

THE UN'S ACTIVITIES IN MYANMAR'S EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT (2011-2020)

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN) has adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 to meet crucial environmental, political and economic challenges. Its main theme is to end poverty by improving health, education, economic growth, reducing inequality, tackling climate change and preserving oceans and forests. It is a global partnership including both developed and developing countries to sustain the Earth Planet. Myanmar also takes part in accomplishing the 2030 SDGs Agenda. Among the SDG 17 goals, Goal 4- Quality Education is the utmost important as a driving force in poverty eradication, human and social capital development. This research aims to explore Myanmar's way of achieving SDG 4 in cooperation with the UN specialized agencies such as the UNESCO and the UNICEF. These two agencies have assisted in Myanmar's education development by funding, training and material support under the guidelines of the Myanmar government and internationally accepted principles. Even in COVID-19 period, their cooperation continued through online learning programmes. Their cooperation is no string- attached and catalyst to Myanmar's continuous education platform. This research analyzes how these two UN agencies have contributed to Myanmar's education development during the period of 2011- 2020. The qualitative and descriptive method is used in the research by analyzing the primary and secondary data.

Keywords: SDGs, SDG 4, UN, UNESCO, UNICEF, Myanmar's education

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) was founded in 1945 with the vision to improve economic, health and social conditions through international collaboration. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were born with the objectives of producing a set of universal goals to meet crucial environmental, political and economic challenges. In 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Summit adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which is a bold and universal agreement to end poverty, and commit to tackle some processing challenges with interconnected goals by all states' participation for safer, more sustainable and prosperous planet for all humanity.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a global partnership which has seventeen goals going hand in hand to end poverty while improving health, education, reducing inequality, spurring economic growth, tackling climate change and working to preserve oceans and forests. The SDGs were built on the millennium development goals (MDGs). This research mainly discusses for the SDG 4: Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Under the SDG 4 main theme, there are seven targets including three sub- objectives with indicators in each target. In implementing the SDGs in Global South countries, the UN has been taking an initiative role as a development partner for the interest of Global South countries. As Myanmar is one of the Global South Countries, the UN's support in the SDGs implementing process is very beneficial for the recipient state.

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Since 2011, Myanmar government has initiated the education reform with the support of international partners such as the UN specialized agencies, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Australian Aid (AusAid) and other partners. This research analyzes the cooperation of two UN specialized agencies: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with Myanmar government in Myanmar's education development process from 2011 to 2020.

The significance of the study is to explore the implementation process of the Goal 4 in Myanmar and the effectiveness of the cooperation of the UNESCO and UNICEF in the education sector. The research question is to which areas the cooperation of UNESCO and UNICEF reached in accomplishing the Goal 4 in Myanmar. It addresses that the education development progress in Myanmar from 2011 to 2020 has been a support to the UN SDG 4 and the UN agencies' assistance focused on primary, secondary and non- formal education sectors with technical, material and human capital assistance, for instance - in policy planning and implementation and less support on the higher education sector.

Method of the Study

This research is based on the qualitative and descriptive method. This research uses primary and secondary data collected the reports of the UNESCO and UNICEF, government and non- governmental organizations (NGOs), seminar workshops, published research scholarly articles and books. After collecting the data, the researcher acknowledged and analyzed the role of the UN specialized agencies' cooperation in Myanmar's education sector development progress from 2011 to 2020 and the challenges these agencies had faced in implementing their programmes.

Findings and Discussion

Education Policies and Programmes in Myanmar (2011-2020)

Myanmar government has been functioning educational reform processes under five policies: 2008 Myanmar Constitution, 2014 National Education Law (NEL) and its amendment in 2015, National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) from 2016 to 2021, 2018 Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP), and Basic Education Law and its amendment in 2019. In Myanmar education arena, there are five sectors. They are Early Childhood, Care and Development (ECCD), Basic Education, Alternative Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education. In these five areas, two successive Myanmar governments (2011-2020) had formulated policies and laws and also tried to implement training programmes, scholarships and stipends till it reached a targeted level in Myanmar's education development progress by benefitting individuals and the whole community. In 2011, among Myanmar government's various reforms, the education reform stood at the fourth place and the government also put urgent and long term effort in education reform process focusing on three areas: access, quality and management. Myanmar's education policy stated that it aims to create an education system which can generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the knowledge age.

In March 2011, then President U Thein Sein announced the ten- point education reform agenda at the Parliament. In the Basic Education Sector, National Education Promotion 20- year-long- term- plan (2011- 2031) was written comprising the enhancement of access to education by implementation of free, compulsory primary education program and awarding stipends for students from needy families. In July, 2012, the Myanmar government implemented the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) in collaboration with development partners focusing on seven areas with three phases: Rapid Assessment, In Depth Analysis and Development of overall national education sector plan. The government increased the budget allotment for education, and removed the public school fees for primary schools since 2010- 2011 followed by the middle school in 2013- 2014. In October 2013, an Education Promotion Implementation Committee (EPIC) and eighteen thematic groups were formed by the government to formulate policies and plans for pragmatic education reforms. The CESR's main task was to recommend the education system reform process and the EPIC's main purpose was to draft policies of the implementation of the reforms. In the basic education sector, the government introduced the KG+12 in 2016- 2017 Academic Year in line with ASEAN countries.

The NEL claimed to strengthen the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the national education system, recognizing non- formal education in Myanmar and its amendment intended to establish standards- based education quality assurance system, expansion of the basic education system to thirteen years and support to learn ethnic language and culture. In 2014 NEL, it defined key issues such as university autonomy, right to form unions and rights of universities to formulate their own curriculum in the higher education sector.

In 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) government activated a sixteen- point reform agenda to implement quality assurance systems in all educational sectors for inclusive education and decentralization. The NESP was adopted as an inclusive approach to improve teaching and learning, and provided as a vehicle for Myanmar to achieve the Goal 4 for Education which was a program from 2016 to 2021. In 2016, NESP addressed three strategies for Higher Education reform: to strengthen higher education governance and management capacity, to improve the quality and relevance of higher education and to expand equitable access to higher education.

In 2015- 2016, in order to produce teachers with right values, skills, and knowledge and provide theoretical foundations and the process of teaching, the Myanmar Teacher Competency Standards Framework (TCSF) was developed by national professional education experts and UNESCO education specialists. In 2016, the TVET Council was established because the vocational education was the first priority according to the government's policy and under the NESP Framework.

According to the MSDP, education plays a critical role for healthy economy. The MSDP's strategy 4.1 aims to improve equitable access to high quality lifelong educational opportunities. In 2018, Transforming Higher Education in Myanmar was set up by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and international partners related with research. On 22 November 2019, the Alternative Education Subsector Framework was launched to guide and design the implementation of alternative education initiatives for out-of-school children in line with MoE's policy of leaving no child behind and helped in achieving MSDP and NESP. Its ambition was for children and youths who have difficulty in accessing formal education, especially those in remote areas, conflict and disaster- affected areas, on the move, disabilities and chronic health problems.

The NLD government also set up the Education Promotion Committees at both Houses in the Myanmar Parliament. The National Education Policy Commission (NEPC) was a statutory body established by the National Education Law 2014 and the National Education Law Amendment 2015 to provide policies in education for the promotion of national development. It was formed on 28 September 2016 with twenty one members who were academics and educationists from various sectors of education with deep knowledge and extensive experience in their respective field. Its primary functions were setting national education objectives and formulating national education policies; and evaluating the functioning of the education system, the implementation of education policies, programmes and projects, and making suggestions for the improvement.

Under the NEPC, there were three committees: the National Curriculum Committee, the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee (NAQAC) and Rectors' Committee (RC). The NCC was formed in November 2016 with fifteen members who are curriculum specialists with great experience. Its primary functions were developing curricula of international standards to meet the needs of national development and nurture good citizens; and making continual review of curricula to keep them in line with international trends and national education policies. The NAQAC was formed on 16 January 2017. It was composed of twenty members with high expertise in the quality assurance of education. Its primary functions were developing and implementing a comprehensive quality assurance system in education; and assessing and providing accreditation to educational institutions and programmes. The RC, formed on 6 April 2018, has members all Rectors and Principals of public higher education institutions. The RC's primary functions were coordinating the affairs of higher education institutions on the basis of policies laid down by the NEPC; helping to enhance the quality of teaching, research and management in higher education institutions; giving guidance to higher education institutions in the transition to autonomy; and providing advice to higher education institutions for increasing revenues to support their development. In 2020, due to COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar government's education development progressions had been run through online programmes.

UNESCO's Activities in Myanmar's Education Sector

In Myanmar, the UNESCO is committed to a holistic and humanistic vision of education, in belief that everyone has the right for quality education for human, social and economic development. It is the only UN Agency that takes a leadership role to fulfill the SDG 4 Education 2030 Framework for Action. It has supported the MoE in Myanmar in three areas: the development of the Education Management Information System (EMIS Data Base/ Education Portal), geospatial mapping of all basic education schools and capacity development for education program (CapEd). In assisting to implement Goal 4 in Myanmar, the UNESCO partnered with the MoE in the form of private- public partnership.

Firstly, the CapEd programme started since 2012 in partnership with the Department of Education Research, Planning and Training (DERPT), MoE to strengthen national capacities in sector- wide policy and planning based on international frameworks through comprehensive training programs at the union and sub- national levels. It has provided broader capacity development building and support in education sector planning and budgeting. In 2014 – 2015, the UNESCO and its partners launched the information technology (ICT) for Education as ICT in teaching in rural areas, ICT pedagogy integration in classrooms which was a first time project in

Myanmar. The UNESCO programme officers trained the Myanmar government officials how to use the ICT for innovative teaching approaches and better ICT skills.

In accomplishing the Myanmar Quality Basic Education Programme (QBEP), the UNICEF was responsible for policy and the UNESCO had duty on curriculum and management. Strengthening Pre-Service Teacher Education in Myanmar (STEM) was the component 2 of the QBEP and started in 2014 to improve pre- service teacher education, especially in technical and capacity development assistance in accordance with the NESP and the MoE's guidelines. STEM Phase I and II focused on four specific areas with operational objectives. They were contextualized and quality teacher policies, reformed teacher curriculum, better management of education colleges and an integration of inclusiveness across all the project's objectives.

In the sector of the curriculum development, the UNESCO engaged in the pro- active support by responding to immediate needs, cooperation with stakeholders and solving emerging implementation problems. In the STEM project, the UNESCO mobilized the expertise, supported in terms of advocacy, strategic advice, generation of evidence, capacity development, work planning, drafting, editing, translating policy documents, monitoring, evaluation, steering Committee Progress Review Accountability and implemented their activities with other developing stakeholders in line with Myanmar government's policies and as a component to fulfill the SDG 4 under the ownership of the Myanmar government. In the Phase II of the STEM, the UNESCO helped in comprehensive teacher policy based on international standards, norms on human rights, gender equality, teachers' rights, and national teachers' competency standard framework (TCSF).

The MoE and the UNESCO organized a high level consultation to strengthen the country's Education Management Information Management System (EMIS) which aimed to support the decision- making, policy analysis, formulation, planning, monitoring and management at all levels of the education system and discussed EMIS Strategic Plan for 2016-2021 on 16 March 2015 under the strong ownership of Myanmar government. To develop teacher policies, the UNESCO has provided technical support under three topics: the establishment and validation of the TCSF beginning teachers, the establishment of the Teacher Education Council (TEC) and the development of the teacher education policy. The TCSF validated in May 2020 and accepted the MoE's approval in August 2020. Concerning with the TEC, the UNESCO has assisted the capacity development of key persons and the comprehensive teacher education policy is still in progress.

To strengthen the management of the education colleges, the UNESCO International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok Team for Planning partnered with Department of Higher Education (DHE), the Ministry of Education for the mainstream inclusiveness. The IIEP supported to develop a simulation model for projects on the need for qualified teachers and monitored the implementation of project's components with regard to technical quality, soundness of policy and sustainability of outcomes.

As a support to the MoE's agenda, the UNESCO and the Department of the Educational Research, Planning and Training hosted a Policy Dialogue on Education for Peace and Sustainable Development under SDG 4.7. In the TVET Sector, the UNESCO cooperated with the German Development Cooperation, GiZ to conduct a comprehensive system review in identifying the development and challenges of the TVET and policy options for strategic

planning and implementation of the TVET reforms in Myanmar. The UNESCO hopes that the demand- driven TVET sector can contribute the country's sustainable development, so it delivered workshops, capacity development training on skills assessment, and forecasting in the labour market.

During COVID- 19 period, Myanmar faced a huge difficulty because the curriculum development progress was ongoing and the UNESCO assisted to move the workshops online, supported the MoE's sector- wide COVID- 19 Response and Recovery Plan for the continuity of the education by safe school openings and preparation of the education system for the future emergencies. The UNESCO facilitated a multimedia package for curriculum trainings, a dedicated E-library for two thousand faculty members in twenty- five educational colleges, established a psychosocial support focal point system for the health, safety, well- being of teaching, non- teaching staff and student teachers with the MoE's support.

The UNESCO has supported Myanmar's education development progress in multiple ways such as organizing a series of policy forums, supporting the pre- service and in service teacher competence development, contribution to applying learner- centered and inclusive approaches in education based on the TCSF and 2019 Basic Education Law. It also actively engaged with the country stakeholders such as the Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC), Mon National Education Committee (MNEC), and Myanmar Special Education Association (MSEA) in implementing its activities.

To sum up, the UNESCO put a lot of great effort in Myanmar's education development process from 2011 to 2020 in line with Myanmar government's guidelines. It partnered with other UN agencies, international donors in Myanmar, local government and NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) in policy formulation and programme implementation. Its cooperation in Myanmar's education sector has aimed to achieve SDG 4 in 2030 with the programme- based assistance but could not cover all targets under the SDG 4. Moreover, its cooperation did not impact on the whole country and targeted only to needy areas, mostly in border regions.

UNICEF's Activities in Myanmar's Education Sector

In Myanmar, the UNICEF purposes to help every child in humanitarian assistance, legal assistance and alternative learning opportunities. Since 1988, the UNICEF has been working in Myanmar. Under Myanmar's education reform processes to achieve the SDG 4, the UNICEF has contributed a lot in technical, expertise and project oriented ways and in partnership with other development partners under the guidelines of the Myanmar government. Furthermore, in implementing its programmes, the UNICEF cooperated with other UN specialized agencies, Save The Children, the local NGOs and the government's ministries.

In 2012, the UNICEF partnered with Australia in establishing the Joint Education Sector Working Group (JESWG) by the MoE for policy dialogue between the government and the development partners. In CESR sector, the UNICEF education specialists helped with technical assistance in its core areas namely, quality primary education, non- formal education and teacher education. Under the UNICEF's Learning Together Initiative, the UNICEF ran head teacher training, management and instructional leadership through a cascade model of training in Rakhine State.

The UNICEF's SITE Project was part of the QBEP 2 by piloting a program of school-based professional development for existing primary teachers in Mon State in 2012 through a series of self- study distance learning modules, drawing their classroom experiences and helping them collaborate with other teachers in inter- school clusters. Education in Emergencies (EiE) was programmed by the UNICEF with the support of Japan and Korea to provide quality basic education for children aged between three and seventeen in northern Shan, Rakhine, Chin and Kachin States starting in 2012. The Myanmar Education in Emergency Sector was drafted with the UNICEF's assistance which acts as a common advocacy role in increased government's allocation for volunteer teachers' salaries and textbook provisions in temporary learning classrooms in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

Under the programme of Education Post Flood Response, the UNICEF and Japan government worked together with the MoE for the construction, repair and rehabilitation of schools in Rakhine and Chin states after the Cyclone Komen in 2015. In conflict- affected areas, the UNICEF played the dual role, providing response and supporting coordination. In providing alternative education to out- of- school children, the UNICEF supported by training facilitators, provision of non- formal primary education textbooks and paying incentives to the facilitators. Since late 2016, the UNICEF has been supporting the Department of Alternative Education (DAE) to develop Alternative Education Subsector Framework and support to deliver non-formal primary and middle school education in three states: Kachin, Kayah and Rakhine States.

In addition, in late 2016, the Education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training Sector Group (ETVSCG) was established to discuss key issues in education sector between ministries and development partners. The Building on Quality Basic Education Program (BoQBEP) was initiated by the MoE with the assistance from the European Union (EU), UNICEF and Denmark to improve access to quality learning for disadvantaged children. The NESP was launched from the QBEP's effort which aimed to guide a national framework for quality and inclusive education for all children in Myanmar. Since 2017, this programme has directed to children in Rakhine State for all-inclusiveness and finalized the Alternative Education Subsector Framework in November, 2018.

In the Report about the Country Programme between the Government of Myanmar and the UNICEF from 2018 to 2022, five programmes were described and among them, the Education Programme outcome focused on all children, mostly for the most disadvantaged children for knowledge and skills in an inclusive, safe, quality learning environment to complete pre- primary, primary, transition to secondary and complete lower secondary education. This report concentrated on three outcomes: (1) preschool and kindergarten, (2) inclusive quality education for all girls and boys and contribution to social inclusion and cohesion and (3) alternative education for out-of-school children and education in emergencies.

For the output 1, the UNICEF supported in drafting the first- costed ECCD Strategic Plan and amendment of the ECCD law through technical support to the Women and Children's Rights Committee of the Parliament. In the Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services, the UNICEF collaborated with the ministries of Myanmar: the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MoSWRR), Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS), Ministry of Education (MoE), and Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA).

Concerning the second sector, the UNICEF gave assistance in school construction in Rakhine State, disaster risk- sensitive Township Education Sensitive Plans (TEIP)s in thirty five

townships where seventeen townships were finalized. The UNICEF encouraged innovation in assessment under the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA- PLM) initiative in transforming the current assessment from the memorization focus to competencies focus. In developing local curriculums, the UNICEF's assistance went to Chin, Mon, Kayin, Kayah, Kachin and Chin States.

In the third one, for the access to non- formal primary education (NFPE), the UNICEF supported in concluding the Alternative Education Subsector Policy Framework. In the EiE Sector, the UNICEF has been a co-leader and advocated the Myanmar government in the payment of salaries for the volunteered teachers and the provision of textbooks in IDP camps. Since 2018, the MoE has increased its engagement in EiE sector. The UNICEF Education Team managed the QBEP following the comments from the MoE. To strengthen the monitoring of the QBEP's activities, the UNICEF developed a monitoring assessment and evaluation plan. The UNICEF Education Field Team tried to cover various aspects of monitoring, evaluation and reporting related to the QBEP.

Technically, the UNICEF supported the ministries of Education, Planning and Finance to issue the yearly education budget briefs. In March, 2020, the UNICEF Chief of Education and Association Director, Mr. Robert Jenkins, urged Myanmar government for quality education available and accessible to every child in Myanmar. During COVID- 19 pandemic, the UNICEF delivered its support to nationwide focusing especially on mountainous regions, Rakhine State, and Yangon Region aiming its support to reach to poorest children at rural and acute areas, IDP camps and hard- to- reach regions.

Overall, the UNICEF Project Office in Myanmar has used its funds in salaries of educators, early childhood intervention pilots (ECIs), development of materials in ethnic language, support in service teacher education, development of head teacher competency framework, local curriculum development, SEA-PLM and non- formal education in IDP camps. Practically, it provided learning materials for primary and middle school children, supporting teacher trainings for ethnic language and distribution of storybooks in local language. Specifically, the UNICEF cooperation in Myanmar's education sector emphasized on basic learning opportunities, and teaching materials to children in remote areas, conflict and crisis places and IDP camps.

In all, the UNESCO's education assistance focused on primary and secondary sector because it is a child focused agency. Its assistance is a programme- based and provided aid in policy drafting, trainings to teachers, curriculum development and education for all focus programs. Its assistance partnered with Myanmar government, international donors, local NGOs and CSOs in implementing its programs. It chose target areas where assistance could be given, so its assistance did not overwhelm the whole country. However, it helped in implementing SDG 4 in Myanmar for primary, secondary, non- formal education and teacher training rather than higher education sector.

The UN Specialized Agencies' Obstacles in Implementing SDG 4 in Myanmar

In implementing the programmes, these specialized agencies faced a difficulty in collecting data, analyzing the situation on the actual needs, and providing support to the children. As most of the assistance went to the conflict- prone regions, the ground condition was different from what it seemed when the project officers went really. In these places, security and safety

was not enough for all staffs, teacher and children where sometimes harmed the access to education. Moreover, these agencies faced a complicated process with numerous layers of State and Union levels and lack of clarity in specific roles to implement the programme activities.

Due to poor security and needs, these agencies needed to change places in constructing the schools in those areas. Some programmes have been cancelled in the implementation process, due to the recipient government's decision changes based on "Do not harm" principle. In the budget arena, there was limited funding by the international donors to these agencies and they had only few partners. There was also coordination issue among Myanmar's working departments at the education sector and occasionally, no substantial progress arose due to their different mandates.

As Myanmar education system is a top- down process, many clashes occurred between the central policy makers and leaders of the teachers' unions and student unions in policy making process. Because of internal weakness, the UN agencies could not actively and practically involve in the development progress and stood at the advisory role. Moreover, in running these programmes, there was not sufficient practical classroom experience, insufficient IT access and training during pandemic time. As pandemic was immediate incident, there was not enough time for preparedness and teachers had to struggle in the cost of phone bills and internet difficulty. Therefore, instead of Child- Center Approach (CCA) method, the teaching method distribution has become the teacher centric, not really effective on ground condition.

Conclusion

From 2011 to 2020, Myanmar's education development progress was in momentum and throughout the history, it has reached the high level during that time because of the reform process, international support and active participation by policy- makers and practitioners on ground. And, all these development processes aimed to SDG 4 for inclusive and quality education. Among its development partners, the UNESCO and the UNICEF's cooperation has been no-string attached and really beneficial to Myanmar community. Most of its cooperation went to hard-to-reach and conflict-prone regions holding human rights principle and respecting Myanmar's sovereignty.

The UNESCO and UNICEF positively cooperated in implementing the UN SDG 4 in most areas. These two agencies chose target areas and accomplished their commitments both in policy making and practical working. Both are operating agencies in Myanmar funded by western countries and directed the in- country program implementation in collaboration with local government's departments, international and local NGOs and CSOs. In implementing their goals, both followed the international guidelines in assistance, for instance, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) and local guidelines such as Naypyitaw Accord for Effective Development Cooperation, Framework of Economic and Social Reforms (FESR) and MSDP.

According to the Goal 4 of the MSDP Pillar 3, People and Planet, human resources and social development is important for 21st century society. The UN agencies' cooperation benefitted Myanmar's education development progress not only in the government- led education progress but also to the local society directly with the government's permission for all-inclusiveness. However, in reality, due to the above challenges, their assistance could not fully

support the education reform process and sometimes, had to halt their programmes. In details, their cooperation mostly focused on four sectors in Myanmar's education: ECCD, basic, alternative and TVET but less on the higher education sector both in policy- making and implementing programmes. At last, their cooperation benefitted the community development, better social and human capital resource in Myanmar not just for the country but also for the individual in the country.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Thida Aung, Professor and Head, Department of International Relations and Political Science, University of Yangon, for her encouragement and guidance to do this research. And then, I really appreciate Dr. Thida Tun, Professor and Head, Department of International Relations, Monywa University for her suggestion in this paper. Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents for raising me and continuous support in my life.

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