



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING Women's Funeral Group, Taplamud

One member of this group wakes up early every morning and walks around Taplamud town to look for dead bodies. If one is found, members of the group are called to come and see, but not to touch or disturb anything, and then they contact the police and the temple.

While this may seem like a dark beginning for a Women's Group, because there are no Burmese monks at the Taplamud temple, services for the dead, an important part of Burmese culture, was being overlooked. Taplamud has proven to be one of the most inaccessible migrant communities in Phang Nga Province. There are many deaths, as it is a fishing community, and the release of tension in the form of fighting often occurs after fishermen come back to port. In just the one day when we came to Taplamud, there were two dead bodies.

Until recently, the funeral ceremonies and cremation had been incomplete, lacking the traditional chants. One woman in the community who knew how to chant began working with an SNF translator, and before long, 15 women were coming together every day for one hour to practice chanting. They contacted SNF for basic support, like clothes and gloves to handle the bodies.

The group wants now to find some fundraising opportunities to make itself more sustainable, and they are talking with SNF about gaining new skills, such as making garlands, that they can sell to cover the funeral costs. The group currently gets some donations from the community, but they spend a lot of money on the ceremony, especially if there is no family of the deceased.

SNF has wanted to work in Taplamud, but has had trouble making headway. There are very few Thais, but about 6,000 Burmese Migrant Workers living there. However, the Thai community and police have accepted this group, and decided that the women could provide this service, even though it is traditionally male monks who chant at funerals.

The women's chanting is very powerful, and other Migrant Workers invite them to their homes, to cleanse the energy. The chanting itself helps the women to feel calm and peaceful, and this activity is meaningful to the community, the family of the dead, and to the women themselves, who feel they are making merit and helping their community at the same time.

SMALL PROJECTS

The Southern Migrant Center (SMC), Ban Niang

The Southern Migrant Center (SMC) began in October 2009 with five GLT (year two) alumni, with the goal of helping Migrant Workers access more information and raise awareness. There were 22 members at the beginning, and now, due to outreach activities, they have a total of 55 current members.

There are several parts to SMC, but the main meeting place is in the Ban Nam Khem Library, created as a social gathering place with room for books in Burmese, Thai, English, and German. People come here to share experiences and information about jobs, accommodation, etc. The youth are particularly glad to have a place where there are elders who can talk with them and give them advice. They said, “if we stay as individuals, then we don’t know anything.” The library has monthly meetings, distributing minutes to SNF and all the SMC members, and it has nine categories of reading material: religious, novels, political, children’s books, magazines, comics, biographies, astrology/fortune telling, and philosophy.

In addition to the library, SMC has a football team with 15 members, who were allowed to compete in last year’s match on the King’s birthday in December, a significant marker of progress in peace building, as formerly the only teams competing were Thai. At the time of writing, they were training again for this year’s match.

SMC also has a savings group, whereby members contribute a small amount of savings and after 6 months can borrow money with the recommendation of two other members. This is an effective micro-credit financing group, which allows members to be more self-sustainable.



Another SMC activity in the past was computer training, and they are currently seeking a teacher for English language classes. They hope to find more fundraising opportunities, as the fee for being a library member is only 100 baht (about \$3) to register, and 50 baht (\$1.50) a month. They prepare and sell food at religious ceremonies and sports events, but they are worried that if SNF ends, they will not be able to sustain their Center, since rent and utilities alone cost around 4,000 baht (\$130) per month. SNF currently helps them with fundraising advice, and facilitates meetings. SMC can maintain the Center for a while, but cannot buy new books or make book repairs without more funds. When interviewed, they were looking forward to SNF’s Small Project Exchange in November, because they hoped to learn how the Ban Nam Khem Library is supporting their group, and to share experiences with other communities who want to start up their own libraries.

NATIONALITY VERIFICATION

U Aung, Male, 52, Ban Niang

U Aung has lived in Thailand for 20 years, after escaping from Burma during the 1988 events. At that time, he was jailed because the Burmese government believed he was connected with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), an ethnic resistance army, although he only gave them food. He plans never to return to his home country and wants to become a Thai citizen instead. While U Aung has a worker card, he doesn't want to apply to any process for citizenship, nationality verification, or a passport, because then he will have to send his information back to Burma. Like many other Migrant Workers, he believes this is not safe for him or his family.

Before coming to Thailand, he was a teacher in his village and believes that education is important. During the 2004 tsunami, he lost his wife and children, but managed to rescue a 2-year-old Thai girl. Later, he adopted Burmese children and now has a good relationship with the Thai community and is very happy living in Ban Niang.



He does any kind of work that people will pay him to do, but hasn't had much work recently. However, he is central to the SMC Ban Niang Library, and goes there before and after work to repair books, keep records of books checked out, and do daily maintenance. As a former teacher, he sees how Burmese do not have much access to knowledge and appropriate education, either in Burma or in Thailand. This is his inspiration to run the library seriously, as he cares very much for it and feels it is important to keep it going.

U Aung sees how people have the interest and motivation to keep the library running, but not the skills and knowledge. He and others are worried about the sustainability of the library. They need SNF to act as a go-between with authorities, and to support them on fundraising, opening a tea shop, running the library, and to help them understand what Migrant Workers can and cannot do in this area.

People who feel like they will really settle down in their host country put more effort into the small projects than those who are uncertain as to whether they will migrate again or return to Burma. U Aung is an example of the difference in motivation between migrants and potential immigrants, and highlights the need for a country-wide policy on citizenship rather than temporary registration.

GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP TRAINING ALUMNI

Kyi Kyi, Female, 26, Ban Nam Khem

Kyi Kyi is a GLT (Y2) alumni who has lived in Thailand for eight years. She used to work with World Vision, going to the community and disseminating knowledge about health. She lost her mother in the 2004 tsunami and quit from World Vision, moving to work in a hospital as a translator for the nurses.

Kyi Kyi took the GLT training because she wanted more education and wanted to make more friendships among Migrant Workers. This training was very meaningful for her because in Burma she did not have much access to education. GLT has built her self-confidence and she is now more comfortable and effective in working with the community.

After the training, Kyi Kyi first wanted to organize a women's group, since women in the fishing towns often don't have a way to earn income while their husbands are out on the fishing boats. Her first idea, to dry and sell fish, was not well-received by the community as they said they had tried it before and it didn't work. Undaunted, her next idea was to create a day care center so that the mothers can be free during the day to work.

She and her friend began the children center, Metta Day Care, together. SNF supported the beginning funds, but as the number of children increased from 10 to 20, people in the community began to have more faith in the project and began to believe in it. When the SNF funds finished, they gave funds to a CBO in Ban Nam Khem to support the day care center and to start integrating Burmese children into the local school.



Kyi Kyi is the contact person for many other groups in Ban Nam Khem, and inspires other women by her work and young age. In the beginning, she tells how it was difficult to talk with community leaders since she is a young woman and this is not common in the traditional cultural roles of Burmese society. But it has gotten easier as people see the outcomes of her activities. She has joined in different trainings and workshops from SNF, such as women's empowerment, and currently works with them as a translator. She dreams that one day she will return to Burma and do the same thing, helping women empower themselves, and taking care of children there, allowing their mothers the freedom to work.

GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP TRAINING ALUMNI

Jack, Male 26, Ban Niang

Jack graduated high school in Burma, and followed that with English and computer classes. At first he wanted to work in Singapore, but he had a brother in Thailand so he came here instead.

He worked first in Phang Nga but moved to Phuket during the time of the tsunami (2004). He lost his brother there and was unable to search for him for three weeks because the roads were closed. After arriving in Phang Nga, he stayed with friend from World Vision while looking for his brother, which he found three months later. Eventually became a volunteer for World Vision.

With World Vision, he worked as a translator and facilitator, going to communities and giving trainings about health. After a year of this, he then came to work as a bartender. During this time, a friend who had done the GLT Y1 training recommended it to him, saying it was about critical thinking, that you understand more about yourself, society, your community. When Jack first called the SNF office the training was already full, but afterwards there was an opening, so he and his wife both signed up.

Looking back, he sees globalization as one of the most interesting topics of GLT, as it helped him understand what is happening in the world and in the community. He also now tries to do simple things like eat better and not litter. He learned to listen without judgment and believes this helps him in his daily working life and also with his family life, since they both listen better. Now, even though she may not agree, she will listen, and Jack says this is very good for his family life. He also was interested in Deep Ecology, as he had lived in Burma in the forest, but never really connected with nature. Now, he really tries to listen, observe, and connect with nature, saying, "We can learn even from a shell."

When asked if this training would be useful back in Burma, he said it would be useful anywhere. The knowledge gained will be with him always, and in the future he dreams of going back to Burma and working with the community he used to live with. For example, the sharing circle, whereby people come together and share their experiences, maybe just a few people on the same street can gather and share knowledge about daily life.



After GLT Jack started a small project, the Migrant Development Group by Migrants (MDGM), and was also a founding member of the Ban Nam Khem Library (see Case Study 2). His experience with World Vision gave him the confidence to go to previously inaccessible migrant communities, such as up in the mountains or deep in plantations and give workshops on NV, HR, education, and health, among other topics. MDGM also organizes a football team and works with another GLT alumni in Ban Chi Noi.

Now they have a football team, a library, an online blog with up-to-date Migrant Worker issues and legal cases in Thailand. Jack volunteers in the SNF office, working on this webpage in the rainy season, which has about 200 visitors from 6 different countries: the US, Malaysia, Spain, Singapore, Burma, and China, all of whom are Burmese.