



LIVING IN LIMBO:

Burma's youth in Thailand see few opportunities to use education and vocational skills

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
Field Mission to Thailand, May 2008

Purpose of the Assessment

"Young people need to see their future, have a vision, see a way how to do it"
17-year-old female member of Karen Youth Organization in Mae Sot

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (Women's Commission) traveled to the Thailand-Burma¹ border in May 2008 as part of its Displaced Youth Initiative, a global research and advocacy project that works to increase support for quality education and job training programs for displaced youth (15-24 years old). The three-year project looks at the skills and education young people need to move their lives forward, while they are displaced, when it is safe to return home or when they are resettled elsewhere.² The purpose of the two-week visit was to look at the educational needs of young people from Burma living in refugee camps in Thailand—what education and job training programs are available, what appears to be working and what more is needed to help young people make the transition from education programs into jobs or self-employment.

Women's Commission staff traveled to Bangkok and Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces in the northwest, visiting Mae La and Site 1 (Ban Mai Nai Soi) camps. The delegation held meetings with displaced young women and men; international and local NGOs; youth groups; UN agencies; and donors. As the situation along the Thailand-Burma border varies by location, the following should be read as a summary of observations, experiences and perspectives of individuals met, not as a comprehensive study. While the focus of the research was on young people from Burma living in refugee camps, the recommendations in this report may be appropriate for migrant workers and other displaced groups living in Thailand as well as in other protracted refugee situations around the world.

Key Findings

- ▶ While young people have had access to school through grade 10, they have had few opportunities to apply what they've learned or continue their education.
- ▶ Young people who participate in vocational training programs have few opportunities to use their skills to earn any money.
- ▶ Having spent their entire lives in camps, most young people do not have the ability or opportunity to identify market opportunities and explore job possibilities, even in the small in-camp economy.
- ▶ Many teachers are being resettled elsewhere, resulting in a shortage of refugee personnel who can pass on skills and knowledge to the next generation.

Snapshot of a Protracted Refugee Crisis

"There has never been a period without new arrivals. That's been consistent."

International aid worker, Site 1, Mae Hong Son

More than 135,000 Burmese live in nine official refugee camps where they have been for up to 24 years. These numbers include tens of thousands of young people. Many have never been outside the camps, and they have few opportunities to work or develop the academic and job skills they will need as adults—wherever they may end up. As a result, their future options are severely restricted. The refugees are forced to be dependent on the international community, including NGOs and UN agencies.



Many young people from Burma have grown up in refugee camps in Thailand never seeing anything outside the camps.

The Thai government, which is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, limits refugees' movement and prohibits their right to work. Despite tight restrictions, some refugees seek illegal employment outside of the camps, working in agriculture, factories and domestic work. Working outside the camps, however, comes with considerable risks; refugees who are caught may face fines and deportation, and sometimes are not eligible for resettlement. In some areas, the local economy survives on low-wage refugee work and bribes. As one international aid worker said, "Just look around. Mae Hong Son exists on refugees—it is the local business."³

As the restoration of human rights in Burma appears unlikely in the near term and as Thai policy towards refugees becomes more restrictive, including in the area of employment outside the camps, the only viable durable solution currently is resettlement. A large-scale resettlement program began in 2005, with an average today of 300 refugees leaving Thailand for resettlement every week.⁴ The United States accepts the vast

majority, nearly 70 percent, of all resettled refugees.⁵ Since 2005, more than 21,000 Burmese refugees from Thailand have been resettled in the United States⁶ which has pledged to resettle 60,000 Burmese by 2010.⁷

What We Heard

"The biggest issue today is food. If there's no food, there are no programs."

International aid worker, Site 1, Mae Hong Son

Refugees told the Women's Commission delegation how resettlement has introduced an element of uncertainty and destabilization in the camps. Many refugees who resettle in the United States and other Western countries find it particularly challenging to assimilate as they have not had the opportunity to learn relevant skills for life in a new country. The majority do not speak English and younger people have spent most, if not all, of their lives in closed refugee camps in isolated, jungle areas of Thailand.

Refugees in the camps told the delegation how life has become more challenging as the better educated and more skilled have left, including teachers, NGO refugee staff and health workers. In fact, an estimated 75 percent of all skilled workers and leaders were expected to depart by the end of 2007.⁸ Despite expectations that camp populations would decrease as people depart, many camps are experiencing a replenishment rate of almost one-to-one due to births, an influx of undocumented migrant workers and new arrivals from Burma. While donors had anticipated a drop in funding needs, expenses have actually increased as new teachers, medics and other personnel need to be trained.



The increase in rice prices is leading to shortfalls in donor funding for other programs.

These trends are all occurring against the backdrop of a funding crisis. One reason given is that countries are experiencing “donor fatigue” after 24 years of providing assistance to the camps without much evidence of the situation improving. As one international worker said, “It is understandable that donors want to see an exit strategy but unless the government of Burma is part of that solution, how is that going to happen?”⁹ Others claim that a shift in donor priorities is taking money away from Thailand to other crises such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan. Meanwhile, the global food crisis has had a significant impact on food rations as the Thai-Burma Border Consortium [of NGOs] (TBBC) faced a \$7 million shortfall earlier this year as a result of the increase in rice prices alone. (Donors have subsequently contributed to address the shortfall.) The Women’s Commission delegation was told that budgets planned a year ago could no longer cover current expenses because of the fall in value of the U.S. dollar.

Findings: Education and Vocational Training

“We need to teach young people to become providers—not just receivers.”
Local humanitarian worker in Mae Hong Son

Education

Formal education in the camps generally consists of nursery, primary, middle and secondary school, up until recently through grade 10. In efforts to work towards Thai accreditation, schools in the seven largely Karen camps moved to a 12-grade system in June 2008. Refugees have established a parallel education system in the camps with the Karen and Karenni Education Departments acting as *de facto* ministries of education. The curriculum is developed by each ethnic education department and has been geared towards repatriation. At the camp level, policies are made by the community-elected camp education committees. Schools are not accredited, which means that students leave school with a certificate that has little value outside of the camps.



Refugees from Burma have access to school through 12th grade, but most are not able to go on to higher education.

Recently, the Royal Thai Government has considered accreditation of refugee and migrant schools, although little progress has been made. If agreed to, this would require an alignment of the current curriculums with the official Thai curriculum.¹⁰ While accreditation presents an opportunity, it is also met with some resistance by refugees who fear losing their cultural identity. Language of instruction, for example, remains a challenging issue as few refugees can speak or teach Thai.

Access to school in the camps is relatively good but staying in school is more problematic. Students generally drop out at the end of primary school or beginning of middle school.¹¹ According to a 2005 survey of 4,508 people in seven camps, only 4.6 percent of young men and 3 percent of young women had completed a high school education.¹² Many young women leave because of early marriage and pregnancy. While there are no policies prohibiting pregnant girls from attending school, the delegation was told that there is strong social pressure for young women to leave school once they get married or become pregnant.

Another reason boys and girls drop out is the lack of job opportunities after finishing school. As one aid worker explained, “If a young boy knows that he will be working illegally in a factory whether or not he drops out after seventh grade or finishes tenth grade, what is the incentive to stay?”¹³ Students also drop out because of financial pressure as parents may not see the benefit in sending their children to school and need them to earn some money to help the family. In addition, retaining qualified teachers is a challenge as they are paid much less than refugees working in other sectors, such as health, and many are leaving to resettle abroad.

If students are able to complete school through grade 10, few opportunities to further their studies are available; they might teach primary school in the camp or attend a vocational training course. Rather than expanding their



In vocational training courses, young men tend to learn skills that result in more highly paid work, such as mechanics and electronics, while young women learn skills that lead to lower-paid work, such as sewing and weaving. Computer classes are very popular, but often do not provide a high level of competency.

educational options as they become more educated, young people face diminishing opportunities as they progress in their studies. Only a few slots are available for post-secondary education programs in the camps, which generally fall into the following categories: general course studies or higher education; specialist training, such as teacher or medic training; or skills building, such as English immersion or leadership training.¹⁴

Despite these challenges and few viable employment opportunities after finishing grade 10, young people are eager to continue their studies. Every young person interviewed listed further education or post-secondary school opportunities as a top priority. The most common question the delegation was asked by young people in the camps about resettlement was if they could attend school in a third country.

Vocational Training

In addition to formal education, there are a large number of vocational training programs in the camps. For example, in Site 1 camp outside of Mae Hong Son, 24 courses are offered, ranging from shoe making to computer classes to electrical repair. Young people who participate in vocational training programs may gain valuable knowledge but have few opportunities to use their skills to earn any money. While a fundamental reason is that the Thai government refuses to allow refugees to leave the camps and work, the Women's Commission found that skills are not being utilized for other reasons, some of which are outlined below.

- **The objectives of the training programs vary and are not always geared toward income generation.** For many local groups and youth organizations, the objective of their vocational training is to build the capacity of their camp/community-based organizations and provide leadership training for the next generation of political activists and leaders. The focus is not necessarily to prepare for work in Thailand, third countries or in the camps.
- **Many programs were not designed based on market assessments, which means that young people are trained in skills that are not in demand,** even within the small in-camp economy. Meanwhile, there is a reported lack of technical and financial resources to develop new demand-driven training programs.
- **Upon completing a course, students often do not have access to capital or opportunities to practice their skills.** One of the few opportunities to apply skills after training appeared to be to work for a nongovernmental or community-based organization, which is not sustainable as this work is dependent on external funding.
- **There appears to be a lack of capacity among youth to identify market opportunities and explore job possibilities.** When participants in training courses were asked what they plan to do upon finishing their current course, they all responded that they would take another course in a new occupation. Training is perceived as a career choice in its own right, not as a step toward employment. An international aid worker said, "As the students have no

A Model Program Combines Education and Apprenticeships

World Education's English Immersion Program in Umpium Mai refugee camp is a post-secondary school program that brings together refugees from various camps. The first 10 months are spent in classes, focused on reading, writing, speaking, critical thinking, program management, computer skills, translation skills, proposal writing, human resource management, monitoring and evaluation. This is followed by a year-long apprenticeship in which students are placed with organizations to begin applying what they have learned. Many of the most impressive refugee humanitarian workers the Women's Commission met were graduates of this program.

experience of the outside world, they are unaware of educational choices or job opportunities.”¹⁶

- **There is a lack of formal accreditation for completing coursework.** And even when courses provide certificates, they do not carry much weight if they are not recognized by the Thai authorities.
- **Vocational training programs are often gender segregated,** with women disproportionately represented in traditionally lower-paying sectors, such as sewing and weaving, and men in mechanics, electronics and carpentry. Computer courses appeared to be popular and more gender balanced.
- **Some camps face difficulties in obtaining approval from the Thai government for projects.** This includes receiving permission to bring in raw materials. Since late last year in the northern camps, it has become much more difficult to move refugees—students, trainers and program managers—between the camps to participate in trainings.

Lessons learned from other refugee settings demonstrate that the more successful vocational training programs that lead to jobs or self-employment include some of the following elements:

- an emphasis on English language instruction so that young people can interact with the international community
- training in computer skills
- financial literacy and other transferable skills
- an opportunity to practice skills and learn on the job through an apprenticeship
- assistance with job placement after training
- a longer course cycle so as to achieve a degree of competency.

With few opportunities to continue their studies or to put into practice what they have learned, refugee youth are becoming increasingly frustrated and despondent about their futures. One community leader said, “When people can't see their futures, you see an increase in social problems, like domestic violence and abuse.”¹⁷ The Women's Commission also heard reports that alcohol abuse among youth is high. Many young people have spent their entire lives within the confines of a camp and are completely dependent on external assistance. Others work illegally outside of camps and risk abuse and deportation. Others have waited patiently a number of years to be resettled to a third country but face tremendous uncertainty and anxiety about what awaits them and whether or not they will be allowed to leave.

Recommendations

“It is essential to help youth. If not, future children will pay.”

Displaced 17-year-old girl in Mae Hong Son

There is much more that the Thai government, with support from donors, the UN, NGOs and local communities, can do to support displaced youth to become more self-reliant. The international community—and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in particular—has an important role to play in working with the Thai government to develop a safe mechanism for allowing refugees to work outside of the camps.

The government is concerned that increased services would act as a “pull factor,” attracting more and more

Oo Reh, Working with Youth in His Community



Oo Reh, 26, lives in a refugee camp in Mae Hong Son in northern Thailand. It took Oo Reh two years to escape Burma and get to Thailand, narrowly avoiding land mines and other dangers along the way.

Oo Reh has completed secondary school and works at the camp's Vocational Training and Non-Formal Education Center. He tries to help other young people by encouraging them to attend vocational training classes. With other students in the music class, Oo Reh has formed a band that plays traditional Karenni music in the camps. The band charges a minimal amount for the maintenance of the instruments. This way, band members do not simply learn how to sing and play musical instruments but also earn a small income.

Oo Reh's ultimate destination is unknown. Many rumors have been surrounding the camps and it is unclear who is eligible for resettlement and, most importantly, if someone like Oo Reh will be able to continue his studies if he moves to the United States. Oo Reh is also worried that the skills he has learned will not be practical for life in the U.S.; he has heard that many young men have not been able to find a job and end up joining the U.S. army.

refugees across the border. However, greater access to quality and relevant education and training programs would prepare a new labor force to contribute to the local economy, reduce reliance on external assistance and decrease tensions and delinquent activities within the camps. As one aid worker said, "We must show the Thai government that refugees are a resource."¹⁸

The Women's Commission recommends that the Royal Thai Government, with support from donors, UN, the private sector and the humanitarian community, provide young people from Burma greater opportunities for quality, relevant education and skills development that are linked to safe, legal and dignified work. This requires the following actions:

- ▶ **Provide a comprehensive "package" of services that includes basic education and catch-up classes** for those who have missed out on years of school, and transferable vocational skills, such as farming, computer literacy or medical training, that would be useful for life in Burma, Thailand or in a third country such as the United States. In addition to learning their mother tongue, English and Thai instruction is needed. Distance learning opportunities via computers, mobile phones and radio programs should be further explored for refugees and Thai youth, so that the host community also benefits from new technology.
- ▶ **Retain qualified teachers and train replacement teachers.** As more and more teachers are being resettled, training new teachers and increasing stipends should be priorities. It is imperative that teachers receive a reasonable salary as they will continue to seek other work as long as they receive the lowest stipend of all camp staff. More advance notice should be given to refugees who will be resettling in order to train their replacements. Rather than cutting back on assistance, donors should increase funds for training new staff and teachers in the camps.¹⁹
- ▶ **Increase opportunities for post-secondary education.** The Thai government should allow refugees to leave camps to pursue post-secondary education in other camps, as well as in Thai schools and vocational training institutes outside the camps. Upon completion, the Thai government should provide formal recognition and documentation.
- ▶ **Allow Internet access in and around the camps to benefit refugees and local Thai communities.** The availability of the Internet would significantly increase opportunities for young people in the camps and local Thai communities through access to information, resources such as scholarships and grants and distance learning opportunities. Internet cafes would also serve as income generating opportunities.

- ▶ **Expand refugees' access to the labor market. Training must go hand in hand with job creation.** The United Nations, donors and international NGOs should outline how they will support the Thai government in developing a system to allow refugees to work and show how it will benefit the host communities. Any system must include protective mechanisms to ensure that refugees are not exploited or put in greater danger. Part of this strategy should allow refugees to lease land adjacent to camps to grow food and permit Thai factories to move into camps. Refugees should also have access to materials and credit to start small businesses.
- ▶ **Develop market-driven training programs.** Donors should support market assessments, impact evaluations and research into viable job opportunities in camps, countries of resettlement and inside Burma in the future. Emphasis should be on vocations and skills that are transferable, such as financial literacy, computer training and language skills. Possible sectors to focus on include: health care, hotel management and catering, alternative energy (solar and hydropower), technology, animal husbandry and agriculture. While in the camps, young people should be trained in the production of goods that are currently provided by relief agencies (e.g., charcoal, soap and sanitary materials). Young people who plan to resettle should be provided with language instruction and relevant skills training, such as catering and child and elderly care. Market assessment tools and studies could also be shared with Thai vocational training institutes and local businesses.
- ▶ **Promote youth self-assessment in all vocational training programs.** Young people should be given the tools to think critically about the selection of training programs and possible job opportunities that best match their skills and needs.²⁰ In every camp, one central location should be established where information is available on course offering, requisite skills, resource and time commitment and possible job opportunities after training. Job placement centers, staffed with job advisers, should also be established that refugees, migrant workers and Thai nationals can all access.

Notes

- ¹ In 1989, the military junta changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. The change was recognized by the United Nations, and by countries such as France and Japan, but not by the opposition movement and other countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. In this report, the Women's Commission uses Burma, as it was the name used by individuals we interviewed.
- ² For more information on the Women's Commission's Displaced Youth Initiative visit <http://www.womenscommission.org/projects/children/untapped.php>.
- ³ Interview with international aid worker, Mae Hong Son, Thailand, May 21, 2008.
- ⁴ UNHCR, *Resettlement of Myanmar Refugees from Thailand Tops 30,000*, June 25, 2008. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=486242242>, accessed August 7, 2008.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Refugees International. "Burmese Refugees: Key Facts on Reducing Barriers to Resettlement." November 29, 2007. <http://www.refintl.org/content/article/detail/10323/>, accessed August 7, 2008.
- ⁸ Thai-Burma Border Consortium. Programme Report July-December 2007. (Thailand, March 2008), p. 1.
- ⁹ Interview with international aid worker, Bangkok, Thailand, May 13, 2008.
- ¹⁰ Marc van der Stouwe. "Potential Certification of Learning Achievements for Burmese Refugees in Thailand." UNESCO IIEP seminar, (Paris, January 2008).
- ¹¹ Su-Ann Oh, Somchat Ochalumthan, Saw Pla Law La and Johnny Htoo. "Education Survey 2005." ZOA Refugee Care Thailand. (Thailand, 2006), p. 81.
- ¹² Ibid. p. 52
- ¹³ Interview with international aid worker, Mae Sot, Thailand, May 15, 2008.
- ¹⁴ Su-Ann Oh, Somchat Ochalumthan, Saw Pla Law La and Johnny Htoo. "Education Survey 2005." ZOA Refugee Care Thailand. (Thailand, 2006), p. 81.
- ¹⁵ Thai-Burma Border Consortium. Programme Report July-December 2007. (Thailand, March 2008), p. 6.
- ¹⁶ Interview with international aid worker, August 5, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Interview with community leader, Mae Hong Son, May 20, 2008.
- ¹⁸ Interview with international aid worker, Bangkok, May 12, 2008.
- ¹⁹ The INEE Guidance Notes on Teacher Compensation in Fragile States, Situations of Displacement and Post-Crisis Recovery provides a suggested framework for compensating teachers. Intended for education authorities and staff within UN agencies, teachers unions, community-based organizations, NGOs and donors, the INEE Guidance Notes provide points for stakeholders to reflect upon as they plan and implement education programs. For more information on INEE Teacher Compensation Guidance Notes, visit <http://www.ineesite.org/teachercomp>.
- ²⁰ The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children/Columbia University Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth includes a series of tools to help young people become active participants in determining which vocation best matches their skills and needs. Available at www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_ysl_toolkit.pdf.

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For more information on the Women's Commission's work on youth, visit womenscommission.org/projects/children/untapped.php



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