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Educating for Myanmar's Future

As it emerges from 50 years of military rule, one of Myanmar's most urgent challenges for long-term stability is ensuring access to schooling for all

The violence that has ravaged Myanmar's Rakhine State underscores the challenges the country faces on its bumpy road from military rule to democracy. The country is confronting a deep crisis, and urgent action is desperately needed to prevent further violence and assist the huge numbers of refugees and internally displaced people. To address the political, socioeconomic, and humanitarian challenges fuelled by the crisis, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, chaired by Kofi Annan, recommends urgent and sustained action on a number of fronts to prevent violence, maintain peace, and foster reconciliation.

While global attention has rightly focused on how to end the attacks on Muslim Rohingya, many other, more systemic fixes are critical to Myanmar's long-term stability. Education reform is one of the most important.

In late August, I was in Naypyidaw, Myanmar's new capital, with the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity. The Education Commission, as we are known, was there to present findings from our latest report, *The Learning Generation*, and to share ideas with the country's leadership on paying for education and improving outcomes. We met with Aung San Suu Kyi, the government's *de facto* leader, and Myo Thein Gyi, the education minister.

Our conversations were cordial and productive. By the end, we agreed on this much: sustaining Myanmar's political transition hinges on improving its education sector.

To many of Myanmar's leaders, their country is an economic-power-in-waiting. Home to some 53 million people, it is rich in minerals, natural gas, and fertile farmland, and it occupies a strategic location between India and China. Most important, Myanmar is rich in human potential, with a diverse and youthful workforce – the median age is just 28 – ready to take their country forward. What Myanmar lacks are the schools

needed to train them.

Before military rule was imposed in 1962, Myanmar's education system was among the best in Asia. For the next half-century, schools were neglected and underfunded. Starved of resources and teachers, the system atrophied. Rote learning replaced critical thinking, undermining creativity. Today, while some children have returned to the classroom, attendance in many parts of the country remains low, and teaching standards poor, contributing to high dropout rates.

In addition to these shortcomings, Myanmar faces severe human challenges, including endemic poverty, poor health indicators, and a lack of basic infrastructure. Among ASEAN countries, Myanmar has the lowest life expectancy and the second-highest rate of infant and child mortality.

Improving Myanmar's education system, while tackling its other problems, will not be easy. But it can be done. Vietnam and South Korea offer inspiring examples of countries that transformed their education systems within a generation. As former South Korean education minister and commission member Lee Ju-ho noted during our visit, teaching young people to think critically takes time, but the results can have powerful knock-on effects for a country's knowledge economy.

Aware of these benefits, Myanmar has put education at the heart of its reform agenda. One priority – to improve inclusivity – is already underway. For example, the government is currently working to encourage instruction in more local languages – more than 100 are spoken in Myanmar – in rural areas. Moreover, the government has increased its education budget, from just 0.7 per cent of GDP in 2011 to 2.1 per cent of GDP in 2014. While spending remains far below the regional average of 3.6 per cent of GDP, funding is moving in the right direction.

To be sure, much work remains to be done. The government's recently completed National Education Strategic Plan sets out an ambitious five-year timeline to improve 'the knowledge, skills, and competencies' of all its students. The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State recommends that all communities should have equal access to education. The Education Commission supports these recommendations. As Suu Kyi noted during our conversation, education will play an increasingly important role in reducing poverty and promoting peace. If members of the current generation are to become productive members of society, she noted, they must be trained in cultural and ethical understanding.

During this fraught period of political transition, inclusive education can help promote a peaceful consolidation of democracy. As the crisis in Rakhine State powerfully illustrates, ethnic and ideological rifts run deep in Myanmar, and accessible, quality education may be the only means by which a common sense of shared identity can be cultivated. And, of course, better training in basic skills can also ultimately boost economic growth and increase social welfare.

The list of challenges facing Myanmar's leaders is long, and overcoming most of them will be neither quick nor easy. But ensuring that no child loses the opportunity to learn must rank near the top of the country's agenda.

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Caroline Kende-Robb

Caroline Kende-Robb is Chief Adviser at the Education Commission.