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Final independent evaluation of the Myanmar Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (My-PEC)

QUICK FACTS

Countries: Myanmar

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Evaluation timing: Final

Administrative Office: ILO Liaison Office in Myanmar

Technical Office: FUNDAMENTALS

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Key Words: Child labor, Myanmar, USDOL, COVID-19, Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, Non-Formal Education, Occupational Safety and Health, Civil Society Organizations, multi-stakeholder response.



BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure

Purpose: My-PEC, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, endeavors to establish a comprehensive, inclusive, and efficient multi-stakeholder response to reducing child labor in Myanmar. **Intervention logic:** This purpose is to be achieved through the accomplishment of five intermediate objectives :(1) Expanded knowledge base on child labor in Myanmar, (2) Increased awareness and understanding about child labor, (3) Improved legal and institutional environment contributing to the elimination of child labor, (4) Improved capacity of national and local stakeholders to coordinate, network and advocate for the elimination of child labor, and (5) Reduced child labor in pilot target communities. The interventions have been divided into two major groupings: national-level and community-level. **Management structure:** My-PEC has been implemented by the ILO Office in Yangon with the overall political and technical cum programmatic supervision of the Deputy Liaison Officer, the technical support of ILO-IPEC under the FPRW Branch and with technical support from Senior FPRW specialist of DWT-Bangkok. In terms of team personnel, the Program has been managed by a team of seven persons.

Present situation of the project

My-PEC was initially set to operate for 48 months (January 2014 to December 2017) with a total budget of USD 5,250,000. The Program benefited from several extensions, both with and without cost, resulting in an overall budget of USD 9,650,000 and an implementation period of 123 months, till September 2024. **Two shocks affected the program implementation:** i) the **COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020**, with Myanmar’s infection rate being the highest in Southeast Asia, and ii) the **military coup on February 1, 2021**, and the continued effects thereafter. Particularly to the coup, the ILO’s Commission of Inquiry for Myanmar has concluded that the actions taken by the military authorities since February 2021 have resulted in far-reaching restrictions on the exercise of fundamental civil liberties and trade union rights, as well as in the incapacity of trade unionists to engage in trade union activities. The project underwent a significant transformation when faced with the dual challenges of a health crisis and political instability. From a development-focused initiative concentrating on skills, vocational training, life skills, and village saving and loan activities, it evolved

	<p>into a more versatile endeavor that included humanitarian and emergency support as an additional program element. The political instability brought on by the coup necessitated a reevaluation of engagement strategies, particularly with the abrupt end to government collaboration. The project discreetly leveraged relationships with trade unions and EOs to navigate this volatile landscape.</p>
<p>Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation</p>	<p>The evaluation serves the purpose of accountability to the donor and ILO constituents. Secondly, the evaluation findings and insights will contribute to organizational learning within the ILO and the donor. It will also contribute to the design of a possible future phase of the Program in Myanmar. Scope: The evaluation covered the whole Program period from the start in 2014 until the time of the evaluation in March 2024 and the geographical areas where the Program has its operations The primary end users of the evaluation findings are the Office of Child Labor Forced Labor and Human Trafficking OCFT in USDOL, the grantee, other project stakeholders, and stakeholders working to counter child labor more broadly.</p>
<p>Methodology of evaluation</p>	<p>The evaluators used a <i>theory-based evaluation approach</i> to facilitate the identification of assumptions, risk, and mitigation strategies, and the logical connection between levels of results and their alignment with ILO’s strategic objectives and outcomes at the global and national levels, as well as with the relevant SDGs and related targets. The evaluation’s inception report assessed the program’s reconstructed theory of change.</p> <p>The evaluation approach included a <i>utilization-focused design</i> to maximize the evaluation process and deliverables to the intended evaluation clients. The evaluation’s utilization focus was inclusive. The evaluators interviewed 117 program stakeholders, including 59.8% women and 40.2% men, through virtual Key Informant Interviews (KII), on online survey, virtual Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with beneficiaries in Ayeyarwady and Mon, and in-person FGDs in the Yangon area. As it was not possible to include communities that can only be reached by boat, up to five hours from a main road, project implementation partners and village mobilizers were used as facilitators to gather community members for FGDs. This approach enhanced the feasibility of collecting primary data in the limited time available for the evaluation.</p>



MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

My-PEC showed an overall solid performance across the seven evaluation criteria, scoring highest at relevance (93%), cross-cutting issues such as social inclusion, social dialogue, and the ILO's normative mandate (92%), efficiency (89%), coherence (83%) and effectiveness (80%). The evaluation found 67% scores for impact, and sustainability in a program operating in an extraordinarily challenging environment with two major external shocks, including COVID-19 and the military coup ending the country's political transition.

Conclusions: My-PEC was highly relevant, aligning well with the organization's ILO P&Bs the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Decent Work Country Program (DWCP). Despite challenges following the military coup, the program maintained its relevance through its high adaptive capacity by focusing on pilot community support and disengaging from the military government. My-PEC coordinated actively with other child labor projects in Myanmar, although uneven opportunities for implementing partners, especially in rural areas, were noted. Adherence to decent work principles and a human-rights-based approach was evident, but disparities in opportunities for girls and boys and disability inclusion persisted due to cultural norms in ethnically diverse communities, influenced by community heads and mobilizers in a traditional cultural setting. Despite challenges from COVID-19 and the military coup, My-PEC effectively met its objectives through adaptation, partner commitment, and continued funding, though the risk of children returning to labor due to education system issues remains. The program was cost-effective but required significant investment to raise awareness and foster national demand against child labor. While the project team successfully overcame implementation hurdles, separating monitoring from implementation affected community trust. My-PEC's impact varied by location, with progress in national reform and ratifying ILO conventions, though the window for further implementation has closed. Sustainability efforts included strategic adaptation by engaging local NGOs and CSOs during crises, but the shrinking space for CSOs poses future challenges. My-PEC promoted social dialogue post-reforms, crucial for labor rights advancements. Support for ratifying ILO Convention 138 remained consistent throughout the program.



RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main recommendations

Relevance

R1: ILO Myanmar Office: In the context where all three ILO child labor interventions end in 2024, the Office should gather donors to assess funding opportunities for scaling up the ILO’s community-based approach to fight child labor to strengthen community resilience in Myanmar. This support should be framed in a new project agreement with the ILO, continuing to apply the My-PEC approach in additional pilot communities in ethnically controlled areas.

Prioritization: high. Next 6 - 9 months

Coherence

R2: ILO My-PEC: Pursue and enhance effort in promoting gender perception changes at community level to the extent that boys and girls select the training they see fit to their aspirations. In new pilot areas, disability should be included by identifying disabled children and their needs.

Prioritization: very high. Next 3 months

Effectiveness

R3: ILO My-PEC: In the upcoming program extension, it is essential to consider that more than vocational skills training is required for children. It is recommended to incorporate one-on-one support for them after the training. This support can be provided through home visits or visits to the implementing partners' center or school, where children and partner staff can regularly meet and discuss their experiences at home, school, work, job hunting, and their need for assistance. Partner staff can offer direct support, provide information, or refer them to necessary resources.

Prioritization: very high. Next 3 months

Efficiency

R4: ILO My-PEC: When selecting new pilot communities, prioritize a broad coverage of community members to create community resilience to the best extent possible. Focusing on fewer communities with a higher coverage of poor villagers should be the priority, particularly where other existing interventions operate.

Prioritization: very high. Next 3 months

R5: ILO My-PEC: To effectively mobilize individuals and ensure consistent utilization of services, the use of center or school-based approaches is recommended, going beyond the implementation partner Swan Saung Shin's (SSS') community-based approach and leveraging on the good experiences of a combination of center-based and community-based approaches (World Vision) and school-based and community-based approaches (MNEC)

Prioritization: very high. Next 3 months

R6: ILO My-PEC: To search for synergies with external partners for service delivery, for example, in education, it is recommended to undertake a service or resource mapping of the organizations involved in areas such as children's education, life skills, vocational training, and child labor case management. This mapping can span from the national level down to the community level including the new communities.

Prioritization: very high. Next 3 months

Sustainability

R7: ILO Myanmar Office: For any new child labor project in the country, strong CSO support continues to be important, and the work to reinforce their position continues to be required to strengthen community resilience (see R1). At the same time, ethnically controlled areas and central contested regions, such as the Dry Zone of the country, where separate education systems have emerged, should be favored when selecting project sites to ensure that the existing school system can be fully used as an essential and sustainable lever to address child labor by bringing children back to schools without collaborating with the post-coup the SAC-controlled institutions.

Prioritization: very high. Next 3 months

R8: ILO My-PEC: encourage implementing partners to conduct community-level risk assessments regularly to identify potential risks that could hinder the project's outcomes.

Prioritization: very high. Next 3 months



Main lessons learned and good practices

Lesson learned 1: When tripartism is disabled due to a military coup or failing state structures, CSOs can have the capacity to still reach communities. Education structures are pivotal in addressing child labor, and the limitations of CSO engagement show when trying to significantly strengthen or even replace the state-run education system in times of crisis.

Lesson 2: Amidst the global trend of shrinking civic spaces and declining democracy, the ILO has the potential to catalyze social dialogue when reform processes emerge in a country. By strengthening tripartite + constituents, including government, employers, workers, and civil society organizations, the ILO can generate the necessary momentum for reform, social justice, and adherence to International Labor Standards (ILS).

Good Practice 1: In countries where multiple ILO interventions address a specific issue like child labor, establishing an agreement between interventions on one Chief Technical Advisor (CTA) to serve as a coordinator is essential for the ILO operating as “One ILO.” Preferably, the CTA should be based in the target country to ensure effective coordination and streamlined efforts.

Good Practice 2: In areas lacking a functional national education system, efforts to reduce child labor must adopt a resilient community approach. This may involve initiatives such as establishing savings groups, providing vocational training, implementing the 3-R (Rights, Responsibilities, and Representation for children, youth, and family) strategy, and utilizing the SCREAM (Supporting Children's Rights through Education, the Arts and the Media) methodology. Alternatively, targeting areas with functioning education systems outside government control for piloting ILO support can also be effective.

Good Practice 3: Programs aiming for policy change, including the ratification and implementation of International Labor Standards (ILS), require long-term timeframes, typically around ten years. Shorter project cycles may necessitate adjustments to project ambitions to ensure realistic and achievable outcomes.