

Teaching Sustainable Development Goals during Conflict Time in Myanmar: Some Reflections

Ronghui Zhou¹, Marip Ja Bawk²

¹University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom. ²Kachinland College, Myitkyina, Myanmar

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This case study explored the learning experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an online Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) course in a conflict zone in Myanmar. Through focus groups and individual interviews (n=7), we evaluated how exposure to the SDGs influenced students' perspectives on sustainable development in the politically complex region. Preliminary findings indicate a significant enhancement in students' understanding of the interconnections between environmental, economic, and social sustainability dimensions. Despite challenges such as poor internet connectivity due to military operations, language barriers, and limited teacher-student interaction, the course effectively broadened student engagement and deepened their comprehension of global sustainability issues. These insights suggest that online educational interventions can significantly equip students to understand, participate in, and contribute to the global sustainability agenda. Education for Sustainable Development can become an essential tool to mitigate local educational challenges and inspire new solutions to address the socio-political issues in the area.

Full paper

Located at the northernmost tip of Myanmar, Kachin state is home to some of the nation's most valuable resources, such as jade, rare earth minerals, amber, gold, and timber. For the past decades, Kachin region in Myanmar has suffered from political instability due to the conflicts between the regional ethnic armed organisations and the Myanmar military (Oosterom et al., 2019; Sadan, 2015). These conflicts have deeply influenced the educational landscape in the region, especially after the 2021 military coup (Bertrand, 2022). Frequent skirmishes and displacement have disrupted formal education, with many schools being permanently closed or repurposed for non-educational needs, resulting limited education opportunities and resources for the younger generation in the region (Sadan, 2014; Ho, 2021). Against this backdrop, education in Kachin State is not merely academic; it's a reflection of larger socio-political narratives, cultural preservation, and the aspirations for peace, recognition, and autonomy.

Building on a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) ([Global Inequalities and the Just Transition](#) on FutureLearn), the leading author developed an undergraduate level course titled 'Human Geography', exploring issues with Rare Earth Elements (REEs) extraction and trade in the region through the lens of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The course was co-taught by the authors with 7

undergraduate students in online learning format at a local college. After completion of the course, we conducted a focus group discussion with 7 students in February 2024 and individual interviews in April 2024 to explore the research question: how does exposure to the SDGs influence Myanmar undergraduate students' attitudes, behaviours, and perspectives to contribute to sustainable development given the local socio-political landscape?

The preliminary findings of this case study suggest that there has been a significant increase in the students' understanding of sustainable development, especially regarding the interconnections between environmental, economic, and social dimensions. The enhanced awareness among students about the multifaceted nature of sustainability challenges prompted a new perception of their roles and responsibilities in fostering possible change under the local political landscape. This shift in perspective was particularly evident in their discussions on REEs, where they critically assessed the socio-environmental impact and ethical implications of REEs extraction and trade in the region, under the global context of a just and sustainable energy transition. Students were able to link the local effects of these global practices to multiple SDGs, indicating a deepened understanding of global interdependencies. New pedagogical approaches such as discussion, debate, and reflection exercise, also challenged students' traditional learning journey and widened the scope of student engagement and competence training. However, key challenges such as internet connectivity issues due to local military operations, language barriers, and limited teacher-student interaction, exacerbated by online learning, hindered the students' learning process. The findings from this case study indicates the potential of new educational interventions, like the MOOC-based course, to make up the local education deficiencies, and to empower students with the knowledge and skills necessary to actively participate in the global sustainable development agenda. These insights contribute valuable perspectives on the educational strategies that can effectively nurture committed change agents in the local area facing complex socio-political challenges.

References

- Bertrand, J. (2022). Education, language, and conflict in Myanmar's ethnic minority states. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 14(1), pp.25-42.
- Ho, E. (2021). Border governance in Kachin state, Myanmar: Un/caring states and aspirant state building during humanitarian crises. *Modern Asian Studies*, 56(2), pp.639-660.
- Oosterom, M., Maran, J. and Wilson, S. (2019). 'Building Kachin': Youth and everyday action in one of Myanmar's ethnic states. *Development and Change*, 50(6), pp.1717-1741.
- Sadan, M. (2014). Reflections on building an inclusive higher education system in Myanmar. *British Academy Review*, 24, pp.68-71.
- Sadan, M. (2015). Ongoing conflict in the Kachin state. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2015, pp.246-259.

