



Barriers for Accessing Education Spaces in Myanmar

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Abstract

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With a population of more than 54.5 million, 135 ethnic groups, Myanmar is one of the world's most diverse countries. Despite this rich diversity, decades of political isolation and economic stagnation have slowed progress on all aspects of human development. Large disparities remain in access to basic services and a legacy of conflict, and natural disasters has had a profoundly negative impact on the ability of many children to realize their rights. In 2021-2022, the twin crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military takeover are driving an acute learning crisis in Myanmar, with millions of children and youth now facing significant challenges in accessing and continuing with their education due to a multitude of complex factor, particularly the most vulnerable children and girls. A significant number of children do not attend school regularly and many children are out of school. The improvements observed in recent years in education outcomes have been reversed and the current situation has resulted in a prolonged learning crisis for Myanmar's 4.5 million school-aged children, as well as adolescents and youth attending non-formal education, with long-lasting consequences for their cognitive development and their socio-economic futures. In order to promote children's learning independent of political conditions or climate change, the study intends to understand the obstacles that students face while trying to enter educational spaces and how to assist children and the community in overcoming those obstacles.

Keywords: *Barriers to Education; Community Participation; Learning Outcomes; School Safety*

Background

Since the military takeover in February 2021, the situation assessment is done continuously and explored alternative modalities for the education services delivery by multi-stakeholders in Myanmar. Despite the reopening of basic education schools (including non-formal education centers) in June 2022 after a closure of over two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a staggering 3.7 million children remained with very limited or no access to schooling (UNOCHA, 2022). Many of these children had been out-of-school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the recent Cyclone Mocha has affected Myanmar severely and its historic landfall particularly in Rakhine and the Northwest including Chin, Magway, and Sagaing. Education infrastructures including community learning centers (estimated 1,246 schools) were partially and totally damaged with roofs ripped off and walls damaged and destroyed. This left an estimated 308,910 children at risk of losing their education and in need of education support. Internally displaced persons camps in low-lying areas of Rakhine are severely affected (UNICEF, 2023). With the compounding effects of the conflict and the impact of the cyclone, the humanitarian community is concerned about the affected population as worsening living conditions heighten anxiety due to the lack of access to basic services.

A learning crisis existed in Myanmar even before the prolonged school closure due to COVID-19, exacerbated by the military takeover on 1 February 2021. Across Myanmar, 2.7 million children were out of school prior to the crisis and have not completed primary education (MoE & UNICEF, 2018). The South-East Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019 assessment showed that 60 percent of grade 5 children in Myanmar were in the lowest proficiency band for reading. Poor learning outcomes for children – especially children from minority groups and children with disabilities - is also confirmed by findings from both the Early Grade Reading Assessment and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment. At the national level, it was estimated that less than 30 percent of grade 3 students in government schools achieve fluency in reading grade-appropriate text in the Myanmar language (UNICEF & SEAMEO, 2020). In 2018, UNICEF reported that 47 percent of children with disabilities (CwD) were out-of-school with the analysis indicating that education outcomes for girls with a disability were worse than those for boys with disabilities. (MoE & UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, the study aims to find out the obstacles to access schools and learning centers to support children's learning continuity.

Research Problem

There are many challenges that can hinder the quality of education worldwide. These include overcrowded classrooms, undertrained teachers, and lack of access for students with disabilities, gender inequity, and lack of family support for education. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive school closures, which has further impacted the quality of education. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), a lack of trained teachers, inadequate education materials, and poor infrastructure make learning difficult for many students additionally, some students come to class too hungry, ill, or exhausted from work or household tasks to benefit from their lessons (Alejo, Yao & Reuge, 2023). It is important to recognize these challenges and work towards removing the obstacles children face in accessing quality education.

Key Terms

Barriers to Education

There are three main ways that armed conflicts negatively impact the education system as a whole and the availability of education in particular. First, the catastrophic loss of resources and infrastructure necessary to keep educational systems operating is linked to armed conflict. Second, when individuals flee (or are forced to flee) dangerous locations, communities break down as a result of the conflict, which has an impact on how and when children are educated. Third, when it comes to who has access to what kind of

education and whether many people are prevented from going to school, armed conflict frequently have a combination of destruction and displacement results. (Justino, P., 2014).

Learning Outcomes

The phrase "learning outcome" has a brief history that dates to the previous century. It shares a tight relationship with the past of another extremely important term in the field of curriculum building, "objective." It can be challenging to tell the two terms apart because they are frequently confused and linked in the literature. The achievement of specified learning goals is used as an indicator of institutional efficacy in yet another approach to learning outcomes that has surfaced. "The school effectiveness and improvement movement has played a significant role in the idea that education can and should be measured (Prøitz, 2010).

Community participation in education

Education occurs not only at schools but also in households, neighborhoods, and society at large. Families and parents need support from their communities and society in order to raise, socialize, and educate their children. No one group can assume complete responsibility for the education of children, regardless of the different levels of duty that every group has undertaken. As long as their children interact with and learn from the world around them, parents and families cannot be the only persons involved in their education. By providing them with necessary skills, schools can help students become better citizens by preparing them to contribute to the advancement of the community in which they live. Schools shouldn't and can't function as independent social institutions. All community-based and family- and parent-centered educational initiatives aim to enhance the quality of education provided, enabling more children to learn more effectively and become ready for a changing global environment. (Epstein, 1997)

School Safety

Despite the fact that every child has the right to an affordable and good schooling, many children are unable to attain this right due to the effects of natural and man-made disasters. Although schools are among the safest places for children to be, many underdeveloped nations don't have them. The World Bank (2022) lists five quantifiable qualities of safe schools. They are:

- 1) Physical Safety: Safety from risks that can cause bodily harm in school or on the way to and from School.
- 2) Mental Health and wellbeing: Prevention of negative stress and symptoms of anxiety, depression, And other m\negative thoughts and feelings; as well as protection from psychological violence
- 3) Instructional practices and environment: Safety derived from the practices and environment in Which leaners, teachers, content, equipment, and technologies interact to enhance learning Engagement and inclusion.
- 4) Interactions and relationships: Positive interactions that promote social and emotional learning (SSEL) and inclusion.
- 5) School connectedness: Partnerships and engagement of school with the (a) families; (b)Community; (c) other schools in the cluster

Literature Review

Although all children are entitled to a safe and high-quality education, the effects of natural and manmade disasters prevent many children from realizing this entitlement. One of the safest places for children to be is at school. For many children worldwide, though, that is simply not the case. In addition to having badly designed classrooms and playgrounds, inadequate or gender-neutral restrooms, and inadequate furnishings, inappropriate school buildings may be particularly disaster-prone due to their location.

(Justino, 2014). The vulnerability of school buildings to severe natural disasters and the harm they cause is undoubtedly a global issue that is not becoming any smaller. The next generation of members of a community is largely educated in schools; because of their age and developmental stage, schoolchildren are among the most vulnerable members of society. In times of calamity, a safer and more robust school can help restore normalcy to society, save the lives of local residents, and act as a temporary shelter. (D'Ayala *et al.*, 2020). As a result, many governments and non-governmental groups now prioritize school safety. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the New Urban Agenda are merely some of the frameworks and conventions that formally recognize the issue of school safety (Kelman, 2015).

On the other hand, positive student, teacher, and school-level outcomes are directly correlated with school safety (Bastidas, 2011). When everyone can thrive in a friendly atmosphere that promotes learning, health and well-being, and healthy connections, then all students, teachers, and staff can feel safe in schools. Schools are any place where learning takes happen, whether it's in-person or online, formal or informal. They encompass both the physical, remote classrooms and the non-physical elements of the learning environment, such values, and standards. (Paci-Green *et al.*, 2020).

Sadly, grave violations have been increasing, including the destruction of property, indiscriminate attacks on civilians and extortion in Myanmar. Arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, early marriage and unsafe migration have been on the rise. The increased risk of forced recruitment and the use of child soldiers has been reported in several areas. Incidents involving landmines and explosive ordnance are being reported across all states and regions of Myanmar. In 2024, over 4.5 million people nationwide will require assistance with their education; the shortage of teachers has been a problem since 2021, and there will be a huge demand for educational resources and materials to find, prepare, and compensate teachers in order to maintain the operation of classrooms. More children are dropping out of school as a result of the infrastructural shortfall in education, which has also grown and heightened feelings of insecurity. (UNICEF, 2024) Thus, the study seeks to find out what obstacles exist to access schools and learning centers to support children's learning continuity.

Conceptual Framework

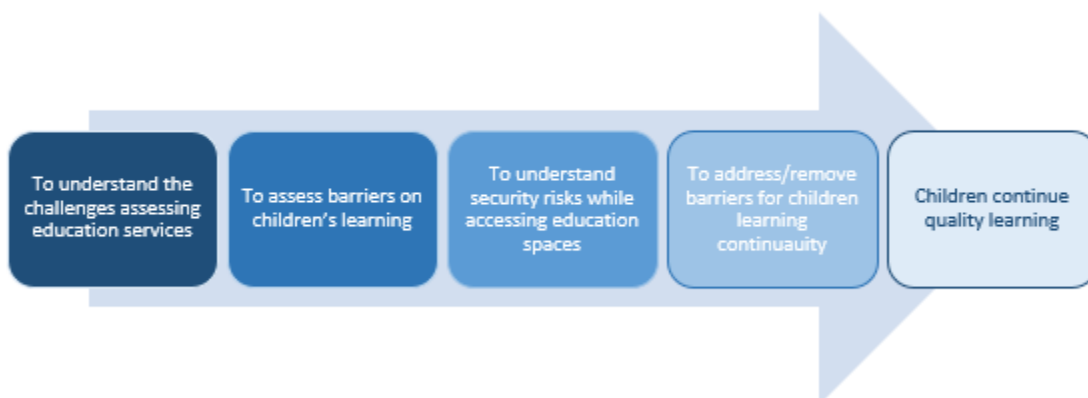


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework

Methods

Objective of the study

The purpose of the community discussions is to understand the challenges of community while assessing the education services and how to support the children and community to address the difficulties that they encountered. The specific objectives of the community consultation are:

- To assess barriers on children's learning through education stakeholder
- To understand security risks perceived to be barriers for accessing education spaces by girls and boys.

The research questions for the study are:

- 1) What are the most significant barriers to accessing formal education?
- 2) If safety was indicated as a barrier, then what the safety risks? Please indicate.

Sampling, Instrument, and Coverage

Purposive sampling methods was applied as the study wanted to understanding perception of parents/caregivers, teacher's community facilitators/volunteers, community leaders. Community-level stakeholders in the education sector include children and adolescents, parents/caregivers, teachers, community facilitators/volunteers, and community leaders (including faith-based and religious leaders). The adoption of a qualitative method approach was deemed necessary in order to incorporate the perspectives of all stakeholders. This approach comprised conducting individual Key Informant Interviews (KII) with teachers, community facilitators, volunteers, and leaders, as well as applying the purposive sampling method based on population. An interviewer-administered questionnaire type based on Key Informant Interview (KII) is used to gather primary data. Even though 1200 participants in total participated in the study, 1047 KIIs were carried out in 65 townships across 7 States (Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Rakhine, Mon, and Shan) and 4 Regions (Sagaing, Magway, Bago - East, and Tanintharyi) following data cleansing.

Participants of the Study

The education sector has a variety of community-level stakeholders, including, parents/caregivers, teachers, community facilitators/volunteers, community leaders (including faith based and religious leaders), and children/adolescents. It was considered critical to get the perspective of all these stakeholders on-board and thus an approach was adopted which included individual Key Informant Interviews (KII) with teachers/community facilitators/volunteers and community leaders.

Data Analysis

This investigation was carried out From October to December of 2023. A five-point rating system was used to measure this, with "nearly all" being defined as 91–100%, "most" as 61–90%, "about half" as 41–60%, "some" as 11–40%, and "nearly none" as 0–10%. Furthermore, there was an additional category of "do not know" available. Data analysis was done using SPSS statistical tools in order to comprehend the study's conclusions. Key Informant Interviews (KII) served as the research tool for filtering the study's variable data. KII employed a Likert scale with four possible responses. To obtain reliable instrument data, tests for instrument validity and reliability were first performed. The validity test was examined using Pearson's Product Moment correlation analysis and SPSS PASW Statistics 18. Given that respondents could select their response exclusively from the options given, the KII were closed questionnaires. The data was analyzed using the descriptive analysis technique, which also served to characterize the independent and dependent variables. Prior to data analysis, requirement-based testing was used to evaluate the data to draw conclusions. In order to understand the level of attendance of open educational spaces in the community, the respondents of the KII survey were asked.

- Barriers for Accessing Preferred Education Spaces By stakeholders, gender and disability status of respondents.
- Barriers for Accessing Preferred Education Spaces by State and Regions
- Security risks perceived to be barriers for accessing education spaces by girls and boys.

Results and Discussion

Barriers for Accessing Preferred Education Spaces By stakeholders, Gender and Disability Status of Respondents

The top three barriers for accessing formal education spaces are “Not all schools/all classrooms reopened following the military takeover” (45%), “Perceived insecurity in, around, or on the way to/from school/classroom” (38%) and “Child is overage” (36%). “Fear of Covid-19” (27%) is following at the fourth place. “Child unwillingness to learn/peer influence” (18%) and “Lack of school feeding” (11%). The “Language barrier” and “Peer-violence/ bullying” were mentioned at minimal with less than 10%. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are four main types of barriers that are common and significant for the respondents. The effect of these three barriers seems to have greater impact on the people with disability.

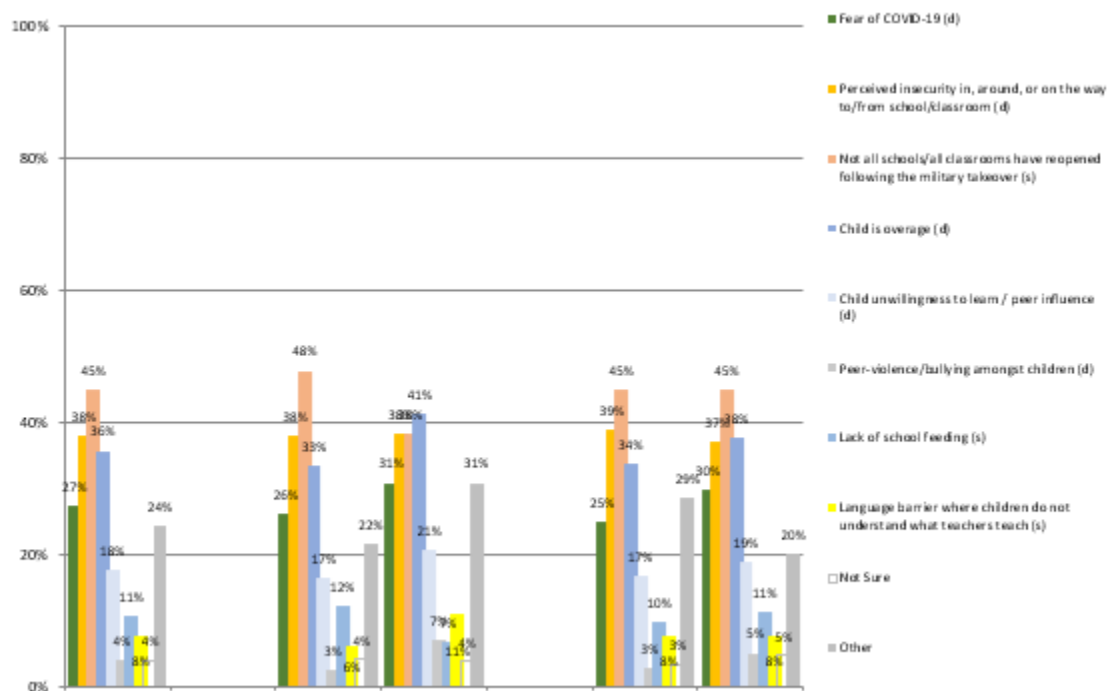


Figure 2: Barrier for Accessing Formal Education Spaces.

Barriers for Accessing Preferred Education Spaces by State and Regions

This section mainly emphasizes on the respondents experiencing two types of barriers - Fear of Covid-19 and Perceived insecurity in, around, or on the way to/from school/classroom while accessing formal education spaces which accounts for 554 respondents (52%) of the total respondents. The combined barrier was the same for both village and IDP camp. But there were differences among the states and regions. It was the highest in Mon/ Tanintharyi (79%), followed by Kayah (50%), Kayin/ Bago East (47%) and Sagaing (46%).

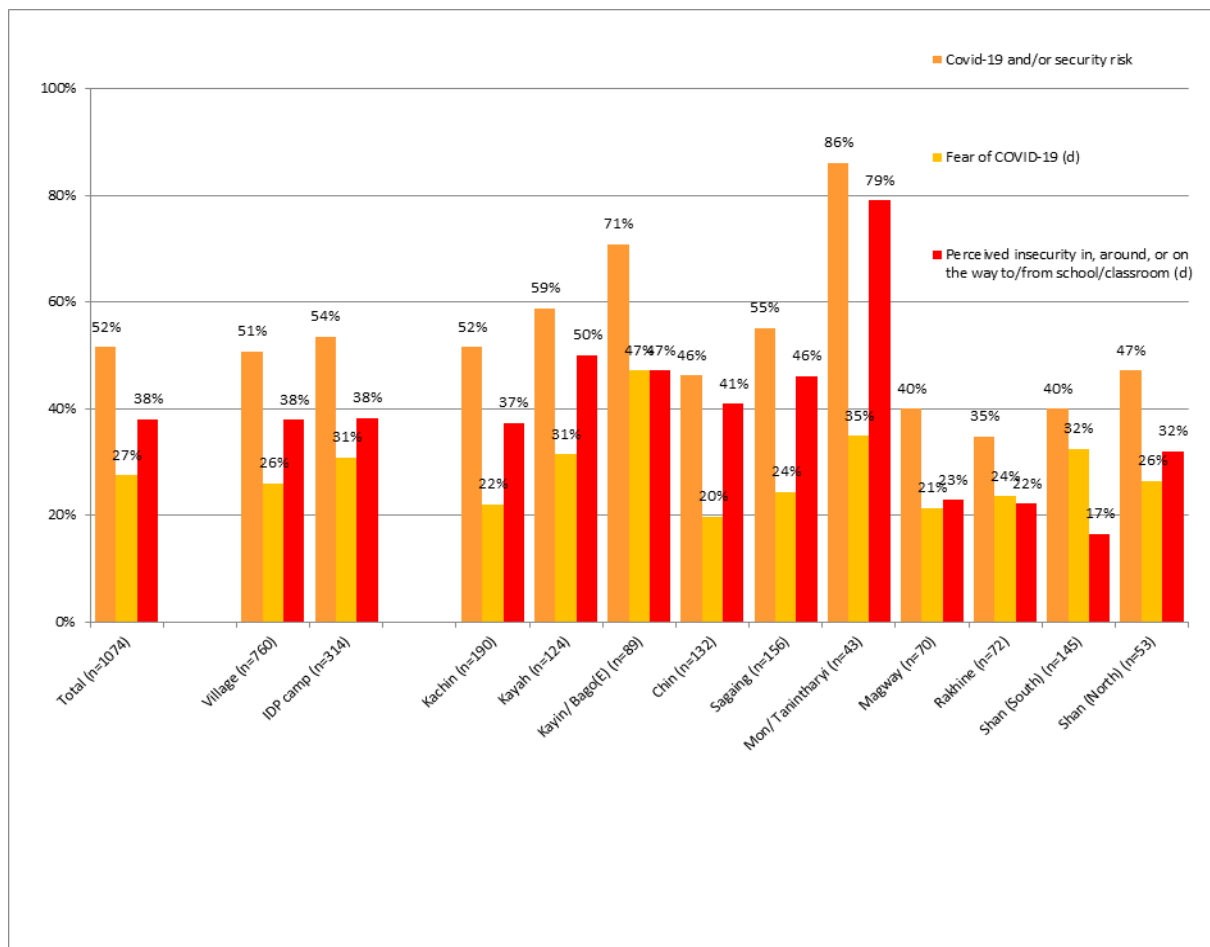


Figure 3: Proportion of Respondents Indicating Insecurity and/or COVID-19 as Barrier(s) to Access Formal Education by Resident and State/Region

Security Risks Perceived to be Barriers for Accessing Education Spaces by Girls and Boys

When the respondents were asked whether security risks affected children based on their gender (girls and boys) the respondents felt that all security risks affect both boys and girls equally (this response ranged from 66% in case of “fear or cases of gender-based violence” to 92% in case of “not enough COVID-19 preventive measures being followed in schools”). (Figure 15) In case of the security risk “possibility of enlistment to any group” 21 percent of the respondents reported that this risk affects boys more while for “fears of or cases of gender-based violence”, 32 percent of the respondents shared that this affects girls more. (Figure 15)

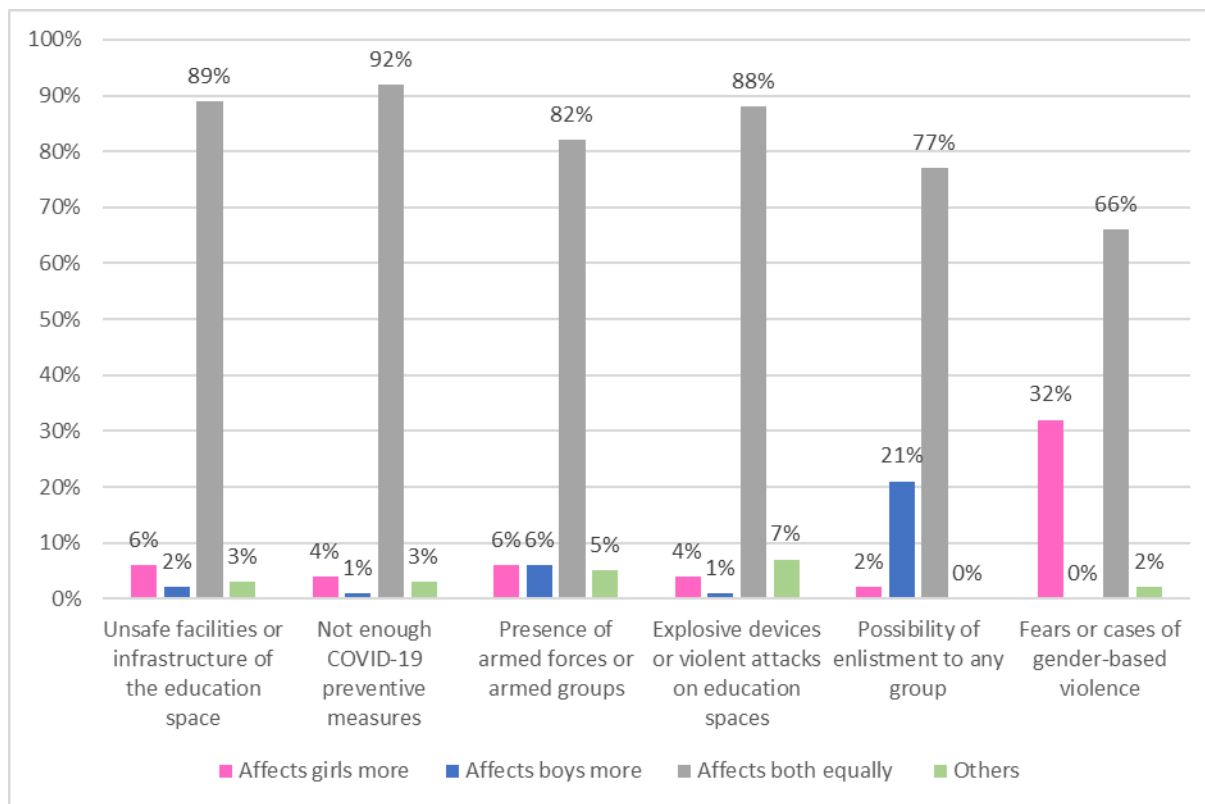


Fig 4: Describes the Effects on Girls and Boys

Conclusion

Children and youth in developing countries face many barriers to obtaining quality education. These include distant, overcrowded or unsafe schools, poor quality of teaching, irrelevant curriculum and learning materials, the pressure for children to work to support the family, a lack of funding for education, having no teacher, or having an untrained teacher, no classroom, a lack of learning materials, the exclusion of children with disabilities, being the 'wrong' gender, living in a country in conflict or at risk of conflict, and distance from home to school. According to the World Bank, low-quality instruction and an inadequate supply of teachers are among the biggest problems facing education systems in low- and middle-income countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened the learning crisis, leaving students in low- and middle-income countries way behind in mathematics, reading, and other subjects. (Patrinos, 2018). It is critical to acknowledge these issues and make progress in reducing the barriers that keep children from receiving the best possible education. This necessitates both systemic advocacy activity and grassroots capacity-building. Due to political dynamic, travel constraint and security, there is a limitation to expand number of participants for the study. Therefore, the sample size and coverage of the study can't expand and only selected some areas to do the study.

According to the study, the learning spaces could be classified nine different categories, however, it was found that the children joined community learning spaces the most due to security, trust and quality of learning centers. Technical vocational education training (TVET) and other learning spaces were found as the last choice although Myanmar is the least developing countries in ASEAN and this learning pathway could support the country's economy development rapidly. It may happen due to limited number of learning centers and need to find out more detail to support decision making for education planning and management in Myanmar.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: In the data collection process, informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Conflict of Interests: Not applicable

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