

Designing for Disruption: Aiding Complex Adaptive Ethnic and Refugee Education Systems

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Abstract

As protracted conflicts escalate globally, over 473 million children now live in crisis-affected contexts (Østby & Rustad, 2024), demanding education responses that move beyond interim solutions toward sustainable, locally-led systems (Burde et al., 2017; Winthrop & Matsui, 2013). This presentation investigates how humanitarian aid approaches can more effectively support education systems operating as complex adaptive systems (CAS) during emergencies, drawing on research from four settings on the Thai-Myanmar border. The analysis builds on comparative case studies which synthesize the perspectives of Karen and Karenni education authorities, teachers, teacher trainers, and international non-government organizations. Building on research demonstrating that locally-led education systems sustain effective programming through decentralized governance and adaptive feedback mechanisms (Tyrosvoutis, 2025; Rinehart, Layi Chan, and Tyrosvoutis, 2025), this presentation examines organizational features enabling continuity during crises. However, these systems often remain undermined by centralized donor requirements and rigid compliance frameworks that fail to recognize their complex adaptive capacity.

This research addresses two critical questions: How can aid approaches support long-term strengthening of education systems and the redistribution power by leveraging systems' complex adaptive traits? What agency do middle-tier actors exhibit in emergency settings and what, if any, capacity building is needed to move beyond mere responsibility transfer? This presentation seeks to challenge neocolonial aid practices by centering local agency and contested educational futures emerging from communities' own contexts, needs, and aspirations, ultimately providing actionable guidance for decolonizing humanitarian education service delivery.