

Addressing Teacher Shortages in Conflict-Affected Kachin State, Myanmar: A Comprehensive Training Approach for Community Teachers

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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

New Generation Teacher Training Center (NG-TTC) is a joint partnership between the Catholic Diocese of Myitkyina's Diocesan Commission for Education (DCE) and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) to address the lack of skilled teachers in Kachin State, Myanmar. NG-TTC combines pre-service training, field-based practicum, and two years of continuous professional development for volunteer teachers in IDP camps and communities in conflict-affected areas.

Internal conflicts have resulted in over 401,000 people being displaced within Myanmar. Though a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement was signed in 2015, several ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have not signed the document and continue to engage in conflict with the Burmese army.

Kachin State is divided between government-controlled areas (GCAs) and non-government-controlled areas (NGCAs) controlled by EAOs. Access to quality education is limited in these remote areas; according to a 2017 UN report, 35,525 people lacked access to education. Furthermore, each NGCA has its own unique education system and challenges. There are significant teacher shortages across all school levels. Government teachers are often reluctant to go to GCAs due to their remoteness and proximity to ongoing conflicts, and they are barred from entering NGCAs. Humanitarian agencies face similar barriers to service-delivery in NGCAs.

Church-based organizations, such as DCE, have recruited and sent volunteers to remote and conflict-affected schools in Kachin for many years over the course of the decades-long conflict. However, NG-TTC is unique as a comprehensive preparation and in-service training program in Kachin – previously, the training period for volunteer teachers before

deployment lasted anywhere from one week to one month. In light of this, the Diocese and JRS embarked on the NG-TTC partnership to enhance the training program and improve the overall quality of education.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

NG-TTC began in 2014 as a collaboration between JRS Myanmar and the Diocesan Commission for Education-Myitkyina (DCE). Each year, DCE recruits and selects volunteers from host and IDP communities through the local church network to serve as teachers in IDP camps and communities in community-based schools managed by DCE and ethnic armed groups. Most of these volunteers (88%) come from Kachin State; 28% are IDPs themselves, while the remainder come from areas that are conflict-affected but have not experienced displacement. Most volunteers are female (77%), and the average age is 21 years. The level of education among volunteers varies: 17% are university graduates, 32% have passed secondary matriculation exams and continue to higher education after their teaching service, and 49% have not passed secondary matriculation exams. Several factors drive volunteers' motivation to teach. Mostly they are motivated by a desire to contribute to long-term development of the area. Some volunteers also see school as an important tool by which to prevent children's recruitment into armed groups, and therefore see teaching as a form of peacebuilding.

During their term of service with NG-TTC, trainees receive the following supports:

Seven months of pre-service training

Before placement, teachers attend seven months of classroom-based training. Sources for the training curriculum include TiCC Teacher Training Package, Myanmar's Teacher Competency Standards

Framework, and JRS' global Teacher Formation Package, among others. The training curriculum addresses issues facing children in Kachin, including youth migration, human trafficking, mine-risk education, environmental awareness, and peacebuilding and reconciliation. A Basic English Course was introduced in 2017 to help improve teaching in English classes. Trainees live in community in a boarding house, learning cooking and cleaning skills they will need during their teaching placements in remote areas. As many of the trainees are themselves adolescents, this structured programme provides important personal value formation in addition to learning the practical independent living skills they will need to thrive while teaching in remote areas.

Two months of teaching practicum in IDP camps

Trainees are placed in an IDP camp near the training centre, where they plan and deliver a summer course for students.

Two-year placements in IDP camps and community schools

Teachers are placed by DCE in coordination with parish priests and local officials. Teachers receive safety briefings before placements, and are accompanied to their placements by DCE staff, where they are introduced to camp and school leaders. The local community provides housing and in-kind food support for the teachers.

Continuous school-based monitoring during volunteers' two-year placements

DCE and JRS staff conduct joint monitoring visits to different geographic zones, where they conduct observation and feedback of each teacher's classroom practice. The remoteness of placements makes this model time-consuming, and monitoring visits can last up to one month. Also, teachers only receive this observation/feedback twice per year, which isn't enough to impact their practice. Therefore, while joint monitoring visits continue, a new approach has been introduced to train head teachers to conduct more frequent observation/feedback at their schools, combined with a teacher self-evaluation to provide a more holistic picture of teacher practice. This

has made the process more efficient and involving the head teacher in the monitoring has improved feedback, since they know individual teachers' skills and attitudes better than external monitors. However, this requires more robust training of head teachers to properly conduct observation/feedback cycles. It also places additional demands on head teachers, who also have regular teaching duties themselves.

Ongoing in-service training during school holidays

NG-TTC staff provide in-service training for volunteer teachers and their community teacher colleagues. These sessions are based on data from staff monitoring visits. The sessions also provide a forum for teachers to come together, share experiences, and provide both instructional and psychosocial support to one another.

Structured On-Ramp to Government-level Teacher Competency

Since 2018, JRS and the NG-TTC have worked with Fordham University to implement a standardized Teacher Professional Development Competency Framework (TPDF) aligned to the Myanmar Teacher Competency Standards Framework for Beginning Teachers. The framework defines a learning pathway for teachers working in an emergency context, including the knowledge, skills, and dispositions evident, in five levels of proficiency based on criteria (Lester, 2005). The TPDF draws from the national framework to define its standards, minimum requirements, and indicators. The first phase of development of the TPDF included focus-group discussions with teachers and teacher-educators in Kachin and Kayah state, Myanmar, as well as other key education stakeholders. A comparative analysis was conducted, looking at Myanmar's national teacher competency framework as well as eight other national and supranational competency frameworks to augment the emergency-specific competencies. Finally, an analysis was conducted of the TiCC Teacher Training Package and Competency List, as well as existing professional development frameworks utilized within the project and by JRS globally. Findings from the FGDs and analysis informed the development of the TPDF, which is now undergoing validation by a wider collection of teachers, teacher-educators, and JRS education staff.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

Since its inception, JRS has regularly monitored the NG-TTC, collecting data on teachers' progress throughout the pre-service curriculum and their teaching service. In 2018, a mixed-method external evaluation utilizing focus groups, informant and participant interviews, and a desk review of project data found that since 2014, NG-TTC enrolled a total of 88 students for its pre-service training, 81 have completed their training and at least one year of teaching service. The average term of service for teachers in placement schools was two years.

Volunteer teachers described the experience of teaching in remote areas as very positive, citing factors such as being able to adapt and be creative with the resources available in their schools, learning the real-life situations and struggles in those areas, and becoming advocates for these marginalized communities. Annual requests for NG-TTC teachers consistently exceed supply, with NG-TTC able to fill roughly 20% of positions. Current volunteers and alumni reported that the most important areas of pedagogical training were lesson planning, strategies to motivate and engage students, and child-centred and active teaching methods. Alumni also noted the role their volunteer experience played in their own future career development. Some cited the personal growth and skills gained during their teaching placement: greater self-awareness, self-confidence, and social skills. Some teachers have stayed beyond their placement, and others have continued to other educational roles: government teacher (those few with university degrees), private tuition teacher, or pursuing higher education. JRS has partnerships with two higher education partners in Yangon to which it can refer some NG-TTC alumni who wish to pursue further studies, but the cost of living and studies in Yangon is prohibitive for many. A small number of spots in local education institutes have also been negotiated for NG-TTC alumni to pursue certificate/diploma programs.

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

- Through the Catholic Church, NG-TTC can reach areas where others cannot due to conflict, including UN agencies and INGOs. One implication is that faith-based networks are active partners in providing quality education in places where formal authorities may be fragile.

- NG-TTC does not have formal certification. Partnership with a certifying institution is desired, but volunteers lack the prerequisites for such programs: passing the 10th grade matriculation examination, and in private institutes, possessing strong English language skills.
- Many alumni wish to become government teachers, but presently there are no pathways or government policy that grants them recognition for their years of service through NG-TTC. This is an ongoing point of advocacy between the government and NGO partners. The government's National Education Sector Plan (NESP) notes several areas for ongoing teacher education reform, including: "An 'open system' of pre-service teacher education provision, whereby different TEIs, potentially including private sector institutions, offer different degree specializations" (GoUM NESP 2016, 146).
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 - "An improved system for the deployment of teachers working in rural and border areas... to attract experienced and qualified teachers to them...include[ing] recognition of prior learning, so that teachers who have taught in different educational contexts (for example, in monastic schools and in refugee camps) can have their qualifications recognised in Myanmar" (GoUM NESP 2016, 144).

REFERENCES

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TEACHER PROFILE

Ja Awng is an IDP and a volunteer teacher trained and supported by NG-TTC. She teaches at Middle School in the village of N Hkwang Pa.

What do you enjoy most about being a teacher?

I am most happy that I can share the education I have with students who are starving for education in the IDP camp in Non-Government Controlled areas (NGCAs) and seeing the smiles on the students' faces when they are in the classrooms.

One good practice I introduced at my previous school was singing and dancing at the last period on every Friday for KG to Standard 2. The kids were very happy and enjoyed a lot. I believe this boosts their well-being.

What are the biggest challenges you face as a teacher?

The biggest challenge I face is communication. The schools I teach in are in the border areas between China and Myanmar and students speak different Kachin dialects and accents, not just the common Kachin language, Jinghpaw. How I adjusted was, I tried to listen to them attentively and learned the language from children and other teachers.

In addition to this, high inflation rate and huge different value of currency between Kyats and Yuan is also a big challenge for us serving as teachers. We receive our small stipend in Kyats, yet we have to spend it in Yuan to buy the food where we are serving. Without the generous support from the community, particularly the parents, simple, decent daily meals are not sure.

What would you like the rest of the world to know about your life and/or work as a teacher?

When I first served as a volunteer teacher, I was just 19 (I joined NG-TTC when I was 18) and I did not know much about life at that time. But the first year of voluntary service in Hpum Lum Yang IDP camp allowed me to grow more and starting to be aware and think about the lives of IDPs in the camp and the education of the IDP children in those area as I, myself am an IDP.

What changes to programs/policies would you like to see?

For me, I want both governments (national and local) to use the same curriculum. It would be great if the

national government recognizes education in the NGCAs.

To address the teachers' shortage nationwide, to promote mother-tongue based multilingual education and to promote peace in our country, the Myanmar government should develop a policy and pathway for community teachers who received training and who served for years to become government recognized/certified teachers and can work in government schools as a career.

Lastly, but not the least, to stop civil war! Education disruption, psychological effects, negative coping and risks to drug abuse and human trafficking, etc. are all consequences of the war....

What are some of the topics/skills that you wish to learn in a professional development program?

Child psychology. Subject teaching methods (I would like to be skillful in the subject that I am teaching such as Maths and Science. For example, Science, we do not have labs where the students can experience hand on exercises such as the laboratory experiments)

Study visit to explore/observe how teachers in other areas/countries are teaching in emergency or protracted or post-conflict areas.



Photo: Ja Awng with a group of children in N Hkwang Pa