

Seeing is believing

(This report is a personal account of an independent author and not representative of the group MBEAN.)

As a donor and a fund-raiser, I am always curious to see the outcomes of my humble effort and contributions with my own eyes. This desire pushed me to arrange a visit to one of the project areas assisted by the MBEAN, during my busy holiday in Myanmar. With kind help from the staff local and abroad, I managed to visit remote villages in Day-da-ye Township, which is part of the Ayarwadi Delta.

It was an early start on a Saturday morning from the ferry port at Pan-so-dan, Yangon. A coordinator from Yangon office accompanied me. There were about 300 passengers onboard; some got seats and the others hired small chairs across the deck. I noticed some life jackets packed in carrier bags hung on the front wall of the ferry. A quick observation informed me that the ratio of life jackets, at least within the visible range, and passengers was far less than 0.1. But who cared? The weather was nice and the sky was clear. After about 10 minutes, we got to the other side of Yangon River and took a shared taxi with 6 others in an old hatch-back towards Kun-gyan-gone. It is a small town between Yangon and Ayarwadi Divisions. There we stopped for breakfast and decided whether we would take a relatively bigger and stable boat or a small motorized one. The difference is that the bigger one has to rely more on the tide as it would not be able to get into small creeks when the water level is low whereas the smaller one can reach the inner areas making the itinerary and schedule more flexible. We chose the latter for its time efficiency.



Cruising along the narrow creek and in the vast river

The river was narrow at the beginning till we got to its mouth where we could see water across the horizon. It was so vast and the breeze was so fresh. The loud noise from the small motor interrupted our conversation at times. It took about 2 1/2 hours to get to the first stop, Htan Taw village. This is where the MBEAN successfully built a new school which was opened and handed over to the local Education Department only 5 weeks ago. Its bamboo gate was locked and we informed the Headmaster who lives locally. It was rather unfortunate that a trip during the week was not possible due to my personal circumstances. We deliberately chose not to inform the villagers in advance as we did not want to burden them with out-of-routine special arrangements for our visit.



New Primary School at Htan Taw village

I spoke to the Headmaster and his wife who is also a teacher at the same school. They have been living and working there for more than thirty years. This committed couple and two other teachers are responsible for a total of 101 pupils in 5 different grades in this primary school. After the 4th grade, children have to go to a middle (secondary) school in a nearby village. It is about half an hour walk in winter months but they have to use a small boat during the monsoons. The older children look after the younger ones as their working parents are not able to accompany them to school.

The Headmaster teaches two classes and other teachers one each. The Headmaster's wife takes the reception class, the most critical grade where a child experiences the school life for the very first time. She helps these young ones learn not only what the curriculum sets out but other important things for daily living such as personal hygiene including cleaning after toileting.



The Headmaster and a teacher, School children playing on a Saturday afternoon

The school hours start around 9:45 am and end around 3:00 pm. The building was plain: a rectangular-shaped brick building of 30 x 60 feet, with zinc sheet roofing. I hope the ceiling would absorb the extreme heat, to some extent. The front corridor joined all three classrooms and a dustbin stood by the entrance. There were only 3 classrooms for 5 classes and one of the rooms was still empty of furniture. The long tables and benches in two other rooms had already started to decay as the wood was of poor quality. In fact, MBEAN donated the school building, a set of table and chair, 5 ceramic filters, a toilet set and an artesian well (only salt water) in the grounds. The rest of the

school furniture as well as textbooks and stationery were contributed by other organizations. I found it a little difficult to explain the limitations, in response to their polite query on whether we could contribute towards replacing the furniture. I wish I could give them a positive answer. At the same time, I would like to be hopeful that there would be someone or some organisation to fill this small gap worth \$ 650.

I also noticed two abandoned rain water collection tanks in the backyard. They were aids from the UNICEF many years ago and were said to be in use for about ten years before the leakage became irreparable. This made me think of how helpful it would be for the school children if these tanks or the similar new ones are back in use. Unfortunately, limited funds and resource allocation are major problems as everywhere else.



Traces of old school destroyed by Nargis, Temporary make-shift school

Nonetheless, the locals were very grateful to the donors for the new school as this is the only opportunity for the education of their future generation. I also came across a group of children on our way to the make-shift school where they were taught until the move to the new building. They were shy and not very forthcoming but said that they enjoyed attending school in the new building. It was so touching when the teachers told me that they always wish the donors well after morning prayers at school.

We continued our tour before the tide waned and reached another village, Too-myaun. This is where a second school is under construction. It is 70% completed and awaiting more funds to finish the rest in time for the new school term in June. The building is identical to the one in Htan Taw and a new toilet is part of the plan. The locals assist the MBEAN by looking after building materials and the site. This primary school will accommodate 155 pupils and the classes take place in the local monastery at present. I briefly met the Headmistress at her house. This school has only three teachers.



New school under construction at Too-myaun village

Our final stop before the sun set was Tama-takaw village. There I met an extraordinary person, a Buddhist monk, who has been leading the development for the local community long before the cyclone struck. The story about how he started the village school from scratch was fascinating as well as heart-breaking. Born locally and trained his monastic ways in Yangon, Venerable U Wimala is a very broad-minded and far-sighted person. He realised the value of education and decided to build a school for the children in his home village. The main income for the locals is generated from the agricultural sector i.e. growing paddies and they do not have much spare cash. Being extremely determined, this young monk borrowed some money and bought a plot of land. He led a group of follower-believers and grew paddy to produce some cash to pay off the debt. Then he travelled to the nearby towns and villages and requested the owners of rice mills to donate husks so that they could use it, together with the mud dug in the plot, in making bricks.

A four years worth of painstaking hard work came into fruition in late April 2008. Venerable U Wimala and his group were excited with joy preparing for the opening of the first school in their village. It was only 4 days before the opening ceremony that the nasty Nargis hit the region. The influx of sea water and giant tidal waves knocked the new building down. Their dream was shattered into pieces. They were devastated but decided to start again after a short period of recovery. Now, they have got a new building funded by the MBCA (Myanmar Business Coalition for HIV/ AIDS). The MBEAN donated school furniture including the blackboards. Other aids by the MBEAN in the same village were for the repair of pedestrian bridges over the creek and local-made septic tanks for 67 pit latrines.



School furniture donated by the MBEAN at Tama-takaw village

Under U Wimala's thoughtful leadership and MBEAN's assistance, the villagers also repaired the damaged embankment, between Toe-sagyin and Tama-takaw. Details are available separately on MBEAN website (http://www.mbean.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=25:embankment&catid=1:report&Itemid=4). They volunteered to donate their labour charges to buy a new Htee-daw for the village pagoda. The Tama-takaw Pagoda is the first and only pagoda in the region to get it repaired. This meant a great deal to the Buddhists. Venerable U Wimala is now considering building a weather-resistant footpath between his village and a nearby village to promote local trading. The estimated cost is nearly \$2,000 for this 2 miles long footpath and they are still looking for a donor/ group of donors.

Talking to the survivors at different villages within available time frame allowed me to get some ideas about how much they have recovered from this life-threatening experience. From my limited encounter, it seems that most of them are back onto their feet. It would be more precise if we take into account their circumstances of having to be back to work for survival as one of the main driving force to recover. The acute bereavement period has passed without long-lasting debilitating effect. Being a Psychiatrist, I was pleasantly surprised not to have met or heard about anybody who seems to suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), bearing in mind the limitations of my trip.

It was clear that MBEAN tries its hardest to cut the overhead costs by maximising the efficiency of existing skeletal staff. My credits go to them for making things happen at the ground level, juggling between challenges in dealing with different people, various demands, harsh weather conditions, and meeting expectations and deadlines.

I would like to thank all MBEAN staff: local and abroad, especially Ko Tin Tun Myint who assisted me throughout this insightful overnight trip, and all those remarkable people whom I met in three different villages.

How amazing is it to support such people who are determined to be back onto their feet at the earliest opportunity? It makes our modest contribution worth more than its actual value!

Nwe Winn Thein
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Following this report, I understand that MBEAN is implementing means to fill the gaps at Htan Taw school.

If you are interested to contribute towards the new independent project by Venerable U Wimala, please contact me at nwthein@hotmail.com.