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impact

Education for a Democratic Future

Pictured: PB alumna Khum Sa Mun Htai – Photograph © Jenny Matthews

Prospect Burma CIO Number 1167686
Prospect Burma has seen many changes since we began nearly thirty years ago.

Although all our scholars are committed to returning to Burma after their studies, in reality few could risk doing so before 2011. Many had come from refugee camps along the Thai border, and were afraid that they might put themselves and their families in danger if they returned before it was safe to do so.

The reforms which began in 2011 ushered in a new era of hope for Burma. Former exiles were no longer unwelcome; indeed they were positively encouraged to return, not only by the Thein Sein government but also by the democratic opposition led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. All sides could see an urgent need to attract back young Burmese with the education, talent and drive necessary to take the country forward. As a result, the majority of our graduates are now returning to Myanmar to put their newly acquired skills into practice; and some of those who have not yet returned are working in Burma-related areas in nearby countries such as Thailand.

Now that we have opened an office in Yangon, it will be easier to track how these alumni are faring, and what impact they are starting to have. This newsletter is devoted to assessing this impact. Our donors have been generous in their support and we are excited to share with you some of the ways this support is resulting in lasting improvements to the lives of ordinary Burmese. There are already some stellar examples, including Dr Sasa who has set up hundreds of health clinics across his native Chin State; and Dr Thein Lwin, a Prospect Burma funded graduate from Newcastle University, whose Thinking Classroom Foundation has brought critical thinking techniques to hundreds of Burmese teachers. I hope you will find the experiences featured in this newsletter similarly inspiring.

Robert Gordon - Chairman of the Board of Trustees

For nearly 30 years, Prospect Burma has supported Burmese students with scholarships that enable them to gain the skills and experience they need to rebuild their country. Throughout this time, our passion to open the doors to education which is so needed by young people has remained the driving force behind what we do. Over the years, we have witnessed many of our alumni become leaders in their fields, and fulfill the Prospect Burma commitment. In this edition of the newsletter, we take a look at the lifelong impact of a PB scholarship and celebrate just a very few of our incredible alumni. We hope you enjoy it.

Hannah Marcazzo
Executive Director, Prospect Burma
Creating holistic peace in Karen State

Prospect Burma alumnus Hsar Doe Doh Moo experienced persecution and conflict growing up in a remote area of the Karen state. Today, he is part of a team dedicated to finding an ecological and social form of lasting peace.

Hsr Doe Doh Moo Htoo was the second of five children born to a teacher and political activist father, in Kaw Moo Rah region in the Karen State. In his application to Prospect Burma for a scholarship in 2004, Hsar gave us a glimpse into what it was like for him growing up:

"Being part of revolutionary movement, our family has faced many hardships in our lives. Between 1984 and 1985, Kaw Moo Rah was severely attacked by Burmese junta troops. As a result, my family and other villagers dared not to stay there any longer and sought asylum in Thailand."

Hsr and his family moved to Maw Ker refugee camp in Thailand. In 1997 the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army attacked the camp with mortar bombs and burned it down, leaving the refugees without shelter and forcing them to find accommodation elsewhere. The family moved on, but the violence and displacement naturally had a significant impact on Hsar.

After completing a Further Studies Programme in Mae La camp, he completed an Intensive College Foundation Course, which allowed him to apply for university. He was supporting himself at this time by working as a teacher, and developed a love for educating others. He told us "after completing my study I will go back and work with my community and involve in educational development and empowerment." In 2014, Hsar completed an MSc in Counselling Psychology from Assumption University, Thailand.

Hsr’s journey instilled in him a powerful desire to create lasting and authentic peace in Myanmar. Today, he puts his skills, experiences and education to use working as the Environmental Educational Coordinator for the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN).

He told us: “KESAN is an indigenous Karen organisation that empowers indigenous Karen communities, promotes locally-defined genuine peace, and protects environment, lands and livelihoods.”

One of the programmes that KESAN is working on is an inspirational initiative which bears out Hsar’s desire to build lasting peace: the Salween Peace Park (SPP). SPP aims to maintain a holistically sustainable environment for local biodiversity, and indigenous people in the Salween river basin. A locally led project, grassroots organisations are implementing plans to protect the 5,400 square kilometre area of park land from mining, damming, deforestation and other environmentally invasive processes.

Hsr told us “The Salween Peace Park is important because it can play a critical role to help us in achieving our local communities’ peace aspirations. The international community and Burmese government need to understand that it’s impossible to have sustainable peace in Burma without addressing our grievances for the recognition of our rights for equality and self-determination. The Peace Park is not only indicative of the geographical feature itself, it is a place where we can exercise our cultural activities freely, manage our own natural resources in a sustainable manner, conserve and protect the rich biodiversity, and rebuild and improve our livelihoods for the well-being of our next generations to come.” continued overleaf
Burma Watch: Regime change after year one

Transition to peace and democracy in Burma is now reaching a crossroads after a difficult first year for the National League for Democracy in government office. There are still positive signs of change after long decades under military rule. But serious challenges remain in national politics that must be addressed if reform progress is to come to all peoples and communities.

Many of the difficulties in such areas as the economy, education and health were expected as the new administration assumed office last year. However three crises continue to dominate the domestic and international headlines, revealing deeper complexities if the NLD is to achieve breakthrough reforms during the life of the present parliament (2016-20). All lie at the heart of the country’s political instabilities. The first challenge is that, despite the NLD’s election victory, the strictures of the 2008 constitution mean that there is not so much an “NLD” government as a “hybrid” NLD-Tatmadaw government, with the national armed forces reserved 25 cent of seats in the legislatures and control of three ministries (home, defence and border affairs). Such conditions severely limit the NLD’s room for independent movement. Most ominously, in January the leading Muslim and NLD constitutional lawyer, U Ko Ni, was assassinated in broad daylight by a gang reportedly connected to military interests. Few doubted that it was a warning shot against radical change.

Second, there has been little progress in addressing inter-community conflict in the Rakhine state. The latest round of violence followed attacks on the police by a militant Islamist group last October, but the Tatmadaw’s response has been widely condemned by the United Nations and other international bodies as disproportionate. With the area off-limits to independent witnesses, over 120,000 civilians are currently in displacement camps (mostly Muslims who...
identify as “Rohingya”), while more than 80,000 refugees have fled into Bangladesh. The NLD government has appointed an advisory commission to investigate, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, but there is little evidence that he has been able to instigate ameliorative change.

Similar confusion follows the third crisis in national politics: the country’s faltering peace process. Despite the optimism of the NLD’s “21st Century Panglong” conference last September, conflict has since escalated in the Kachin and northern Shan states, with the Tatmadaw still launching military operations. Over 100,000 civilians are internally displaced in northeast Burma, and the next “21st Century Panglong” meeting has been postponed several times. A new conference is scheduled for late May, and China and Western governments have pledged support. However, with ethnic nationality leaders complaining that there are two governments to negotiate with (i.e., the NLD and Tatmadaw), hopes are presently muted of political change at any time soon. Inevitably, such events have cast a shadow over domestic and international perceptions of the NLD’s first year in office. Among the public, there is still popular support for the NLD as it seeks to build a stable platform for peace and reform. But as realities kick in, it is also clear that national reform is going to be a long-term process.

Turning tragedy into a new beginning

When he graduated from University, Maung John Zar Ring Thang was confronted by a natural disaster devastating his home country. The event took him on a journey which would shape the rest of this life.

Maung John Zar Ring Thang undertook a Master’s of Theology in 2008 at St Vincent School of Theology in the Philippines. Upon graduation, he was confronted by the biggest natural disaster to have threatened Myanmar in many years, Cyclone Nargis.

In early May 2008 Cyclone Nargis hit the coast of Myanmar, creating a storm surge which travelled 40 kilometres up the Irrawaddy delta, causing catastrophic destruction and at least 138,000 fatalities.

Maung John returned immediately to Myanmar, and began volunteering for a natural disaster relief project overseen by Caritas Myanmar, to support the communities most affected by the Cyclone. Motivated by his experiences, and by the ongoing need which he saw in the Chin State, he went on to create the Agency for Basic Community Development (ABC).

Maung John told us: “With the experiences I got from the disaster relief program, I decided to form a civil society group for the Chin State which remains the least developed area in Myanmar, with a handful of local NGOs there. Since 2010, ABC has been working on social promotion, civic education and capacity development of local Civil Society Organizations in the Chin State.”

ABC works with small community groups to offer impartial small-scale assistance supporting the development of areas which they identify as basic needs, hydraulic needs and civic educational needs. Though informed by Maung John’s Catholic faith, ABC collaborates with a range of humanitarian and development organizations in order to build a just, peaceful, and humane society. In order to reach some of the most underserved groups of people in the country, ABC works alongside grassroots organisations to support development in remote areas.

In 2017 ABC continues to grow and Maung John is positive about their future. He is particularly proud of a project to build a disaster risk reduction network for the Chinland community.

He told me “The vision of our organization is “to live life in its fullness” through the enlightenment, empowerment and transformation of society... The Prospect Burma scholarship helps me to actualize my potential.”

Despite the many challenges that continue to face Myanmar, the dedication of our returning Alumni like Maung John Zar Ring Thang continues to inspire and to shape the future of the country.

To find out more visit www.abcmm.org

Maung John Zar Ring Thang in Chin State
In a country whose primary economic activity is agriculture, does higher education for the majority of the population really matter? Once there are enough doctors to keep farm workers strong enough to produce crops, enough vets to keep cattle healthy and enough teachers to get the brightest students to university, where they can qualify as doctors, vets and teachers, what more does Myanmar need?

A few years ago, there was significant debate in the UK about the purpose of university education. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the organisation responsible for the quality of UK higher education internationally, offered a list of 'behaviours, attributes and skills' students should acquire from higher education, regardless of their discipline. The

These are the attributes needed for the generation of entrepreneurs, citizens, problem-solvers and nation-builders that will shape Myanmar’s future, ensure a diverse economy and cement an effective democracy. The ability to persevere and innovate in challenging situations is arguably more important in Myanmar than in the UK. And these abilities are every bit as important as technical skills, which is why it is crucial that organisations like Prospect Burma continue to support students to study arts and humanities as well as science subjects. If Myanmar is to take its place in a 21st-century world, it needs people to interpret and learn from its past, bring hope, joy and determination to its present, and look to the future with purpose and ambition.

Knowing that the current generation of students will go on to lead the country in a crucial time in its history, it is also vital that the opportunity of a university education is not limited to an elite. As well as earning more, graduates throughout the world tend to experience better health and wellbeing, to influence policy and practice in all spheres and generally make decisions that affect their less-educated peers. These privileges are then passed down from generation to generation.

What could this cycle of inherited privilege mean for Myanmar? There are definite advantages to building an educated middle-class with greater economic and political power, but there is also a serious risk of widening inequalities if minority groups are not able to take up the same opportunities. In Myanmar, these groups certainly include ethnic minorities, as well as women, people from rural areas and disabled people, all of whom are under-represented in all aspects of decision-making in Myanmar, and who are less likely to complete a secondary education, making university unattainable.

What if it were possible to 'design in' equality, making sure that a diverse cadre of graduates with a wide range of skills were available to take the country forward? What if these graduates could bring together their technical skills, resilience and creativity, enhanced by a deep understanding of all areas of Burmese society as well as the wider world? What could these people achieve – and what could stop them?
In 2012 ex-political prisoner Ko Saw Thet Tun had the idea to provide free, accessible education to the children of political prisoners, and people from remote locations throughout Myanmar. As a young man, after witnessing the 1988 uprising, Ko Saw Thet Tun believed the best way to fight for the future of Myanmar was to take up arms against the government, and he joined the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). He was captured and imprisoned for seven years. Upon his release, he began to campaign more peacefully for change, writing and distributing leaflets with a group of friends. He was arrested again in 1999, and this time imprisoned for 22 years. He was eventually released in 2011, and started to teach English to the children of political prisoners. Over the years he decided that education, and not force, was the way to make lasting change.

Since then, the scheme has grown and in 2012 became the Sky Age school, which Prospect Burma is proud to fund, with support from the US State Department. They teach English and Computing skills to young people from the age of 16 at their site just outside of Yangon. Students and teachers live on site during the 7 months of their term, and school days are long, with classes beginning at 7am and ending at 9pm, with breaks for food and exercise throughout the day. This immersive atmosphere enables students to learn at a much quicker rate. Students all take part in looking after the school and each other with rotas for cooking and cleaning, and all of this results in a familial atmosphere.

Suu Myat Noe Min, 22, is a teaching assistant at Sky Age. She is the daughter of political prisoners, and during their incarceration was brought up by her grandmother, believing that her parents were working abroad. She found out the truth one day when a friend’s parent accidentally let it slip. It was quite a lonely for her growing up, she told Joe, as other families were wary of letting their children befriend the daughter of political prisoners. After leaving high school she joined the first ever batch of Sky Age students, and began to study English. It was when she arrived there that she began to feel a part of something. She was studying with other children of political prisoners. She told Joe that she loves Sky Age because:

“There is no discrimination – not because of religion, not because of ethnicity, not because you have parents who are political prisoners. It is hugely comforting to find yourself with people from a similar background to you.”

She was encouraged by Ko Saw Thet Tun to take the British Council English Language qualification funded by PB, and after passing became a teacher at the school. In 2016 Suu Myat Noe Min joined the Myanmar Mobile Education (MyME) project, which works to educate tea-shop workers, who are predominantly children, and teaches a huge variety of subjects from English language to life skills.

Suu Myat Noe Min’s eventual goal is to become an engineer, but in the meantime is passionate about passing on her English skills to upcoming students. She would love to change the future of Myanmar ultimately. She watched her father work for change through political activism, but for Suu Myat Noe Min the impact she would like to make will be through advocacy and education.

It is a commonly shared goal of Sky Age’s students and graduates to spread the school’s reach even further, especially into more rural and remote parts of the country. Through their hard work and dedication, more and more young people are able to access higher education opportunities, or more lucrative employment opportunities.
Donate to Prospect Burma today and transform the future of Myanmar

Hsar Doe Doh Moo Htoo’s desire for peace led him to a Prospect Burma scholarship, and from there back to Myanmar where he is putting his passion, skills and education to work.

A commitment of £25 a month will change the future of many more students like Hsar, and of their country.

A small monthly donation makes a huge difference

Now is a crucial time for Myanmar, and your support is needed more than ever.

Sign up to a regular donation today and start making a difference! You will receive a welcome pack with more information about Prospect Burma, and we will also be in touch regularly to update you on the impact of your support. Any amount you can give is very gratefully received, but why not consider one of the following?

| £25 a month | £25 a month will cover the cost of course materials such as textbooks, photocopying and stationery, for one student for a year |
| £35 a month | £35 a month could pay for a student to undertake the Intensive English Language preparatory course and exam, a vital qualification for many University courses |
| £50 a month | £50 a month could pay for a teacher’s salary for a year at the International English Programme school in Kachin state, teaching vital skills to young Burmese |

Complete and return the enclosed standing order form, and start making a difference

“It's undeniable that education plays a crucial role in an individual, a community, and nation's development... The PB scholarship has instilled hope in me by fulfilling my dream in the pursuit of tertiary education, which I am fully aware that majority of my friends and fellow young Burmese peoples do not have. Their investment in my education equipped me with the essential knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence as well as competence that I am able to help instil hope in my fellow Karen peoples, and together build a hopeful and thriving community and democratic country of Burma where there is no more persecution, discrimination, exploitation, oppression and conflict.”

Hsar Doe Doh Moo Htoo, PB alumnus