

Identity as an Institutional Design Principle: How Kachin Ethno-National Identity Shapes Governance Rules in Community Schools

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Abstract

In conflict-affected regions where the state fails to provide education, community-run schools often become sites of cultural resistance and collective identity formation. However, there is few study on how ethnic identity is integrated into both formal and informal governance rules, as well as the institutional implications. This study addresses how Kachin ethno-national identity, expressed through language (Jinghpaw), self-determination ideology (Awmdawm), and historical narratives of resistance, enters the institutional design of Kachin community-run schools operating under prolonged conflict in Kachin State. This study explores identity embedding across seven rule types of the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework: position, boundary, authority, aggregation, scope, information, and payoff rules. Using qualitative analysis of interviews with key stakeholders of eight community-run schools, this study shows three patterns of identity embedding in institutional governance. First, schools intentionally incorporate Kachin identity into Boundary and Position rules to limit leadership roles to Kachin Christians or community members. This creates an identity-based moral authority as a governance principle. Second, Scope rules explicitly mandate Jinghpaw language instruction, Kachin history, and Christian rituals, transforming identity from a cultural backdrop to an operational requirement. Third, Payoff rules reframe voluntary teacher labour, parent donations, and community discipline as moral obligations tied to being a good Kachin Christian rather than as contractual duties. Importantly, community members actively acknowledge and appreciate these identity-infused arrangements, viewing them as indicators of institutional legitimacy demonstrating that schools represent "our people" and "our struggle." These findings challenge the institutional design literature that considers identity an external factor, revealing that in conflict-affected contexts, ethnic identity is an integral institutional component that generates legitimacy through cultural meaning-making.