

## POLICY BRIEF

# Calling the Government of Myanmar to Sign Up to the Worldwide Initiative for Safe Schools (WISS)

### Executive Summary

Myanmar is exposed to multiple natural hazards including floods, cyclones, landslides, fire, earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts, and thunder storms. In 2008, Cyclone Nargis became the most devastating disaster in the country, affecting 2.4 million people and causing damage costing approximately 11.7 trillion Myanmar Kyats (4.1 billion USD).<sup>i</sup> An estimated 50 to 60 percent of public schools, including monastic ones, were destroyed or damaged. The total damage and losses in education are estimated at about Myanmar Kyats 116 billion, including Myanmar Kyats 25 billion from the damage to educational materials.<sup>ii</sup>

The recent floods in Myanmar in 2015, coupled with Cyclone Komen, made the annual flooding even worse. There were 4,116 schools affected, with 2,400 schools shut down and 250,000 children out of school.<sup>iii</sup> The affected schools were closed for about three weeks on the average, affecting children's learning.<sup>iv</sup>

The Ministry of Education of Myanmar has been mainstreaming disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives since mid-2000. The Government of Myanmar developed the Myanmar Action Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction (MAPDRR) in 2012, aligned to the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). Since Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the Government made strong commitments to ensure safety in schools and set clear targets for mainstreaming DRR in education.<sup>v</sup> Despite this progress, schools in Myanmar are often not constructed or maintained to be disaster resilient, nor do they have adequate systems in place to respond. School disaster management is not systematically integrated and implemented under the Ministry of Education yet, and children need improved capacity in knowing what they should do before, during, and after disasters. In addition, the government of Myanmar has not signed up to the Worldwide Initiative for Safe Schools (WISS). There has not yet been a high-level political commitment to secure the implementation of safe schools at all levels with appropriate budget allocation.



School children in Myanmar draw a village map showing hazards and risks

The partners in the WISS would like to call upon the Government of Myanmar and the development partners in Myanmar to invest in making disaster resilient schools. We strongly encourage the Government of Myanmar to become a Safe School Leader and sign up to the WISS. This helps ensure that policy and legal frameworks align with a comprehensive approach to school safety as part of national disaster risk reduction and education sector plans and strategies, and that they can be effectively implemented with adequate budget allocation.

We recommend that the national education authorities of the Government of Myanmar have a national level committee and full time focal point to lead comprehensive school safety in safe school facilities,

school disaster management, and disaster risk reduction and resilience education. This builds capacity of teachers and school personnel to teach children what they should do before, during, and after disasters, and encourages children to participate in decision-making processes on how schools can be made safer for themselves.

### Context and Importance of the Problem

Myanmar is globally ranked 12 out of 191 countries for the highest risk of humanitarian crises or disaster in the Index for Risk Management 2017, and is the highest risk country in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>vi</sup> According to the Global Climate Risk Index 2017, Myanmar was the second most affected country by extreme events from 1995-2014.<sup>vii</sup> Myanmar is exposed to multiple natural hazards which include cyclones, storm surges, floods, landslides, earthquakes, tsunamis, drought, and fire.

**Fire** is the most frequent hazard communities face, accounting for annual losses of 1 billion kyats (approximately 1 million USD).

**Flooding** is the second most frequent hazard. It is estimated that over 2 million people in the country are exposed to flood hazard every year. Floods occur in three waves: June, August, and late September to October.

The highest risk of flooding is in August, during the peak monsoon rains. The catchment areas of major rivers in the north and central zones, as well as the Southern Delta, are prone to riverine floods. The mountainous and hilly areas in Kayin, Kachin, Shan, Mon, and Chin states are threatened by flash floods. Coastal regions are at risk of flooding due to extreme rainfall and storm surges.

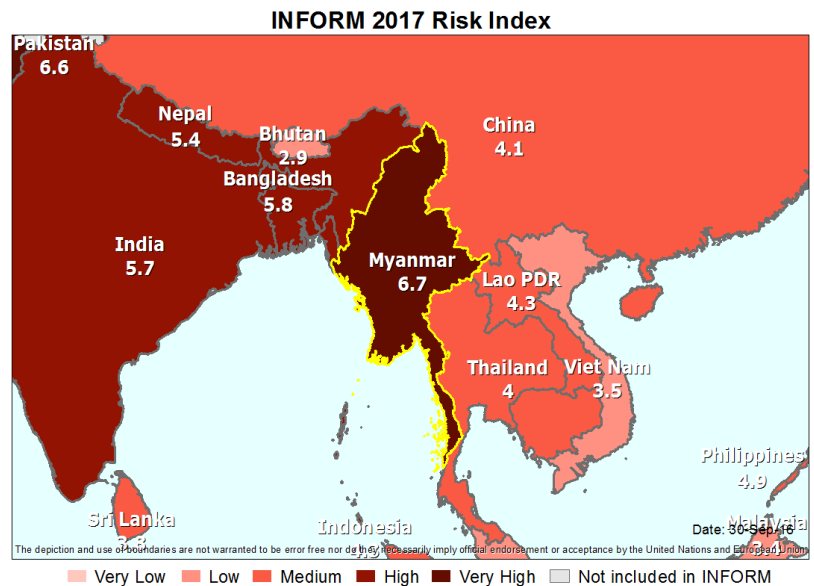
The Myanmar coastline is susceptible to severe **cyclones** which form in the Bay of Bengal, which has two cyclone seasons: April to May and September to November. According to the Myanmar Hazard Profiles, the frequency of cyclone landfalls in Myanmar was once in three years before the year 2000. More recently, cyclones cross the Myanmar coast every year.

Myanmar frequently experiences **earthquakes**, due to the Alpidic-Himalayan earthquake belt that passes through the country from north to south. Since 1900, there have been 8 strong earthquakes.<sup>viii</sup>

### Disaster Impacts on Education Sector

In May 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit the coastal areas of Myanmar, affecting 2.4 million people and leaving 84,537 people dead, 53,836 persons missing, and 19,359 injured. Total damage and losses were estimated at 11.7 trillion Myanmar Kyats (4.1 billion USD). The Post-Nargis Joint Assessment Report also indicated that more women than men died, distorting social structures. Child deaths are also believed to have been substantial, although fatalities disaggregated by age are not available.

Cyclone Nargis had a significant impact on the education sector. An estimated 50 to 60 percent of public schools, including monastic ones, were destroyed or damaged. The total damage and losses in education were estimated at about Myanmar Kyats 116 billion, including Myanmar Kyats 25 billion from the damage to educational materials. In addition to the many casualties and trauma suffered by children, some schools in certain areas have been used as emergency shelters to accommodate affected families, which compounded the disruption of children's education.<sup>ix</sup>



Floods are an annual event in Myanmar but the particularly heavy rains in 2015 during the early monsoon, coupled with Cyclone Komen, made the annual flooding even worse. The National Natural Disaster Management Committee reported the statistics in Fig 1 between June and August 2015.<sup>xii</sup>

No. of schools damaged <sup>x</sup>	4,116
No. of schools destroyed	608 (Ayeyarwady, Chin and Rakhine State account for the majority of the destroyed school buildings with 549 schools destroyed in these three states alone. <sup>xi</sup> )
No. of schools shut as a result of the floods	2,400
No. of children out of school as a result of the floods	250,000

Fig 1

The lack of information on the impact of education as a result of the floods is widespread throughout the flood affected areas. For example, the UN's Humanitarian Needs

Overview did not include any figures for the number of flood-affected people in need of education in any of the flood-affected areas, focusing mainly on the WASH and food security sectors.<sup>xiii</sup>

Although schools officially re-opened across Myanmar on August 10 2015, many students remained out of school for several months because their schools were destroyed or badly damaged.<sup>xiv</sup> An unknown



A school inundated by the 2015 floods in Sal Taw Village, Pwintbyu.

number of schools were used as evacuation centers or as shelters, which in some cases delayed the return to school even further. School materials for both students and teachers were destroyed or lost in the floods. However, again there is very limited data on the extent to which school materials were destroyed and how this resulted in a further delay for children to access quality learning.<sup>xv</sup>

### Critique of Policy Option(s)

Since Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar in 2008, the Government of Myanmar made strong commitments to ensure safety in schools through the development of plans and guidelines, and the establishment of multi-stakeholder working groups dedicated to the implementation of different aspects of DRR in Education. The Disaster Management Law was enacted in 2013 with guidelines and regulations on its implementation provided in 2015. The Myanmar Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction 2009-2015 has been a primary instrument for advancing disaster risk reduction in the country. The plan sets clear targets for mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in education.

The National Education Law was enacted by the Government of Myanmar. The government is leading the process of national education reform. A Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) has been informing new policy and planning, and a National Education Sector Plan (NESP) was developed for 2016/17-2020/21. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement also issued the Guidance on Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction in the Education Sector, Myanmar – Rural Setting. It includes structural, non-structural, and pedagogical approaches, and opportunities for mainstreaming, including the incorporation of disaster risk reduction elements in school construction.<sup>xvi</sup> However, the guidelines need to be updated and there is lack of leadership and mechanisms for implementing the guidelines across districts and down to schools, primarily due to lack of funding and technical capacity.



Furthermore, a School Safety Toolkit for Myanmar has been developed by the ASEAN Safe School Initiative (ASSI) to supplement these training resources with more concrete tools. This toolkit is adapted from the Toolkit for Building Disaster-Resilient School Communities in Southeast Asia developed by SEAMEO INNOTECH,<sup>xvii</sup> and in line with ASSI's School Disaster Risk Management Guidelines for South-East Asia. This toolkit is intended for school principals and teachers, School Disaster Management Committees, Parent-Teacher Associations, and the Myanmar Red Cross Society. The Safe Schools toolkit has been endorsed by Department of Basic Education under the Ministry of Education, but it is not yet approved by the Ministry of Education.

The Ministry of Construction formulated the Myanmar National Building Code and Land Use Planning Guidelines. The Sub-Working Group on School Construction leads the development of national guidelines for the construction of safe schools that will serve as the standard. However, as the national guidelines for the construction of safe schools just developed, there is very limited practical evidence of the guidance being used. Additionally, rural schools in Myanmar are built mainly using construction materials such as wood and bricks, and in some areas, bamboo and thatch. They are built with the key purpose of providing a learning space and their endurance to natural hazards is limited. Structurally sturdier construction materials like bricks and woods would make a school relatively strong, but whether it will be able to withstand natural hazards would also depend on the construction methods.<sup>xviii</sup> In addition, school-based disaster risk management tools have been developed by partner agencies who are working directly at the school level. However, there is no formalized approach to school based disaster management under Ministry of Education yet.

Moreover, DRR components have been integrated into current school curriculum in the life skills and science subjects. At the primary level, one of the five main areas of "Life Skills Subjects" is "Environmental Education," and there is a chapter on DRR called "Caution in Emergencies" that explains human-made and natural hazards. The Ministry of Education has revised the General Science Subject of the lower secondary school curriculum (Grade 6 to 9) and included lessons on storms in the main area of study "Earth and Space." The lower secondary "Life Skills" includes lessons on flood, emergencies, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, and fire. The revised upper secondary school subjects include a lesson titled "Earthquake" in Grade 10 English and "Earth Surface Process" in Grade 11 Geography. Nevertheless, in an education system like Myanmar, the emphasis has been more on completing the formal syllabus than attention given to extra-curricular activities or non-academic related subjects. Thus, learning priority is usually given to topics that are considered more relevant for the exams than disasters and related information. Most children still do not know what they should do before, during, and after disasters.<sup>xix</sup> On the other hand, the national teacher training curriculum does not include the discussions on school disaster management yet. Therefore, the technical capacity of teachers to teach children on DRR still an issue in Myanmar.



Eight year old Mg Myo Kyaw Than collects drinking water after being affected by the 2015 floods. Save the Children's response included the rehabilitation of schools.



Children play around the village of Nga Pye in Pauk Taw township after most of the schools were damaged and closed by the 2015 floods.

In Myanmar, despite progress over the last decade on DRR in Education, the challenges to make education safe from disasters are pressing and the education of children is still interrupted when disasters strike. Looking back at past disasters highlights that an increased focus on these areas is needed to ensure children are able to continue their education when disasters strike. However, there are a lot of obstacles in developing and/or implementing the policies, guidelines, and plans to address the identified gaps in school safety in Myanmar. The Government of Myanmar has not signed up to the Worldwide Initiative for Safe Schools (WISS) yet. The WISS is a governmental global partnership that aims at securing political commitment and fostering school safety implementation

globally. The initiative motivates and supports governments to develop and implement national school safety policies, plans, and programs in combination with the three technical pillars promoted through the Comprehensive School Safety Framework.<sup>xx</sup>

To sign up to the WISS is a first entry point of the Government of Myanmar to show the high-level political commitment to make education safe from disasters and ensure children can access quality education without disruption. The Government of Myanmar also can learn and share experiences in school safety implementation with other countries for possible replication, which shows the strong technical leadership on school safety in Myanmar to the world.

## Policy Recommendations

The partners in the Worldwide Initiative on School Safety would like to call upon the Government of Myanmar and the development partners in Myanmar to invest in making disaster resilient schools. We strongly call for the following points:

- Government of Myanmar signs up to the Worldwide Initiative for Safe Schools (WISS) and becomes a Safe Schools Leader
- Government of Myanmar should ensure enabling policies, guidelines, and legal frameworks for a comprehensive approach to school safety are in place at the national and sub-national level, which will be part of national disaster risk reduction and education sector plans and strategies with adequate budget allocation
- Government of Myanmar commits to build capacity for teachers and school personnel to teach children and youth what they should do before, during, and after disasters, and encourage children to participate in decision-making processes on how schools can be made safer for themselves
- National education authorities of the Government of Myanmar should have a national level committee and full time focal point to lead comprehensive school safety in safe school facilities, school disaster management, and disaster risk reduction and resilience education
- Development partners and donors provide technical and financial support to Government of Myanmar in signing up to the WISS and implement the national priorities for comprehensive approach to reducing risks for all hazards to the education sector.

**By Save the Children in support of the work of APCSS and GADRRRES**

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Asia Pacific Coalition  
for School Safety



Global Alliance for  
Disaster Risk Reduction & Resilience  
in the Education Sector



Save the Children

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>ii</sup> Union of Myanmar. Government of the Union of Myanmar, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the United Nations. *Post-Nargis Joint Assessment*. Jul 2008. World Food Programme. 13 Feb. 2017. <[http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp189113.pdf?\\_ga=1.87040926.740016782.1486955834](http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp189113.pdf?_ga=1.87040926.740016782.1486955834)>.
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- <sup>iv</sup> ASEAN Safe School Initiative. *Safe Schools Toolkits*. 2017.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Index for Risk Management Results for 2017*. Index for Risk Management (INFORM). 13 Feb. 2017. <<http://www.inform-index.org/Portals/0/InfoRM/INFORM%20Global%20Results%20Report%202017%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf>>. The overall INFORM risk index identifies countries at risk from humanitarian crises and disasters that could overwhelm national response capacity. It is made up of three dimensions – hazards and exposure, vulnerability and lack of coping capacity.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Global Climate Risk Index 2017*. GermanWatch. 13 Feb. 2017. <<https://germanwatch.org/en/crri>>.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Myanmar HCT Risk Assessment (Update May 2016)*. Global Shelter Cluster. 2016. 13 Feb. 2017. <[https://www.sheltercluster.org/sites/default/files/docs/humanitarian\\_country\\_team\\_risk\\_assessment\\_may\\_2016.pdf](https://www.sheltercluster.org/sites/default/files/docs/humanitarian_country_team_risk_assessment_may_2016.pdf)>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Union of Myanmar. Government of the Union of Myanmar, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the United Nations. *Post-Nargis Joint Assessment*.
- <sup>x</sup> Save the Children. *Education Disrupted: Disaster Impacts on Education in the Asia-Pacific Region in 2015*.
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xii</sup> Union of Myanmar. National Natural Disaster Management Committee. *Situation Report 5*. By Government of Myanmar and the United Nations. Relief Web, 8 Sep 2015. 13 Feb. 2017. <<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/NNDMC%20sitrep%205%2020150909%20final.pdf>>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, pg 9.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Schools Damaged After Myanmar Floods*. Plan International, 2015. 13 Feb. 2017. <<https://plan-international.org/myanmar/schools-damaged-after-myanmar-floods#>>>.
- <sup>xv</sup> Save the Children. *Education Disrupted: Disaster Impacts on Education in the Asia-Pacific Region in 2015*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *ASEAN Safe Schools Initiative: Compilation of Case Studies*. Relief Web, Dec 2015. 13 Feb. 2017. <<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ASEAN%20Safe%20Schools%20Initiative%20Compilation%20of%20Case%20Studies.pdf>>.
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- <sup>xix</sup> Union of Myanmar. Relief and Resettlement Department. *National Progress Report on the Implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (2009-2011) - Interim*. PreventionWeb, 4 Nov 2010. 13 Feb. 2017. <[http://www.preventionweb.net/files/16315\\_mmr\\_NationalHFAprogress\\_2009-11.pdf](http://www.preventionweb.net/files/16315_mmr_NationalHFAprogress_2009-11.pdf)>.
- <sup>xx</sup> UNISDR and GADRRRES. Worldwide Initiative for Safe Schools (WISS). UNISDR and GADRRRES, GADRRRES.net. 13 Feb. 2017. <[http://gadrrres.net/uploads/files/resources/WISS\\_information.pdf](http://gadrrres.net/uploads/files/resources/WISS_information.pdf)>.

