Chairman’s introduction

On 22 May, Prospect Burma was privileged to take part in HRH The Prince of Wales’ 70th birthday reception for all the charities of which he is Patron. It was a time to take stock of where we’ve reached and what lies ahead.

This will be my last editorial as I step down as chairman after seven years.

These have been years of great change for both Myanmar and for Prospect Burma. 2011 saw the start of long-awaited reform in Myanmar under President Thein Sein and the reentry into active politics of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

As Myanmar was changing, our own charity was also entering a new phase of renovation. Many new internal policies have been developed, in accordance with the changing landscape in which we are working. We have periodically reviewed our strategic objectives to ensure we remain on track, to successfully deliver services while remaining true to our updated Vision, Mission and Values. The charity has been rebranded to enable us to portray clear messaging about our work. In 2015, the UK office moved to a new, larger premises in Victoria, thereby giving us the space we needed to recruit valuable support from a range of talented volunteers. Like many other UK charities, we have updated our legal status to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Our most important step has been to open a Prospect Burma office in Yangon in 2016. This has not only allowed us to assume full control of scholar selection and follow-up but has widened our reach to remote and disadvantaged regions and communities. It has also allowed us to start in-country fundraising, which we hope could become a significant new stream of income.

Of course new challenges have arisen along the way. Chief of these has been the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State. Over its nearly 30 years of existence, Prospect Burma has borne witness and reacted to many ups and downs in Myanmar’s turbulent history. But our fundamental belief remains unshaken: it is only through the power of education that imaginative solutions can be found to tackle and resolve these difficult civic problems. That is why we should take heart in the stories of connections contained in this issue, stories of resilience and dedication as more students start down the path of self-betterment with the help of Prospect Burma.

Burma watch: A time of frustration and worry

The casual visitor to Yangon today will see a burgeoning Asian city, seeking to compete with developed neighbours in China, India and Thailand. Beneath the surface, however, Myanmar is a land in deep crisis. As the countdown begins for the next general election in 2020, many challenges are looming for the National League for Democracy government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The country’s future path looks far from certain.

Overshadowing the political landscape is the September report by the UN’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, recommending that several leaders of the national armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, be considered for war crimes before the International Criminal Court. The evidence is stark: over 700,000 refugees, most of whom identify as Rohingya Muslims, who fled from the Rakhine State into Bangladesh last year following Tatmadaw “clearance” operations in response to attacks by a new Islamic force.

The number of casualties and displaced persons, however, is also increasing in northeast Myanmar, as Tatmadaw operations continue against ethnic Kachin, Kokang and Ta’ang organisations that do not have government ceasefires. As the UN investigators point out, there is a systemic dimension to human rights abuse in the country.

Against this backdrop, there was little reform progress at the third “21st Century Panglong Conference” in July, and during recent months hopes for nationwide peace and reform have been receding. In their defence, NLD officials say that the party’s room for independent manoeuvre is often limited, with the Tatmadaw continuing to dominate many aspects of government. This influence includes control of three ministries. But NLD leaders also came under criticism during September after two Reuters journalists received seven-year jail terms under state security laws for reporting military abuses in the Rakhine State. Citizens want to see the NLD abolish, not accommodate, restrictive laws and practices.

As this impasse continues, the key parties in national politics – the NLD, Tatmadaw and ethnic nationality groups – are focusing their attention on shoring up their positions before the next general election. In the absence of peace and reform, it is the economy and international relations that are becoming of heightened importance. Despite improvements in health indicators, many families are yet to see real progress in the quality of their lives. Equally striking, Western visitors and investors have shied away in the light of the Rohingya crisis. Western governments are leading the calls for international action.

In this vacuum, China is again taking a leading role within the country, with officials ambitiously pushing President Xi Jinping’s “Belt and Road Initiative”. A raft of major energy and infrastructure projects are planned to criss-cross Myanmar, opening China’s land and sea routes to south Asia. Modernity and investment are welcomed, but fears are growing that the country could swiftly become a dependency on its powerful neighbour. More than ever, peace and reform are needed among Myanmar’s peoples if the country is to face up to its many grave challenges on equal and solution-finding terms.
Han Seth Lu is a brand new student receiving support from our From Learning to Leadership programme. He will be going to the University of Central Oklahoma to begin studying Early Years Education this autumn. Growing up in a remote region of Myanmar gave him a passion for education and the desire to change his community.

Han Seth Lu is from Bago, and was a diligent pupil. After Grade 11, he was awarded a two-year English Access Micro-Scholarship Program by the U.S. Embassy. Through this programme, Han Seth Lu was invited to visit the United States to study Youth Leadership. He even attended a town hall meeting with President Obama. Coming through Myanmar’s education system, he recalls experiencing a new side of education through this programme. He tells us, “I had a chance to learn Civic Education, Active Citizenship, Democracy, and Community Service...The most important thing was that I was able to explore on my own, think critically, and learn outside the box.” He quickly developed a passion for education, and knew that he wanted to train to become a teacher. As he now heads off to university with the support of Prospect Burma, to study Early Years Education, his dream is to ‘be able to provide quality education to everyone regardless of age, gender, ethnicities, and identities.’

Learning about different educational styles, especially in regards to early years education, will enable Han Seth Lu to make a significant difference to young student’s lives when he returns home.

While Prospect Burma provides scholarship opportunities, heading off to University like Han Seth Lu is just the very beginning of the story. The true return on an investment in education comes when our alumni return to the country.
The Prospect Burma Multiplier Effect

It starts with an individual...

Education has a profound and life-long impact on an individual. But the ongoing and far-reaching effects of education are far greater than this.

Our three programmes break down the barriers to education:

Access to Education helps people from Myanmar gain the skills they need to continue education.

From Learning to Leadership helps students undertake tertiary education.

Change in the Community hub gives ongoing support and networks when they take their skills and qualifications home.

“Education is a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability.”

The World Bank

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Health

Education is one of the most powerful ways to reduce poverty and improve health.

Economy

If a country’s population is educated an average of one extra year, its annual per capita GDP growth gets a 25% boost, from 2% to 2.5%.

Poverty eradication

For every year an individual spends in education, their potential earnings go up by 10%.

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Child mortality

A baby born to a mother who has received an education is 50% more likely to survive past its 5th birthday.

Gender equality

A woman’s earning potential will be up to 20% higher for every year of schooling she completes.

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...It ends with the community
Mon State

Employment and industry in Mon State, as elsewhere in Myanmar, are predominantly reliant on agriculture, with some fishing on the coast. Only approximately 20% of the population complete secondary schooling*, partly due to the lack of belief in the state education system, as well as lessons taught in Burmese and not in the local Mon language.

* https://www.education-inequalities.org/
Myanmar needs education more than ever

In a previous edition of the newsletter, we reported that the rapid introduction of mobile technology in Myanmar had a positive impact on the country. However, there have also been some negative consequences that have fuelled discussions and conflict between regions and ethnicities. We look at how a broken education system fuels online hate speech.

Earlier this year international media reported that there had been a huge spike in hate speech on Facebook at the start of the Rohingya crisis. The world had watched in horror over the previous nine months as reports of atrocities against the marginalised Rohingya community in Myanmar’s northern Rakhine State were documented by different media and human rights agencies. Facebook had been utilised to a huge degree to fuel and spread anti-Rohingya sentiment, with users sharing incendiary content by anti-Islamic Buddhist nationalists. Content which was previously physically disseminated, a slow and laborious process, could now be shared instantly at the click of a mouse.

While Facebook is hugely culpable for this, and is rightly being held accountable, the platform alone isn't to blame.

For decades Myanmar’s broken, under-funded and restrictive education system has been deliberately used as a tool by the military government to control the population of the country. Under tight sensorship, the education system focussed on rote-learning, encouraging students not to question and investigate, but to memorise and accept. This combination of new technology with no limitations on content, and a population that has been pressured to accept what it is told, created the perfect storm.

This combination of new technology with no limitations on content, and a population that has learned to blindly accept what it is told, created the perfect storm.

The impact of Prospect Burma’s work, and of a quality education, is undeniable. However, with the news full of atrocities, we have seen a decrease in funding from individual supporters at a time when Myanmar needs it more than ever.

Thant Sin Oo studied for a Master’s degree in Media in Development at London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies with support from Prospect Burma, and his thesis focussed on the use of hate speech online in Myanmar. Prior to his Master’s, Thant Sin Oo spent time as a support worker in some of the country’s remote regions.

He told us: “Two years of spending time in the remote communities in Myanmar allowed me to see how knowledge and information were accessed by the people and how it shaped community development. I also noticed that as the new digital technologies advanced they quickly spread, even to underdeveloped regions of Myanmar, and became adapted by people to use for various needs. These mobile technologies intertwine, replace, reshape, and get adapted to the existing social practices within these societies, for both good and bad.”

Mobile technology was introduced into the country over an very short time, and the consequences of this are only just starting to be felt. The explosion of online technologies within Myanmar has had an enormous impact throughout the country, not least for people living in remote and rural areas, and many of the effects of this are positive. But it has also presented a new challenge: a populace that has not been taught to question what they read in an age of unlimited reporting and information.

Thant Sin Oo’s studies led him inevitably to Facebook, of which Myanmar has become an enormous consumer. As the Guardian reported, of the 53 million inhabitants of the country, around 14 million are users, and it is considered the foremost news source by many. In fact, it is used as much as a news source and information-sharing hub as a social platform. A population which has been taught to simply believe, and repeat what it is taught, is the perfect audience for unverified hate speech on Facebook. Only in the aftermath of criticism by United Nations investigators has the organisation begun to take action, closing a number of accounts down.

When he was studying in 2016, Thant Sin Oo chose to focus his Master’s dissertation on online hate speech, even before it had been recognised by international media as an issue within Myanmar, as the beginnings of this were starting to emerge. He told us “I chose this topic in hopes of achieving useful findings to guide the counter-messaging projects in the country to promote tolerance and peace.”

Today, Thant Sin Oo is back in Myanmar and working for “Tech 4 Peace” that helps civil society organisations use technology to promote positive online culture.

Without meaningful education, with an emphasis on critical thinking and the encouragement of independent thought and a questioning approach to reading, it is easy to see how “fake news” could become so prolific in the country. This is why investing in education, and the work of Prospect Burma, is more important than ever.
Level up - The PB change maker taking education back home

Saw Khine Thet Tun (pictured above) is Karen, and grew up surrounded by conflict and discrimination. In conflict zones, education is often one of the first casualties, a situation which is further compounded by Myanmar’s sub-standard education system, and discrimination against ethnic groups including the Karen people.

Saw Khine Thet Tun undertook a Masters of Education at Ramkhamhaeng University in Thailand with Prospect MCAP was to contribute my knowledge and experience that I gained from international university to the marginalized community members.”

He encountered a lot of difficulties when he started out, including issues around the political implications of creating an education programme in Myanmar, and a lack of available funding. Saw Khine was determined however, and MCAP became a reality. Today there are three MCAP academies in remote parts of the country; Kachin State, Kayah State and Karen State. Each academy takes on around 30 students a year, offering these young people a life changing opportunity to access education they otherwise would not have. The importance of this cannot be overstated - many of these young people are from rural, agricultural backgrounds, and without MCAP would have limited options.

Saw Khine said: “Education is the right investment for our country’s future because, globally, people accept that education can guide the nation to become more economically productive, build the society peacefully and democratically as well as support sustainable development. More importantly, the quality of education is essential to be pursued by community members to solve wicked problems in our society.”

Burma’s support, graduating in 2010. Through his time studying abroad, he learned the inherent value of a quality education, and in particular the importance of learning critical thinking. With his qualifications and determination to create change, he co-founded the Myanmar Community Academies Programme (MCAP), a two year diploma designed to create young leaders in remote parts of the country. The diploma combines quality academic learning including English language training, community development and numeracy, with leadership skills, intercultural and interreligious understanding and cooperation.

Saw Khine Thet Tun told us: “My key inspiration to co-start
Prospect Burma at Christmas

With beautiful images donated by artist Sally Oyler, our Christmas cards are truly special. Choose from traditional winter scenes or vibrant landscapes. All Christmas cards contain the message “Season’s Greetings” inside, except “Tobogganing Penguins” which has “Merry Christmas”, and “Shwedagon Pagoda”, which is left blank for your own message. You can also shop online at prospectburma.org/shop/

“Shwedagon Pagoda at Buddhist New Year”
Pack of 5 - £6

“Camel Train Rajasthan”
Pack of 5 - £6

“Svalbard Reindeer”
Pack of 5 - £6 (NB these are portrait)

“Chinstrap Penguins singing”
Pack of 5 - £6

“Tobogganing penguins”
Pack of 5 - £6

Christmas card selection pack
3 packs of 5 - £14 Please state which 3 designs you want on form

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I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. Tick box if you would like to claim gift aid on your donation

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