

Mapping the Neoliberal Paradigm in Higher Education in Myanmar

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Neoliberal Development Policy

- Neoliberalism has completely reinterpreted the meaning of “doing development”, driven by multilateral organizations
- Framing the neoliberal development policy
 - Underlying assumptions: market liberalization, attracting foreign direct investments, greater participation in global value chains, good governance as necessary conditions for economic growth
 - Washington Consensus
 - Mantra of “stabilize, privatize, and liberalize” (Rodrik 2006)
 - Post-Washington Consensus
 - “Getting institutions right”, “good governance”
 - Role of government as a *complement* to markets, making markets perform their functions better (Stiglitz 1998)
 - World Governance Indicators

Neoliberal Development Policy

- Eastern Europe: embracing neoliberalism was perceived as a strategy to minimize perceptions of the communist legacy (Appel & Orenstein 2016)
 - Incentive of European Union membership
 - Competitive signalling: institutional reform towards establishing 'enabling environments' for capital
 - 'Improving the investment climate' is now promoted through benchmarking efforts, such as the IFC/World Bank Doing Business report series, which assess and rank countries in relevant areas and send signals to capital about the investment worthiness of a given locale.
- Economic growth that is inequitably captured, widening social stratification, reducing opportunities and mobility for lower socio-economic groups, and a declining proportion of national wealth captured by wage labour

Neoliberal Development Policy

- **Development for whom?**
 - Broad academic literature critical of neoliberal, one-size-fits-all prescription
 - Ills of neoliberal capitalism witnessed across the globe
- **Do we have an alternative paradigm for emerging countries?**
 - Embrace neoliberal policies while addressing the socioeconomic issues?
 - A full departure with a “post-neoliberal” alternative?

Myanmar Context

Myanmar's Turbulent History

- **1962: General Ne Win's military coup**
- **1962 – 1988: The Burmese Way to Socialism**
 - Study exchanges were limited only to other socialist countries in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.
 - Research became a vehicle to support the socialist revolution, as Burmese scholars lost touch with international trends and practices
- **August 1988: Student-led 8888 Uprising, and the Fall of the Burmese Way to Socialism**
 - Deliberate separation of disciplines and faculties, and closure of university campuses
 - Establishment of University of Distance Education: to diminish students' capacity to mobilize (Koon-Hong 2014)

Myanmar's Turbulent History

- **Industrialization Plan of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)/State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)**
 - More market-oriented outlook, but ultimately failed to successfully reverse decades of macroeconomic mismanagement
 - Foreign joint ventures with state-owned enterprises
 - Privatization of state-owned enterprises: cronies with close ties with military personnel who now own most of the largest conglomerates in Myanmar
- **Key Reforms under SLORC/SPDC**
 - Myanmar Foreign Investment Law (1988) – Promotion of export-oriented foreign investment
 - Private Industrial Enterprise Law (1990) – Promotion of private sector development
 - Cooperative Society Law (1992) – Reform co-operative societies in line with market economy
 - Myanmar Citizens Investment Law (1994) – Promotion of domestic investment for private sector development
- **2011: Quasi-civilian government, new reforms initiated**
- **2015: National League for Democracy's election victory**
 - Re-engagement with Western economies, interest from both investors and donors in this "last frontier" of Asia

Donors and Development Organizations

- **Cyclone Nargis in 2008**
 - Pivotal point in terms of engagement with international donors and INGOs
 - Marks the start of proliferation of INGOs and international donors, largely in humanitarian assistance
- **The IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB): key advisors for economic reforms**
- **Nascent economic research in academia, and non-academic is heavily shaped by shifting donor interests and donor-government dynamics**
 - Foreign “technocrat/specialist”, local research “assistant”
- **New dynamic in using development as a tool to accelerate peace process**
 - Recent shift in ideology for UN agencies, World Bank with a focus on “conflict-affected” and “vulnerable populations”
 - Development as a tool to accelerate peace process
 - Rural-urban divide, interethnic tensions, where most ethnic minorities live in rural Myanmar, on lands rich in timber, minerals with long history of exploitations by cronies
 - e.g. World Bank’s planned \$250 million “Peaceful and Prosperous Communities Project” (PPCP)
 - Statement issued by network of Karen CSOs and NGOs that the root cause of civil war is not due to underdevelopment, but the lack of equality and power sharing

Higher Education Landscape in Myanmar: An Overview

Economics in Higher Education

- **Interview with former professor of Yangon University of Economics**
 - Socialist curriculum before 1988
 - Marxism/Soviet Union/Exploitation of capitalists
 - However, some professors were already sharing philosophy of free markets in private (Views strengthened by economic aid and loans to save the economy from brink of collapse in mid-1970s)
- **Closures of universities for two years after 1988 Uprising**
 - Reform of economics curriculum happened after re-opening of universities
 - New curriculum: market economy, free market

Higher Education Reform: Challenges

| MINISTRY OF REFERENCE | SUB-CATEGORY | NUM. |
|---|---|------------|
| Ministry of Education | Arts and Sciences Universities | 42 |
| | Universities of Economics | 3 |
| | Universities of Distance Education | 2 |
| | Universities of Foreign Languages | 2 |
| | Universities and Colleges for Teacher Education | 25 |
| | Technological Universities | 33 |
| | Universities of Computer Studies | 27 |
| Total | | 134 |
| Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation | | 7 |
| Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry | | 1 |
| Ministry of Defence | | 6 |
| Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture | | 5 |
| Ministry of Border Affairs | | 3 |
| Ministry of Transports | | 2 |
| Ministry of Health and Sports | | 16 |
| Total | | 174 |

Data provided by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, The Republic of Union of Myanmar, November 2018.

- The current system governing higher education institutions today is a legacy of the structure designed by the socialist government under the University Education Act in 1964, where specialist “professional universities” were separated from “arts and science universities” teaching social sciences, science and humanities.
- Officially, English remains the language of instruction for universities stipulated by law, though in reality, lectures and lessons are mostly delivered in Burmese given the poor level of English of tutors and professors (Dinmore 2015).
- Dominance of poor-quality distance education: According to the National Education Strategic Plan, there are 225,178 students enrolled in distance education universities, nearly twice the number of full-time students in HEIs under the Ministry of Education (NESP 2015)
- Universities are separated – both in spatial and academic terms

Next Steps

- **The neoliberal paradigm: diffusion, or translation?**
 - Further interviews with Myanmar and foreign experts in economics education
 - Interviews with Economics professors at the three main Economics universities
- **Further detail the historical events and the evolution of economics education**

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