

## Statement: International Day of Education 24 January 2019

As the world observes the first International Day of Education, KHRG calls for urgent measures to be taken to ensure that all children in Myanmar can benefit from a free and high-quality education in their native language. Indeed, accessing education continues to be a challenge in rural areas of Southeast Myanmar. This situation contributes to the social and economic marginalisation of local people, further undermining the full enjoyment of their human rights and preventing them from stepping out of poverty. According to UNICEF, Myanmar has the second lowest youth literacy rate among ASEAN countries, which illustrates the failure of the government to meet its obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the country's Constitution.

Over the last years, the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement coupled with greater public investment have improved access to education in some parts of Southeast Myanmar. However, local children still lack comprehensive access to education materials and free, high-quality schools within a safe distance from their community. In parallel, educational fees and hidden costs further undermine the right to education for families facing livelihood and food security issues. Middle and high school education is particularly difficult to access due to higher fees and a lack of facilities in rural areas. Many villagers also remain displaced in refugee or IDP camps, which affects the quality and stability of their access to education. Sporadic armed clashes force others to temporarily leave their village, thus interrupting the activity of schools. KHRG also documented that trust in government teachers is undermined by cases of abuse against students, including sexual violence and corporal punishment.

Karen and other ethnic minority students attending Myanmar government schools experience language-based discrimination on a daily basis, as the classes are taught in Burmese. Even though Karen language, history and culture were allowed to be taught in government schools in 2014, KHRG documented that Karen classes usually take place outside of school hours. Furthermore, there is a lack of Karen language teachers, and some of them do not even receive a salary. Not only does this situation clearly favour Burmese native speakers at the detriment of the local Karen population, it also threatens the very survival of Karen language and identity in the areas where education falls under the responsibility of the government.

In the areas controlled by the Karen National Union, Karen students are able to attend classes in their native language. However, the KNU education system and other local schools lack resources and are not recognised by the Myanmar government. As a Karen mother from Doooplaya District said to KHRG: *“Even if our children graduate from a KNU school, they cannot get a good job. Only people with a Myanmar government school degree can.”*

In its General Comment No. 13, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognised the vital role of education in empowering women, safeguarding children from exploitative and hazardous labour and sexual exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy and protecting the environment. According to KHRG Programme Director Naw Htoo Htoo: *“The time has come to take concrete measures to ensure that every child in Myanmar benefits from a free and high-quality education that accommodates and promotes their native language and ethnic identity. If we lose the battle for education, we lose the battle for human rights.”*