Welcome to our spring newsletter. I hope you are safe and well.

Many of you have been in contact to express your shock and deep sense of loss at what is happening in Myanmar right now. Among the mix of emotions - disappointment, anger, helplessness - the overwhelming message has been one of personal concern for individuals whose lives have been turned upside down. The safety and welfare of our beneficiaries, staff, partners and friends in Myanmar is paramount to us. As I write, most are safe enough at the moment. As you read this, I hope this is still the case.

Many of them though are experiencing extraordinary hardship. I’d like to particularly recognise our staff in Myanmar who persevere - at times without food, sleep or away from home - to put others first. They are wonderful individuals doing an amazing job.

The young people we support also continue to study, despite extreme circumstances. They feel that Prospect Burma and its supporters have put our faith in them. They are working hard to return that investment, and gain the skills the country will need to build a long term future.

Generation Z in the spotlight

This newsletter has been overtaken by events in Myanmar, but the overwhelming theme that has emerged is not one of fear, mourning or despondency. Instead, it is one of young people in Myanmar arriving and shining on the world stage as strong-minded, creative, caring individuals.

Even as the human rights and humanitarian situation in Myanmar deteriorates, the upcoming generation give us hope for the country’s long term future.

These young people are Myanmar’s Generation Z. If you’ve not heard the term before, or are unsure what it means, then read on. Put simply, they are the best prospect that Burma could ever wish for.

Best wishes,
Hannah

Prospect Burma’s 2021 programmes

We have more than 30 years’ experience of working against a backdrop of conflict, disease and disaster in Myanmar. We know how to adapt. Our three programmes for 2021-22 are in advanced development:

- **Access to Learning** (pre-university): We will continue our courses offering English language, digital, critical thinking skills and intercultural awareness to post high school age students. Our courses may be smaller this year as we assess the changing situation, with more of an emphasis on online courses and/or targeting border regions.

- **Learning to Leadership** (international scholarships): We will continue to support students to attend high quality universities in other countries, despite logistics becoming more complicated.

- **Change in the Community** (post-university): We have suspended alumni groups within Myanmar at the moment for safety reasons. We will explore demand for similar groups among Myanmar alumni and students living outside of the country.

Prospect Burma was originally conceived following the 1988 protests to support long term sustainable development in Burma. We researched the assistance that could be given in such a closed country. It became apparent that higher education - primarily international scholarships - was the best way we could help fill the skills gap and equip people to build their own future. That aspiration is as relevant in 2021 as it was in 1988.
There is a terrible element of déjà vu over the events of the past three months.

It was in the aftermath of a military clampdown in 1988 that Prospect Burma was established, when hundreds of protesters were killed by the security forces and up to 10,000 students and democracy activists fled into the borderlands to seek sanctuary. Political reform was held up, and the future lives of an entire generation of young people were disrupted.

Tragically, since the military State Administration Council took government control on 1 February, many events have followed the same pattern. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and leaders of the National League for Democracy, which won the 2020 general election, remain in detention; over 740 civilians have been killed and more than 3000 arrested; and the national armed forces – known as the Tatmadaw – have initiated airstrikes and shelled villages in conflict-zones in the Kachin and Karen States. Communities in every part of the country have suffered great loss, and many civilians have been displaced from their homes.

For the moment, any imminent end to the current impasse is very difficult to foresee. Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the SAC leader, has promised a new general election in the next two years once investigations have been completed into fraud allegations during last November’s polls. But, while the election was not perfect, these are claims that few people take seriously. Rather, the SAC’s actions have precipitated the largest protest movement for peace and reform since the 1988 students. Spearheaded by the young people of “Generation Z”, political opposition is still building.

In an age of digital media, democracy supporters in 2021 have one advantage over their 1988 predecessors: high-speed communications. During the past three months, anti-SAC resistance has rapidly expanded into a broad coalition. There are three key elements: a Civil Disobedience Movement, a Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (parliament) and a National Unity Government, consisting of NLD MPs-elect and representatives of other ethnic and political groups. Meanwhile the SAC has been widely condemned across the international community, with the UN taking a human rights lead. Although Asian neighbours have maintained relations with the SAC, officials are shocked in private by the instability that the generals bring.

As in 1988, state failure is now the darkest cloud facing the country. All the time, the human costs are mounting. The health and education systems have collapsed; millions of people have lost their jobs; and civilian displacement and humanitarian emergency are increasing in the borderlands. COVID-19 is spreading untreated and unmonitored. It is indeed a very bleak picture of a land in national breakdown.

It is important to stress, then, that hope is not lost. If nothing else, the events of the past three months have demonstrated that the spirit and determination of the people are not broken. The present crisis marks a setback, but it is by no means an end. Now is the time to redouble efforts to ensure that the present generation of young people – Generation Z – will be the first to enjoy real freedoms and peace.
The state of education

Myanmar has one of the world’s highest secondary school drop-out rates, with nearly a third of pupils leaving before they reach their matriculation exams. COVID-19 and the military assumption of power now makes it even harder for Gen Z to get grades to go to university.

Myanmar’s academic year runs from June to March. The COVID-19 pandemic broke in March 2020, so the state education system simply closed as usual and then didn’t reopen in June.

However the 2019-20 students still needed the results of their matriculation. This is the ‘passing out’ exam - their score dictates whether they can attend a domestic university and/or which career course they can follow.

The annual mass marking session - in which 45,000 teachers (1) converge in one location - didn’t take place, but national results were still published in August. They showed that two thirds of around 900,000 students failed the exam, with worse results in rural areas.

Meanwhile, for pupils hoping to matriculate in 2020-21, schools have been largely closed. Matriculation results are scheduled to again be published online in August. It is unclear how many secondary pupils were able to take regular lessons, let alone their matriculation exam.

Organisations like Prospect Burma have provided supplementary education where we can. Despite the pandemic, during 2020 we were able to deliver courses in Yangon and Sittwe, mostly through online means. This enabled some secondary/post-secondary students to learn critical thinking skills, interact with young people from different areas around the country, and gain an English Language Qualification.

However we only had capacity to help around 100 young people. This was a drop in the ocean among the 4.5 million secondary school level pupils in Myanmar.

For the coming academic year 2021-22, matters are already worse before it has begun. To begin with, 6,000 of Myanmar’s 47,000 basic education schools were repurposed last year as quarantine centres.

Others have now been repurposed by security forces. In March, UNICEF reported more than 60 schools and campuses being commandeered in 13 states and regions (2) as well as teachers being beaten.

Other schools have been damaged by conflict. The photograph on this page was published by the Karen Education & Culture Department, showing a classroom shattered by what they say was a military air strike.

As well as a lack of buildings, there is also now a lack of educators. In February, teachers were one of the first professional groups to announce a protest strike. Some teachers have lost their jobs, some have been arrested, and others are in hiding.

The longer term looks even more bleak. The National Education Strategic Plan expires in 2021 and its draft successor has been scrapped.

All indications are that the young people of today will become another ‘forgotten generation’, like those who were denied education in the decades following the 1988 protests, and with equally damaging impact.

However, while Myanmar has been here before, so has Prospect Burma. Our operations are already in place to help young people qualify for and attend international universities, so they can gain the skills Myanmar will desperately need in order to rebuild its future.

(1) All figures in this article published by Ministry of Education, except: (2) UNICEF statement.
It can feel discriminatory to be pigeon-holed like this. But it is how marketers work, and the shift in technology which underlines these generations is unarguable. For Generation Z, many of them could press icons or swipe screens before they learned to speak. This has shaped the way they think.

Myanmar is of course very different to the USA and western world. In Myanmar, mobile phone connections compared to population exploded from 4.8% in 2010 to 127% in 2021 - i.e. many people now have more than one phone. Pushed by technology, 50 years of generational development has been condensed into one decade in Myanmar.

Exposed to international social media, and with the ability to build huge online personal audiences, Myanmar’s “Gen Z” has learned to express its identity online. On Facebook, no sayar can keep up with their tech savviness or creativity.

Industry statistics for web searches in Myanmar show that Gen Z loves fashion, movies, celebrities and good causes. Personal Facebook pages are also ‘personal branding’ pages with carefully choreographed profile photos and stories. Helping good causes is highly valued and Gen Z creates huge online movements.

Thus, when the military tried to assume power over the internet as well as the government in Myanmar, this was interpreted by Gen Z as a personal assault on the medium in which it defines itself. It has organically built online movements which are leading the international narrative on Myanmar.

In the USA, social researchers and marketers group different generations by characteristics. “Baby boomers” is an official term, having been used in the US Census to define those born during the high birth rate post war years. The other generational terms were coined from the ’nineties onwards. “Generation X” is a literary reference, the others have been added with no consensus. Here is just one version of the definitions:

Baby Boomers  
Born mid-1940s to mid-1960s  
Competitive and self-reliant, hard workers

Generation X  
Born mid-1960s to around 1980  
Straddle non-digital/digital, do things their way

Generation Y  
Born 1980 to mid-1990s  
Goal-oriented, focus on what’s next (Millenials)

Generation Z  
Born mid-1990s to around 2010  
Confident, multi-taskers, technophiles

For Gen Z, mobile phones have always existed

Welcome to Generation Z ...Myanmar style!

Generations X, Y and Z. Who are they and what do these terms mean? Let’s bridge the generation gap which crosses all borders, but is especially powerful in Myanmar.

Graphics credit: Freepik.
Generation Z gets creative

Traditionally, every conflict is accompanied by an ‘information war’ to win the hearts and minds of the people. But Myanmar’s current situation is different. It is the people themselves - and specifically Gen Z - who are best at harnessing modern digital communication.

Young people everywhere are on a journey to build their confidence, explore and express who they are, and to build relationships. For Generation Z, this manifests itself through social media.

‘Gen Z’ know every trick to get attention on Facebook. Now, they’re using their expertise to get the attention of the whole world. There is no leader or structure. The biggest online movements grow organically with everyone tailoring it to their own self-brand.

Phase 1 - early days after 1 Feb

Gen Z know that humour and ‘wow’ images get ‘liked’ and shared on social media, because they like and share those sorts of posts themselves. They flooded Facebook with funny messages - in English - which made their situation relevant to young people in other countries.

Social and mass media lapped up cheeky comparisons of the military to ex-boyfriends, women’s private parts or Arsenal Football Club’s poor form. Gen Z harnessed the three-fingered Hunger Games salute, knowing this was popular and relevant elsewhere. They played to their audience.

Emboldened, interest groups added to the momentum. In a country where homosexuality is illegal and a social taboo, gay and transgender people were welcomed onto the streets because they could capture international attention too. Ethnic groups including - remarkably - Rohingya demonstrated alongside doctors, bodybuilders, brides, engineers, sports enthusiasts and any group you can think of. The early days of the protest brought great anger, but a sense of joyous unity too.

Phase 2 - tactics change as danger mounts

By mid-March, battle troops were on the streets using live rounds. In response, Gen Z got arty. Many have avatars - often fun digital cartoon characters of themselves - which could be mischievous while avoiding facial recognition searches. A digital drawing of a multi-generational family peacefully protesting was shared worldwide.

Like pot banging, egg art has a place in Burmese culture and Gen Z also knows it is relevant to other cultures. By Easter, US and European media were full of pictures of brightly coloured protest eggs, keeping the Myanmar situation in the public eye.

Flowers, vegetables, canvas paintings, projections, stunts and photo opportunities kept up online momentum as street protests turned ugly.

Phase 3 - the situation darkens

By April, the death and detention count created a darker tone. No
choreographed campaign can match the tragedy of human stories like that of Kyal Sin, shot dead in her “everything will be okay” t-shirt; or the extraordinary bravery of Sister Ann Rose Nu Twang pleading on bended knee for security forces to show restraint.

The speed of social media allowed flash protests to be organised and then disappear in minutes. Motorbikes kept people mobile, and where it was too dangerous for people to march, their shoes were put out in the street instead - and the world kept sharing the incredible images.

Candlelit vigils and ‘blood’ (red paint) protests captured the sadness of loss of life. At the same time, creativity is now being used in defence.

Where male security forces are expected to arrive, women’s undergarments are strung across the streets because it would be considered demeaning for any man to walk underneath them. Women’s prominent role in protests is remarkable in such a patriarchal country, and especially brave given ongoing reports of rape and torture.

Online, homemade instructional videos are now rife on how to fashion a crossbow from a bicycle wheel, or even a slingshot from a toilet cleaning brush. None of these of course are a match for military grade weapons.

The importance of communications

Gen Z’s social media expertise ensures that the situation in Myanmar is recorded. They are filling the gaps caused by seizure of media organisations and satellite dishes, journalists being arrested and regular internet shutdowns.

Their communications expertise is giving the UN and other nations a mandate to act, putting pressure on foreign investors, and providing evidence for international courts to consider. They are providing a level of accountability for actions which contrasts with the 1988 protests when few had cameras or the means to publish videos and photos.

Communications is often seen as one of Prospect Burma’s ‘softer’ priority course subjects, compared to the likes of law or medicine. However these past weeks have shown that skilled communicators can have a huge impact, and some of the photographs on these pages were taken by Prospect Burma alumni who now work as communications professionals. The last word also goes to one of them, who writes:

“Earlier today, Generation Z protesters cheered and shouted “Happy New Year!” to the sound of gunfire at a protest in Kyauk Myaung. They wanted to show that they were not scared of the troops or their guns. I have been moved to see Generation Z’s unity, creativity, intelligence and its strength.”

“But you cannot underestimate the military, because they never play fair and like to hit below the belt. Looking out at the city, hushed in the darkness, at 00:23 I think all the unarmed generations X, Y and Z know the army is about to take their atrocities to another level. Tonight though, I will try to sleep with the sound of gunfire.”

Photo credits: Facebook and original photographers/artists; it is assumed all photos/graphics were originally published with the intention of being shared.
Health was a common theme, reflecting that Myanmar has one of the worst healthcare systems in the world by several metrics. Government expenditure on health has risen inside two decades from an average £3 to £42 per person (1). But this is still extremely low on a global scale – the UK spends £3,100pp and the US £7,632pp. Note this is an average – in reality, Myanmar’s health services are concentrated in urban areas, leaving remote villages with scarce, under-serviced facilities.

“We lost our home, land, and the crops we planted on the farm because of Cyclone Nargis”, wrote one applicant. “It seriously affected my family, we did not know how to recover from the damage. My ambition is for people in poor places to cure their disease without going so far and be able to access clinics where they are sick. I want to be a nurse and serve in my rural community.”

Other applicants focused on specific fields of healthcare. One had cared for his father, who deteriorated then died after a stroke, and now wants to use his experience to help others. He wrote: “I plan to aid post-stroke victims rehabilitate effectively, being mindful of their mental state. Additionally, more and more people in Myanmar are struggling to cope with increased unemployment rates..."
and the fear of contracting COVID-19, thus initiating a steep decline of mental health amongst citizens.”

His application asked for support for training to “prescribe the appropriate medication at a reasonable cost”. This is an important factor in Myanmar where an estimated 1.7 million people are pushed into poverty each year due to the cost of buying medicines. (2)

Infrastructure

Engineering and environment were subjects which often went hand in hand. Myanmar has few highly qualified engineers. Six years ago the Myanmar Engineers Society reported that only 260 of its 50,000 members (0.5%) were qualified to oversee multi-storey building construction (3).

However, in rural areas especially, engineering is closely tied to nature because construction needs to cope with natural weather phenomena including the annual rains.

“Our roads are made of mud instead of concrete so that we can’t walk properly during the rainy season”, wrote one. “Instead, I used to travel with boats to go to school and patients were carried for two hours to arrive at clinics. After graduation, I want to become a skillful engineer and work effectively for the many areas that are suffering from lack of proper construction”.

Another applicant in the same region applied for an environmental course to study flood-resilience and water management. Imagine how the region could benefit if both were able to work together? These are exactly types of connections Prospect Burma nurtures.

Young generation

For many others, the generational aspect was high on their minds. One wrote: “What if Myanmar does not have enough young qualified leaders just because of poor education, or not having opportunities to pursue well-rounded education in other developed countries?”

Another went further, writing: “When young people are disengaged from the political process, a significant portion of the population has no voice in decisions. In emerging democracies, the inclusion of youth in formal political processes is important from the beginning. Thus, my future plan is to accelerate our young people to take active and prominent roles in the political process in Myanmar through engaging in civil society platforms.”

Of all the words in all the applications, these maybe sound the most incongruous given the turn of events which then happened in Myanmar’s national politics. However, this makes these words even more important to document at this time.

Every application form we received showed that, beyond the familiar pictures we are now seeing of protests and conflict, there is a huge, positive ambition among young people to make life better for the people around them. Each applicant asks Prospect Burma to help them on their personal road to make this happen.

Since February 1, their roads now seem more difficult than ever. But young people in Myanmar do not give up easily. In the words of one of our youngest applicants, “I am just a common girl who is striving hard to achieve her dream of helping my country’s developing process. I believe those who are crafting their dreams into reality have never been on flowery roads.”

(1) World Bank resume of WHO health expenditure per capita
(2) World Bank Myanmar COVID-19 Emergency Response Project (P173902)
(3) Oxford Business Group article
Our scholars are incredibly resilient. We select them from under-served communities, so they often come from families blighted by hardship or violence. They already know how to survive

But the current situation is still immensely difficult for them, both practically and mentally. Prospect Burma is providing pastoral assistance where we can. Here is a taste of what they are facing - and bravely overcoming. The post-it notes are direct quotes from scholars we’re speaking to.

Scholars inside Myanmar

A handful of our scholars remain in Myanmar, because they have been unable to travel to their international universities due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

They are reporting that lack of sleep is a big issue. For some, people have been killed in their street. They hear gun shots in the night and are often part of neighbourhood watches for security forces.

Their universities provide them with online lectures and guidance. Access to foreign website is blocked so they use VPNs which hide their location and circumvent the blocks. They will be arrested if found out.

Their study is further hampered by nightly internet shutdowns. This is particularly frustrating for scholars studying remotely at universities in other time zones.

Regular food is starting to become a problem. The UN World Food Programme (UNWFP) reports that only 25% of Yangon’s regular freight transport is still operating (1). As the year progresses, farmers are unlikely to get finance to grow rice and shortages are expected. The average price of cooking oil has risen 18% since February, while many family incomes have fallen.

UNWFP estimates that, as the economy collapses, the number of food insecure people in Myanmar will more than double by October, to 6.4 million.

The immediate issue though is getting hold of cash in order to buy food or medicine (see box on next page). We can guess that some scholars are missing meals, but they don’t complain.

Some good news in May is that all our remaining scholars in Myanmar are in the process of arranging land travel or flights to their universities in Thailand, Hong Kong, Germany and Canada. We are hopeful that all could all arrive by June.
Scholars already outside Myanmar

When we speak to international scholars, it is clear that family back at home is really, really important to them. They are worried sick that their families will be affected by violence or COVID-19.

Some haven’t been home for over a year due to travel restrictions. There is great uncertainty - and sadness - that they may not be able to return to Myanmar, or see their families, for the foreseeable future.

We help connect them to other Prospect Burma students but, being Generation Z, they usually find their own ways to connect through social media anyway.

Bank transfers to or from family back in Myanmar are proving difficult. As is communication generally due to internet shutdowns.

In Thailand, there are unfounded rumours that a wave of Burmese refugees is causing a rise in COVID-19. Our scholars are experiencing discrimination and ostracisation. But they keep studying.

One of our scholars is studying Clinical Psychology. She says: “My dad was a former political prisoner. I witnessed first-hand the power of psychological resilience exhibited by many individuals in my own community.”

“There is a lot of experience of trauma. The complex daily experiences of grief can heighten mental health issues. Generosity, warmth and love are really keeping people alive and safe”

“Thankfully, there are several helplines and online mental health platforms now. Even from the other side of the world, I often work with them to provide coping tips and strategies, and I’m training volunteer counsellors.”

The student above is finding ways to use her education to contribute directly. However, other international scholars clearly struggle with feelings of guilt and helplessness that people in Myanmar are going through so much, while they are stuck so far away.

We believe the best way scholars can help is to stay safe, and to keep studying to gain the skills and knowledge that Myanmar will one day need in order to recover from the multiple crises it currently faces. The country’s needs are growing, and that means the experience scholars are developing now will be even more vital in future years.


Our staff are facing similar practical challenges to our scholars. Our Country Manager describes the everyday problems of getting cash for food:

“Only six KBZ banks are open in Yangon. Many people queue at the bank at 4am, and have to run many times when they see the military because it is nightly curfew time. About 50 token-holders can withdraw cash each day. You need to register for a token, which took a week for me to receive. Or people are selling them online for $30 (10 times the average hourly wage in Yangon). I queued with my token on my allotted day. But they changed the booking system while I was in the queue, and I will have to wait at least a fortnight to re-register.”

My parents are in a refugee camp and they are safe, but I am worried for all Myanmar citizens. It has really affected me a lot. I am not allowed to go to campus due to COVID-19, there are so many things that we cannot do.

In Thailand, they said that Myanmar people brought COVID-19. So they discriminate against us in our campus. They avoid us. They asked all Myanmar students to put their names on a list. We feel so much pain now, we do not deserve this too.

I am worried for my parents. Also money transfer is difficult. I am well but mentally worried. Internet connection is bad for contacting parents. I cannot decide anymore if I can return home.

In Thailand, they said that Myanmar people brought COVID-19. So they discriminate against us in our campus. They avoid us. They asked all Myanmar students to put their names on a list. We feel so much pain now, we do not deserve this too.

The situation makes me feel uneasy but I need to accept it. I feel powerless and I want to do something to help back home. I am concerned about my family every day and night. We decided to limit our communication for the sake of our safety.

Our staff are facing similar practical challenges to our scholars. Our Country Manager describes the everyday problems of getting cash for food:

“Only six KBZ banks are open in Yangon. Many people queue at the bank at 4am, and have to run many times when they see the military because it is nightly curfew time. About 50 token-holders can withdraw cash each day. You need to register for a token, which took a week for me to receive. Or people are selling them online for $30 (10 times the average hourly wage in Yangon). I queued with my token on my allotted day. But they changed the booking system while I was in the queue, and I will have to wait at least a fortnight to re-register.”
We are really grateful to everyone who has donated so far to our urgent appeal for young people in Myanmar. Thank you as well to those who have arranged their own events or challenges; people like Kathleen Baird-Murray who organised a May Day for Myanmar online raffle of exclusive beauty and fashion items.

Up to 100 people joined in each of our online events in early 2021. A special thank you to Britain-Burma Society for hosting the first of these in January.

Prospect Burma supports young people to gain skills Myanmar needs, including:

- Specialist Healthcare
- Engineering
- Information Technology
- Public Administration

Education is the only long-term solution for Myanmar, and young people can’t get quality higher education inside the country. We need to act now, so that another generation doesn’t end up being denied the skills to tackle its multiple challenges, as happened after the 1988 democracy protests.

Please donate any funds you can via www.prospectburma.org/donate or a cheque made payable to Prospect Burma at the address below. Thank you so much.

Prospect Burma supporter events

We are planning more online opportunities for you to meet our students, alumni and supporters in other countries in 2021, as well as in-person events as lockdown restrictions hopefully ease.

If you would like to set up your own event or challenge like a cake sale or a 10k run - like the people below did pre-pandemic - please get in touch with our Senior Supporter Relations Manager Tahnee Wade at tahnee@prospectburma.org. She’d love to hear from you.