

Impact Snapshot

Sustaining Education for Burmese Refugees

Decades of conflict in Myanmar displaced over 90,000 refugees into camps along the Thailand border, where children and young people face significant barriers to education, including a lack of access to stable, accredited schooling. This crisis is worsened by a critical shortage of qualified teachers, as camp educators lack formal training, adequate compensation and specialised curriculum resources. Pervasive displacement trauma severely hinders students' cognitive development and classroom engagement. In the border area of Kayah State, Myanmar the 2021 military coup further intensified insecurity and disrupted education for returning refugees. For example, project partner Zetaman was supporting 90 schools before the coup, but this fell to just 40 after the coup, as schools closed because the safety of students could no longer be ensured.

Children and young people need safe and supportive learning environments, opportunities to build skills and confidence and education systems able to continue operating through crisis and displacement. The Sustaining Education for Burmese Refugees project responded by working with local education partners, teachers, parents, students and communities to strengthen teaching, provide learning resources, integrate psychosocial support and create alternative learning and skills opportunities for children and young people.

At A Glance

Country: Thailand and Myanmar

Duration: July 2018 – June 2022

Sectors:

Education

Total Reach: 24,426 people directly including 6,263 women, 4,365 men, 7,200 girls, 6,391 boys and 207 people with disabilities; and 21,574 people indirectly

Funding / donor: The Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP), The Noel and Carmel O'Brien Family Foundation and Caritas Australia.

Relevance

The project was closely aligned with the education and protection priorities of refugees, returnee internally displaced people and host communities, responding to gaps identified through ongoing engagement with teachers, parents, students and local education partners. In Thailand, project implementing partner Jesuit Refugee Service worked with the Karenni Education Department and the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand to coordinate education support, while in Kayah State it worked with local education and church partners and participated in education cluster coordination at sub-national and national levels. Community-led planning through Parent Teacher Associations, Family Friendship Groups, parent education sessions and teacher feedback mechanisms helped ensure that activities responded to changing needs.



Project Interventions and Impact

Implemented in border communities in Thailand and Myanmar, specifically refugee camps in Mae Hong Son, Thailand and conflict-affected communities in Kayah State, Myanmar, the project combined education, skills development, psychosocial support, peacebuilding and local capacity strengthening to help children and young people continue learning and thrive despite displacement and conflict.

Access to Quality Education

The project helped children maintain access to basic education in camps while strengthening the quality and continuity of teaching. Teachers received training and ongoing support, while schools received learning materials, infrastructure and management assistance. When COVID-19 closed schools, local project implementing partner Jesuit Refugee Service and the Karenni Education Department adapted quickly to home-based and blended learning, providing learning materials, supporting parents to create learning spaces and become more engaged in their children's education, and integrating psychosocial and social-emotional learning into the curriculum. Eighty-five percent of school-aged children accessed basic education, exceeding the 80% target, while 79% of camp-based teachers improved their performance against a 65% target. Students reported that teachers were more responsive to their questions and learning styles, and that varied materials such as songs, videos, images and group activities made learning more engaging. The shift to home-based learning, however, reduced interaction and satisfaction for some students.

"Sometimes we gave suggestions to teachers. They let us study in a group and explain to each other. It is interesting to learn like this." School student, Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp

KEY IMPACTS

More children stayed connected to education: 85% of school-aged children accessed education and 91% took their examinations and passed their tests, exceeding the project target and helping maintain learning continuity during major disruptions.

Teaching quality improved: 79% of camp-based teachers improved their performance, compared with a 65% target, supported by ongoing monitoring and training.

Positive discipline replaced punitive practices: Teachers and parents shifted towards positive approaches to behaviour management following child safeguarding, social-emotional learning and peacebuilding training.

Learning continued through COVID-19: Jesuit Refugee Service and Karenni Education Department adapted education to home-based and blended models, with parents taking a more active role in supporting children's learning.

Alternative education, skills and opportunities for young people

For young people who had left school, the project provided an alternative pathway through vocational training, sports, leadership activities, community service and small business support. These activities were particularly relevant for young people who needed to contribute to household livelihoods or who felt unable to return to formal education. Eighty-four percent of participating out-of-school youth reported increased skills, confidence, friendships and enjoyment, exceeding the 70% target. Young people described gaining practical skills they could apply in the workplace as well as greater confidence to communicate with others. Small business grants also enabled some participants to support their families. The evaluation found, however, that the impact of this outcome could be further strengthened in the next phase by providing financial support to complement business training, expanding coverage and increasing the number of activities.

KEY IMPACTS

Young people gained practical skills and confidence: 84% reported increased skills, confidence, friendships and enjoyment, exceeding the 70% target.

Vocational learning created pathways beyond formal schooling: Training responded to young people's preference for practical skills that could be used in daily life and work.

Young people became more confident speaking and participating, for example one participant said the activities meant they were "not shy or afraid of speaking in front of people".

Skills were translated into livelihood support: Small business grants helped some young people use their new skills to contribute to their families' livelihoods.

Education management and community-led systems

The project invested in local people and organisations so that education could continue even when project staff could not safely access communities. Training strengthened the skills of education managers and non-teaching staff, while monitoring tools helped identify teacher training needs. Eighty-nine percent of education management and non-teaching staff demonstrated improved skills, exceeding the 65% target. This capacity became particularly important during COVID-19, when the Karenni Education Department had to manage education continuity with limited external support. The Education Department developed alternative learning scenarios and worked with camp committees and parents to distribute learning materials and responded to teacher turnover. Community-based structures also contributed to decision-making, with Parent Teacher Association discussions influencing education priorities. One significant decision was to open Grades 11 and 12 in the camp, expanding future education and career opportunities for students.

KEY IMPACTS

Local education leadership strengthened: 89% of management and non-teaching staff demonstrated improved skills, exceeding the 65% target.

Local systems became better able to respond to crises: Karenni Education Department developed alternative learning approaches and maintained education during COVID-19 when external access was restricted.

Communities influenced education decisions: Parent Teacher Association engagement contributed to the decision to introduce Grades 11 and 12, creating additional education and career opportunities.

Local knowledge continued beyond direct training: The Training of Trainers model enabled trained partners to pass knowledge on to teachers, young people and students.



Social Cohesion, Psychosocial Wellbeing, Protection and Inclusion

Education was paired with psychosocial support, social-emotional learning and peacebuilding to help children, families and communities cope with conflict and displacement. Ninety percent of monitored early childhood teachers improved their skills in psychosocial support, social-emotional learning and peace education, against an 80% target. All core members of the Justice and Peace Commission and Youth Commission reported increased wellbeing and solidarity, while youth-led activities provided community-based psychosocial support to 1,374 community members, far exceeding the target of 100. The project also strengthened child safeguarding through trained focal points, reporting mechanisms and safeguarding policies. Children with disabilities were included through an inclusive education program and disability awareness activities. The evaluation, however identified areas for further work, particularly mainstreaming gender, improving disability data and inclusion in Myanmar's regular education system, and ensuring children's meaningful participation in program design.

"Many people are struggling with their emotions here, we can see on their faces, students want to be educated, but not everyone can attend. Those who were able to attend school were thankful for the support they received. We conducted peace education training in conflict areas, using a 'learning by doing' approach and we can see that people enjoyed the activities. Psychosocial support activities also helped us to handle our own emotions." Youth participants in a Focus Group Discussion in Myanmar

KEY IMPACTS

Psychosocial support reached far beyond the original target: Youth-led peace and psychosocial activities reached 1,374 community members, compared with a target of 100.

Young people became agents of peace: Trained youth continued providing peace and resilience activities even after being displaced to new communities.

Safeguarding systems strengthened: Child protection focal points, reporting mechanisms and safeguarding policies helped create safer learning environments and increased caregivers' confidence in sending their children to school.

Children with disabilities gained greater opportunities to participate: Inclusive Education activities, parent support groups and disability awareness work increased attention to inclusion, although further work is needed to support the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education in Myanmar.

Sustainability

The project's evaluation considers the project's benefits likely to be sustained, particularly because local implementing partner Jesuit Refugee Service has invested in education systems, community groups and long-standing relationships, rather than relying solely on direct service delivery. The Karenni Education Department and other local stakeholders demonstrated increased capacity to plan and manage education independently, including adapting learning approaches during COVID-19 and responding to teacher turnover. In Myanmar, trained members of the Justice and Peace Commission and Youth Commission also continued peace and psychosocial activities after displacement, extending the project's influence beyond its original locations. The Training of Trainers approach provides a practical mechanism for retaining knowledge within communities, while Family Friendship Groups have continued to support community mobilisation and livelihoods. However, sustainability remains vulnerable to teacher turnover, low teacher remuneration, heavy workloads and the broader insecurity affecting communities. The evaluation recommends strengthening retention strategies, leadership capacity and human resources within local education structures. It also recognises that basic needs such as food, livelihoods and security remain immediate priorities for displaced communities. Sustainability therefore depends not only on maintaining skills and systems, but also on continued flexibility and support as the context changes.



Case Study

Building confidence to support others

As part of the Sustaining Education for Burmese Refugees project, young people in Myanmar were given opportunities to build leadership, peacebuilding and psychosocial support skills through different Training of Trainers (TOT) sessions.

Lilibeth*, a young person from Loikaw who loves learning, participated in TOT sessions on Peace and Social Cohesion, Active Citizenship and Psychosocial Support. Initially, she lacked confidence to facilitate training herself, however after leading three sessions, she felt comfortable sharing her knowledge with other young people, including on leadership.

The psychosocial support training was particularly meaningful for Lilibeth. Having experienced stress and trauma, she learned practical ways to understand herself, heal and cope with stress. She then shared what she learned with friends and others, helping to promote mental wellbeing and psychosocial support more broadly.

Lilibeth now volunteers to support communities and internally displaced people, including through logistics and education for children. She says the training has given her the knowledge and skills to support others during a difficult time and to contribute as a young community leader.

"The training Jesuit Refugee Service provided through the project is very useful. Jesuit Refugee Service has helped young people acquire the knowledge and skills they need during this difficult time," she said.

* Lilibeth is an alias. Identifiable information has been withheld to protect the safety of participants and staff.



Recommendations / Future Programming

1. Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment using an Asset-Based Community Development Approach to understand teachers' workloads, non-teaching responsibilities, career plans and core competency gaps, and use the findings to adapt training.
2. Expand opportunities for out-of-school children and youth to participate in productive activities that benefit both young people and their communities.
3. Regularly update and use Karenni Education Department's student dropout database to identify out-of-school children and youth and design activities that support pathways into continuing education or vocational training.
4. Strengthen children's safety on the journey to school by working with camp security and child protection organisations within camps.
5. Develop a roster of trained substitute teachers in consultation with teaching staff and Karenni Education Department to reduce the impact of teacher turnover and absences on teaching quality.
6. Strengthen education management capacity by providing additional human resources and training for head teachers, trainers, administrators and coordinators in areas including data collection, computer skills, Excel and English.
7. Strengthen children's meaningful participation in the design and implementation of future projects, ensuring their views inform programs affecting their rights and wellbeing.
8. Strengthen support for teachers and school leadership through reasonable teacher compensation, measures to address staff turnover and leadership training for school management.

This Impact Snapshot summarises results from the final evaluation of the Sustaining Education for Burmese Refugees Project, implemented by Jesuit Refugee Service and supported by Caritas Australia, The Noel and Carmel O'Brien Family Foundation, and the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). The Evaluation was conducted by an independent consultancy.

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