manoeuvre exists for civil society actors in the sector of welfare provision and in certain territories with a degree of ethnic autonomy – and especially where these two areas of state weakness coincide or overlap.

3.2 The Weakness of the State-Run Education System

The weak performance of the state in the sector of education can be considered as only one devastating example of the general failure of the state of Myanmar to perform its welfare function. Even though hard empirical evidence is very hard to come by, it is interesting that the failure of the state-run education system even becomes evident when reading (between the lines of) the government propaganda (see below).

Indeed, in certain rural areas government schools do not exist at all. Furthermore, schools are mostly poorly equipped and usually lack basic teaching materials such as benches, tables and books. Even though education is supposed to be compulsory and free there are many unofficial allowances which parents have to pay, such as fees for the enrolment of their children or financial contributions to the maintenance of school buildings. Moreover, parents also have to buy school uniforms and books for their children, which many poor people cannot afford. As a consequence, they often take their children out of school. According to various voices from within the country more than 50 per cent of all children

drop out of school before they even finish the primary level, which means that they completely fall through the cracks of the state-run education system. In this respect, it is noteworthy that even according to – in all likelihood embellished – statistics published by the Ministry of Education (MOE) the completion rate of primary school is just slightly above 70 per cent (MOE 2007a:21, MOE 2007b:1 and 5).[6] The drop-out problem is also reflected by the recent government initiative to establish so-called post-primary schools (MOE 2007a:7, MOE 2007b:2). As in many poor and rural areas there are only primary and no middle or high schools.[7] Some government primary schools have been "upgraded" to post-primary schools which means that they now teach up to the sixth, seventh or eighth grade as well (MOE 2007b:2). It has already been mentioned that it is, of course, also due to poverty that children drop out of school after finishing the primary level even if there might be a government-run secondary school in the immediate vicinity. In any case, the post-primary programme seems to reflect a somehow desperate attempt of the government to keep children in school, be it only one or two years more than their primary school attendance. As one high-ranking government official of the Ministry of Education aptly admitted himself, "Otherwise (i.e. without post-primary schools, my own remarks) they drop out after primary."

Apart from the problems mentioned, teachers are often only poorly trained and teaching methods tend to be repetitive, outdated, teacher-centred and based on ex-cathedra teaching. Among others, two main reasons for the poor training of teachers can be identified. Firstly, the state-run teachers training system has been constantly deteriorating. Even the Ministry of Education itself admits that not all teachers have an academic qualification or even "attended certified courses" (MOE 2006)[8]. Secondly, civil servants – including teachers and professors –

[6] However, in public the government usually prefers to refer to the rate of (initial) enrolment which it claims to be nearly 100 per cent. However, this figure too is strongly contested by independent experts.

[7] Experts from within the country have told this author that there is primary, middle and high school and that primary and middle school have four grades each while high school has two. Official sources from the Ministry of Education also divide the school system into primary, middle and high school (MOE 2007a:6f.). However, recent publications of the Ministry of Education suggest that the primary level officially has five grades instead of four (MOE 2007a:7, MOE 2007b:2). In fact, it is conceivable that the situation might vary according to place and circumstances. The post-primary programme could itself be mentioned as a case in point here.

are generally very badly paid, which is why well-qualified people, especially those who have obtained education and training abroad, usually have no interest to become teachers. The national universities usually face similar problems as the schools but, -more importantly, access to tertiary education is also highly restricted and often subject to political loyalty to the regime. Moreover, there is also an obvious lack of vocational skills training as well as a dearth of *capacity building* in fields such as management, project-oriented work and even English, which international organizations and businessmen active in Myanmar recognize instantly as soon as they try to hire staff.

As a consequence of the weakness of the state-run education system at all levels which has been depicted in this chapter, various commercial private schools as well as computer, English and vocational training centres have been established in recent years. Even though the certificates of these private education institutions are not recognized by the government, most wealthy people prefer to send their children there instead of sending them to a government school. As private education is not legally provided for, these institutions are not allowed to register with the Ministry of Education. As a makeshift solution most of them have chosen to register with the Ministry of Commerce and officially operate as businesses. Generally, enrolment and (note) monthly fees are very high and mostly have to be paid in foreign currency. All of the private schools registered with the Ministry of Commerce which the author visited were businesses in the truest sense of the word due to the high fees which they requested. None of them would have been interesting from the point of view of development aid and poverty alleviation. Nevertheless, two aspects regarding these schools are interesting in reference to the *relational understanding* of civil society and worth more extensive research in the future. First, registering with the Ministry of Commerce might in fact constitute a strategy for non-profit making and thus more welfare oriented civil society-based initiatives to get a school started. Second, and maybe even more importantly, many founders of and teachers at such commercial private schools would probably claim that they represent civil

[8] The information cited above is given in a rather cryptic and euphemistic way. It is claimed that the "objective" of the government is "to increase the percentage of teachers having required (sic) academic qualification (matriculated) to 96" and "the percentage of primary and middle school teachers who have attended certified courses to 97" per cent respectively, both by the year 2005. However, the source does not provide data about the status quo.

society as well as identify themselves with the *type of action and interaction* described as being characteristic for civil society.[9]

Apart from private commercial schools, non-profit self-help approaches to the provision of educational services have also become ever more significant in recent years due to the failure of the state in the education sector. The current Myanmar Local NGO Directory, which only lists registered organizations with an office in Yangon, already mentions 57 NGOs including monastic schools and church-based organizations that engage in education (DLN 2005). Taking into account that many civil society initiatives in Myanmar are informal and that their scope of action is mostly very localized, the actual number of self-help groups in the education sector can comfortably be expected to be much higher. The article now concentrates on depicting some of these civil society activities, focusing first on government-controlled and then on ceasefire areas.

4 Civil Society Activities in Education: Government-Controlled Areas

4.1 Monastic Schools

The most prominent civil society actors that are active in the education sector in government-controlled areas are monastic schools or *monastic education centres* as they are often called. Throughout the history of Myanmar, monastic education has been crucial as a means of providing the country's ordinary citizens with a basic education. Today, in some rural areas, monasteries are in fact the only educational institutions that exist (Brandon 1998:235). Monastic schools especially reach out to poor children, are free of any charges and the teaching materials are mostly provided to the children. Some specifically target street children and orphans and not only teach them but also provide them with food and accommodation. In fact, many monastic education centres also serve as orphanages, or vice versa. Some of these orphanages have established their own medical and income-generating facilities such as tailor shops and carpentries. Moreover, as monastic orphanages mostly lack the money to pay any staff, their

[9] Two founders of such commercial private schools have in fact told this author that they considered their initiatives as civil society activities. However, members of Myanmar's business community as a whole often claim that they are civil society actors, both because it is still quite difficult to run successful businesses which are independent from government interference in Myanmar and because they sometimes seem to use this as a strategy to receive foreign support.

pupils usually not only have to cook and wash for themselves but they also have to take care of the maintenance of school buildings and other facilities. Consequently, monastic education centres are typically highly self-organized. Financially, however, most of them depend on donations from local communities or, in some cases, international donors and friends. Mostly with the help of international friends or donor organizations, some monastic schools have also managed to establish libraries with relatively rich collections of books.

There are various types of monastic schools, but there seem to be three main categories: The first category of monastic schools confines itself to imparting Buddhist teachings. The second category is constituted by monastic schools which consider it their main task to impart Buddhist teachings but which, at the same time, also teach children basic literacy skills. These second type monastic schools are unable to hold exams or to award their pupils certificates which are recognized by the government though. However, the third category of monastic schools are those that adopt the government curriculum. In other words this means that they engage in formal education. This indicates that they deliberately try to fill a gap in the state-run education system by teaching the government curriculum to children whose parents cannot afford to send them to a government school.

According to official government figures 1,183 of these third type monastic schools are recognized by the government in a kind of co-education system. They seem to be registered with both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. According to the same source, these 1,183 schools reached 158,040 pupils in the 2003-2004 academic year (MOE 2006:25). If monastic schools are recognized by the government, their pupils also have the possibility to acquire an officially recognized degree. They can either do their final exams at a government school or they can do them at their respective monastic school, which then, however, has to send them to the ministry responsible for marking and issuing the certificates.[10] For officially recognized monastic schools there

[10] During my field study in summer 2006 several experts as well as teachers at monastic schools said that officially recognized monastic schools were registered with the Ministry of Education and that it was also the Ministry of Education to which all officially recognized monastic schools had to send their pupils' final exams for marking. However, during another research trip in early spring 2007 high ranking officials from the Ministry of Education claimed that all monastic schools were under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Nevertheless, a publication of the Ministry of Education itself claims both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to

also seems to be a kind of bridge system, which makes it possible for pupils to change from monastic to government schools. If, for example, pupils complete the primary level at an officially recognized monastic school, they sometimes appear to be allowed to do a special test. If they pass this test, they can get accepted at a government middle school.

According to other official statistics, which the author obtained from a UN agency active in the country and which are largely in accordance with the official source MOE 2006 cited above, the majority of all officially recognized monastic schools teach at the primary level or at the so-called post-primary level.[11] Some, but much fewer, officially recognized monastic schools teach at the middle level.[12] Furthermore, two to five officially recognized monastic schools were reported to the author to teach at the high school level.[13] Moreover, there are also various monastic education centres that engage in vocational skills training or computer training activities. With regard to the figures cited, it should be noted that they are likely to be incomplete due to a general lack of reliable data concerning almost every aspect of politics in Myanmar. However, it is also crucial to stress yet another aspect: Even though the figures indicate that monastic schools might not be so numerous in present-day Myanmar, it is still obvious they make important contributions to bridging some of the gaps in the state-run education system. These schools specifically reach out to the poorest of the poor, who would otherwise not have access to education at all.

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be in charge of the officially recognized monastic schools (MOE 2006:25).

[11] As monastic schools are in many places the only educational institutions that exist and mostly teach at the primary level, many of them have adopted the government's pattern of upgrading primary to post-primary schools.

[12] According to this second official source cited here, there are 1,158 officially recognized monastic schools which altogether reach 161,492 children. According to the same source, 144,008 of these children are taught at the primary or post-primary level and only 17,484 are taught at the middle level. However, the source does not give the number of schools which are active at the primary level and at the middle level respectively.

[13] This information about the number of monastic schools active at the high school level is not backed by the official sources cited above. Instead, it is based on various interviews that the author conducted in Myanmar in summer 2006. While some of the people interviewed claimed that five monastic schools taught at the high school level, others said it were only two. The author herself was able to visit one of them and read the funding proposal of a second one. Thus, the author can confirm that there are at least two monastic schools active at the high school level. There might be three more, but their existence could not be confirmed during this field study.

Generally, most monastic schools teach novices and other children together[14]. Moreover, teachers who work or volunteer at monastic schools are not necessarily always Buddhist monks. Indeed, quite often, Buddhist monasteries largely serve as protective umbrellas for more secular educational initiatives taking place under their auspices. Sometimes, for instance, monasteries simply provide their compound and then invite professional teachers to volunteer.

Many monastic education centres provide their services regardless of race and religion, but education is certainly conducted in accordance with Buddhist values and principles. Indeed, the main purpose of some Buddhist education programmes is to counter similar efforts by the Christian churches and prevent people converting from Buddhism to Christianity. This pattern is especially relevant with regard to those monastic schools which are also orphanages. Even though not all of the children they care for are Buddhist, some monastic orphanages require every child who wants to live in their compound to wear a Buddhist novice's robe. Even in orphanages where this is not the case, Christian or Muslim children who live there are sometimes encouraged to convert to Buddhism.

Monastic education centres vary both in size and in the degree to which they are co-opted by the regime. While some only have a few dozen pupils, others have between 100 and 800 (some big monastic schools have even more pupils, but they are exceptions to the rule). Many rural Buddhist groups are localized and centre on individual monks. While they are relatively independent, their radius of action is necessarily limited to a few beneficiaries and their education facilities and materials are often very basic. Even though they fulfil fundamental welfare tasks, such informal initiatives are often invisible to Western donors and consequently receive little or no foreign support (South 2004:248f.). By contrast, large monastic schools are often granted a surprisingly large scope of action at first glance. The Dhamma Buddhist Education Centre in Rangoon,[15] for example, runs its own medical and income-generating facilities such as a tailor's shop, a carpenters and a garage in order to make it self-sufficient. It teaches

[14] The majority of the population in Myanmar is Buddhist. As a consequence, most children who go to monastic schools practise Buddhism. Not all of them are novices though. Moreover, in some cases even non-Buddhist children go to a monastic school for education, because there are no government schools where they live (see below).

[15] Organization known to the author; name and place changed for safety's sake.

several foreign languages and is allowed to invite foreign teachers and experts to volunteer. In addition, it maintains a library with a relatively rich collection of books. Moreover, it has a language laboratory and computer facilities and offers computer training courses for pupils and teachers alike. However, this room for manoeuvre is directly dependent on the personal contacts that the presiding monk maintains or used to maintain with several high-ranking officials. While such personal linkages with the ruling establishment compromise organizational independence, they also protect the institution from repression. Although the Dhamma Buddhist Education Centre receives no financial support from the state, military officials have in the past paid public visits in order to take some of the credit. In return, the institution has been granted considerable autonomy in running its programmes up to the present day.

As a local university professor told this author, many of the monks who run big monastic schools in Myanmar received their own education at the state-run Theravada Buddhist University, an institution which can be considered as an instrument of the government to promote but also to "purify" and control the Buddhist faith. To sum up, in spite of co-option (or precisely because of it), the Buddhist *Sangha*[16] enjoys a measurable scope of action, which enables it to offer essential educational services that the state fails to provide.

4.2 Community-Based Schools in Rural Areas

In rural areas community-based schools are crucial as a means of providing village children with basic education and skills. Officially, the government mostly portrays these education institutions as government schools, but in reality they owe their existence to the engagement and the material contributions of the respective local communities.

Just as there are many types of monastic schools, there are also various patterns regarding the way in which community-based schools are established and organized. Among others, the following scheme seems to be common: While there is a government school (building) in the village, the government is unable to recruit a village teacher. In fact, this is a very common problem in present-day Myanmar. Professional teachers are usually highly reluctant to be transferred to remote areas, especially as they receive no adequate financial compensation.

16 Community of Buddhist monks and nuns in Myanmar.

As a consequence, local communities frequently establish informal groups and collect money to pay the village teacher themselves. If no professional teacher is prepared to work in the village, *community-based groups* sometimes even choose a teacher among themselves. Mostly, these makeshift teachers are community leaders who are respected persons and have a certain education as well as certain skills but who have never been trained to be teachers.

Another frequent type of civil society action in rural areas follows a slightly different pattern: Often, the next government school is too far away from the village – for example, in a neighbouring village or town. In this case, local community-based groups sometimes even construct the school building on their own and then either share the teacher with the government school nearest to their village or, as depicted above, also recruit and pay the teacher themselves. Officially, the government mostly declares these community-based schools as "extensions" to the government schools located nearest to them. In reality, however, all the efforts and expenses to establish and run these schools have been made by the respective local communities themselves.

4.3 Early Childhood Development, Non-formal Education, Free Extra Tuition, Vocational Training and Capacity Building: The Role of local NGOs

In government-controlled areas, local NGOs – be they Buddhist, Christian or primarily secular – are unable to engage in formal education. Nevertheless, they run certain worthwhile education programmes in the sectors of early childhood development, non-formal education, free extra tuition, vocational skills training and capacity building.

Early childhood development is aimed at children up to five. In this field, local NGOs run nursery or pre-primary schools, where they basically seek to stimulate creative thinking in children, which means that they mostly try to apply child-centred methods and participatory approaches. Some of the NGOs interviewed even claimed that they practised the *Montessori* approach. Apart from playing and singing songs with them, nursery school teachers usually also teach preschoolers the Myanmarese and the English alphabet. Mostly, local NGOs try to work in close co-operation with local communities. Indeed, according to one NGO worker, a number of local communities already have their own programmes in place but lack the skills necessary to efficiently promote skills and knowledge in a way which is suitable for children. Consequently, the main activity of NGOs

that engage in this sector is often to teach community leaders how to run proper early childhood development programmes on their own.

Another field some local NGOs work in is non-formal education. In this field they mostly work with street children and school drop-outs, provide them with food and accommodation and teach them both basic literacy skills and vocational skills in order to enable them to earn their living and stand on their own feet. According to one international NGO worker, NGOs active in non-formal education often try to develop their curriculum in close cooperation with their target groups and frequently readapt it to their beneficiaries' needs. It should be noted, however, that non-formal education is a highly sensitive area of engagement even for local civil society actors and that a lot of programmes in this field have been stopped. Likewise, some local NGOs have been waiting for the official approval of planned non-formal education programmes for such a long time that they have become uncertain whether they will ever be able to get them started. As a consequence, many local NGOs have opted to engage in less controversial education support activities. For instance, some local NGOs give grants to poor parents whose children are enrolled in government schools but who – without this support – would have to take their children out of school and send them to work due to financial constraints. Other education-support activities of local NGOs include the establishment of free hostels for poor children who come from remote areas in order to seek education and training in the cities.

It should also be mentioned that local NGOs that are active in early childhood development or in non-formal education are unable to work or even register with the Ministry of Education. Instead, they usually register and – if possible – cooperate with the Ministry of Social Welfare, which is formally in charge of early childhood development. Indeed, the fact that the Ministry of Social Welfare is responsible for early childhood development programmes seems to provide a small window of opportunity for local NGOs to get involved in education at all. This ministry seems to be a bit less suspicious of private education-oriented initiatives than the Ministry of Education itself.

The NGO activity that might be considered as coming closest to formal education is free extra tuition. Local NGOs as well as engaged individuals run all sorts of free extra tuition programmes in order to help children who have problems at government school but are unable to pay for extra tuition. Many free extra tuition programmes specifically target pupils who have problems in English as well as pupils who are preparing for their matriculation examination.

While free extra tuition is always a well-meant endeavour and undoubtedly might often help children, it should be noted that it can also be counterproductive; the quality varies. What is more, with the state-run education system deteriorating it has become common practice for parents all over Myanmar to send their children to one of the many extra tuition programmes that exist, be they with costs or free of charge. As a result, some ten-year old children who this author spoke to spend almost all of their day in class going to the government school in the morning, to an extra tuition with costs in the afternoon and to another free extra tuition in the evening – sometimes as late as nine or ten o'clock. With the absorptive capacity of a ten year old child being unquestionably limited and the quality of free extra tuitions often inadequate the impact of some of these programmes becomes questionable.

Another field of local NGO engagement is vocational training which regards training activities in professional areas as different as nursing, medical training, tailoring, agriculture and accounting. Moreover, some NGOs offer computer training courses which mostly focus on basic Microsoft Office skills. Due to financial constraints, most NGOs rely on the voluntary engagement of their teachers and trainers. While it is often local pensioners who act as voluntary teachers in NGO vocational training courses, some NGOs have also managed to invite international experts to volunteer for a limited period of time. None of these vocational training courses can earn the participants an officially recognized degree though. However, NGO workers often help their students to find a job after completing the course – by writing recommendation letters to possible future employers, for instance. In actual fact, some local NGOs have already established a network of contacts with local enterprises and employers which helps them to place their former students in a job.

Moreover, the local NGO community has initiated various types of capacity building initiatives in fields such as project management, proposal writing, financial accounting, community organizing, leadership skills, conflict management and English in order to train its own new generation of staff as well as local people who want to work with international (aid) organizations and NGOs active in the country. Apart from local aid workers, the beneficiaries of these capacity building initiatives are often community leaders such as pastors or socially engaged local businessmen because these people can potentially act as trainers themselves and pass their skills on to other people in their communities. One local NGO known to the author relies on self-education methods and has in the past been able to

invite foreign experts for seminars and trainings. The certificates that students can acquire after completing NGO capacity building courses are not recognized by the government. However, they are usually recognized within the community of local NGOs and international NGOs active in Myanmar. Moreover, at least one NGO which the author visited had found a way to have its certificates accredited by an international education institution. As there are no adequate state-run training programmes in the field of development aid, these capacity building initiatives have meanwhile come to present an important means for the local as well as international community of aid workers in Myanmar to train and recruit its own staff.

4.4 Parent-teacher Associations (PTAs) Provide Basic Educational Facilities at the Boundary between Civil Society and the State

*Parent-teacher associations (*PTAs) have become ever more active in recent years. In many towns and regions of Myanmar, these groups consisting of parents and schoolteachers are the only actors to lay the foundations for basic education. Because the state often fails to provide even the most basic educational facilities and materials, PTAs collect money for textbooks and take care of the basic maintenance of school buildings. Some PTAs have even managed to establish links to each other, thereby forming a network, which indicates that their degree of organization is increasing. Moreover, various PTAs have contacts with international organizations that not only support them financially, but also make them familiar with modern approaches to teaching and interactive learning. In this sense, PTAs perform a central role in filling the gaps that exist in the sector of education due to state weakness.

Due to the worthwhile contributions of their members with regard to service delivery, PTAs at least to some degree can be said to account for civil society actors in the *relational* sense, particularly as some of them were reported to the author to practise deliberative forms of decision making, such as voting their own chairpersons. This means that at least to some extent they practise the mode of action and interaction defined as being characteristic for civil society. Nevertheless, whether PTAs can be described as genuine civil society institutions is questionable. The teachers who are members of these organizations are usually part of the state-run education system. Moreover, the government more often than not seems to require parents whose children are enrolled to pay obligatory fees to the local PTAs. In fact, the government has relied on the contributions

of PTAs since the socialist period. In many cases these links with the state-run education system adversely affect the ability of PTAs to operate in a self-organized and self-reliant way and thus curtail the extent to which these organizations can realize the type of action and interaction characteristic for civil society. Hence, PTAs are better described as being located at the boundary between civil society and the state. It could be argued, however, that this boundary shifts considerably as soon as the teachers involved are not state officials but community leaders who teach at community-based schools. Most notably so, because it is also conceivable that in such areas where a government education system does not exist the local population might be much less – or even not at all – subject to government pressures to pay obligatory fees to the PTAs, as both the PTAs and the schools themselves are then genuinely voluntary community initiatives rather than state-controlled.

In any case, for the international donor community the cooperation with PTAs might actually provide a window of opportunity precisely because of their rather hybrid character. The connections which PTAs by nature have with the state apparatus could potentially enable international aid workers to engage with civil society and the local state at the same time, thereby fostering cooperation between the two as well.

5 Civil Society Activities in Education: Ceasefire Areas

As mentioned above, since 1989 the regime has negotiated ceasefires with most of the armed ethnic resistance groups, thereby granting them some degree of autonomy. In some cases, this degree of autonomy also extends to education. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), for instance, has formal administrative autonomy over its area and is allowed to have its own department for education. Moreover, the KIO runs several other education institutions such as a Teachers Training School (ICG 2003:9). In the Special Region 4 in Northern Shan State schools run by the central government exist alongside Chinese schools and so-called self-reliance schools which the Educational Department of the Special Region 4 is in charge of. As a result of this increase in ethnic autonomy many of the ceasefire agreements have led to the emergence or enlargement of spaces for civil society activities in the sector of welfare provision in general and in the sector of education in particular (Smith 1999:37-49; Purcell 1999:89ff.; South 2004:233). Moreover, due to decades of civil war most ethnic minority areas are faced with enormous problems of underdevelopment. While the regime is mostly

unable or unwilling address these grievances it might still be afraid that the armed resistance groups will call off the ceasefires due to economic frustration. This may be another important reason why the military regime allows development projects to be conducted by civil society actors, particularly in ethnic minority areas (ICG 2001:23). Consequently, just as in government-controlled areas, it is mostly in the sector of welfare provision that civil society activities have been allowed to emerge in ethnic territories.

5.1 Christian Churches and their Role in Education

Probably the most important civil society actors in the education sector in ceasefire areas are Myanmar's Christian churches. As most Christians in Myanmar belong to ethnic minority groups, the Christian churches are mostly active in ethnic minority areas. This is not to suggest, however, that the welfare services of the Christian churches in Myanmar are generally confined to non-Burman ethnic nationalities or Christians. Many of them rather deliver their services regardless of ethnicity and religion. Education programmes are however usually conducted in accordance with Christian values and principles.

Until 1962, various Christian denominations in Myanmar ran their own officially registered schools up to high school level. Even though the churches had already encountered some serious restrictions before, after the military coup in 1962 these schools were finally either nationalized or simply closed down. Myanmar's Christian churches have been prohibited from running officially recognized schools or register any other education programmes with the Ministry of Education ever since. Nevertheless, many educational initiatives exist under the religious umbrella of the Christian churches up to the present day.

In ceasefire areas, the contributions which Myanmar's Christian churches make to bridging some of the gaps that exist in the state-run education system often go hand in hand with community-based self-help initiatives, such as the establishment of *community-based schools* depicted above. There are various forms of cooperation between local churches, local communities and even local government institutions which are aimed at providing basic education in ceasefire areas. In many rural ethnic areas, for example, there are no government schools at all. As a consequence, local communities often construct a school building on their own and, subsequently, the local church or bible school provides the teacher (May Oo 2004). Another common scheme seems to be that the government

provides the physical educational infrastructure such as a school building but – just as in remote areas under government control – is unable to pay for a teacher. In such cases again, teachers are often provided by the respective local church organizations. Another important contribution local churches in ethnic minority areas frequently make is to provide books and other teaching materials to government schools that lack the financial means to purchase these materials themselves.

Furthermore, according to a leading church official, Myanmar's Christian churches run about 1,500 nursery or pre-primary schools all over the country and in ethnic minority areas specifically. Apart from playing and singing songs, children who go to church-based pre-primary schools also learn the Myanmarese and the English alphabet as well as the alphabet of their respective ethnic language. However, what seems to be somewhat sensitive is that the Christian churches tend to consider the pre-primary schools as missionary instruments. Interestingly, up to now church-based pre-primary schools seem to have been relatively free to formulate their own curriculum and set their topics as long as they refrained from criticizing the regime. Recently, the government seems to have become a bit wary of these church-based education institutions though. As a consequence, it is currently planning to develop certain guidelines for the curricula of church-based pre-primary schools. However, as the authorities regarding this matter seem to be divided or even disputed between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Welfare, this plan so far seems to exist on paper only. Moreover, according to one source the government has announced that in the future teachers working at church-based pre-primary schools needed to be trained by the government. While this measure would definitely curtail the independence of these Christian schools, it remains highly questionable whether the government actually has the capacities necessary to implement it. One church worker said that his / her organization did not really worry about this plan, since the government only had the capacities necessary to train 50 pre-primary school teachers per year which with regard to the 1,500 church-run pre-primary schools already in existence was totally insufficient.

Other education support activities of the Christian churches in ethnic minority areas include the provision of free extra tuition and the maintenance of hostels that are free of any charges. Free extra tuition programmes aimed at helping children who have problems at government school are either conducted by staff members of local church organizations or run by private volunteers and local

community leaders for whose activities the local churches provide protective umbrellas. While church-run hostels that are free of any charges do not constitute educational institutions per se, they are of crucial importance for many pupils from remote ethnic minority areas nevertheless. As many villages in ethnic minority areas are small and very remote, secondary schools are mostly far away. As a consequence, many poor parents can only send their children to a secondary school if there is a free, church-run hostel in the town where the school is located.

Moreover, there are about 30 Christian colleges – or so-called Seminaries – all over the country and in ethnic minority areas especially. The Seminaries can be attended after matriculation. Their prime mission is to teach Bible Studies, but as most of the books they use are in English, they also impart good spoken and written English skills. What is more, the Seminaries currently also seem to be attempting to establish a Bachelor of Arts system. If this attempt was successful, this would mean that apart from Bible Studies Seminary students could also study some secular subjects such as English and economics. Just as many monastic schools, some Seminariesare highly self-organized. Often, students live in the compound of the Seminary because their home towns or villages are far away. One such Christian college which the author visited not only had its own cooking and basic medical facilities but also a number of sewing machines so that the students could mend and make their own clothes. Moreover, the students had to take turns in the kitchen as well as in cleaning the compound. In theory, all important decisions were supposed to be made by the founder and principal of the Seminary. However, he / she usually had to travel a lot and thus in practice a committee of teachers administered the college. Students were allowed to form a students' council which was in charge of organizing community activities such as sports competitions.

The Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) in Rangoon serves as a Christian University and issues Bachelor's as well as Master's degrees. Even though it provides tertiary education, it is registered as a religious and not as an educational institution. Students at MIT can not only study theology but also choose among a limited number of secular subjects including English and economics. The degrees that students can earn from the Christian colleges and from MIT are not recognized by the government. As a consequence, some of the students who study there also follow a long-distance education course at a government university at the same time. However, the degrees of MIT and the Christian colleges are recognized within the national Christian community with which

most of the students seek employment after completing their education. Some of these tertiary Christian education institutions also resort to alternative accreditation methods such as having certificates accredited by international education associations. Moreover, as one church organization representative stressed, the problem in Myanmar is usually not to get a certificate but rather to acquire worthwhile skills and good quality education. Some teachers at the MIT and at the national Christian colleges have studied abroad and, as a consequence, are often highly qualified.

A generally very interesting aspect is that Myanmar's Christian churches have managed to establish and maintain national network structures, such as the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC), the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) (ICG 2003:17). This aspect distinguishes the Christian churches from the Buddhist *Sangha* which tends to have a much more localized and decentralized organizational structure. These network structures constitute a great asset with regard to the coordination of the various national church-based educational activities. The MCC, for example, provides capacity building programmes such as teachers training and constitutes a common forum for member churches where they can exchange experiences and discuss about their activities in the education sector. Moreover, the MCC maintains some education support programmes which aim at financing scholarships for gifted students to study abroad. However, these scholarship programmes have not always been successful in the past because many beneficiaries have chosen to stay and work abroad instead of coming back to Myanmar in order to work in their own communities. Apart from the educational programmes mentioned, the women department of the MCC runs vocational training courses in various professional fields. Other MCC departments run capacity building programmes in the sectors of humanitarian and development aid, which the MCC also engages in.

5.2 Culture and Literature Committees and their Role in Education

In recent years, the regime has allowed various ethnic minority parties to issue publications in their own ethnic and local languages, which would have been unthinkable before the ceasefires. Following this increase in ethnic autonomy, civil society initiatives in the sectors of culture and literature have been mushrooming. As the Culture and Literature Committees are legal organizations which exist

in almost every ethnic village, a lot of different activities take place under these umbrellas. Specifically, most Culture and Literature Committees focus in some way on literacy and teach children and illiterate adults important spoken and written language skills. As early as the year 2000, 46,000 primary-school children in Mon State and 27,000 in Shan State were able to attend language courses in their own ethnic tongues (Smith 2002:26).

Most Culture and Literature Committees teach the local ethnic language of their respective region and mainly rely on community education approaches such as informal education programmes and summer schools. Others, however, already seem to have incorporated Myanmarese and other non-culture-related subjects into their curriculum. In fact, one UN representative active in the country told this author that some Culture and Literature Committees were even able to engage in formal education and had adopted the government curriculum, especially in Mon State. Just like the Buddhist monastic schools and the educational institutions run by Christian churches, most Culture and Literature Committees are active at the primary education level. However, there also seem to be some that teach at a higher level and impart a number of skills.

The Mon Culture and Literature Committee has conducted educational projects and produced publications in collaboration with the Buddhist *Sangha* (ICG 2003:18). In predominantly Christian areas it is mostly the Christian churches and church-related organizations that – in cooperation with Culture and Literature Committees and other communal actors – help to promote ethnic languages and address basic educational needs, which the central government is unable or unprepared to tackle itself. While ethnic Cultureand Literature Committees teach members of their respective ethnic communities important spoken and written language skills, at least some of them tend to exclude members of other ethnic groups. Consequently, in spite of their worthwhile educational activities Culture and Literature Committees potentially also bear the risk of being culturally divisive, thereby reinforcing ethnic cleavages.

6 In a nutshell

So far, this article has provided a number of informational details about the multifaceted ensemble of civil society groups that are active in Myanmar's education sector. Before moving towards a conclusion, it seems to be useful to summarize the most important common features of civil society initiatives in the field of education as well as the major differences between them.

Firstly, there are quite a lot of community-based initiatives in the sector of education, if we define this sector broadly. However, most of these community-based groups cannot engage in (formal) education directly. Instead, they are confined to providing physical support to schools. For instance, their education support activities include the construction and maintenance of school buildings. Moreover, these groups often donate money, benches and school books to government and community-based-schoolsalike or pay for village teachers' salaries. Secondly, there are a number – but definitely much fewer – civil society groups that can engage in education more directly. Most of them apply informal, community-based approaches to teaching, whereas only a few groups have managed to involve in formal education and to be allowed to teach the government curriculum so far. Among the groups that are able to engage in formal education, monastic schools or monastic education centres are undoubtedly the most prominent. Thirdly, most educational initiatives which are aimed at children take place at the primary or even at the pre-primary level. While there are some at the middle level, only a handful exists at the high school level. However, there are several educational initiatives for (young) adults in the sectors of vocational skills training and *capacity building*. Fourthly, most educational initiatives take place under religious umbrellas, such as Buddhist monasteries or Christian churches. Even groups that are registered as NGOs often have a religious background. Indeed, this pattern of civil society action is very common in Myanmar and not unique to the field of education. If they are conducted under the auspices of a religious organization, civil society initiatives generally seem to be perceived as being less political and therefore less threatening by the regime. Last but not least, it should be acknowledged that even though the number of civil society initiatives in the education sector has been increasing during the last years, the government is still extremely suspicious of private educational initiatives. Accordingly, private education has not been legally provided for as of yet. As a consequence, the grand majority of the civil society groups that are active in Myanmar's education sector cannot register with the Ministry of Education. As a makeshift solution some of them have chosen to register with the Ministry of Social Welfare or the Ministry of Religious Affairs. So far, the governmentally recognized monastic schools remain to be the only civil society-based education institutions which can officially engage in formal education.[17]

7 Conclusion

Civil society activities do exist in Myanmar and their room for manoeuvre can be identified by using a *relational approach*. The state apparatus of Myanmar is weak with regard to many of its core functions. Spaces open up for civil society actors within such areas of state weakness. This tendency is particularly relevant with regard to the failure of the country's welfare state. Correspondingly, civil society initiatives have been emerging in areas where the state-run education system is weak or failing.

Civil society actors make worthwhile contributions to bridging *some* of the gaps that exist in Myanmar's state-run education system. Nevertheless, they lack both the influence and the capacity necessary to adequately patch it up. Generally, two main reasons can be identified for this conclusion. Firstly, Myanmar's civil society in itself constitutes a patchwork and not a coherent and co-ordinately acting entity. If we look at the ensemble of civil society activities in the sector of education, we see many small-scale initiatives. However, they are mostly very localized and lack meaningful connections with each other. Besides, in view of the numerous deficits and weaknesses that exist in the state-run education system, it seems to be justified to wonder whether this system can still be patched up at all. In other words, the gaps that exist in Myanmar's education system are too immense for civil society actors to be able to provide more than makeshift solutions to specific local problems here and there. Secondly, the ensemble of civil society groups that are active in Myanmar's education sector mirrors many of the deficits and weaknesses of the state-run education system in the gaps of which it operates. For example, the quality of education that is provided by civil society groups varies largely and is sometimes highly inadequate. Just like professional teachers at government schools, voluntary teachers who teach at community-based schools or run free extra tuition programmes are often only poorly trained and frequently rely on outdated teaching methods. As a consequence, tuition is often conducted in a highly hierarchical and repetitive way.

[17] It has also been mentioned in chapter 5.2 that some Culture and Literature Committees in Mon State seem to have managed to adopt the government curriculum as well. However, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, there are no indications that these Culture and Literature Committees are able to register with the Ministry of Education or that there is bridge system comparable to the one that exists for governmentally recognized monastic schools for them as well.

This is far from surprising, because the inadequate qualification of private and voluntary teachers directly results from the weakness of the state-run education system under which they received their own education and training.

If we extrapolate these conclusions, the case study of civil society initiatives in Myanmar's education sector is also highly suggestive with regard to the broader theoretical discussion. Firstly, it provides strong evidence for the assumption in the research on failed states that state weakness can be conducive to the emergence of civil society.[18] Where the state fails to perform its functions and the population is faced with the need to attend to welfare and other governance issues itself, self-help initiatives are likely to emerge, even if the regime is highly authoritarian. Secondly, the findings of the present case study also correspond with the proposition of the relational approach, that civil society seen in the context of state weakness and authoritarianism mirrors the weaknesses and deficits of the state in which is operates. The prerequisite for a healthy and independent civil society – one that adheres to democratic norms such as flat hierarchies, pluralistic tolerance, and dialogue – is the existence of a strong democratic constitutional state. As this prerequisite has not been fulfilled in the authoritarian context of Myanmar, civil society has taken on a different form and mirrors many of the dark sides of the context of action it is operating in. In a nutshell this can be observed in the way in which civil society groups conduct their activities in the field of education. Free extra tuitions of varying quality that are conducted in a teacher-centred and rather authoritarian way have been mentioned as specific examples. However, it is also possible to identify some general patterns regarding the way in which most civil society groups that are active in Myanmar's education sector organize and constitute themselves. These patterns also reflect the context of state weakness and authoritarianism in which these groups operate; and they are not unique to civil society groups in the sector of education but they characterize civil society organization in Myanmar at large. For example, civil society groups in Myanmar are sometimes exclusive bodies, with membership and benefits confined to a specific ethnic or religious group. Furthermore, their internal structure is often hierarchical, they do not favour active participation by their members with respect to decision making, and they sometimes lack transparency. Moreover, as regime constraints on civil

[18] Compare Risse 2005:8-12. It is worth mentioning, however, that the research on weak states and civil society theories have only very rarely been combined with each other as of yet.

society remain considerable in Myanmar, the observation that social spaces exist should not be misconstrued as ascribing any political negotiating power to the emerging civil society organizations, which they do not have. Instead, they are issue-orientated and mostly very localized. In order to be able to tackle the welfare needs of their respective communities, civil society organizations in Myanmar are obliged to stay away from politics and are consequently far from performing an advocacy role, a task which is normally attributed to civil society in democratic contexts. Moreover, in order to find a *modus vivendi* under the current regime, civil society organizations in Myanmar often have to keep up functional ties with members of the ruling establishment or even let themselves become partially co-opted by the latter, which often gives them a *double identity*.[19] Consequently, Myanmar's civil society is still at an embryonic stage.

Coming back to civil society activities in Myanmar's education sector particularly, what are – against this backdrop – the policy options for international aid organizations? In spite of their dark sides, civil society initiatives in Myanmar's education sector make highly worthwhile contributions, because they specifically target very poor children who would otherwise not have access to basic education at all. Moreover, even though the regime is generally suspicious of all educational initiatives which are not conducted by the government itself, it still seems to be more willing to let local civil society actors engage in education than international NGOs. As a consequence, the international community should focus on creating the enabling conditions for civil society actors in Myanmar's education sector to operate. First of all, civil-society-based educational initiatives urgently need material support. However, civil society actors also need to be given access to adequate capacity building aimed at both enhancing their professional qualifications and at making them more familiar with pupil-centred and interactive teaching methods. Only if both their material needs and their need for expertise are met, will civil society actors be able to improve the quality of their

[19] However, bigger and more co-opted organizations also often seem to act as protective umbrellas for smaller and more independent initiatives operating under their auspices. Generally, the Christian churches tend to be a bit more independent than the Buddhist monasteries. However, the grand majority of the population of Myanmar is Buddhist. Consequently, the churches are marginalized with regard to their number and their relative independence does not result into strong negotiating position vis à vis the state.

education programmes. However, with the current regime being so suspicious of international engagement in the sector of education specifically, it will be a big challenge for the international community to find ways of providing support to local civil society actors in the education sector in a way that is not dangerous for them. While it might always be possible to channel money and donations to them, capacity building initiatives – such as workshops and seminars – are much more difficult to realize at the current stage. Indeed, some small civil society organizations reported being questioned and harassed after inviting foreigners to merely visit their education projects. A few bigger civil society-based education institutions have in the past been allowed to invite foreign teachers and trainers to volunteer. However, these institutions usually tend to keep certain relations with members of the ruling establishment, which many donors might feel uneasy with. Apart from the problems mentioned, the embryonic civil society in Myanmar's education sector is only rarely able to live up to Western donor guidelines and expectations. As most civil society initiatives in Myanmar are small and informal, they are usually unfamiliar with the formal requirements of donor organizations such as proposal writing, accounting and monitoring.

In view of the chances and challenges which are likely to arise from any future engagement with civil society actors in Myanmar's education sector, it will first of all be necessary to conduct more research in order to get a better understanding of the conditions on the ground. In point of fact, several international aid organizations active in the country have told this author that they lack information about the state of civil society initiatives in the education sector. They need broad-based and reliable field studies in order to be able to step up their work in this field. However, what yet seems to be obvious is that cooperation should be started from least-controversial areas. Increasing financial and material support for monasticeducation centres might be a good first step. Buddhist monastic schools not only reach out to the poorest of the poor but they are also deeply rooted in the local communities. Moreover, they are conceded a comparatively large scope of action by the government and often face less restriction than other local civil-society actors that engage in education. Furthermore, the *training of trainers* by means of providing scholarships to civil society leaders to study abroad is also possible in quite a number of cases. Another important aspect which the international aid community needs to consider has already been hinted at: Civil society is far away from constituting a viable alternative to a functioning state-run education system. Moreover, if the state-run education system deteriorates

further, this will also affect civil society-based educational initiatives in a negative way, since they tend to mirror the deficits of the state-run education system. Consequently, the capacity of civil society groups that engage in education and the capacity of the state-run education system need to be built up simultaneously. What is more, cooperation measures aimed at building up state capacity in the education sector could also help in identifying reform-oriented forces within the state-run education system and sensitize them to the need of granting civil society actors some room for manoeuvre in areas where the state-run education system fails. To sum up, identifying local partners, channelling material support into community-based education projects and detecting groups within the state apparatus who are willing to back such co-operations are all ways that remain far from being fully explored.

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