Warmest Greetings from the Myanmar Office Country Manager,

Coming from Chin State, one of the most underdeveloped in Myanmar, it is wonderful to have this opportunity to serve Myanmar students as Country Manager. With the support of different scholarship foundations, I gained an MA in Education as well as an MBA, which gave me personal experience of the beauty and impact of scholarships and individuals who support educational opportunities for those who are marginalized and suffering different challenges in their life.

My pursuit of education began when I was five years old. I would begin the day by waking up early, walking across a village and forest, attending school without having a lunch box and only reaching back home at the sunset. In search of lunch, a group of us would go to a nearby forest to pick fruits during lunch break. Many times we had to return to our classrooms with empty stomachs. This is a familiar story to many children from mountainous areas of Myanmar; this is the case not only in Chin State but also in Rakhine, Kayin, Shan, Kayah, Kachin, and so on.

As Chin, it is not easy to learn the Burmese language. For those who live in villages, we must go to town to study secondary education where we get mocked on our Burmese pronunciation and usage of language by Burmese speaking students and even by some teachers. This is the case for many other ethnic minorities. For many of us, English becomes our third language that we must learn in order to get ready for international higher education and a brighter future.

My father was a missionary, and it was through moving from place to place with him that I came to realize how diverse we are in Myanmar. The phrase “Unity in diversity” is more relevant than ever in Myanmar but still far out of reach. The difficulties that arise from having a country with so many different ethnicities and languages seem to be a big hindrance to building a peaceful Myanmar. Even Chin State, the most peaceful state of Myanmar in terms of armed conflicts has become a scene of violence between the Arakan Army, and the Tatmadaw since 2018. The hard-won education of many young students is disrupted in times of conflict. Even before armed conflicts reached the area, the rate of passing matriculation* in Chin State has always been the lowest in Myanmar due to poverty and language barriers.

Living in such an ethnically diverse country has always been challenging. Equality and quality education are basic foundations which we are still seeking. Internationally educating the people of Myanmar will be the most unfailing investment for the development of the country, as the standards of education in-country still fall far below international standards.

Lalfak Mawia, Country Manager, Myanmar Office

* Matriculation is the completion of year 10

The UN has declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages. Myanmar is an incredibly diverse country which has around 100* different ethnic groups. Accordingly, there is a myriad of distinct languages, traditional dress and customs. In this edition of the newsletter Prospect Burma is delighted to celebrate Myanmar’s indigenous languages, and looks at how language is affected by, and in turn affects, education and development.

*The official government figure is 135. However the situation is rather more complex. Around 20 nationality identities are represented in contemporary politics, such as Bamar, Karen, Kachin, Mon and Shan, and there are also many dialects and sub-groups in the field.
Around the world, languages are disappearing. Between the years 1950 and 2010, 230 languages became extinct, according to a UNESCO report*. Today, roughly a third of languages are endangered (around 2,370), and we are losing languages at the rate of approximately one every two weeks†. Globalisation has resulted in a few languages becoming by far the most prevalent, with 78% of the world’s population speaking just 85 languages‡.

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country, with many unique groups of people with their own languages, customs, fabrics and ways of life. The Bamar people are the predominant ethnic group, and make up 68% of the population. The remaining 32% is made up of around 100 other ethnic groups. However, many of the languages spoken by these ethnic groups are at risk of disappearing.

According to the UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger, four languages from Myanmar became extinct in the period from 1950 - 2010: Taman, Hpun, Malin and Pyu. The most recent to become extinct did so in 2008. Many more are considered under threat or imminent danger of extinction.

“When you lose a language you lose all of the indigenous knowledge that is tied up with it. Native languages contain vital information about local habitat.”

One such group under threat in Myanmar is the Moken. The Moken language is considered “definitely endangered”, with approximately 6,000 speakers left as of 2007. The Moken people are a sea-based nomadic group, spending most of their year living in boats on the water, travelling between the approximately 800 islands in the Mergui Archipelago. The Mergui Archipelago is located in an area claimed by both the Thai and Burmese governments. They have been regarded suspiciously by governments, due to the nomadic nature of their lifestyle, and attempts have been made to forcibly settle them. There are many challenges facing their culture, according to Survival International, which states that “Their semi-nomadic numbers have diminished in recent years due to political and post-tsunami regulations, companies drilling for oil off-shore, governments seizing their lands for tourism development and industrial fishing.”§

But why is the preservation of languages like those of the Moken important? For one, when a language is lost, so is all of the indigenous knowledge that is tied up with it. Native languages contain vital information. As the Independent reported “Embedded in indigenous languages, in particular, is knowledge about ecosystems, conservation methods, plant life, animal behaviour and many other aspects of the natural world.”‖

As a people closely tied to the landscape in which they live, the Moken language is inherently linked to the sea. For example, according to Survival International, “One myth tells of the la-boon, or ‘the wave that eats people’, which is invoked by angry ancestral spirits. Legend has it that just before the la-boon arrives, the sea recedes. When the waves receded prior to the tsunami of December 2004, leaving kabang (their boats) grounded near the coral, the elders of a Moken village in Thailand recognized the ominous signs and led their community and tourists safely to higher ground.” It is believed that as a result of this knowledge, only one Moken man died due to the tsunami.

In Myanmar, ethnic groups are already vulnerable to loss of identity. In school, students are expected to learn in Burmese, a language which not all of the population speaks at home, and in order to study abroad students need to learn English. In a schooling system where critical thinking is stifled, students are not taught the importance of preserving their native language and customs. In a country where infrastructural development is so important, it is vital that the irretrievable loss of identity and language does not become a casualty to it.

Many of Prospect Burma’s students and alumni, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds themselves, are conscious of this. As we shared in “Connections” in 2018, a group of Mon students, including our scholar Kyaw Sein Win, have started a Facebook group which shares vital scholarship information in the Mon language. Hsar Doe Doh Moo Htoo, a Karen alumnus, is working to bring the Salween Peace Park project to life, helping to preserve traditional Karen livelihoods and skills in a protected area of forest. As always, education is the key to preserving these disappearing languages and knowledge. Once they have gone, there will be no coming back.

References
† https://news.un.org/en/audio/2016/01/608532
‡ https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2012/07/vanishing-languages/
§ https://www.survivalinternational.org/galleries/moken-sea-gypsies
‖ https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/indigenous-language-native-american-under-threat-culture-history-environment-a8578691.html

What do you think? Let us know by sending a message to kirsty@prospectburma.org

† https://news.un.org/en/audio/2016/01/608532
‡ https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2012/07/vanishing-languages/
§ https://www.survivalinternational.org/galleries/moken-sea-gypsies
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The largest ethnic group in Myanmar is the Bamar, followed by Shan and then Karen.

According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, one of the biggest threats to indigenous groups in Myanmar is armed conflict.

There are 28 languages in Myanmar that are currently at risk, close to extinction or already extinct according to UNESCO.

The military confiscation of land is also a critical and ongoing threat to indigenous peoples. Official statistics indicate that hundreds of thousands of acres have been taken since the early 1990s. However activists believe more like millions of acres were seized*.


Burma Watch - Reform or Retrenchment? Uncertainty Continues

Apprehension pervades the political and economic atmosphere in Myanmar at present. On the surface, the country is still moving – slowly and hesitatingly – towards a more optimistic and democratic future. And yet, three years after the National League for Democracy assumed office, the sense is widespread that no major political corner has been turned. Ethnic conflict continues in several border areas; the Rohingya crisis remains unaddressed; economic reforms appear to be stalling; constitutional reforms have not been started; and the influence of the national armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, is still omnipresent on the political stage.

“The question now dominating political circles is whether any of this impasse will be resolved in advance of the next general election, scheduled for next year.”

In the meantime, international concerns are deepening about the humanitarian emergency in Rakhine State. Not only do over 700,000 refugees remain in Bangladesh, but conflict has recently spread among the Rakhine population after a nationalist force known as the Arakan Army stepped up activities. Last December, the Tatmadaw announced a temporary ceasefire in the country’s other borderlands, but Rakhine State was omitted. Despite the ceasefire announcement, Tatmadaw operations are also continuing in the Kachin and northern Shan States.

Against this backdrop, international human rights condemnation has continued. Only one country stands out in its present support for the government, China, which is pursuing its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative to develop a land route to the Bay of Bengal. Under the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, agreed late last year, over a dozen major infrastructure projects are planned. Amidst the many uncertainties at present, Chinese developments could be among the biggest game-changers to the social and economic landscape of the country – if and when they go ahead.
Bridging the gap
Meet the first students of our brand new Bridging Programme

For several years, Prospect Burma has been working on ways to open up our Learning to Leadership programme to even more people. There are several factors which can prevent a student from Myanmar from being able to attend university abroad. The majority of English language courses which are available are in the cities, which is a major preventative factor for people from rural areas of Yangon. The difficulty of speaking Burmese as a second language already hinders many people from ethnic groups from getting the most out of state education. Having no access to careers information which can help individuals make informed decisions about what to study and why is also a big issue. To address this and to open up education opportunities for many more people, Prospect Burma developed the Bridging Programme. The programme provides young people with a quality English qualification (IELTS), which will help them build careers or go on to further study abroad. The first group to attend our Bridging Programme is a diverse group of 20 people, from five different states - Rakhine, Shan, Kchin, Kayin and Kayah. We met with them in our Myanmar Office to hear about how the programme is going, and what their future plans are once they complete their IELTS qualification. Here are some of their stories.

Aung Naing Tun is from Mrauk-U, in Rakhine State. Aung Naing Tun’s first language is Arakanese, and this caused him some problems when applying to study at West Yangon University which he attended from 2012. Aung Naing Tun has enjoyed the IELTS training course, and has found the reading section the most challenging aspect. He works at the head office of a sub-election committee in Rakhine, and is passionate about the importance of civil services. Once he has completed the course he would like to study a Master’s of Public Administration abroad.

Htu Hkong is from Myitkyina, Kachin State. She has noticed a marked difference being in Yangon, in comparison to her hometown. In Myitkyina there is an 8pm curfew, after which no one is allowed out. She has been able to travel around Yangon even at night time. When she completes the IELTS course she would like to apply to study Development Studies. When asked about the difficulty of being from an ethnic minority she told us: “I have had some challenges because of the language barriers as a lady from a minority group, not just in my school life but in my work life...[English] is my third language”

Saw Eh Gay Dah (also called Saw Joy) is from Hpa-An, in Kayin State. He understands the importance of learning languages, and also experienced difficulties at school. He told us: “At that time, all of the teachers used Burmese language in teaching all of the subjects. Every day, I just sit in the classroom and listened to the teachers without understanding what they taught. And also I was so silent in the class because I was not capable to communicate in Burmese. Every day, I just went back home and studied lesson without knowing the meaning.”

Undertaking the bridging programme Saw Joy is experiencing a different mode of teaching. He is enjoying learning, and when he has completed his IELTS qualification he would like to study a Master’s in Public Administration. We asked him how he was finding living in Yangon: “Yangon is totally different to my home town...In Yangon it takes a lot of time [to travel] because of traffic jam. Crowded people and traffic jam effect the environment to become noisy and polluted, whereas my town is a pleasure of fresh air and silent environment.”

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From tradition to tech

Myo Zaw came from a very traditional, Karen household and today passes on IT skills to a new generation of Karen youth.

Considered “different” by their peers.

Myo Zaw however did complete his school education, and decided to study computer science at the Computer University of Hpa-An, close enough to home that he would not need to move away from his family. Unfortunately, while he was there, he struggled to gain any meaningful education from his course. As with the secondary education system in Myanmar, lessons were learned by rote, so that rather than working on computers to study the systems and coding, he would spend time manually writing up long lines of computer code by hand with a pen and paper.

Myo Zaw told us that gaining an international education had been a lifelong dream of his, but one which he didn’t think could be realised. When he heard about Prospect Burma, he realised there was a possibility it could happen after all. He told me that when he received the confirmation letter he jumped for joy. With the support of Prospect Burma, Myo Zaw studied a masters of Telecommunication Studies at Assumption University in Thailand. He was finally able to study using a real computer, and see the mechanisms he had memorised put to use.

Karen children often experience bullying as a result of their clothes and speech, which are considered “different” by their peers.

Today, Myo Zaw is the Principal of Education Gathering Group (EGG), a higher education facility in Hpa-An, which caters to young people who want to gain vital critical thinking, English language, and computing skills. It’s a mission that should sound very familiar to Prospect Burma supporters. The students that come to his school are from a wide catchment area, and are united by their desire to gain a more meaningful education. He is keen to pass on the critical thinking skills and other core learnings which made such a difference to his own life.
Could YOU pass the IELTS exam?

In order to study internationally, Myanmar students need to gain a recognised English language qualification, such as the IELTS or the TOEFL. This is just one of many criteria that they have to meet in order to gain admittance to universities around the world. For many of our students, English will be their third or fourth language, and it is incredibly different to all of the native languages in Myanmar. So do you think you have what it takes to pass? Take a look at Prospect Burma’s sample reading test below. Please note - this is a mock test question created by the Prospect Burma team; it is not an official test question and should not be used for preparation by anyone wishing to take the IELTS.

Reading Test instructions

Read through the passage below and then answer the corresponding questions.

You have twenty minutes.

The Origin of the World’s Languages

There are over 7,000 spoken languages around the world today. According to Ethnologue, an online compendium of the world’s languages, there are exactly 7,111. Interestingly, around half of them are spoken by approximately three billion people, and it is believed they come from the same root, a language called Proto-Indo-European, or PIE for short.

The difficulties of recreating a proto-language of this antiquity are further compounded by the fact that there are no written records of the language. Despite this, experts have managed to recreate this ancestor of the Indo-European languages and it is the most widely understood of all proto-languages of its era.

In 2013 Andrew Byrd, who is the Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Kentucky, recorded an example of PIE. While we cannot be certain that this is exactly how PIE would have sounded when spoken throughout 4,500 – 2,500 BC, it is an educated approximation. The section of text orated by Andrew Byrd is called The Parable of the Horse and the Sheep. This was originally written in 1868 by linguist August Schleicher, who was the first scholar to write in PIE. Now known as Schleicher’s fable, the tale has been edited and expanded over time, as academic knowledge and beliefs about PIE have changed.

Questions 1–4

Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading passage 1? Answer True, False or Not given to questions 1–4.

True if the statement agrees with the information
False if the statement contradicts the information
Not given if there is no information on this

1. PIE is short for Proto-Indigenous-European.
2. PIE is the only proto-language that we do not have written records for.
3. Andrew Byrd wrote a story in PIE called The Parable of the Horse and the Sheep.
4. PIE is the only proto-language which is fully understood by linguists today.

Question 5

Choose the correct letter, A, B, C or D.

5. Half of the world’s languages probably come from PIE and are spoken by how many people?
   A Two billion
   B Three billion
   C Four billion
   D Five billion

END OF TEST

So, how did you find it? The actual IELTS test contains many more sections, including reading, writing, listening and speaking tests. This is a much shorter, simplified version of a reading test than you would find if you were to take the IELTS. We hope it has given you an insight into how challenging university preparation is for our Myanmar students.
30 years of Prospect Burma

In 1989 Prospect Burma began life, and now 30 years later we are still working to help build a better, more peaceful future for Myanmar. The next edition of our newsletter will be a celebration of those 30 years. We are incredibly grateful to all of our supporters who have helped us reach this momentous milestone, and look forward to celebrating with you with a huge collection of student and alumni stories, memories of PB and more. With that in mind, we would like you to share your Prospect Burma stories with us. If you have any memories of PB, our students, our events, or any other aspect of our work, we would love to hear about them. To share yours, please email kirsty@prospectburma.org or send a letter to Kirsty at the address in the contact box below.

30 scholarships for 30 years

In celebration of our 30 year milestone, we would like to support 30 brand new scholarships for 2020. If you are interested and would like to know more information about how you can get involved, please contact our Development Manager Simon at simon@prospectburma.org or by using the contact details below.

You can also make a donation to our work online at www.prospectburma.org/donate